

**PERSPECTIVE: The Reality of Tough Stuff**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

**INTRO**

**CCC life questions...**

Is the Spirit flowing through me?  
Does God make my day?  
Who shares my tough stuff?  
How worn is my welcome mat?  
With whom am I fishing?  
How are my investments doing?

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**PRAYER**

Ecc 4:9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup> And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (ESV)

<sup>9</sup> Two can accomplish more than twice as much as one, for the results can be much better. <sup>10</sup> If one falls, the other pulls him up; but if a man falls when he is alone, he's in trouble. <sup>11</sup> Also, on a cold night, two under the same

blanket gain warmth from each other, but how can one be warm alone? <sup>12</sup> And one standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer; three is even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. (LB)

<sup>9</sup> Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. <sup>10</sup> If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. <sup>11</sup> Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? <sup>12</sup> A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. (NLT)

If you've ever taken 20-30 minutes to thoughtfully read through the Old Testament library's book of *Ecclesiastes*, it is likely you come away with at least 3 impressions.

Impression #1      Whoever wrote this book **attempted** to have just about **every pleasurable experience** it is possible to have living in this world. (2:1-10)

*Ecc* 2:9-10 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

Impression #2      Whoever wrote this book came to the **conclusion** that doing it all and **experiencing** it all **doesn't satisfy**

<sup>11</sup> Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Impression #3      Whoever wrote this book was brutally honest about this world; namely, Even though this world might have its beautiful scenes and wonderful experiences, for some reason **life is still tough**.

<sup>4:1</sup> Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. <sup>2</sup> And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. <sup>3</sup> But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. <sup>4</sup> Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. <sup>5</sup> The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. <sup>6</sup> Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Now, you and I might be inclined to say, "Wow...talk about a glass-half-empty individual!" Perhaps.

But let's keep in mind noted last week) that "all Scripture is God-breathed." The Spirit of God

was breathing out a very truthful and realistic look at the world in which we live. Truth is, sometimes

the glass is "half-full" or more; other times, the glass is "half-empty"...or more!

What's your glass like today? If we all were brutally honest this morning, it is likely we'd all say to one another, "Ya know, yeah...some good things are happening. To be sure. But if I were really

candid, there is some tough stuff in my life with which I am really wrestling. And...I'm not sure why...or even how to chart my way through."

Don Carson describes what is often our experience. He writes --

*Many believers are never troubled by such matters [i.e., the intellectual questions about suffering]. Millions of ordinary Christians hold that God is omnipotent, that God is perfectly good, and that suffering abounds in the world. At many stages of their experience as Christians, they do not feel there is a problem. They have brief, theological answers that satisfy them...or perhaps they have not really had to think about these matters much at all. They know God loves them, and that is enough.*

*And then, something takes place in their own life that jolts them to the core. Perhaps it is a first-year university course in philosophy. Perhaps it is an extraordinarily painful personal bereavement. Your father dies; your child contracts MS. Your spouse walks out with another partner, The job on which you had set your life's hopes slips away and is offered to someone else. You are stricken with a terminal disease. You drift into depression, the slough of despond. Your Christian witness proves not only fruitless, but offensive to all your friends and colleagues. You lose your job, and with it your house and life savings.*

*Suddenly, questions about suffering become vital.<sup>i</sup>*

Sooner or later, for everyone (in this room), handling tough stuff becomes more than theory.

Os Hillman calls it a "Joseph Pit" experience (cf. Genesis 37:24<sup>ii</sup>):

*What does your Pit look like? How deep is it? How wide? How dark? How painful?...one thing is consistent in every Joseph Pit experience. Our life is interrupted. We lose control over our circumstances. We are cast upon a sea of uncertainty with a raft but no oars. For the first time in our life we are forced to depend entirely on God and others.<sup>iii</sup>*

For the next 9 weeks, we want to learn (or for some *re-learn*) how to stay unbroken when thrown into the pit? Jesus himself said, "In this world, you will have trouble." So how do you and I not just survive, but even thrive, in the tough stuff?

Ecclesiastes 4 says, "You become a cord of three strands. You interweave your life and your heart with God and with others. You regularly and consistently share your with others your tough stuff. Why? "Because a cord of three strands is not easily (or quickly) broken."

So welcome to **A CORD OF THREE STRANDS**, a teaching series on why an essential exercise in our everyday walk with Jesus, to be an effective and fruitful disciple, is sharing your tough stuff. Here's the map ahead.

- Weeks 1,2,3 Strand #1 YOU  
GAIN a PERSPECTIVE about the tough stuff:
  - Where does it come from?
  - Is there any purpose for it?
  - Why should I choose to share it?

- Weeks 4,5,6 Strand #2 OTHERS  
BIOGRAPHIES of people who thrived in tough stuff because it was shared
- Weeks 7,8,9 Strand #3 JESUS  
Why He is the SAVIOR we need in the tough stuff

A cord of three strands is not quickly, nor easily, broken. Let's begin by talking about Strand #1 – YOU...and what perspective you/I have about the tough stuff. Specifically, am I thinking rightly about

## **FROM WHERE DOES THE TOUGH STUFF COME?**

We have all kinds of questions that sound like this:

- Why does life have to be so difficult?
- Why is the human experience so full of hard things?
- Where in the world did evil and suffering come from?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- (and) Why doesn't God (if He's so good and so powerful) protect all of us better from all this stuff?

What we need are solid answers to these questions, not just guesses. We need God to give it to us straight. And, He does. His word provides 3 crystal clear answers.

### **#1 TOUGH STUFF IS THE ENDURING CONSEQUENCE OF CHOSEN SIN**

Please circle the word “chosen.” Tough stuff is the enduring (and I might add “multiplying”) consequence of *chosen* sin. Within His creation, God created two groups of beings both originally endowed with the power of moral, right-or-wrong choice.<sup>iv</sup>

In the beginning, **ANGELS had a CHOICE**. Indeed Scripture reveals that the highest and most exquisitely created angel—one who like none other attended the presence of God—this angel chose to sin. Isaiah describes what happened inside the heart of that angel:

Isaiah 14:12 “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!  
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!  
<sup>13</sup> You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God  
I will set my throne on high;  
I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north;  
<sup>14</sup> I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.’

You noted the 5 “I will(s)” in the heart of that angel. Ezekiel adds this angel was “the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty (Ezk.28:12), an “anointed cherub placed on God’s

holy mountain” and “blameless” until (28:17) “your heart was proud because of your beauty, you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.” Therefore, God says, “I cast you to the ground.”

In 1 Timothy 3:6, Paul notes that “the devil” (his name for this fallen angel) was puffed up with conceit and fell into special condemnation. When Lucifer fell, one-third of the angelic host chose to follow him. Suddenly, the angelic and unseen spiritual world shuddered when sin exploded.

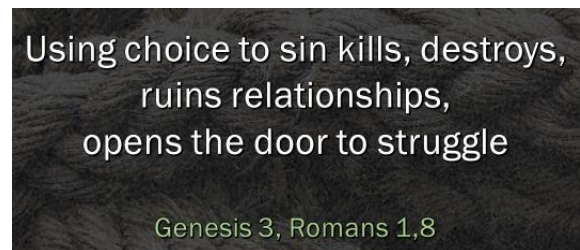
And, in the beginning, **ADAM and EVE had a CHOICE.**

Genesis 2:16-17 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Genesis 3:6-7 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

The God whose image we bear, the God who made us, has always been clear about the source of tough stuff.

**Using choice to sin kills.**  
**Using choice to sin destroys.**  
**Using choice to sin** opened the door to pain, suffering, toil, and greater struggle.



**Using choice to sin** cast the entire physical creation into Ecclesiastes calls “vanity,” what Romans calls “a bondage to frustration,” and what physics calls the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics (namely, every moment creation is losing both available energy and overall structure. To put it succinctly, it is winding down, not up).

We live and operate in a marvelously created universe *that is* deeply and functionally flawed Don

Carson notes that if we listen to Scripture, the Biblical plot boils down to this:

*The sovereign and utterly good God created a good universe. We human beings rebelled; **rebellion is now so much a part of our makeup that we are all enmeshed in it.** Every scrap of suffering (we might say “tough stuff”) we face turns on this fact.*

BECAUSE of chosen sin in the prideful angelic host and chosen sin in the prideful human race, tough stuff is the enduring consequence in this world.

## **#2 TOUGH STUFF IS OFTEN SATAN’S STRATEGY TO DESTROY OUR FAITH, AND US**

We will come back to this in a few weeks, but let me give you a glimpse into the life of a man

named Job (p.389 ESV).

<sup>Job 1:8</sup> And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" <sup>9</sup> Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason?" <sup>10</sup> Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. <sup>11</sup> But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."

<sup>20</sup> Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. <sup>21</sup> And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." <sup>22</sup> In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

<sup>2:6</sup> And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." <sup>7</sup> So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. <sup>8</sup> And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. <sup>9</sup> Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." <sup>10</sup> But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Doesn't take a Biblical scholar to figure out what's going on here. Satan, when allowed, uses all the tough stuff at his disposal to destroy our relationship, our faith, our confidence in God. In fact, if permitted, he would destroy us. A key part of our perspective is keeping in mind what Peter wrote:

<sup>1 Peter 5:8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

TOUGH STUFF is the enduring consequence of chosen sin.  
TOUGH STUFF can be a tool in Satan's strategy to destroy

**#3 TOUGH STUFF IS PURPOSEFULLY REDEEMED  
BY A LOVING GOD SO THAT WE MIGHT KNOW HIM BETTER  
IN BECOMING LIKE HIS SON JESUS.**

Sitting in a worship service much like this, one Sunday morning Larry Crabb felt an usher's tap on his shoulder. In the church office's phone, Crabb would hear, "Larry? This is Dad. Bill's been in an accident. Phoebe just called from the airport." Dr. Crabb would soon realize that his beloved Bill lost his life when an UA 737 crashed just into a neighborhood park in Colorado Springs. Crabb was devastated. And yet in time, Larry Crabb would write about his grief and his recovery in a book entitled *FINDING GOD*. Here's how it began:

*Let me tell you why I wrote this book. I have come to a place in my life where I need to know God better or I won't make it. Life at times has a way of throwing me into such blinding confusion and severe pain that I lose all hope. Joy is gone. Nothing encourages me.*

*Perhaps the most important lesson I learn as I go through dark seasons is this: there is no escape in this life*

from pain and problems. I can live obediently, practice spiritual disciplines, and claim my identity in Christ, but problems still continue.

More than anything else, I need a person to trust, someone who can give me hope, joy, and peace in the midst of life's unpredictable struggles. A plan to follow is not enough. More than ever before, I am convinced that God yearns to be known by us far more than we want to know Him, and His great work in us is to increase our passion for knowing Him until it is stronger than all other passions.<sup>v</sup>

Of course, this is why Paul wrote what he did in Romans 8:

*Romans 8:28* And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.<sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also **predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Elisabeth Eliot said it, "God never does anything TO you that isn't FOR you."

## CONCLUSION

Here is the central CORD OF THREE STRANDS Biblical truth for our next 9 weeks:

**In a world of unavoidable tough stuff, we are  
unbroken conquerors when  
woven together with God and godly companions.  
It's why we share our tough stuff.**

May I offer these suggestions to get the most out of our next 9 weeks together?

- If at all possible, DON'T MISS a weekend of worship during this series. With the Holy Spirit at work, these weeks in God's word can be life-changing
- Next week, our *Cord of Three Strands devotional* should be available. Pick one up and USE IT to meet with God and others over the next 60-90 days. Buy one for a friend, a neighbor, a colleague.
- In your CONNECT GROUP, use the sermon-based studies together. These will help us together, as a church family and team, lean into growing together in this key area of relationships
- INVITE someone to church. Let someone know there are answers and help for the tough stuff of life.

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<sup>i</sup> D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord: Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Baker Book House, 1990), 18-19.

<sup>ii</sup> "They (i.e., his brothers) took him (i.e., Joseph) and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was not water in it" (ESV).

<sup>iii</sup> Os Hillman, *The Upside of Adversity: Rising from the Pit to Greatness* (Regal Books, 2006), 25.

<sup>iv</sup> Why did God his morally-and-rationally-capable creatures the power of choice? Choice is essential for genuine, loving relationships. When out of love a giving-God chose to create a universe, and place us on the one planet outfitted to sustain life, God put in place a network of relationships. He created angelic beings who could choose whether or not to love and worship and find their greatest joy in a triune God. He also created human beings who could choose whether or not to love and worship and find their greatest joys in a triune God. A network of relationships, not robots, in which choice would sustain or destroy all the good provisions God set before His creation.

<sup>v</sup> Dr. Larry Crabb, Jr., *Finding God: Moving through your problems toward* (NY: Walker and Company, 1993), xi.