

The Art of Suffering Well

Jesus promised we would suffer for His name, yet how many of us know how to rise above our struggles? While he and his wife battled cancer, Billy Hornsby offered this profound message on how to face life's biggest trials—including death.

Editor's Note: In

light of Billy Hornsby's death (see "Transitions"), we wanted to pay tribute to this remarkable church planter by sharing one of his last public messages, which he delivered in December to his home church in Birmingham, Ala. At the time, the cancer in Billy was progressing rapidly and, though he believed God for healing, he was upfront about the possibility of dying. Given this context, Billy's powerful words—and how he lived his last moments on earth—take on new meaning and prove that God can provide grace, strength and victory in any situation, no matter how bleak the outcome.

Have you ever started a year thinking, *This is going to be a great year—in fact, I'm going to have the best year of my life?*

At first, everything seems to be going great and life is good. But then

tragedy strikes. Maybe your business goes south, or maybe you get a dreaded disease. It rocks your world because you have such great expectations for the future, but suddenly you find yourself in despair over a tragedy that's affected your life.

I experienced this firsthand after finding out in 2009 that I had melanoma and then recently discovering it had spread throughout my body. It was shocking. I was left reeling. And like most people who have a head-on collision with tragedy, I dealt with several emotions that tried to rob me of my inner life.

Fear was the first thing to hit me. Fear has no equal in messing up your life. First John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment." I trust in God. But I'll be honest, when you get a bad report—especially when you find out you have a disease—it can be terrifying. Some days I'd feel as if I had the victory, and yet the very next day I'd feel completely destroyed by my emotions. Fear has the power to torment.

Dread can also torment you and rob you of your joy. You start wondering about what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month. In my case, it was: *What's going to happen when they do this procedure?* I had to go through several medical procedures, and I began to

dread my
reactions to the treatments. Even though I'd say I wouldn't
experience
any of the side effects from these procedures, I did—and I'm
convinced
some of them were worse than they were supposed to be *because*
I dreaded all that time. Dread steals your todays. The more
you dread about tomorrow, the more you lose today.

I've also encountered doubt. I don't
doubt God at all. I'm the kind of guy who doesn't blame things
on God; I
don't get angry at Him. But when doubt tries to creep in, I
can feel
the condemnation. We know condemnation isn't from God; it
comes from the
enemy. And when we're facing a tragedy, we don't want to
doubt—of all
the times in our lives, that's when we know we need to have
faith.

But doubt will naturally begin to breed
condemnation if you let it linger. You'll begin to think you
really
don't have any faith and that you've let God down. That
condemnation
will open the floodgates to fault-finding questions: *Did I do
something wrong that's causing me to go through this? Is God
punishing me for something?*

We all struggle with this, even when we
know these attacks are straight from the enemy and not God
punishing us.
My mama used to tell me: "Billy, that's what you call life. As
long as
you're on earth you're going to have pain, you're going to
suffer,
you're going to get sick. When you die you don't have to worry

about any
of that stuff. But while you're living, some of that stuff is
going to
come your way."

So if we're all bound to face suffering,
how do we avoid giving in to these emotions—very real,
powerful
emotions—that the enemy uses to steal our life? When we're
struggling,
when we're suffering, when relationships fail, when health
fails, how
can we stand with God in faith and live in the covenant He's
made with
us?

1. Run to the Word.

I live in a city that offers some of the
best medical care in the nation. The doctors, hospitals and
medical
centers that have helped me have been an incredible blessing
through my
trial. But none of these is my hope. The Word of God is my
hope. It is
my cure. Proverbs 4:20-22 says: "My child, pay attention to
what I say.
Listen carefully to my words. Don't lose sight of them. Let
them
penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those
who find
them, and healing to their whole body" (NLT). What a promise!
The Word
brings health to your body; like medicine, it brings a cure to
the
entire body.

My wife Charlene is also going through

cancer. She's been battling it for four years. I've been on chemo for three months; she's been on chemo for *four years*. The other day we were taking chemo at the same time, and Charlene was getting her treatment intravenously. The nurse couldn't find a vein and kept jabbing around until finally she asked my wife, "Honey, am I hurting you?" My wife didn't even blink: "I'm tough," she said.

My brother says Charlene is the toughest person in the world—and I agree. But I also know part of the reason why.

Every night before we go to bed, I ask her if she took her medicine.

She knows I'm not talking about the medicine the doctors gave us; I'm

talking about the Word. Every night I find her in the bedroom reading

the Bible—she's taking in God's Word because that's her cure.

The Word is where we get our strength and tenacity. The Word is our medicine.

2. Take no thought for tomorrow.

Jesus said, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of

itself" (Matt. 6:34, KJV). Another version says, "Do not be anxious

about tomorrow" (ESV). At times fear paralyzed me. I once ran right

through a red light while driving because I was so consumed with fear

from all the things I was going through. To be honest, it took

me a few

weeks to overcome this fear. But the way I did was by applying this

Scripture: *Take no thought for tomorrow*. It was like a command from Jesus to me. When thoughts came to me of all the things that could

go wrong and all the suffering I might have to endure, I would tell

myself: "No, I'm not dwelling on that. I'm not taking any thought on

that whatsoever."

When you start thinking about future

suffering or struggles, or all the bad things that could happen, stop

those thoughts immediately. Obey Jesus and take no thought for tomorrow.

3. Surround yourself with family, friends and intercessors.

I recently visited my brother in

Louisiana for a few days, during which most of my family came to see me.

It was so encouraging to have them express their love for me and pray

for me. They made me feel like a million dollars—friends and family can

do that.

Just as important as being encouraged by

family and friends is having people pray for you. I actively recruit

people to pray for me and agree with me in prayer. Knowing you have

people around you to lift you up makes the struggle easier.

4. Submit to God.

James 4:7 says: "Submit to God. Resist

the devil and he will flee from you.” Some people say they don’t believe in the devil—and that’s exactly how he’d prefer it. He wants you to believe he doesn’t exist. But I can tell you firsthand: We have an enemy.

How, then, do we deal with him? We must submit to God, which means we have to line up our lives with God’s Word, His principles, His will and His purpose. Only then can we resist the devil. We don’t come against the devil on our own; we come against him by the authority of the name of Jesus Christ. It’s only by His authority that I can tell the devil, “The Lord rebuke you.” I tell my cancer, “*The Lord* rebuke you.” He’s my savior, my healer. My greatest weapon in resisting the devil is submitting to God.

5. Be a good soldier.

Paul told Timothy: “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:3-4).

A few weeks ago I gathered my whole family around me and we talked frankly about my situation. I reminded them that I belong to Jesus Christ. He’s the one who called me into this battle, into this ministry. Even as I’m facing this dreadful disease, I’m going to live a life that honors Him. I may suffer, and I

may

struggle in all this. But I've given Jesus my word that if I struggle,

I'm going to struggle well; and if I suffer, I'm going to do it as a

good soldier. I vowed to show others that there is enough grace from God

to withstand and overcome anything that comes my way. That's the

promise of God to me.

That's also a sobering message to give

your family. But I wanted to encourage my grandchildren, my sons-in-law,

my children and my wife that no matter what we go through, we must

endure it as good soldiers. I never want to bring disgrace on the name

of Jesus because I forsook His grace, love and peace and became so

self-absorbed that I pitied myself. Rather, I want my life to glorify

God—and it will, somehow. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm more focused now

on being a good soldier than anything else, and I believe God will honor

that, just as He'll honor you when you make the same commitment.

The Key Is Covenant

We often forget how much God honors our

commitments. He takes them seriously because He is a God of covenant—and

He does not take covenant lightly.

A story in Genesis has really opened my

eyes to this truth as I've faced this season of trials.

Abraham was talking to God one day, reminding Him how he didn't have any offspring and that Eliezer of Damascus would end up being his heir because he was childless. God replied by promising Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky—and he proved this by entering into a covenant with Abraham: "So [God] said to him, 'Bring Me a 3-year-old heifer, a 3-year-old female goat, a 3-year-old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon.' Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away" (15:9-11).

Picture the scene: Abraham lays out carcasses as part of the offering he's making to God so they can enter into covenant. As soon as he does, vultures swoop down on the carcasses to devour them. But the Bible says, "Abram drove them away." I imagine Abraham didn't just say, "*Shoo, shoo!*" More than likely, he got a stick and went after those vultures. He drove them away because he didn't want them destroying his covenant with God.

Isn't it just like our enemy to try to swoop in and steal our covenant? Each of us needs a big stick because

we're covenant people. There is nothing more the devil would like to do than steal your covenant.

The story continues: "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then [the Lord] said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them 400 years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions'" (15:12-14).

Remember, God is making a covenant with Abraham. I imagine Abraham couldn't wait to find out what God would say or do. But I'm guessing he probably didn't expect God to say his family would be slaves in a foreign land and would be afflicted for 400 years.

Are you sure you want to enter this covenant?

I imagine God asking mid-sentence. And then He told Abraham of what would happen at the end of those 400 years: "They shall come out with great possessions."

Yes, Abraham's descendants would be afflicted, but they would come out with all the riches of Egypt. Israel would emerge as an extremely wealthy people as a result of enduring the affliction.

God concluded His covenant with Abraham with a supernatural sign, which often gets overlooked when people read this story. Verse 17 says: "And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces."

It's significant to know why there was a smoking pot and a flaming torch that passed between the pieces Abram had offered. The smoking oven—or the "smoking furnace," as it says in the King James Version—is a sign of struggle. It's a sign of torment and affliction. God was letting Abraham know upfront that in this covenant there will be struggles sometimes.

You may be struggling right now—it may be with disease, family relationships, marriage problems, business problems, financial problems. For those of us going through such trials, it often feels like we're in a furnace. Things are heating up, and we're struggling so much we don't know what to do.

But let me encourage you with the good news God *always* offers because of His covenant with us. Through Jesus, we've been included into this same covenant with Abraham—and this covenant didn't just end with a burning furnace; it included a flaming torch that passed between the pieces. The flaming torch symbolizes the presence of God.

He will never leave you and He will never forsake you. He will walk with you through every fiery trial, every struggle and every season of suffering.

We are covenant people because of Jesus Christ. We are the body of Christ. The Bible says that because of Jesus' suffering, because of what He paid for, we have been healed. Isn't it wonderful to know that the Lord is with us through all our struggles and through all our pain?

You will endure struggles. You will face suffering. But when you know that the Lord is always with you, through every situation—because of *His* covenant—you can struggle well and honor God.

About Billy Hornsby



In 2000, Billy Hornsby co-founded the Association of Related Churches (ARC) with a handful of pastors who desired to plant thousands of churches across the United States. Within 10 years, ARC was one of the largest church-planting organizations in the country, and an astounding 90 percent of its churches continue to grow after the five-year mark. Prior to leading ARC as its president,

Billy had been in full-time ministry since 1975, including serving as senior associate pastor at Bethany World Prayer Center in Baton Rouge, La. The Louisiana native was also the European Coordinator for EQUIP, a nonprofit organization founded by John Maxwell to develop Christian leaders around the world, and had authored several books, including his most recent release, *The Attractional Church*. After battling cancer for more than two years, Billy passed away on March 23, 2011.