



WEEKLY LEADER GUIDE

STORY OF MY LIFE

WEEK 3

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Story of My Life

WEEK 3



WEEK SUMMARY

We live in an amazing world of technology. When you think about it, our phones, computers, tablets and nearly every app we can download have the same purpose—to make life easier. And we can all agree on one thing: *easy is good*. If there's a way to make life simpler, smoother, or less complicated, we're on board. And, because we believe that *easy is good*, our brains also draw the natural conclusion that *not easy is not good*. In a lot of ways, that logic can save us hurt. But it's not always true, is it? We've had experiences that were both difficult and good—like getting a job or raising a child. The other problem with our “easy is good” mantra is that it can often give us a distorted view of God. It can be tempting to assume that if we experience something *not easy* then it must be *not good*. And, if God allowed us to experience it, then maybe *He* is not good. But what if we've got it all wrong? What if difficult and good aren't enemies? What if God can take something *not easy* and use it for our good? As we'll discuss this week, Jesus' closest followers experienced difficulties and discovered that the path to a better life story is rarely easy, but it's always worth it.



THINK ABOUT THIS

One of the greatest things for anyone in a small group to hear is, “me too.” The power in those two words cannot be understated when someone is sharing a doubt or a hardship. The whole point of small group is to share experiences and ensure that no one is alone in whatever it is they're going through. You may have never had the same experiences as your group members, but chances are you've felt similar emotions, wrestled with similar tensions, and asked similar questions of God. Focus on what you do have in common and chances are, you'll find a “me too” moment.

Do your best to relate to the hardships that the others are sharing and encourage others to do so as well. You don't need to have the answers to all the doubts and questions your group members may bring. Sometimes saying “me too” to a doubt or an experience will do more to build trust than any other answer. Within community there will be shared experiences. Do your best to encourage those experiences and facilitate the growth of relationships through “me too” moments. This week, try to relate to what your members are sharing and let them know that no matter what they're thinking or feeling, you're with them. And more importantly—so is God.

TEACHING MATERIALS



VIDEO 03



AUDIO 03

Story of My Life

WEEK 3



BOTTOM LINE

**THE PATH TO A BETTER STORY
IS RARELY AN EASY PATH.**

**Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings,
because we know that suffering produces perseverance;
perseverance, character; and character, hope.**

ROMANS 5:3-4

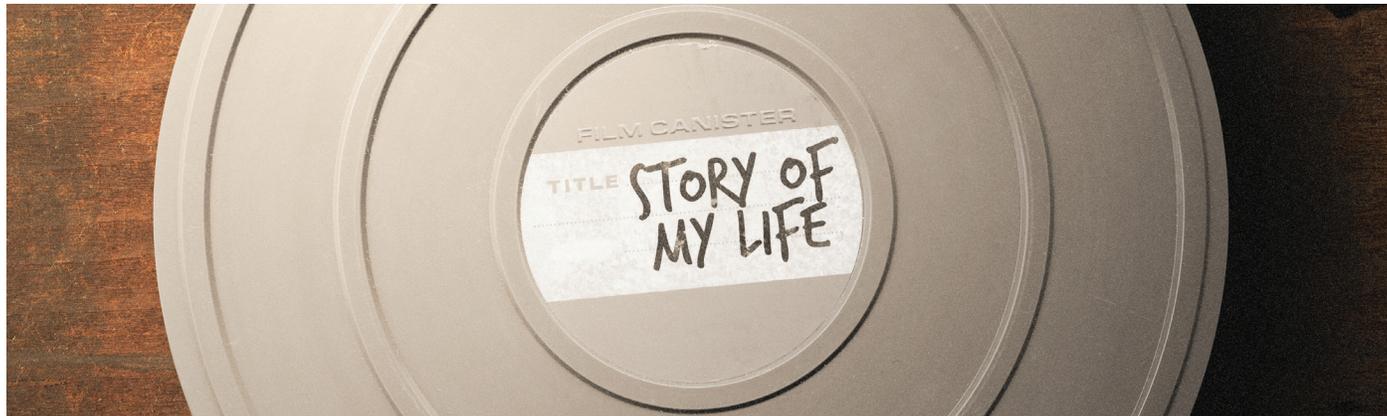
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are a guide to get the conversation started in your group—don't feel like you need to ask everything you see here! As long as you're having a conversation, you're on the right track. Also, feel free to adjust the questions to fit the needs of your specific group.

- 1. WHAT PIECE OF TECHNOLOGY DO YOU HAVE THAT DOES THE MOST TO MAKE YOUR LIFE CONVENIENT AND EASY?**
- 2. GIVE SOME EXAMPLES OF THINGS THAT ARE BOTH DIFFICULT AND GOOD.**
- 3. WHAT IS THE VALUE OF GOING THROUGH DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES? GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF SOMETHING THAT WAS HARD BUT MADE YOU BETTER.**
- 4. WHAT MAKES UP A PERSON'S CHARACTER? WHAT DO YOU WISH PEOPLE WOULD SAY WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER?**
- 5. HOW HAS GOD USED A CHALLENGE TO MAKE YOUR LIFE STORY BETTER?**
- 6. WHAT ARE SOME WAYS WE CAN SHOW GRATITUDE IN THE MIDDLE OF DIFFICULT THINGS? (SAYING "THANK YOU" OUT LOUD, BEING KIND TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE, ETC.)**
- 7. WHAT'S ONE CHALLENGE YOU'RE FACING THAT WE CAN PRAY ABOUT OR ENCOURAGE YOU THROUGH THIS WEEK?**

Communication Plan

WEEK 3



CONTINUING THE EXPERIENCE

Did you ever wish you could strategically communicate with your small group outside of group time? Ever wish you could find a way to share quick snippets of what they're learning or even send a word of encouragement to them?

Well . . . now you can.

The communication plan is designed to help your small group attenders engage with the truths in that week's group time. Below you'll find bite-size content that you can post on your

attenders' social media channels or send through email. There are tweets, posts for Facebook and Instagram, and images that you can use. And they're all designed to help your attenders connect with the week's topic.

Remember to make these posts and tweets yours. Don't feel like you have to use all of the content provided in a given series. Use this plan as a starting point as you leverage social media with your small group.

TEXT MESSAGES

SEND THIS TO EVERYONE IN YOUR GROUP:

Hi! Just wanted to let you know that I'm asking God to help give you His perspective as you're walking through tough stuff this week. Take heart—He is working for good!

SEND THIS TO ANYONE WHO MISSED GROUP THIS WEEK:

(Leader: You can find the audio file in your downloads. Use a service like Google Drive or Dropbox to share it.)

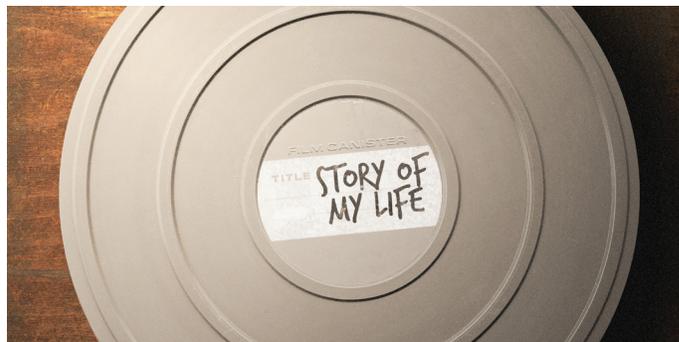
Hey—we missed you at group! Here's the link to the audio so you can catch up. Hope all is well and can't wait to see you next week!

SEND THIS TO ONE OR TWO PEOPLE IN YOUR GROUP, JUST BECAUSE:

Hey! Just touching base. How has your week been? Will I see you at small group next week?

SOCIAL MEDIA

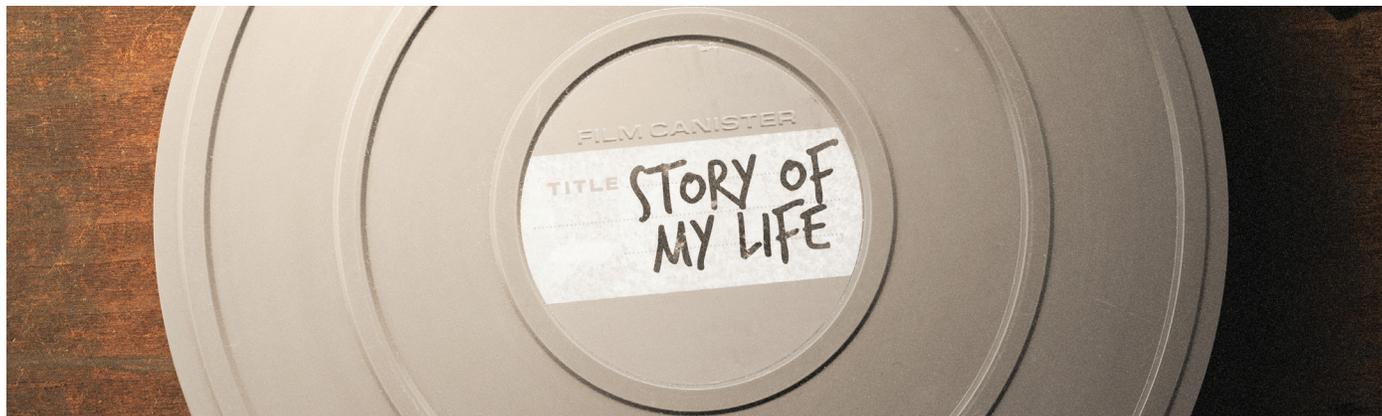
POST THIS TO YOUR FACEBOOK OR INSTAGRAM:



This week, we looked at how the path to a better story is rarely an easy one, but how God in His goodness uses every hardship to grow something beautiful in us. I'm excited about next week and looking more into what it means to live a better story.

Weekly Email

WEEK 3



FOR THE LEADER

Remember to email your small group every week with a reminder of when small group meets, directions, and any information that would be helpful for them. To make it simple, just **copy and paste the email below** and fill in any information that you think

your group members might need to know. Since every group and leader is different, feel free to change the email text to fit your group.

WEEK 3 EMAIL

Hey everyone!

Hope you all are having a great week! I wanted to send out a quick email to let everyone know what we'll be talking in small group this week.

We're in week three of *Story of My Life*. This week's topic is about the purpose of difficult times and how God not only helps us endure hardships, but He also makes us better because of them. We'll spend time in small group talking about different circumstances we've all experienced and how God uses each and every circumstance to grow our faith.

I'm really looking forward to our time together.

Here are the details for our meeting:

Date/time:

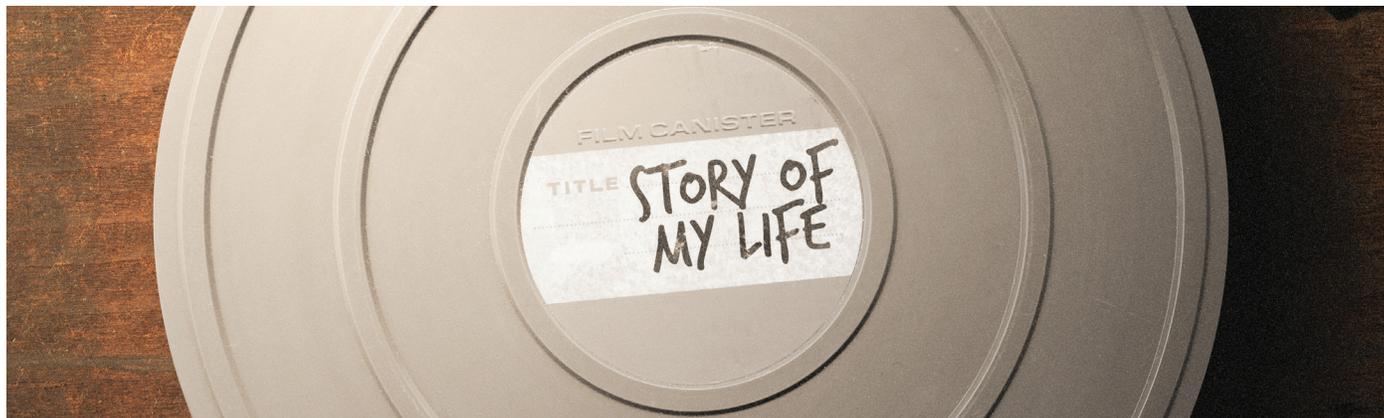
Address:

Our weekly Bible Reading Plan and the questions for this week are attached.

See you guys soon!

Bible Reading Plan

WEEK 3



OVERVIEW

Wouldn't it be awesome if you could help your small group members engage with God's Word all week long, instead of just during your weekly small group time? That's the intention of the Bible Reading Plan that goes along with this series.

Every week of a series comes with five unique verses and five unique prompts to help your small group members think about and engage with Scripture throughout the week. Each Scripture image can be found in the "Graphics" folder of the series download and each prompt can be found below.

HOW TO USE

We've designed these images and prompts to be flexible enough to use in a wide variety of ways. But to help you get started, here are three things you might want to try:

- 1. POST THEM.** These images and prompts work perfectly on social media!
- 2. TEXT THEM.** If you're looking for a more personal way to encourage your group members to read Scripture, try texting

each day's Scripture and prompt to the group. Of course, we're all busy. So to save time, you may want to sign up for an online texting service and schedule those in advance.

- 3. PRINT OR EMAIL THEM.** An easy way to have your group use the Bible Reading Plan is to simply print or email the next page. That way they have each day's reading before the week begins.

SCRIPTURE AND DAILY PROMPTS FOR EACH IMAGE

MONDAY (Day 1) Philippians 4:11-12

What do you think is the secret to being content in any and all circumstances?

TUESDAY (Day 2) Philippians 4:13, NLT

Paul's source of contentment was knowing that he could handle any circumstance with Jesus. Do you think the same is true for you? Are there any circumstances in your life that you think you can't handle? What would it look like for you to trust in God's strength in those circumstances?

WEDNESDAY (Day 3) James 1:12

Going through a trial? Know this: God sees you, and when these temporary circumstances have passed, He'll crown you with a crown of life—and it will never be taken away.

THURSDAY (Day 4) Psalm 27:1

Do you feel like you rest and trust in God? Ask Him to teach you to rest in His great power as the stronghold of your life.

FRIDAY (Day 5) Isaiah 41:13

God is offering His hand to walk you through any circumstances you face. How can you accept His help?

Bible Reading Plan

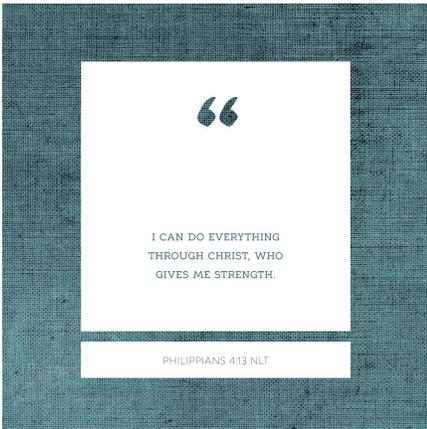
WEEK 3



I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

PHILIPPIANS 4:11-12

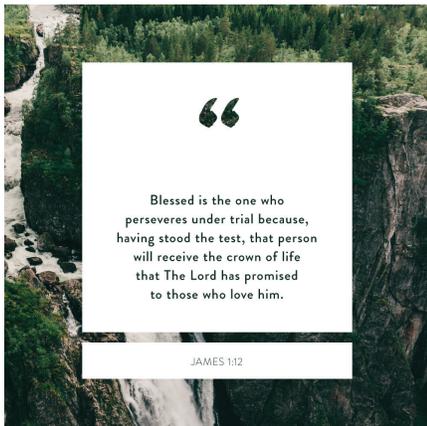
DAY 1: What do you think is the secret to being content in any and all circumstances?



I CAN DO EVERYTHING THROUGH CHRIST, WHO GIVES ME STRENGTH.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13 NLT

DAY 2: Paul's source of contentment was knowing that he could handle any circumstance with Jesus. Do you think the same is true for you? Are there any circumstances in your life that you think you can't handle? What would it look like for you to trust in God's strength in those circumstances?



Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that The Lord has promised to those who love him.

JAMES 1:12

DAY 3: Going through a trial? Know this: God sees you, and when these temporary circumstances have passed, He will crown you with a crown of life—and it will never be taken away.

Bible Reading Plan

WEEK 3



DAY 4: Do you feel like you rest and trust in God? Ask Him to teach you to rest in His great power as the stronghold of your life.



DAY 5: God is offering His hand to walk you through any circumstances you face. How can you accept His help?

Teaching Script



Week 3

BOTTOM LINE

THE PATH TO A BETTER STORY IS RARELY AN EASY PATH.

INTRODUCTION

We live in an amazing world of technology. Technology solves so many of our problems and makes life so much easier. Think about it. I can adjust the temperature of my home from 300 miles away. My kids can FaceTime their grandparents whenever they want. I can find the closest gas station from any road in the nation with a few taps on a screen. Have you ever thought about that? It's amazing. When you think about it, nearly every device we own has the same purpose—to make life *easier*. And you know what I say to that? *Thank you*.

And whether it's the apps on our phones or the appliances in our kitchens, I think we can all agree on one thing: EASY IS GOOD.

TENSION

Now don't worry. I'm not about to tell you that easy is bad and that we should all look for ways to make our lives harder. I'm not going to suggest that God is mad every time we use our phones to order pizza or let a machine wash our dishes for us. Not at all.

But I do want to draw our attention to something. There's a side-effect to this "easy is good" mentality. For most of us, while we believe that EASY IS GOOD, our brains also draw the natural conclusion that NOT EASY is NOT GOOD.

Isn't that true? With all of the modern conveniences that we have, it can be tempting to think that when something is complicated or difficult or requires some work for us, it must be NOT GOOD. And that's a problem.

Why?

Because NOT EASY things happen to all of us. We've had people we love die. We've had good friends break our heart. We've been so frustrated with our kids that we've yelled. We've

become so discouraged that we've felt like the only option is to give up. We all have a number of other experiences that we can file under NOT EASY. So when our motto for operation is "EASY IS GOOD," it can be tempting to make the assumption that when God allows us to experience something NOT EASY then it must mean GOD is NOT GOOD. That His intentions for us are not good.

Of course, not all problems are the same. There are some difficult things we bring on ourselves. All of us have made life more difficult at times because of the dumb choices we've made that came with consequences. But that's not what we're talking about here. I'm talking about the kind of pain and difficulty that we experience simply because it's a part of life.

For a lot of us, that's exactly what stands in the way of us having a close relationship with God. For some of us, we've experienced some NOT EASY moments or some downright awful ones. For some of us we're in the middle of those moments, and it has lead us to believe that God isn't on our side. That either He isn't as powerful as we once thought . . . or maybe worse, He just isn't as good.

At the same time, there's something that many of us know, especially those of us who are a little bit older and those of us who have lived a little bit longer.

Not everything difficult is bad.

Isn't it true that most of what's truly worth doing in life is rarely easy or problem-free? Talk to any entrepreneur, and they'll tell you their success hardly came overnight. If it came at all, it happened after they mortgaged their house, worked too many 90-hour weeks, and didn't take a salary for three years. And what about raising kids? The only people who think raising kids is easy



Teaching Script

Week 3

are people who have no kids. But if you've been awake through sleepless nights, fought with a toddler over what shirt he's going to wear, watched your middle school daughter cry herself to sleep, or picked your son up after being cut for the third time from the football team, then you understand hard. Nothing about that is easy, but is it worth it? Absolutely. Some of the best parts of life are going to come with pain, difficulty, and problems.

So where does that leave us? If easy is good but not easy isn't necessarily bad, what are we supposed to aim for? Is it possible to have a good life story, even when it isn't easy? And how do we respond? What do we do when God allows our lives to be something other than the easy, care-free story we hoped for?

TRUTH

The apostle Paul, who we talked about last week, wrote about this very idea in a letter to the church in Rome. In fact, Paul believed if we prayed for and sought an easy or safe life, then we'd actually be missing out on one of the very things God uses to give us a better story.

We talked about how Paul's circumstances were far from easy. He endured jail, torture, beatings, and rejection. To live how Paul lived in the first century and in an empire that was hostile to this new faith was the very opposite of easy.

Yet in spite of these circumstances, Paul wrote this: *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:3-4).*

Paul started by saying that we can have hope, which sounds pleasant, but then he followed with the fact that it will come through suffering. Which is not so pleasant. Who rejoices in . . .

- Another failed attempt at dating?
- A child who won't sleep through the night?
- A missed job opportunity?
- A miscarriage?
- The death of a parent?

Rejoicing isn't anyone's first reaction. Yet Paul, in the middle of difficult circumstances, didn't tell us to pray for an easier life, or to run away from a challenging life. He told us that there's a way to live the best life in the midst of challenges. And he shared that when we endure difficult situations, it will lead to three things: perseverance, character, and hope.

Paul says that suffering, pain, and difficulties aren't always bad. In fact, **the more of them we face, the more endurance we develop.**

You understand the idea of endurance if you've ever trained for a race or played a sport when you were young. The whole reason for workouts is to produce endurance—to train your body to go farther and get through more than you thought it could. **When we choose to do difficult things, we develop endurance.** In other words, when you go through something hard, you become the kind of person who can get through something hard. You become stronger. You have more character. And knowing you've gotten through something before can give you the hope that you'll get through it again.

But don't miss this. Paul said in order to gain perseverance, character, and hope, we have to go *through* suffering—not around it. To become the kind of person we want to be, we have to go through the moments that are going to get us there. In fact, he even took things one step further—Paul's desire for us was that we'd glory in our sufferings, we'd rejoice in them, because we'd know about the good things God was growing in us as a result of them.

If you think this sounds impossible, you aren't alone. Rarely do I want to glory—or delight in—my difficulties. I want to remove them. But Paul knew something we tend to forget—that change for any of us is difficult. We have to be forced to change. We need help to grow. Look back over your life, and you'll see that it was in the hard times when you matured as a person. It was there in the pain where you grew closer to God. Sure, you grew and matured some in the easy times, but the hard times were the times that really changed you. Suffering and difficulty are two of the best teachers to change us, shape us, and move us all in the direction of making us more like Jesus.

God has never promised any of us an easy life or that He would remove all our obstacles when we started following Him. But He has promised He would be present with us as we walk through them. Not only that, God has promised that the difficulties in life and the suffering we experience don't get the final word.

Paul said that endurance produces *character*. **Character is about what you get through.** It's about *who you are* and *who you are becoming*. Every time you face a challenge head on, you become a person of character who isn't afraid of tough challenges.

Now, that doesn't mean God will never come through for us or will never remove difficulty in our lives, or that we should stop

Teaching Script

WEEK 3



praying for suffering to end. We should always know that God wants us to ask Him to help us, to change our circumstances, or to remove our pain. Jesus did before He died, so we can too. And sometimes, God removes the suffering. But He may not. You may have to keep looking for the job, battling the crisis, and dealing with the pain. But you can do that knowing this: **Your difficulty is never there because God doesn't love you or isn't with you.** He is with you in every hard situation and His heart hurts as you do. And as awful as those hard things are, He is using those hard things to produce good in you.

The apostle Paul knew the truth we all have to learn: **the path to a better life is rarely an easy path.** The difficult things in your life that feel like they might defeat you, are actually the very things God can use to grow you if you surrender them to Him. **What we think is limiting our life, God is leveraging to help us live a better life.**

APPLICATION

What would your life look like if you took this truth seriously? How would your life begin to change if you believed the difficult path was the one that led to a better life? I think if we began to run from the idea that an easy life is a better life, and embraced the possibility that pain and difficulty could bring us endurance, character, and hope, then we'd find we were moving in the direction of living a better story.

So what suffering or hardship have you hoped God would simply remove from your life?

- Being jobless?
- The increasing amount of debt?
- Infertility?
- Tension in your marriage?
- A wayward child?
- A fading friendship?

In life, we'll all face hardship or suffering. But God doesn't want us to hide from it. He wants us to rejoice in it because He is producing something far greater in value—perseverance, hope, and character.

I want to challenge us all to do something, and before I say it, I want you to know I'm aware it isn't easy. Some of you have been through some really difficult and dark times. Some of you are right in the middle of them now. But even if this is an immensely difficult season, I want you to at least try. My challenge is this: Right now, in your head, **thank God for whatever hardship you're enduring.**

Here's why that step is such a big deal: When we choose to give thanks for our tough circumstances rather than avoid them,

something powerful happens in our hearts. Something starts to grow in us. God says it's either perseverance, character, or hope.

Could you imagine being a person of perseverance? That no matter what the circumstances are, you knew you could fight through to the end believing that God was with you and that He was up to something good in you?

Could you imagine being a person of character? A person who knows you can get through this moment because you've gotten through tough moments before? A person who is sure that God is with you, even when things seem dark? Could you imagine having the type of character that caused you to leverage your pain to help someone else?

And what about hope? Could you imagine having the kind of hope that remains regardless of job loss, relational crisis, or financial fail? Could you imagine having an unwavering hope that God would use your pain for good? The kind of hope that believed God would use the difficulty to change and transform you into the person you ultimately want to be?

LANDING

It's possible that the more we believe this truth, the more we might even come to believe that **we don't necessarily want ease, we want better.** We want whatever it takes for God to change and shape us into the people He sees we can be. We want to live a better story.

God hasn't promised us an easy life. But He has promised to be with us and to use every difficulty to grow us.

What if you believed God was with you all of the time?

What if you believed His eyes were always on you?

What if you believed that, no matter the outcome, He would be holding you?

Believing those things can help you and me live a better story. We can do life with less fear and less frustration because we won't spend so much of our time and energy striving for ease. Instead of asking God to make your path easier, ask Him to show you where He is in the midst of it. Remember that in the same way Jesus' suffering led to the pouring out of God's love, your suffering can do the same. When you're hurting, the holes in your heart allow God to pour in His love and peace more deeply.

And in the midst of the difficulties, if you keep turning to God, you'll discover the fuller, richer life Jesus promises. It won't be easy, but the story of your life will be better than you ever imagined.