

## Transcript for Episode #4 of the Desperate for Hope Podcast with guest Paul Tripp

**Vaneetha:** Paul, welcome to the Desperate for Hope podcast. Thank you so much for joining me today.

**Paul:** It's very good to be with you. Yep.

**Vaneetha:** Paul we met, we've met several years ago, but your ministry has impacted my life for decades. I don't know if we've talked about this, but your book, Age of Opportunity was the first time I realized in parenting that my kids weren't the problem. That I was the problem. I was so sure if I had different kids, we would have an amazing family.

And you showed me, really, the Lord showed me through your book that I was the problem. And that really opened my eyes to the gospel of grace, I would say, in a way that I hadn't seen before. So I'm so looking forward to this conversation as you talk about this in relation to suffering. So for those people who don't [00:01:00] know you, I'd love for you to just say a little bit about what you're doing now, your day-to-day life, and then maybe jump into your story of suffering.

**Paul:** Yeah, well my, my primary work is just gospel writing and I'm always working on another project, and the project I'm working on right now is a Bible project. I've written gospel summaries of every book of the Bible. And then this Bible has from Genesis to Revelation, a daily Bible reading plan. You can finish in a year.

At the end of every daily reading there will be a devotional out of that reading by me. So this has been a big, huge mountain to climb, but I'm getting there. I'm writing devotionals that will be in the month of August. So I just have September, October, November and December to complete and I'll be done.

So it's been the most exciting thing I've ever done. I've fallen in love with the word of God all over again, and I get up every morning excited to write [00:02:00] and feel very blessed that I've been chosen to do this project.

**Vaneetha:** Wow, I cannot wait for that. Your devotional New Morning Mercies. I think everybody I have ever known has gotten that book from me, so I cannot wait to read another one. And this one just threaded through the Bible as people read along, is just even more amazing. So thank you. Wow. Can't wait

for that. Would love to hear, some people probably know your gospel, all the gospel literature that you've put out, but may not know your story of suffering.

So I'd love for you to share that.

**Paul:** Yeah, you know, I had some minor symptoms back on October 19th, 2014. My doctor said, you just live real close to a major hospital. Why don't you just go and they can check you out? I thought I would be released in a few moments with some medication or something and before long there were [00:03:00] heads of five different departments of the hospital in my emergency room, and I knew I was very sick.

I was in the midst of kidney failure and I didn't know it, and that began a series of, well, it's been in the last seven years, 10 operations. And, and it's been, it's been very hard. It at times didn't make sense why, at the moment of my greatest ministry influence, I was rendered weaker than I've ever been in my life.

For a period of time for two years, I had a surgery every four months. Well, if you have a surgery every four months, you. You don't fully recover before you have the next surgery. And I was just getting weaker and weaker. Most recently I've had, a condition in my shoulders that has been extremely painful and has meant I can't dress myself and whatnot.

I'm, I'm at a point where I'm, I'm getting some help with that and, and better.[00:04:00] But yeah that's my story. It's been seven years of just unrelenting suffering.

**Vaneetha:** Wow. Do you have pain with that as well with the kidney failure? I know you have weakness

**Paul:** I have, I don't experience, pain. I do experience, sleeplessness and fatigue. So, my pattern now is I get about a half a day of work and then I'm, I'm pretty much done. I just don't have the energy after that. And I was known as the Energizer bunny, a guy of, of endless energy, and that's just not the case anymore.

Yeah, I remember seeing you speak for the first time and you were running around the stage. I was just amazed at your energy, so I'm sure that that's hard. Reminding you, you know, of our limitations.

**Paul:** Yep.

**Vaneetha:** As you have written so much about the gospel, how did the gospel become more real to you in the midst of this suffering?

**Paul:** [00:05:00] You know, one of the things that I was confronted with and, Vaneetha, it was it was very humbling that much of what I thought was faith in Christ, and the gospel of His grace, wasn't that at all. It was just that I was healthy and well, and I've always been able to do things quickly, and productive.

And there's other pride in that. And you know, the scripture says that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness and that's really what I've experienced. That all of a sudden I began to experience what it really means to just entrust yourself to Jesus and in ways that, that defy the logic of human strength and human health, and human wisdom [00:06:00] and human righteousness and all those things.

I'll give you an example. During, in the middle of that suffering, I was writing a book about parenting. The book is actually called Parenting. And when that first copy was delivered to me, I said, tearfully to Luella, my wife, I don't remember writing this book. And that wasn't an exaggeration.

**Paul:** It was the only time that I've ever sat down and read my own book cover to cover.

I literally didn't remember the process and content of that book. Now, that's what God is able to do. Weakness in God's hands is a workroom for His grace. And, and I think, I don't know what you're gonna ask next, but I wanna speak to this, that, we hate weakness [00:07:00] because we hate to be dependent. We are naturally self-sufficient, self independent human beings. That's what sin does to us. And so we don't like weakness. But God knows if we're ever going to know the deepest hope, hope and joy, and peace of His work, He's got to crush that independence in us.

**Vaneetha:** Hmm.

**Paul:** And, and one of the ways He does that is lead us through these moments of weakness.

Not because he's capricious and doesn't love us, but he wants us to, to experience power that is greater than any power we would ever independently have on our own.

**Vaneetha:** I love that, "weakness in God's hands is the workroom [00:08:00] of God's grace". I think that's a beautiful testimony because I think that is part of suffering always is weakness in different areas of our lives. And so that's a great quote that I want to remember. One of my biggest takeaways from your book, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*. In which you tell your story about kidney failure. You say this, "Your suffering is more powerfully shaped by what's in your heart than by what's in your body or in the world around you." And that quote has stayed with me. Could you just explain that?

What did you mean by that? For people who are hearing it for the first time.

**Paul:** Well, suffering is never neutral. What I mean by that is you never come to your own suffering empty. you always bring a bundle of things to your suffering that alters the way that you suffer, that shapes the way you suffer. That's why [00:09:00] not everybody suffers the same. So what's that bundle? You have a view of life.

You have a view of yourself. You have a view of God. You have a view of meaning and purpose. You, you have a view of what you deserve and what you don't deserve and what life is about. And all of those, those, deeply theological things then shape the way that you suffer. For example, if you are convinced going into suffering that God is distant and absent and doesn't hear you, then you won't seek Him and His help during your suffering.

Or if you're convinced that you're basically a good person and you only deserve good things to happen to you. Then you will struggle with deep anger while you're [00:10:00] suffering. So suffering is always shaped by the things that you bring to it. In fact, I would say something even further than that, suffering exposes what I believe.

Suffering doesn't change what you believe. Suffering exposes what you've already believed.

**Vaneetha:** Wow.

**Paul:** And, and so if, if a person who really believes, unshakably believes, that God is good, that person won't experience anger with God their suffering.

**Vaneetha:** Hmm.

**Paul:** Because you're already convinced that God is good. Now, that doesn't mean you won't cry out to him. It doesn't mean you won't ask for your suffering

to end, but you don't go... you don't have that war with God that so many people have. That's something that is the result of something you brought to your [00:11:00] suffering. I I, I'll give you an example. I was counseling a severely depressed woman and she was talking to me about God. And as she was defining who she thought God was, I thought if I thought that's who God was, I'd be depressed too. So her problem was she had this misshapen, unbiblical view of God that resulted in hopelessness in her life because she felt powerless. And God was not a source of power that she would trust. Well, that was not, something that was forced on her by her situation. That was something she brought to her situation and shaped the way she was dealing with it.

**Vaneetha:** I was just writing [00:12:00] an article this morning about do we actually look at God in our suffering or do we look at our problems? And it's sort of a similar thing, like what do we think about God when we think about our problems? Do we see His presence and provision, promises, or do we just see the problems and that, God sort of fades away. Or as this woman, maybe we don't even believe God is good or God cares.

**Paul:** I think that's a really important point. I, look, the Bible is the most honest book ever written. I mean, the blood and guts and dirt of the fallen world are almost on every page of scripture.

So biblical faith will never require you to deny reality. If you deny reality, you may reach momentary peace, but you're not exercising biblical faith.

But there's a balance to this. That doesn't mean that it's healthy to meditate on your problems. [00:13:00] Because if you're, if you meditate on your problems, you're going down. It's very important in the midst of your problems to meditate on God, on His character, on His power, on His presence, on His grace, on His faithfulness, on His love, and I think that's one of the, the major disciplines of suffering well. It's requiring yourself not to let your suffering dominate your thinking, dominate the meditations of your heart. Now that's hard because when you're, you know, you've been through it for decades. When you're suffering, there are a thousand what ifs that plague you. There are a thousand if only that plague you.

Now we have the problem of Web MD where we can go and create even more fear because we're self-diagnosing and we think we're [00:14:00] dying of, of everything. It just doesn't work. And so you have to require yourself to focus on God. I have an Irish friend who's been a dear friend of mine, and he knew what I was going through, and he would send me an Irish choir singing a beautiful hymn. And I'd, I'd listened to that hymn in my chair cause I didn't have much

strength to get out of the chair and I'd weep. But what was happening in that moment is the gospel was taking over my meditation. And for that moment, I wasn't thinking about what I was going through.

I was thinking about God and His presence and His promises and His grace. So you gotta fight the battle of your mind and not let your situation control your meditation, but, but God control it.

**Vaneetha:** Right. [00:15:00] It was interesting. Recently I took a picture with my iPhone camera and I put it on portrait mode. So I took a picture of something and everything faded into the background, but what I was focusing on, like that was crystal clear and huge and everything else faded into the background. And it's sort of a similar thing, like if we are focusing on our problems, those are crystal clear and God is blurry in the background.

Like maybe he can help, maybe he can't. But if we focus on God, then our problems take, we see them in a different light as well.

**Paul:** You know, one of the things that impressed me as I've done this Bible project is that in, in some of the historical moments that were the saddest and the darkest for God's people. God speaks with the most clarity of His presence, His power, His restorative, and forgiving grace. And it's like God's saying in the middle of darkness. [00:16:00] Wait a minute, I'm gonna change the narrative here. **I want** the narrative to be about me and. That's what we need to do. We need to change the narrative that's in our head. What story are you telling yourself every day? Is it just the story of your suffering and your aloneness and nobody understands? And how's this gonna turn out?

Or is God controlling the narrative? Now what's wonderful about that is that's not playing monkey games with your mind. Because what Grace does is it means your little story by God's power has now been embedded in the larger story of redemption. So you have a new story to tell yourself about who you actually are and where your hope is actually to be found.

And in that way, you're not deceiving yourself, you're not lying to yourself, but you're actually [00:17:00] telling yourself a narrative that is now your identity as a child of God.

**Vaneetha:** Yeah. The narrative in which we put our lives in and our suffering in makes such a difference. I know in this Bible study I outlined these that I, that is coming out, Desperate for Hope. I have, three principles that have really been

sort of this lens or anchors through which I view suffering. And one is the presence of God that He's with us, that he will never leave us.

And the next one is the purpose of God, and that is that our suffering really is part of a much bigger narrative that God is writing. And we may not know the purpose, but we know there is a purpose. And then lastly, another P, is the promise of heaven that this will end. Our suffering it will end, and we will be in heaven one day.

So we don't need to think it's gonna go on forever As I was thinking about that and rereading your book, Paul, and I read a lot of your books, I feel like I got some of those principles from your writing because [00:18:00] it feels like in reading what you write, you do talk about the presence of God and His power with you, His provision.

The meaning of suffering that God is sovereign in, there's purpose and that, that our suffering will end. And just wondering if you could speak to, from your own writing and experience, maybe the presence, purpose, and promises of heaven.

**Paul:** the first thing I would say about just the, the fact that God exists and is in control is, is so significant. Here's what that means, human beings can't ultimately find hope by understanding everything.

Because there are things that you just won't understand. Hope is found in trusting the One who is in control.

And understands all these things.

**Vaneetha:** Mm-hmm.

**Paul:** My children would, I'd have to say no to them when they were [00:19:00] little, very little, and they would, I knew they would never understand my explanation for why I had to say no. But I would say to them, does your daddy love you? They would say, yeah, my daddy loves you, loves me.

I said, is your daddy a mean daddy who just wants bad things for you? They'd say, no, no, no. I'd say, okay. Go down the hallway and say to yourself, I don't wanna know why my daddy said no, but I know my daddy loves me and I know he's good, and I know he understands. And that's, that's our heavenly father. Our heavenly father can't make every explanation that we want because our minds couldn't contain it. So trust isn't, isn't found in demanding that I understand

everything, trust is found in entrusting myself through the purpose, who understands and controls it all. That leads to a second thing, and it's taught all throughout scripture that God's greatest gift to us [00:20:00] is the gift of Himself. It's the one place where the giver is the gift.

**Vaneetha:** Hmm.

**Paul:** And so rather than saying, well just do this and do this, God says, I know what you need. It's me. And I will go with you, and I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you. There's one thing that can't be taken away, and it's God's presence. I think that's why after talking about suffering, Romans 8, Paul ends with the crescendo of "nothing can separate us from the love of God", because he wants us to know that God has created an unshakable bond with us.

And then His, His, power. I, I love what it says in Ephesians 1, that that power is the same power [00:21:00] by which Jesus was raised from the dead.

**Vaneetha:** Mm-hmm.

**Paul:** Look into that empty tomb. That's your power.

**Vaneetha:** Yeah. Wow.

**Paul:** Pretty, pretty amazing. I mean, what could there be, what definition of greater power than they could be in the power of resurrection?

And then, then we have the promises of God. I don't know if you've thought about this, but the, the reliability of God's promises is only as good as the extent of his sovereignty because God can only guarantee the delivery of his promises in places where He rules.

So in my loft here I can promise you things, but I can't promise you things at the loft next door cause I have no power there.

Since God [00:22:00] rules everything all the time, there will never be a situation, never be a location where He is unable to deliver what He's promised.

**Vaneetha:** Mm.



**Paul:** And the ultimate promise is new heavens and new Earth. That suffering and death will not win. the 1 Corinthians 15, that treatise on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, says that because He's risen, He is now the ascended king Christ.

Sitting at the right hand of God's throne. And know what He's doing now? He's putting enemies under His feet. The last enemy is death. And then we will be ushered into a world where there is no more sin and no more suffering, no more pain, no more disappointment, but peace and righteousness will reign [00:23:00] forever and ever.

And these things that we're talking about, I can absolutely say, oh, what gets me up in the morning.

**Vaneetha:** I, I would say the same.

**Paul:** And give me, gives me reason to continue, even when things are hard. When I, when I began to have this, shoulder problem and began to be extremely painful and restricted, you know, my first thought is, oh no, here we go again. Here's gonna be another multi-year travail. And that's when you have to preach the gospel to yourself. I, I wanna say one thing about that. It's really important that all of us understand that no one's more important in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do. You are in a constant conversation with yourself. [00:24:00] And what you say to you, about you, about God, about life will shape the way you live, will shape your emotions, will shape your thoughts and desires and choices. And I think most people are, are not aware of their private conversation. They're not aware of the things they say to themselves that are harmful or untrue.

And so I would just encourage people, listen to your private conversation. Is God at the center of that conversation?

What, what are you saying to you?

**Vaneetha:** I remember reading that and hearing that from you, and that has been profound in my own life. Just listening to myself. Because I think we have this talk that we probably wouldn't say out loud, but we're thinking, how are we gonna get out of this? Or is God even, does God even care? We [00:25:00] may think those things to ourselves. And I have found when I dare to voice them to other people, that's when God's grace really can come in. When I'm willing

**Paul:** Oh, absolutely.

**Vaneetha:** both admit it and let someone hear that private conversation. There is such healing in that, whereas I think sometimes we have it and then rather than responding with the truth of scripture to ourselves, we just don't admit it to anybody, but it just sort of goes deeper into our hearts.

**Paul:** I, I actually think that if we would say some of the fearful, doubtful things that we think if we'd say 'em out loud, it would surprise us. Most of the time that conversation is not verbalized and so we're, we get accustomed to the way we think and we don't challenge those ways of thinking, and we just need to listen to your private conversation.[00:26:00]

And what is the fruit that that private conversation is producing in your life?

**Vaneetha:** Yeah, I've asked myself sort of the question from Psalm 42, why are you cast down, oh my soul? And then so why are you upset? And just really sort of digging beneath that and saying it aloud to God can really help. Cause sometimes we have this vague sense of things are horrible, but we don't really take the time maybe to go with God in those things and admit what we're feeling.

**Paul:** Yeah. You know, you, you had mentioned earlier, we don't always know what God's purpose is in our suffering. And I think that's absolutely true. We, we need to be careful that we don't put words in God's mouth that He didn't speak. But there are, there are three places where scripture does address that question, and I think it would be helpful for us to talk about that. [00:27:00] First, in Romans 8, Paul makes it very clear that, For God's wise purpose, He has chosen us to live in a dramatically broken world between the already ever conversion and the not yet of our home going. Paul says, we live in a world that's groaning, waiting for redemption. You groan when you're in pain. You groan when you can't do what you're supposed to do. You, you groan when you're disappointed. So this world is groaning, and so it's pretty clear that suffering is a universal human experience. If you're not suffering now, you will someday. And if you're not suffering now, you're probably near somebody who is.

And so, God knew that His purpose [00:28:00] for us would be best served by living in a world where suffering exists.

And that's, that's all of us. So you, you suffer because you live in this broken, groaning world. There's a second thing, that the Bible clearly teaches. That suffering is God's tool of growing, maturing sanctifying us. That, you know this is true. It's almost silly to say. But you've never heard someone say, I had three

of the easiest years in my life and I learned so much. You've never heard that, but you, you hear over and over again. You even hear this by unbelieving people. I went through a tough time and I learned so much. It's very clear that in God's [00:29:00] hands, suffering is productive of a development of good character.

**Vaneetha:** Mm-hmm.

**Paul:** And so it's not like it's just meaningless fate and I can't escape it. There's a third thing that the Bible clearly teaches, is that God uses suffering to qualify us to minister to other sufferers. Paul says, we comfort you with the same comfort that we received from God. And so, you know, it's not just, Vaneetha,

I don't just own, own my blessing. I don't even own my suffering. My suffering belongs to the Lord. So you suffer because you live in a fallen world. You suffer because God loves you and wants to grow and mature you, and you suffer because God's [00:30:00] called you to minister to the hurting people in this world.

And suffering is what tenderizes you and makes you compassionate and understanding. No one gives grace better than a person who's cried out for grace themselves.

**Vaneetha:** Oh wow. I love that, Paul. And that's, I, I do write about those things in the Bible study. So it's, it's neat that you mention them, that, that even though we don't know all the purposes of suffering when it happens. And we can't say this happened because of, you know, from my instance, you know, my son didn't die because God needed, Somebody said to me at his funeral, God needed another angel. Of, of course, that on multiple levels is not true.

But at the same time, there are so many purposes in suffering that the Bible talks about that we know are true and, and you know, ultimately they are for our joy and God's glory

**Paul:** Yeah, and I, I think the wisdom of God is shown by [00:31:00] God doesn't talk about those three purposes with a specificity, individuality. But He, He talks about them generally for all of us because in particular moments doesn't tell us why this particular moment of suffering has hit me at this particular time.

I don't have answers for that, but I have a general sense that God is a God of purpose and that all that He does in my life has purpose.

**Vaneetha:** Mm-hmm. I would say that idea has changed my theology of suffering .Because I think before my son died, I really didn't see purpose to suffering quite the same way. I mean, God had shown me there was a purpose to my having polio. But, It was after Paul died and I really grappled with why did this happen, that the sense that God is sovereign and there is a purpose and there are 10,000 reasons, really transformed how I lived in that, not [00:32:00] thinking this was some random event and God maybe would clean it up, but there was no purpose.

And knowing that God is purposeful in everything that comes into our life. I think for everyone listening in their own suffering, I think gives you hope in the midst of it. Cause if it was random, that would make me feel hopeless.

**Paul:** Yeah, and I, I think for those of us who are staying alongside of sufferers, It means we have wonderful things to say about God's presence and promises and purpose in suffering. But we should be careful that we not say more than God has said and act like we know more than we actually know. I mean, sometimes, you know this is true cause you've experienced and so have I, the most powerful thing you can give a person in suffering is to model for them the presence [00:33:00] of God. I'm gonna be with you in your anger or depression or fear and doubt and suffering is not gonna drive me away. And in that way, we're, we're making God's presence visible. My mantra is God makes His invisible grace visible by sending people of grace to give grace to people who need grace.

**Vaneetha:** Oh, say that again.

**Paul:** God makes His invisible grace visible by sending people of grace to give grace to people who need grace. And so this has been liberating to me because I've, I've tried to live a ministry life. I don't have a have to have an answer for everything. Sometimes my most deeply theological answer is, I don't have a clue. But [00:34:00] I know someone who is tender and kind and loving and powerful and wise. And in this moment where we're clueless, He's worthy of your trust.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. Wow. Well that is a perfect segue into one of the things I wanted to ask you. How do you respond to people who have pretty deep questions in their suffering. Like, why is God letting me suffer? How do you respond to those questions that I'm sure you've gotten as a pastor and a counselor and a friend?

**Paul:** I, I think that those very questions are all over the Psalms.

**Vaneetha:** Mm-hmm.

**Paul:** One of the things, I think the reason that the Psalms are in the Bible is because they're meant, they're there to keep us honest about the true nature of, of faith. God will confuse you. He will do unexpected things. He will bring [00:35:00] the unplanned and the unwanted into your life.

And so being laden with questions is, is in one way, part of the life of faith. Of course, I have questions. You know, trying to understand God in ways is like trying to put the ocean in a thimble. You know, He's, He's incalculably great. And, and so, I think the normal life of faith is asking questions.

Now it's, I like to think of those questions being in two categories. One is the questions of wonderment. God, I just don't understand and I wanna trust You. But I don't understand what's going on in my life. I think that's appropriate and wonderful, and I think God [00:36:00] receives those kinds of questions with a tender heart.

They're not offensive to Him. We don't disgust Him when we ask those kinds of questions anymore than when your child says, "mommy, I don't understand." The second, the second set of questions, are what I would call the questions of accusation. And they may come in a question form, but they're accusing God of not being good.

And wonderment and accusation have completely different spiritual directions to them. Cause in wonderment, I'm running to God with the struggles of my heart. In accusation, I've already determined I'm not gonna run to God because I don't think He's trustworthy. [00:37:00] And, and so God is able to handle your questions.

Bring your questions to Him. Better to bring your questions to God in humble, confused, wonderment than to turn your back on God. Because you can't figure out who He is and what he's doing. So, so I, I think like the Psalmist, when the Psalmist says, how long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will my enemies triumph over me?

And say, where's your God? That's an act of faith because you're bringing those questions to God instead of accusing the reputation of God to a friend as an act of rejection of Him. And they're just, they're just two different pathways.

**Vaneetha:** Yeah, I, that's such an important distinction. Like we can have questions, but are our questions driving us to God? Are we asking them

[00:38:00] of God? Or are they driving us away from God? Because we're basically accusing God. We're not even talking to God. We're just determined that God doesn't care. And so our questions are really of His character versus understanding what's going on.

**Paul:** Yeah, I, maybe we ought to talk about this too. Sometimes what is revealed there, is a difference, a disparity between your professional theology and your actual street level theology. Maybe on Sunday you sing those songs with everybody else about God's goodness and presence of power, but on Tuesday you're pretty mad at Him and not wanting to trust Him.

A great example of this, it's, it's, I think, the primary example of a disparity between what you say you believe and what you actually believe is the life of Jonah. God calls Jonah to Nineva. Jonah hates [00:39:00] Ninevites, and doesn't wanna be part of God's work there. Runs another direction, hops on a boat,

God sends a storm and the sailors on the boat are trying to figure out whose fault the storm is, and they find Jonah and they ask him to introduce himself. Now listen to what Jonah says. He says, I am a Hebrew. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven. What? There is no actual fear of the Lord in this man's life, or he wouldn't have run from Him. So you know that, that's a cultural confession. That is not actually what he believes. And so sometimes doubt is able to, to live in our lives because we think because we've said X on Sunday, we're okay. When actually, we're not entrusting ourselves to our Lord. I think the enemy of our [00:40:00] souls will gladly give us our formal theology if underneath it he can, control our hearts.

**Vaneetha:** Wow.

**Paul:** Because just because you have the right theological statement doesn't mean on a Tuesday, when you're facing unthinkable things, that you're actually entrusting yourself to your Lord.

**Vaneetha:** hmm. That's so true.

**Paul:** Is there, is there a, is there a distance, a disparity between the formal theology that you say you believe and what you think about God and how you respond to God in the hardships of everyday life?

**Vaneetha:** That's sort of the rub of all of our suffering is are we really believing, truly believing, the things that we say we believe about God. And I would love for you to speak to somebody maybe who's listening that says, wow,

I, I probably have not been trusting God. I'm not asking [00:41:00] questions of wonderment.

I'm asking questions of like, accusations. What can they do if they, they recognize themselves in that?

**Paul:** Well, I can tell you what not to do. Don't hide in shame. Don't wallow in guilt. Jesus has completely carried your guilt and carried your shame on the cross. Jesus shamed shame on the cross. So that in my darkest, foolish, most faithless moments, I can run to God and know He won't turn me away. So don't be so afraid that you've stepped over the line in your anger with God, that He's turned His back on you. The most horrible moment of Jesus on the cross was the [00:42:00] moment when God turned His back on the Son, on His own son. And Jesus cries "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me? Jesus took every single ounce of my rejection, so I would never again see the back of God's head. So the first thing you do is run to God, not run away from Him. He's already paid the price for your disbelief.

**Vaneetha:** Hmm.

**Paul:** He already paid the price for your doubt and your anger and your accusation. Second thing, run to God's word. I would say run to the Psalms.

Because if you're suffering and you can't relate to the Psalms, you're probably comatose. Because it's all over there.

And not just human suffering, but just the goodness of God in the face of [00:43:00] human suffering. Third thing I'd say is run to godly community. How about getting on your cell phone and calling a trusted friend and say, I'm having trouble trusting God. Would you help me?

Would you walk with me through this? Would you be an encouragement to me? Would you, every once in a while, remind me of things that I couldn't, I can't remind myself of. So run to God. Run to His word. Run to his people. We were not hardwired to suffer on our own. This sounds cliché, but I don't care. Suffering well is a community project. I need help.

And one of the things that just has been so clear to me is I would not have made it through without the body of Christ, without dear friends [00:44:00] that just held me up and would pour things into me that I was not able to pour into myself. I mean, the closest of those is my wife, Luella. She would confront my moments of disbelief and say, Paul, do you hear what you're saying to yourself?

And that would just sort of get my attention. And she would remind me of God's presence and His promises again. So run to God. You don't have to be afraid of him. Run to His word, it's meant to give you life. And run to His people.

**Vaneetha:** So say you are the person on the other end of the phone and somebody says, wow, I'm struggling to trust God. Or something tragic has just happened in my life. What would you say are wise things to say and do? Being on the other end of [00:45:00] that phone call for people who don't know what to say.

**Paul:** First thing I would do is pray for the person.

**Vaneetha:** Hmm.

**Paul:** And pray again. God's presence, God's promises, and God's power, that it would be evident to them. Second, this is not a time for a lecture on the sovereignty of God. It's a time for that person to know that God's mercies are new every morning. I, I've just recently written on the passage lamentation that says, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His, His mercies never come to an end. They're new every morning.. Great is Your faithfulness. That's what I wanna pour into this person's life. And you know, sometimes it's best to say, look, I'm, [00:46:00] I don't want to answer you right now. Let me pray for you and let me, let me get back. Cause I really wanna be a help to you. And just, grab a hold of some of those passages of scripture so you're ready to have a conversation that is uplifting and hopeful. And then I would say to this person that, whatever your struggle is with God right now, you don't have to hide from Him. God, God welcomes you into His presence. The cross of Jesus Christ forever ends our need to hide. And, and then I think it's, if you're able, you have to be careful that you don't make promise you're not gonna keep, it's wonderful if you say that person, I'm gonna keep checking up on you. Now if you can't do [00:47:00] that, it's really discouraging for people to make those promises and not follow through. I'm just gonna say this. I think, as a generality, we say too much "I'll pray for you". And we, and we five minutes later, we've forgotten that we've made that promise. So if you're gonna promise your involvement, make sure you follow through.

**Vaneetha:** Thank you. That's a great word. I, I think one of the things I have been doing is praying first for myself that God would remind me to pray. I mean, it sounds so simple, but God doesn't even put that on us. We can say, God, remind me to pray. And then I try to write it down on a prayer card. But, that is such an important thing is to follow through on what we say.



**Paul:** Cause I think in suffering we try to tell somebody, oh, we'll be there, we'll do this, and then we have other things going on and we forget. Yeah, and what, what we do forget too, is that the most acute, [00:48:00] dramatic moments of suffering are followed by a long tail of suffering.

And the Church, people of God, tend to be really good at rising to the moment, but before long, everybody's gone back to their life and that person feels terribly alone. The crisis is over, but they're left with the long-term impact of that crisis in their lives.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. Remembering the long tail of suffering and really remembering it's never too late. Even if you haven't called in a month, you can call. I think we feel like, oh, I haven't kept up. So I've lost my opportunity, but recognizing you've never lost it. You can always call. You can always pray.

**Paul:** Yeah. Amen. I absolutely agree.

**Vaneetha:** Well, Paul, you and Luella, have become friends for me and Joel, and you guys are really fun people.

You have a great sense of humor. And in this podcast, I love to [00:49:00] talk about what brings people joy, what makes them laugh. I'd love to hear that.

**Paul:** Well, you mentioned it. God, God has blessed me with a wonderful sense of humor. There's never a day in our lives we don't laugh, and whether that's saying silly things to Luella or making witty observations about life. We're very thankful for that. I'm a, I'm a creative by nature. So I love to cook.

I think making a meal is a way to bring joy into people's lives. I'm a painter by vocation and I love creating beauty that way. And then I'm just, I'm just blown away by the pleasures that are everywhere around us in this beautiful world that God made. I mean, if you, I was walking along a stream one day and there was a feather [00:50:00] on the ground and I picked it up.

When I saw it on the ground, it just looked gray. When I picked it up, I rubbed it with my fingers and it was stripes of white and black all the way up that... it was beautiful. And I'm thinking, this is one feather of one bird that God wouldn't leave one color, but he had to make it more interesting than that. If you cut a square of bark off a tree, it's not just brown, it's 50 shades of brown with incredible texture, and that's everywhere you look in God's world.

And then God gave us pleasure gates. Eyes and ears and mouth and the ability to touch. So we could take in this beauty that He's created. And I wanna say to people, get outside your house. Go to a zoo, stand at the edge of a pond, [00:51:00] walk through a forest, smell some flowers, and, and just remember, what joy God has at creating this kind of joy for us.

Hmm. We should all look out of our windows every day and just smile at what God has created around us. It's just hard to imagine. I mean, grass, you know, a sea of green. That's all these individual little things. Stems of grass. I mean, how crazy is that? You know? So I think if you do that, it just brings joy and it makes you, makes you smile.

If you, if you watch a puppy, you're gonna laugh. Or the wild wild actions of a cat [00:52:00] make you smile. Or listen to the chirping of a bird. I remember we were on, when I was in a staff at 10th Presbyterian Church, we were on a pastoral retreat at the Jersey Shore and we're, we're having a Bible study, and Phil Ryken said, stop.

He said, everybody be quiet. He said, there's a Mockingbird out there. And so he listened, and this Mockingbird did the calls of seven different birds, and then he'd start again. Well, all of a sudden we are laughing and worshiping just because somebody had the sense to point out that bird to us. So there are so many things in the world that are beautiful and bring new joy and bring you smile.

And if you can't find them in your house, get outta your house and enjoy God's world.

**Vaneetha:** Yeah. Wow. Pay attention.

**Paul:** Oh, because of that, because of that. I wanna say one other [00:53:00] thing. Luella and I love museums because we love the ability that God has given, people to capture the beauty of His world. Or, or go to a good concert. Music is an amazing thing. All those sounds of all those instruments came outta the mind of God.

It's, it's amazing. So, we need to laugh and we need to smile and we need to find things in our lives that God has given us that stimulate that in us.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. Well you and Luella just, have a way of noticing beauty that... Joel and I have been to your loft and we both think, particularly me, it is the most beautiful place I've been to. Like I was sort of in awe the way Luella and

you both have curated beauty in your home. And so it just speaks [00:54:00] to the fact that you live that and you love beauty and you see it as from God and that just brings joy, whether you can get out of your house or not, just to curate beauty.

It doesn't have to be expensive. It can just be paying attention. So I love the way you model that. And, um, just one last question, Paul. This podcast is called Desperate for Hope, and I like to ask guests, what, where have you found hope, practically one way when you felt most desperate for it?

**Paul:** You know, I, I think, you know, the spiritual answer would be in the word of God, but there are times when even that seems hard. I really do believe that it is in being vulnerable so that friends feel the welcome to give you hope. and I, [00:55:00] I would've never gotten through what I've been through in the last seven, eight years if I hadn't been surrounded by loving patient, godly friends who spoke hope into my heart when I couldn't find it.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. Praise God. Well, I feel like our conversation and the words that you spoke, spoke hope into my heart, so I'm, I'm praying that it does the same for the people listening. So thank you so much for joining me today, Paul. I've loved our conversation.

**Paul:** It's my honor. And you are, you're one of my heroes because you've been through hell and back and yet, you have such a sweet spirit and such a desire to serve and to love. And, when, when people ask me, who are your suffering heroes? I always say Vaneetha Risner. She, she's, she's one of those. So you, you are a beacon of hope, and [00:56:00] I'm honored that we have this friendship.

**Vaneetha:** Oh, well your, our friendship has meant, means so much to me. So thank you again, Paul. So appreciate you.

**Paul:** Yeah.