

Suffering is a Showcase for God

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Date: 16 February 2025

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[0 : 0 0] You're listening to a sermon recorded at Providence Community Church, Truth and Beauty in Community. If you are in the Kansas City area, please consider joining us in person next Sunday.

We meet in Lenexa, Kansas at 10 a.m. every Lord's Day. Until then, we pray that as you open your Bibles, the Lord will open your heart to receive His Word.

We're really only going to focus on the first three verses today of John chapter 9. And I want to read those to you right away. As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth, and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Now, one of the things that I observed right away as I read this passage is that here we have actually kind of a key to thinking well. I would say that this little exchange is the key to thinking really about anything.

You know, Romans 12.1, you probably know that verse. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, on behalf of or for by of or because of the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices.

[1 : 1 5] And then in verse 2 of Romans 12, it says, Don't be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but have your minds renewed. And I remember reading that as a young guy thinking, okay, I don't know how I'm supposed to renew my mind.

It's kind of stuck behind a bunch of bone. How do I get in there and shake the etching sketch, as it were? Remember, this little section in John 9, these two verses, is actually, if you'll think about it, a key to how to begin to renew your mind.

I say that because of this. The disciples had two presuppositions going on in these two verses. The first one is this. People with disabilities did something to deserve their fate.

Okay, and we will see that that is a wrong presupposition. But they had a second presupposition. And that was, Jesus knows things that nobody else knows.

Now, this is actually the key to thinking. They're asking the right person the wrong question. And yes, it would be great if we asked the right person the right question.

[2 : 2 8] But that is actually not where we start as we are growing in our faith. And we never completely nail that. We will often start with presuppositions that are polluted by worldly categories, by the flesh, by our own sin, by the enemy, and so on and so forth.

We will often approach, like, our understanding of the world with polluted presuppositions. There's really nothing to do about that except go to Jesus and ask questions.

Go to God's word and ask questions. The best we can do, most of the time, in our effort to think well, is to simply consult the word of the Lord. Even if we enter into that conversation with some broken presuppositions, God is faithful.

I can't tell you the number of times I've entered into a conversation with the Lord, either by reading his word or by prayer, and realized in the midstream of the conversation that fundamental aspects of the way I was thinking about this were off.

And I got that clarity because I did what the disciples did here. They had a broken presupposition, but they had one that was right, and it's a really important one. Go to the Lord.

[3 : 4 3] Ask your questions. God is gracious. He doesn't require us to ask the perfect question to get the right answer. So in some ways, this little conversation is just a reminder, and this is just a brief point as we get to the big point.

It's just a reminder of what we see in Proverbs 3. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him. That's what the disciples are doing.

They're not asking a great question, but they're asking a great person a bad question. And friends, this is key. This is fundamentally key to navigating this world, making sense of this world, is to

understand you are not the fountain of great questions, but God is the fountain of great answers. Jesus answers in verse 3, So that's a little bit about thinking.

How do we think? Well, you understand that ultimately you have to ask questions of the word of God and be open to being corrected, even in your presuppositions. But as long as you're going to the word with a faithful, like a heart of desire to learn and to understand, God will direct your paths.

[5 : 03] If you don't lean on your own understanding, God will direct your paths. So that's a little bit about thinking in general. But I really want to spend the rest of this passage thinking about suffering, how to think about suffering.

Friends, one of the advantages to going to church, at least a church that's kind of centered on his word, is you are going to be amongst the entire population of the city, of the country that you live in, you're going to be uniquely confronted with challenges to prepare for suffering well before you suffer.

There's no other venue in the world that I know of that routinely speaks to people who are doing well about preparing for the time in which they will not do well.

The church is unique in this respect. Now, let's be clear. The church has to be centered on the word. Because there are plenty of churches that barely talk about suffering at all.

And if they do, they mostly do to respond to people in the midst of their suffering. And even then, I'm not sure that they give great answers. But a church that is just dedicated to going through the word of God as the word of God is here, what you're going to find is that churches are going to talk, those churches are going to talk a lot about suffering, and you're going to be in seasons of your life where you're not suffering.

[6 : 20] And it's so unique. You will not find this anywhere else. Where people, really the Lord, right? He cares about you so much that he wants to prepare you for the next hard moment.

But I was, somebody was calling me, oh, I can remember the details now, I won't share them. But somebody was asking me something about someone who's near death. They were walking with someone who's near death.

And I remember just kind of had this flashback of all the times I've been with someone as they've passed from this life to the next. And, you know, 30 years of pastoring, there's quite a few folks like that.

And then I just got to thinking about something I've been thinking a lot about this year, and that is, boy, there sure is a world of difference between how people suffer in terms of the attitude that they take, in terms of the way that they frame it, the way that they understand it, the way that they handle it.

There's a world of difference between two people can go through the exact same difficult thing. And if one of them has been prepared by the Lord through his word to suffer well, man, a dramatic difference in how they endure hardship.

[7 : 30] One of the things I've really wished I could tell everybody who's going through hard things is, is your hard thing is hard, but your sin in the hard thing is really what's going to make the hard thing much harder.

As somebody once said, there's no bad situation you've ever been in that you can't make worse.

The truth is, is that if you don't sin in reaction to the suffering that comes into your life, the suffering itself becomes a much more manageable experience.

The majority of people who are really, really fully deconstructed, storm comes, knocks the house down completely, are people who had never been prepared to suffer well, never been taught how to think about suffering, and so forth.

All that to say, don't you dare, don't you dare think as you're sitting here, I'm okay, so I'll check out as Chris talks about thinking well about suffering. No, the Lord is good. He knows that one day you will need this, and now's the time to build your, you know, your house on the rock.

So let's think about this. How do we think about suffering? How would God have us think about suffering? Go back to verse 1. As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth, and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

[8 : 48] Now, as I said a moment ago, we all enter into all sorts of things with polluted presuppositions. But what God wants to do this morning through his word is, like, you definitely need to get rid of those polluted presuppositions when you face suffering.

This, it's important in general, but if you walk into your suffering with, like, bad ideas from the beginning, it's going to be really difficult.

Let's say that you aren't suffering, but you just, like this, like these disciples, you're encountering someone else that's suffering. Do you see how their bad presuppositions are making them bad friends and bad neighbors?

Right? Because they're looking at this guy, and their first instinct is, like, how can I help this guy? Their first instinct isn't, like, man, I have compassion for this guy. Their first instinct is, because of their presupposition, that being, people who suffer must have done something they deserve it, they immediately become Job's friends.

So, here's another deal. Like, you don't even have to be the one suffering. If you need to think about this well, so that when someone in your life is suffering, you're not a jerk to them.

[10:08] You're actually helpful. There's a passage in Job. I mean, Job's three friends, essentially, all they're doing is saying over and over again what the disciples said here.

You must have done something, Job, to deserve this. Eliphaz says, who being innocent has ever perished? Their categories are wrong.

They haven't spent sufficient time bringing their broken presuppositions to the Lord. And so, these terrible friends plague Job throughout the entire book with their faulty thinking.

There's another danger. If you don't have the right idea about suffering, if you don't know how to think about it well, you might enter it and you might start thinking like Job thinks. Job's thinking is broken as well.

He thinks that he is righteous, completely righteous, and this whole thing is completely unfair, which is also kind of a broken idea. So, you need to walk into this thinking well.

[11:08] I'm going to tell you a story throughout this sermon about a guy that I eventually met. But long before I met him on July 4th, 1995, this man, whose name is John Knight, was cheering on his wife in the delivery room as their son Paul came into the world.

And this was not their first child, and everything seemed to be routine, but as the nurse is cleaning up little Paul, she says, I think we have a problem. And this child was born without eyes.

Just born completely without eyes. John and his wife were members of Bethlehem Baptist Church back when Piper was the pastor. And listen to the words that he shares with Piper many years later about that experience.

He says, We were the good family at church, John. We volunteered for things, came to church every Sunday, went to Sunday school. We were the nice young couple, and just as proud and self-righteous as we could be sitting in your pews.

I came to your church because it was a smart church. I thought I was a Christian. But it was about two months later when Paul was hooked up to more tubes and sensors, surrounded by medical professionals over at Children's in Minneapolis.

[12:31] I just came to the conclusion, God, you are strong. That's true. And you are wicked. You are mean.

You are capricious. What did this boy ever do to you? That's in September 29, 1995.

John Knight continues, So we separated ourselves from our church. We quit our small group and quit the Sunday school. We quit coming to church. Over the next year, the church did not quit on them.

In what sounds essentially like potentially a legal case of stalking, many meals appeared without asking, without permission.

And many people appeared in their lives week after week after week for years. One of the things that would happen every once in a while, fairly regularly, is that church members would appear to speak with John, with John 9 in their hand.

[13:47] Make sense? This man who had been born blind, parents in that story, John and his wife's experience with their son Paul being born without eyes.

And here's how Mr. Knight responded to those efforts. He says, So friends, like, this is the stakes. If you don't think about suffering well, you're not any better than John. Like, this is where we go, unless we have been trained by grace and lean not on our own understanding.

It's just crucial that you commit well before the hardship comes to thinking about suffering the way that this passage teaches you to think about suffering.

Look back again. I'm going to read the passage again. It's three short verses. As he passed by, he saw a blind man from birth, and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned?

[15:11] This man or his parents? That he was born blind. Jesus answered, It is not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Now, I'm going to leave you just with one idea in this sermon that is fundamental. As I've walked with people who have suffered great, horrific difficulties, buried children, discovered cancer at stage four, discovered a marriage that was built on lies and so on and so forth, I will tell you, this is absolutely the fundamental key.

And Jesus gives it in this passage. In order to make sense of pain, a human being has to understand their purpose. Now, I'm going to tell you what your purpose is, and I'm also going to tell you you have absolutely no vote.

You didn't make you, you didn't design you, you didn't put you in this world. You have a purpose, and you get absolutely no say in what your purpose is.

That's up to the one who made you. And that purpose is seen in Jesus' response. He says, It's not that this man sinned or that his parents sinned, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

[16:39] Underline the word displayed. That's the key to understanding suffering, is to know what you are, what purpose you serve, why you exist, and why you were placed on the earth.

And that is, human beings are billboards. They are canvases. They are created, you are created to display things about God.

We see this at the very beginning when God determines to make man in his own image. He causes us, human beings, to be brought into a world that already existed to do one thing that the rest of the world is only doing incompletely, and that is, we are called to bear the image of God.

We are displays, we are billboards. And you don't get a say in that. I don't get a say in that. That's just what you are. And Jesus says, you're thinking about this wrong.

It's not about this initial causation, who sinned, and so on and so forth. He opens it up entirely and says, no, this man is blind because he is a billboard.

[17:49] Now, when you encounter your suffering or when you encounter someone else's suffering, this understanding makes all the difference. we all, indeed creation itself, exists to display the glories of God.

And in your greatest moments of pain, you have to understand this. You were put on this earth to say things about God. You were put on this earth to be a canvas.

You are God's poema, Ephesians 2. You are his workmanship, his epic poem. All of your crud, all of your glories, all of your hardships, all of your triumphs, all of your thorns in the flesh.

You're a story meant to tell the world something about God. And if you will understand that and accept that, you will be able to start thinking well about suffering.

this is the fundamental truth that carries all the way throughout Scripture. If God has saved you, he has done so in order to display his perfect patience.

[19:03] Paul says that in 1 Timothy 1. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

There's no difference between Paul and you in that respect. You were saved to display God's perfect patience. You were saved to display God's perfect glory.

And one day, if you are saved, you will be delivered into his presence. And what will your purpose be there in eternity, forever? You're still a billboard.

Ephesians 2. Even when we were dead in our trespasses, Ephesians 2.5, even when we were dead in our trespasses, we were made alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

What is your purpose in eternity? So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

[20:12] You and I are displaced. grace. So what do I think about when I'm suffering? I need to understand that my suffering is telling the world a story about God.

That's what my suffering is for. The key to thinking rightly about suffering is to remember what you were put on this earth to do and that is to display, to teach, to tell, to bear image.

So your salvation displays the goodness of God. One day your glorification which is what we call that moment when you arrive into heaven.

One day your glorification will display the goodness of God and that the key to this passage is just that your tribulation also displays the goodness of God.

2 Corinthians 4 7-10 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power, there's that word show again, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[21 : 16] We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

Growing up we lived about 30 minutes north of the Lake of the Ozarks and our uncle had a cabin there and it was pretty great. We had a ski boat and all that stuff and so at a young age I would get out there and try to water ski and kind of a difficult thing to do and tubing really wasn't as big of a deal as water skiing was back in the 70s and 80s.

We liked our life simple. We water skied and we drank Mountain Dew and things were simple back then. there was always this moment when you fall and you're going fast especially if you have a crazy uncle who's you know maybe drinking bush light instead of and there's this moment where you fall and like the only thing that you understand in that moment is like the life jacket's doing all the work because you crash and you burn and like you're underwater water but there's artificial buoyancy to you and suddenly kind of pop up out of the water again and you learn to trust in this thing so that then you that's really actually for me was the key to learning how to water ski was to understand that this thing would do its job every single time.

what Paul's saying in 2 Corinthians 4 is that I've been crushed I've been abandoned I've been perplexed but Christ keeps lifting me up and that's the story that his suffering is telling the world and that's the story that your suffering is meant to tell the world your suffering is meant to tell the world that God is faithful when you are at your most fragile that's what it's for friends we've been I've been here for a while now at this church and I look at some of my one of the things I was so excited about when I came to Providence eight years ago I guess was there were people that were older than me here my last church I was the oldest guy and so there's some people here that are a lot older than me anyway but you know they weren't that old when I first got here and now we're in this phase where Angela and I talk about this every once in a while some of our people maybe even us are going to get some hard diagnosis from the doctor in the next ten years so forth and you just realize like that's just what this stage of life brings it's like this is serious stuff do you know not only that you have the life jacket but that that story is sweet and God is eager to tell it to the world that in your most catastrophic crisis he will sustain you and are you okay telling that story with the last chapter of your life because that's actually the best possible story you could tell with the last chapter of your life now how do we apply this well one of the things that we need to make sure we don't do when we're suffering is we better not hide we better not hide this brings a whole new perspective to me to what Jesus says in Matthew 5 when he tells us to not hide our light when I read that verse as a young man

I think that hiding my light means I gotta show all of my triumphs I gotta make sure the world sees all my triumphs all the things I do well all the disciplines of grace and my great manners and my great love for my wife and the great fathering I've done and so on and now I realize a bunch of the light that I have to show the world is a resilience that comes only because of Christ's faithfulness so friends one of the temptations I face when I'm at my worst when I'm suffering either self-inflicted or not is I'm one of those guys that when when I start to choke I'm gonna go out into the woods and die alone you know I wanna hide I don't wanna be a hindrance to other people I don't want people to look at me weird like they're looking at this guy who was born blind I don't want people having theological conversations about my suffering so my temptation I think some of you do this too my temptation is like I just wanna hide and so the miscarriage comes or the job is lost or whatever and there's a great temptation in these moments to just fade into the background but that would be if you hide it shows that you don't understand your basic purpose and you don't understand your basic purpose for your suffering because your basic purpose including the times when you suffer is to display and you can't display well if you're hiding

[26 : 43] I was thinking about this this week about just like I want you to understand that when you're suffering when you're the one who's sick when you're the one who has the limp when it's going poorly for you I want you to understand you can't hide then you need to show what God is doing and so I just developed this acronym it's not very good but maybe it'll be helpful to you and it's just the acronym for show and the S stands for strength a strength that is not your strength that's

one of the things that you'll display Paul after he has this incredible vision of the third heavens there's a risk that he might become arrogant God afflicts him with a thorn in the flesh and Paul doesn't like this and he says three times I pleaded with the Lord this is 2 Corinthians 12 I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me but he said to me my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon me for the sake of Christ then I am content with weakness insults hardships persecutions and calamities for when I am weak then I am strong so the S in show stands for a strength that is not your strength the H in show stands for a hope that does not disappoint what are you showing in your hardship number one a strength that is not your strength number two a hope that does not disappoint

Romans 5 3 not only that but we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that the suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us the O in show stands for outweigh there is a glory that is coming that far outweighs our present sufferings Romans 8 18 for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us 2 Corinthians 4 16 we do not lose heart though our outer self is wasting away our inner self is being renewed day by day for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal and the W stands for world this world is not our home

Hebrews 13 14 for here we have no lasting city but we seek the city that is to come in your hardship show up don't hide let the story of God's faithfulness the buoyancy of his grace imputed to you prove that he is good even when you're not now look back at verse 4 John 9 verse 4 Jesus corrects in verse 3 he says hey it's not like that it's not because this one sinned or that one sinned he exists to display the works of God and in verse 4 Jesus says we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day night is coming when no one can work as long as I am in the world I am the light of the world having said these things he spit on the ground and made mud with saliva then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him go wash in the pool of

Siloam which means sent and so he went and washed and came back seeing we had this nutty weird like what's the word substitute bible professor I don't know what else to call him he was a visiting bible professor he just appeared like Melchizedek one day in a class like I have no idea where he was where he came from he left after this and he did a whole lesson on this he took us outside and had us make mud with spit it's like really hard to make enough eye covering mud with spit and I don't really remember the point of that I just remember thinking Jesus Jesus like it would have been a long time like a fair amount of work to just stand there it's just been very awkward you know the blind guy doesn't know what's going on he's just hearing things but but it's always been interesting I'll tie this in in a second it's always been interesting that Jesus chose to heal him this way nothing about this is like necessarily triumphant this is all very earthy so as a result of this we won't read the rest of the chapter but as a result of this we get another one of these pharisaical inquisitions like we had when Jesus healed the man who had been lame for 38 years pharisees again this happens on the sabbath

I've talked about this already Jesus is doing this to provoke a who do you think you are kind of thing and Jesus reveals his divinity by making it a point to heal people on the sabbath and so forth so there's this pharisaical inquisition now we have two different characters we have the man who was blind who was born blind and he's been healed he's been given vision at this point and we have the pharisees who can see but show their spiritual blindness okay so now we have we have a contrast in the story between someone who can see and someone who can see but can't see there's two layers of seeing that emerge in this passage there's spiritual sight and there's physical sight now one of the things that you need to understand is that the pharisees go from spiritual blindness to physical blindness you say you mean Jesus made them blind guys the pharisees leave this earth with eyes that work and enter into a world of outer complete utter darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth it's interesting because they depart this world and enter into physical blindness they're spiritually blind and then their bodies match their spiritual state now why do I bring that up well one thing is this don't take your salvation for granted in the midst of all of your suffering don't take your salvation for granted listen to this sentence we want to shout that life with a disability and

with

[33 : 09] Jesus is infinitely better than a healthy body without him we want to shout that life with a disability with Jesus is infinitely better than a healthy body without him you know who wrote that John Knight the man whose son was born without eyes the man who left the church the man who spent the first year of his sufferings cursing God you know how he realized his need for Christ he was walking through a children's hospital hallway feeling intense anger toward I think one of the caregivers actually wishing that person was dead and God put a mirror up to him and said look at you and John saw the bitterness and the venom in his own heart and he knew I am not a saved man I am I am not a saved man I do not love like a saved man

I am a selfish hard bitter man now I have friends that were friends with John before he was saved John thought he was great before he was saved all of my friends say he was a real idiot so I think everyone knew John except John John has this moment where he's like I need Christ I need the same one who chose for my son to be born without eyes to give me spiritual sight when I met John many years later there was no trace of an angry man at all all I saw was a man full of joy and here's what's really interesting his life had gotten much worse when I met him as a son not only was born without eyes but also wound up having serious mental disabilities and wound up also having seizures and later on his wife was diagnosed with stage four cancer this is a man who has spent the majority of his adult life on this earth suffering and all

I met when I met him was this little radiator of joy why because he had a moment when he realized that without Christ he was going to go to hell and that Jesus shed his own blood to save his soul and he didn't take his salvation for granted he realized that without Christ he deserved eternal punishment for his sin he realized that he was a debtor to mercy and that was his story for as long as I've ever talked to him this brings up one more thing I want to share with you look at verse 35 at first the guy who's born blind gets healed physically he goes through this tangle with the Pharisees the Pharisees kick him out of the synagogue and in verse 35 it says Jesus heard that they had cast him out and having found him he said do you believe in the son of man he answered and who is he sir that I may believe in him and Jesus said to him you have seen him and it is he who is speaking to you he said

Lord I believe and he worshipped him all right this story is unusual because the normal order of operations for Christians is backwards here and here's what I mean by that for the majority of us our spiritual sight comes first we are saved from spiritual blindness the God of this world no longer blinds our eyes to keep us from seeing the face of Jesus we see Jesus we believe in Jesus our spiritual vision is restored and then one day when we proceed from this life to the next God heals! God heals all of our physical infirmities so this guy's just kind of living an exceptionally backwards life in that respect he's healed first and then he's spiritually healed second what I want you to understand is that the order of operation sometimes changes but both things always happen this is key some people get saved after they get healed most people get saved and then eventually pass from this life to the next and get healed what I want you to understand is that the same hands that applied that mud to those eyes will not not not might will one day wipe the tears away from your suffering eyes you will be healed of all the stuff all the stuff you will one day come into the presence of this same

[38 : 06] God and he will delight in removing every gram of infirmity from your body even as he is delighted by applying his righteousness to remove your sin let's be clear like for sure the day is coming when you will be healed just like this man you will be healed twice you will be healed spiritually and you will be healed physically and so if you're going through suffering right now you need to understand that like both of these things are going to happen I don't know the order but they will happen absolutely will happen and if you love someone who's suffering understand this they will be healed Jesus Christ is faithful I want to end by reading to you from Revelation chapter 21 and begin to discuss how we apply this to our time of communion Revelation 21 begins then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city new

Jerusalem coming down from heaven from God coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes for the former things have passed away and he who was seated on the throne said behold I am making all things

new and he said write this down for these words are trustworthy and true and he said to me it is done I am the alpha and the omega the beginning and the end to the thirsty I will give from the spring of water of life without payment to the one Jesus Christ if

Jesus has applied his righteousness to your soul if his cross work has been your only hope for salvation the day is coming when he will wipe every tear every ounce of pain from your body he will make you new and you will be as this man was and the communion table is God's gift to us to keep pointing us to that ultimate coming future 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 23 for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you but the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me and the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this remembrance of me in verse 26 for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes until he comes to make all things new so friends if you're a follower of Jesus Christ if you are confident that he has shed his blood for your soul would you come and partake of this looking forward to the day when all of the healing of all of his great mercies and kindness please come