

Thorns and Thistles

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Recorded on October 4, 2023

I have a question: Have you ever asked yourself the question—this is a rhetorical question—why does everything have to be so hard? Why is everything so difficult? Why is everything a struggle? I think one of the reasons that we look forward so much to the Feast of Tabernacles every year is because of our struggles. We get to step off the merry-go-round for a little more than a week. We get to put Satan's world on hold, we hit the pause button. We get to disconnect and then focus on the millennium. My first decade and a half of Feast of Tabernacles were camping out at Big Sandy. Those were some really good times.

At my first Feast I think I was 17 years old—I was either 16 or 17—when I walked onto the campus for the first time and into the campground, there was just a different feeling there. Everybody working together, everybody happy, everybody focused on the right things, families everywhere, little kids everywhere. Everybody was just so happy and eager to serve, eager to help. It's a good thing because camping is not all that easy. Cookout camping—camping where you're cooking out three meals a day. I know they probably have some modern equipment now that makes it a whole lot easier, but back then the whole campsite was running on Coleman fuel, Coleman lanterns, and Coleman stoves. It was hard and clean up—whenever you have to, you haul your own water in 5-gallon buckets from the bathhouse which could be 50 to 100 yards away. It's a chore. Taking care of kids; while I was camping out at Big Sandy, I had two kids born—not at camp but keeping the Feast there—taking care of infants and even more difficult were toddlers. They were getting into everything. There are volunteer duties to be done. We're walking security in the middle of the night and we were young so that wasn't so hard, but then you have to clean bathhouses and that's not so much fun. That's a lot of work. Inconveniences—we had that long walk. In Big Sandy there were like 40 rows of campsites on either side. So, on row 1, it started at the bottom of a hill and went up a hill and then somewhere around row 20-25 you were down the hill. If you were back on row 30 and walking up that hill with your toddlers and your infants and your bags, all the stuff you have to do, it's a long walk to the Tabernacle. Then you have to turn and walk back.

Think of the preparation of just getting that Feast site ready. The roads had to be built, the bathhouses had to be built. A lot of it was by work parties coming up from the various churches around there and I was part of those work parties. About four or five years ago we went on a family trip to theme parks in Florida and on the way back we stopped by Big Sandy and drove around the campus just seeing the old sites. The Piney Woods had almost completely overgrown. You have to see how much it had overgrown to see how much work it was to keep it up every year. It was just full of saplings and brush and some of the streets were impassable. It was a different site. There was a lot of work that went into the Feast sites.

With all of that work, especially in Big Sandy, where you had sand everywhere. Sand, sand, and more sand; you had sand in your underwear, sand in your sleeping bag, sand in your kids' diapers, you had sand in their mouth, in their eyes—so the name Big Sandy was very, very appropriate. So why did we look forward every year to the Feast of Tabernacles when it was so difficult? Now, I'm 71 years old and if you told me I had to go do that, I would say "No". We looked forward to it every single year. You think back during Christ's time, it was the 3rd pilgrimage feast of the year so the roads in Israel would have been full of families traveling to Jerusalem, talking and laughing and singing, playing along the way getting there. When we were headed to Big Sandy, we all had these little green stickers on our cars, unless you were handicapped and then you had an orange sticker. We would look for green stickers all the way to the Feast. We would see a green sticker and look at the license plate and wave and wave. It was like we were connected; we were all heading to the Feast site to keep God's Feast.

At opening services, we heard the annual question: "Why are we here?" Followed by:

"Who is here for the first time? Who's here the 2nd year, the 3rd year, the 5th year, and (whether people were standing up or raising their hands)—30 years, 40 years."

I am confused by whether I was 16 or 17 years old—I think I was 17 for sure but it may have been 16, which makes this my 55th or 56th Feast of Tabernacles. Joyful, joyful times, meeting people from all over the country and the question that everybody wanted to know was, how did you come to the knowledge of the truth. What is your story? We would swap stories of how we came to understand the truth. We would swap stories about the miracles that God had worked in our lives. How He had intervened for us. Just strangers bound by the bond of God's Spirit, with a single purpose—unity.

The Feast is where we unplugged. Unplugged from the world, recharged. Then after the Feast we would say "goodbye" to each other and we would head back home, kind of regretting when the Feast was over. But we would head home with a renewed commitment to do better, to be better, to study more, to pray more, to focus more on what life is really about, to be more mindful of our purpose. I have to tell you; this has been a tough year for me. There have been lots of struggles, lots of uncertainties, lots of difficulties and there still are. As most of you know, last year Feast of Tabernacles I spent in the ICU in Orlando, Florida with Samuel. That was hard. In the cardiac ICU most all the patients are unconscious because they are recovering from a heart procedure, so the rooms are tiny and there are no restrooms or anything. I slept in a hospital recliner for four weeks. As we say in Texas, "That ain't easy." But I did it. The greetings from the Feast of Tabernacles, the mentions from the pulpit, the signs that you all made for Samuel, it made all the difference.

There is a lot of uncertainty about Samuel's health. Meetings with doctors, various opinions about whether Samuel would survive and if he did survive what would life look like for him. Some of the doctors wanted to put Sam on a med pump that would be installed and they thought that would be his best chance of living. But that would

mean—I didn't know I was going to get chocked up about this—that Sam couldn't go swimming. He couldn't take a shower; bathing would be more difficult. No baseball, no basketball, no riding the bike—he would be a couch potato, allowed to go on slow walks with his portable pump. One of the doctors, pushed to try an oral medicine that was fairly new and it came with a long list of side effects. But, if it worked it would allow Sam to be mobile, so we all had a talk, Sam included—the pros and the cons—and we decided to go with the oral medication so Sam would just have a better quality of life for the time that he is alive. A long story short, Sam didn't experience a side effect. He was put on a special diet and that diet eliminated all fast food, all junk food, all processed food, his diet is basically one ingredient food. It's fruits, vegetables and healthy meats. Because of that diet he has lost all of his excess weight and if you know Sam, he was a little "rolly polly" and now he's got close to a 6 pack and is feeling really good about himself and he's more mobile. He can run further and faster. He still has some limitation. If he didn't have the limitations, we would have been able to fly to the Feast and I wouldn't be up here speaking in front of a camera right now. But I expect it's possible that he could be cleared to fly in the next year or so. I want to thank you all for all you did. The signs, the greetings, the cards, the mentions from the podium—it made a really big difference—so thanks.

Today I want to talk about the subject of suffering and struggle. The title of the sermon is:

Thorns and Thistles

Back to the original questions, "Why is life so hard? Why are some people so difficult? Why are some circumstances just so difficult?" When I was first coming into the church and understanding the truth, I was beyond naive. As they say, I was a little wet behind the ears. My view of life was so simplistic. God's laws work, they just work. You keep the Sabbath; you keep the Holy Days and God is going to bless you. Break God's laws and there are going to be consequences; it's black and white. You work hard and pay your tithes, you never have to worry about money because God's laws work, just like gravity. Keep God's dietary laws, you don't have to worry about sickness or health because God's laws work, just like gravity—every time. You take a glass and drop it, you don't have to wonder if that glass is going to be suspended in midair, you just know it's going to drop. That's just the way God's laws work, right?

I was a little bit naive 55 years ago. I couldn't really read the Bible and understand it for myself. I read booklets, I did my Correspondence Course, I took the tests on the Correspondence Course because you had to pass the test before you could get the next group of lessons. I listened to sermons, I took careful notes, and I'm fairly sure that most of us have had a similar journey. It took years of sermons, booklets, Bible studies, going to church, a Correspondence Course; it took years and years before I had a solid framework where I could read the Bible all by myself and it made sense. God's word spoke to me. I could believe what it said, I didn't need confirmation from anybody else to tell me that I had permission to believe what God is saying. Before, when I was young, I thought that the ministers at Worldwide Church of God were all just spiritual geniuses.

To be able to take the Bible and answer Bible questions—at our Bible studies you could pass your questions up and the deacons would take them up to the table and they would alternate and no matter what questions you threw at them, they had the answer. I grew up in Protestantism with devout grandparents attending a Baptist church. What I had learned about theology and God and what I believed, contradicted what the Bible said. I couldn't finish half a page before I thought it was confusing. So, my beginning in understanding the truth was that God gave us laws for our good, we keep His laws, we escape the suffering of all those who break His laws are doomed to experience. As a bonus, when the plagues of Revelation come, we get to go to Petra, avoid all the plagues and get to campout just like we did at Big Sandy, for 3½ years.

If my view of the world and the church and God's laws had not been so innocent and so black and white, if I had known about suffering, I wonder if I ever would have started the journey. I think that God gives us what we need to know to get started and then He gives us what we need to keep going on the journey. Many people have left the church because of suffering. When I was 17 years old, attending church with my parents and my siblings, my 12-year-old sister was killed in a horse-riding accident. A 12-year-old little girl—innocent, happy, perfect—and now she's dead. What happened? What happened to God's protection? Was her angel "off duty" that day? That tragedy, along with other trials, took my parents out of the church, which in turn took all my siblings out of the church. Being fairly new in the church, they just weren't prepared, they had no understanding about suffering and trials. So, they slowly began to slip out of the church, attendance began to slip. At first, they were only attending on Holy Days and then they lost track of the Holy Days. After a year or so, Christmas didn't seem so bad. Clean and unclean foods are all canceled with modern processing and refrigeration, those were the old days and these were the new days.

In the future, there will be a time when suffering comes to an end—it's over. Let's go to Revelation 21:1, we're going to start with the end in mind.

Revelation 21:1 *Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.*

2) *Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

3) *And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*

4) *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."*

5) *Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful." (NKJV)*

How much suffering is in the world today? You look at war around the world. How much suffering is in our lives? How much suffering have we had this year? How much suffering do we just know that other people are enduring? There was a time when

suffering didn't exist. Let's go to John 1:1. This is probably a scripture everybody has memorized, it's one of the first ones I memorized.

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2) He was in the beginning with God. (NKJV)*

There you had perfect unity, perfect oneness. John 10:30 is a really, really quick, short scripture. It's just where Christ said *I and My Father are one*; complete unity. There was a time when there wasn't any division. There was complete unity and then God began to expand. In Job 38, we'll read the scripture where we see the angels existed before creation.

Job 38:4 *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.
5) Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?
6) To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone,
7) When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy? (NKJV)*

The angels were created before the physical universe and there was still peace, joy, celebration, unity. But the age of peace and unity ended when one created being began to deviate. Just one created being became dissatisfied. If you go to Ezekiel 28, I know we've covered these scriptures recently, but it's good to establish where suffering comes from.

Ezekiel 28:11 *Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
12) Son of man, take up a lamentation [What is a lamentation? Lamenting, regret] for the king of Tyre [we know this wasn't a physical king because of what follows], and say to him, Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
13) You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering: The sardius, topaz, and diamond, Beryl, onyx, and jasper, Sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes Was prepared for you on the day you were created.
14) "You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; You were on the holy mountain of God; You walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones.
15) You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, Till iniquity was found in you. [One being's dissatisfaction led to rebellion.]
16) By the abundance of your trading You became filled with violence within, And you sinned; Therefore I cast you as a profane thing Out of the mountain of God; And I destroyed you, O covering cherub, From the midst of the fiery stones.
17) Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, That they might gaze at you.*

*18) You defiled your sanctuaries By the multitude of your iniquities, By the iniquity of your trading; Therefore I brought fire from your midst; It devoured you, And I turned you to ashes upon the earth In the sight of all who saw you.
19) All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; You have become a horror, And shall be no more forever.” (NKJV)*

So, the universal peace and unity that had always been, came to an end. Look at Luke 10:18. This was when Christ made a comment to the 70, He had sent out.

Luke 10:18 *And He said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. (NKJV)*

From that point on, good and evil would coexist and as long as good and evil coexist, there will be suffering. This is where it all began. Then God began to extend His family; let’s go to Genesis 2:7-10. God begins to extend His family.

Genesis 2:7 *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*

[Temporary life began.]

8) The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.

9) And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10) Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. (NKJV)

Notice the river because we’re going to circle back to the river. Genesis 2:15.

Continuing in verse 15) ...

15) Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

16) And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat;

17) but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (NKJV)

Adam had instruction and he had clear consequences. God said,

“Eat freely all you want” (and that included the Tree of Life)—“eat all you want. There is only one tree that is forbidden.”

This was a test. Adam had a choice.

18) And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." (NKJV)

Now woman was made. Now notice Genesis 2:25.

25) And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (NKJV)

There was no shame, no guilt—pure innocence. You know how an infant doesn't know they are naked. A toddler, they would lose their diaper and run around the house—there's no shame, no guilt, they are innocent. No emotional suffering, no psychological suffering, just innocence and trust. That's how Adam and Eve were; perfect in health, perfect in every way. That changed in a moment because God gives everyone freedom of choice. In Genesis 3:1, we see the slide.

Genesis 3:1 *Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'"*

2) And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden;

3) but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die'"

4) Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.

5) For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (NKJV)

God is withholding from you; He doesn't want you to have this good thing.

Continuing in verse 6) ...

6) So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. (NKJV)

What happened then? Did they both fall dead? No.

Continuing in verse 7) ...

7) Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

8) And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (NKJV)

That was new, they never did that before.

- 9) *Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"*
10) *So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."* (NKJV)

Before that, Adam and Eve had never experienced fear and now they are afraid.

"Because I was naked, I am exposed and feel like I need to hide."

If I found myself naked outside in my neighborhood I would want to hide too. This shame they were experiencing was the result of one wrong choice. What changed? Their eyes were open to both good and evil. They were changed on the inside. Their perception changed. Shame and embarrassment entered their heart, so they hid themselves. They had never experienced fear, shame, and guilt; they didn't know how to deal with it so they just hid. They would never be innocent again—no "do overs". This was the beginning of guilt, shame, and suffering. What happens after your busted? You have to fix the blame. So, Eve blamed the serpent, Adam blamed Eve and then God laid out the consequences. Everything has changed now. Continuing in Genesis 3:14.

14) *So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life.*

15) *And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."* (NKJV)

That's the first Messianic prophecy.

Continuing in verse 16) ...

16) *To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you."*

17) *Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.*

18) *Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field.*

19) *In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."* (NKJV)

So, work just got a lot harder, got a lot more painful. In Texas we had these things called Bull Nettles and it's a weed—not real tall—but it has these tiny hairs all over it and if you get up against a Bull Nettle and those little thorns stick in you, they sting like crazy. They are so small it's hard to get them out and there are so many of them. You don't have to walk into a Bull Nettle more than once before you learn your lesson. In Texas we have a tree called a Locust tree. It has thorns about three inches long and if

you're trying to get one of those out of a field, you better be careful. You better have your leather gloves and gear because those things hurt; they can go in deeply.

I looked up on the internet what a thistle looks like and they are beautiful flowers. But they have a bulb under them just full of thorns and their leaves are covered with spiky, pokey things. It just makes life difficult and it makes life painful—thorns and thistles. So, God said,

“Adam, after you live a difficult and painful life, you're going to die and return to dust. Difficult situations, difficult people, emotional pain, psychological pain, physical pain, hard work and difficulty—that's the new norm. Hurt people hurt people.”

So that continues. All because of one monumental mistake that couldn't be undone.

Continuing in Genesis 3:22) ...

22) Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—

23) therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.

24) So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (NKJV)

So now eternal life is off the table. *The Tree of Life* is no longer available. Suffering was never God's intent. You look at Christ's heart when He was here on earth, His compassion for people—a big part of His ministry was healing. Let's go to Matthew 4, we'll pick up a couple of examples of that.

Matthew 4:23 *And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.*

24) Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them.

25) Great multitudes followed Him—from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. (NKJV)

If you were sick and suffering and maybe had been sick and suffering for a while and heard about a guy who could heal and take away suffering, you would probably want to track that guy down and probably follow Him too. You would have hope for your relatives who were suffering, “Let's get him or her there.” There were many kinds of afflictions mentioned in that list. Throughout the gospels, there are 27 recorded healings by Jesus, but obviously there were way more than that. Look at Matthew 8:16.

Matthew 8:16 *When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick,*

17) that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities And bore our sicknesses." (NKJV)

That's from Isaiah 53. Now let's look at Luke 13, a particular example of the compassion and empathy that Christ felt for humans.

Luke 13:10 *Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.*

11) And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up.

12) But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity."

13) And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.

14) But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day."

15) The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it?"

16) So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?"

17) And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him. (NKJV)

Christ had empathy for human beings. He expanded His healing through His disciples; look at Luke 9:1.

Luke 9:1 *Then He called His twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases.*

2) He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (NKJV)

The church was built on the signs and wonders of the apostles. If you read how Paul established the churches going north of Israel first, into the northern part where the 7 churches are mentioned in Revelation. Then up into Galatia and over into Greece and finally into Rome, how did He get everybody's attention? It was through these miraculous healings. Peter did the same thing; it's recorded in the New Testament. The church was built on the signs and wonders of the apostles. Let's look at James 5:13.

James 5:13 *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.*

14) *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.*

15) *And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*

16) *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*
(NKJV)

Healing has been a part of God's work since the beginning and I can't even begin to count the number of times that God has intervened for me and my family and for brethren. We're not yet to the point of no more crying or pain. Jesus' healing was one at a time, one here and one there, but it wasn't universal. Universal healing is a promise for the future. Let's look at Isaiah 61:1.

Isaiah 61:1 *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;*

2) *To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn,*

3) *to console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.*

4) *And they shall rebuild the old ruins, They shall raise up the former desolations, And they shall repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations.*
(NKJV)

Now we're getting to the millennial type of scriptures. Let's look at Isaiah 44:1.

Isaiah 44:1 *Yet hear now, O Jacob My servant, And Israel whom I have chosen.*

2) *Thus says the LORD who made you And formed you from the womb, who will help you: Fear not, O Jacob My servant; And you, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.*

3) *For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, And floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, And My blessing on your offspring;* (NKJV)

Let's go forward to Isaiah 55, I like the way this scripture starts.

Isaiah 55:1 *Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price.*

2) *Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance.* (NKJV)

continuing in verse 12) ...

12) For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13) Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, And instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; And it shall be to the LORD for a name, For an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.” (NKJV)

So instead of thorns, briars, thistles, we have useful plants coming up. What is the source of this water and healing? Let's look at Zechariah 14:8.

Zechariah 14:8 *And in that day, it shall be That living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, Half of them toward the eastern sea And half of them toward the western sea; In both summer and winter it shall occur.*

9) And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be— “The LORD is one,” And His name one. (NKJV)

Unity—no more division. Remember the river in the Garden of Eden? Let's go to Ezekiel 47:1.

Ezekiel 47:1 *Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the front of the temple faced east; the water was flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar.*

2) He brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gateway that faces east; and there was water, running out on the right side.

3) And when the man went out to the east with the line in his hand, he measured one thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the water came up to my ankles.

4) Again he measured one thousand and brought me through the waters; the water came up to my knees. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through; the water came up to my waist.

5) Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed.

6) He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen this?” Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river.

7) When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other.

8) Then he said to me: “This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed.

9) *And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.*

10) *It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim; they will be places for spreading their nets. Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the Great Sea, exceedingly many.*

11) *But its swamps and marshes will not be healed; they will be given over to salt.*

12) *Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.” (NKJV)*

With literal water and trees, God is teaching us spiritual lessons here, symbolic of spiritual healing. Let's go to Isaiah 35:5, some millennial verses. This is what we look for in the millennium.

Isaiah 35:5 *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.*

6) *Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. (NKJV)*

This is that universal healing that I was talking about earlier. We will be a part of that restoration. God has a step-by-step plan to eliminate and annihilate suffering. Let's take a look again at where God is taking us, back to Revelation 21. This is where we began our journey early in the sermon.

Revelation 21:1 *Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.*

2) *Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

3) *And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*

4) *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”*

5) *Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”*

6) *And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. (NKJV)*

Just like in the Garden of Eden, the water of life is given freely—all you want. Let's turn to Revelation 22:1, coming back to the river again.

Revelation 22:1 *And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.*

2) *In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

3) *And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (NKJV)*

Too many people are suffering today, suffering in every way—emotionally, psychologically, from illness, war, death of their loved ones and just from the uncertainty of not knowing what's going to happen and continuing fear of what might happen next. The world is full of suffering. But God has a plan to end suffering. The Feast of Tabernacles pictures a time when suffering is replaced with blessings, health, and abundance. Suffering entered the world through Satan. When Satan is removed, sin declines and suffering is reduced. Let's turn to Revelation 20 and read about that, in verse 1.

Revelation 20:1 *Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.*

2) *He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years;*

3) *and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. (NKJV)*

When Satan is released for a little while, sin expands and suffering expands, until the whole world is once again filled with sin and suffering. But when Satan is finally destroyed, along with his demons and humans who just would not repent, suffering will be permanently removed—once and for all, it's gone. Revelation 22:6.

Revelation 22:6 *Then he said to me, "These words are faithful and true." And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place.*

7) *"Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (NKJV)*

Continuing in Verse 10) ...

10) *And he said to me, "Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.*

11) *He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still."*

12) *And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.*

13) *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."*

14) Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. (NKJV)

Why does everything have to be so difficult? Why is life so hard? Why are some people so difficult to deal with? Before Satan's rebellion, there was unity and peace. Before Adam and Eve took for themselves the knowledge of Good and Evil, there was no suffering, no fear, no want, no shame, no guilt. Life was not difficult. Suffering entered the world through sin. Suffering and enduring suffering with God's help, is a big part of our path to salvation. Consider the book of Job, look at what he suffered. You know we can learn from that, that God set limits on the attacks on Job. We know that in the end it worked to Job's benefit. He ended up better off than when it started. Just some words of encouragement, let's turn to Romans 8; I could read this whole chapter and it all applies and is very, very meaningful but I'm just going to go through some of the scriptures because they are so encouraging. We'll begin in Romans 8:5.

Romans 8:5 *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.*

6) For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. (NKJV)

Continuing in verse 11) ...

11) But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

12) Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

13) For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

14) For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

15) For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

16) The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

17) and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (NKJV)

Continuing in verse 23) ...

23) Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

24) For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?

25) But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (NKJV)

Continuing in verse 28) ...

28) And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

29) For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

30) Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

31) What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (NKJV)

Continuing in verse 35) ...

35) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36) As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

37) Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

38) For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,

39) nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NKJV)

Our faith in these promises, is what keeps us going. Looking forward to that sure hope that we know is going to happen. That's why we look forward to the Feast of Tabernacles, the time picturing Satan being removed, when sin is reduced, when blessings and the healing of the whole world comes about and we are able to be a part of that. For a little while, as we're able, let's put Satan's world behind us, let's hit the pause button and let's focus on the wonderful "World Tomorrow" and truly what it will be like.