

Suffering & Anxiety



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A Christian Survival Guide

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Good grows from suffering.



About the Guide

Suffering and anxiety are perennial issues in the Christian life, but anxiety has also been a major problem in the last 50 years. One in five Americans battles an anxiety disorder. And the other four are likely facing a major grief or hardship. These painful experiences make us feel weak and brittle. But the Spirit works precisely in these things to make us stronger in Christ. This guide is meant to inform, encourage, and inspire you as you walk as pilgrims in a world God is renewing, soul by soul.

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This short list of resources will help you go deeper in loving and counseling fellow strugglers, through books, articles, and podcasts.



01

What They Are

Suffering and anxiety are seeds. We can either use them or avoid them. But they exist to grow things in us.

What Are They?

Suffering and anxiety are seeds. By the grace of God and our faith in Christ, they grow things in us, *good* things, *strong* things. They are not pointless hardships or random struggle-wars. They aren't obstacles to be cleared from our path. They are *planted* in us. They go down bitter and ugly, but there is divine potential for them to grow up into beautiful things, to change us in ways we might not otherwise change (see [*Finding Hope in Hard Things*](#)).

Seeds exist to grow something grand.

Anxiety is a subset of suffering, and Scripture deals much with both topics. While suffering *can* be a form of judgment for sin, it's often portrayed as a place of learning, a classroom, a sort of garden where things start to grow in human hearts. Think of [*Job*](#) and his great losses. Think of David and his fleeing from Saul. Think of Jesus in Gethsemane. Hard things come. Pain is felt. Anguish has a voice. Lament is real. Anxiety churns. But then what happens? Faith. Perspective. Hope. [*New life*](#). In the power of God, horrid things are used to make beautiful things. Evil never ultimately wins. And so our suffering and anxiety are never *ends*; they're beginnings; they're seeds.

At eighteen, I stared at my father as he took his three final cancer-ridden breaths. It was the most painful, heart-shattering experience of my life. It was my first seed, heavy and horrid. But God planted it deeply, beneath the



*In the power of
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beautiful things.*

light that would call it forward. Time settled. Water fell. Light beckoned.

Do you know what grew next? [An anxiety disorder](#). I had thought it was the most hideous weed. It crushed me beneath its weight, brought me lower than I thought a human could go. I was weak, paralyzed, ever-threatened. How would things ever be “normal” again?

We ask questions about seeds, too, some of the same ones that apply to suffering and anxiety. How long is this going to take? Why hasn’t anything changed yet? Why does it have to be this hard? When am I going to benefit from this?

How we go about trying to answer those questions says much about who we are and what we believe. The Apostle Paul said something amazing about suffering. He said he wanted to “share” in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10). He *wanted* this? Why would he want to suffer with Christ?

Before we answer that, we need to know that Jesus Christ came down in order to go up. He was humiliated before he was exalted. His death came before the resurrection. Paul Miller calls this the [J-curve](#).¹ The seed of Christ’s life went to a low, dark place *first*. Only after that did he sprout above death’s surface and shine with a new body (John 12:24).

1. Paul E. Miller, *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

This is why the Apostle Paul *wants* to suffer with Christ. He wants to share in that glorious, resurrection life (Phil. 3:11). Paul could see that suffering was a seed, but he stared at the flower, the crown of vibrant-petaled new life . . . unbreakable life, everlasting life.

Until we attain that everlasting life, there will be millions of moments when our little deaths (instances of suffering) lead to little resurrections. These are the seeds of suffering growing inside us.

This is a call to remember each day that seeds exist not to be squelched by the soil or covered by “better” things, but to *grow* something grand. Whatever suffering or swell of anxiety you’re battling right now, it is a germinating seed. What do we do with seeds? We tend them and wait patiently for growth. We trust the gardening process. We trust the great gardener. We ask God questions, and then we go to his Word for answers.

In Christ, suffering and anxiety are seeds, things that will grow what God desires in you.

Seeds of anguish and of pain
Bring us into deeper dark.
We pray for sunlight and for rain,
Pleading for a hidden spark.

The wait and wonder press around,
We cry out for some other way.
But that is where the growth is found
As hope propels us toward the day.



02

What They're Not

Suffering and anxiety are not usually direct punishments for sin or reflections of a lack of faith. These views can seem biblical, but they do more harm than good.

Damaging Views

Well-intentioned Christians can cause great pain when they simplify or [reduce](#) suffering and anxiety in certain ways. Like [Job's friends](#), some Christians reduce suffering to a direct result of some sin. “If you’re battling suffering or anxiety, you must have done something wrong, and God is punishing you.” This approach compounds hardship with guilt. The same applies to anxiety when people suggest that your faith should help you “get over it.” For these people, continuing to battle anxiety means your faith is weak.

Approaches like these are damaging because they assume too much of God’s perspective (who alone knows the complexity of *why* suffering meets us) and heap guilt on those already carrying a heavy burden. And yet these approaches are still rampant in the church. Why?

First, many people don’t know [how to interpret and apply Scripture](#). They take God’s words out of context and apply them haphazardly. You can usually spot this error simply by asking people, “What does the Bible say in the surrounding verses?” If they don’t know, then they’re probably guilty of misinterpretation.

Second, people love a [simple answer or explanation](#) because it makes them feel in control. Falsehood can do that to us; lies can make us feel like gods. Isn’t that exactly what happened in Genesis 3? But the more you stare at a lie, the easier it becomes to see its fractures.



Take an example from Jesus. His disciples spot a blind man and ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). What’s their assumption? That *sin* is what led to the blindness. Sin caused suffering. Jesus completely opposes this assumption with his response. “Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him’” (John 9:3). Something bigger was going on than the execution of a simplistic moral equation. In God’s world, things are not always $A + B = C$. In this case, one man’s suffering—his whole *life* of blindness up to this point—served one, mysterious purpose: *to display the work of God*. In other words, suffering is an arena for the work of God.

This wasn’t the answer the disciples expected. They were looking for a simple explanation. Either (a) this man is paying for his sins or (b) he’s paying for his parents’ sins. Jesus burns up their equation and blows away the ashes. More was going on than they assumed. And that’s always the case with our suffering.

What Jesus does here, and what he says elsewhere about bearing our cross (Matt. 16:24–26) tells us that God’s primary purpose for our lives is to display his work in us. Jesus tells his followers what their main objective should be in this life: “let your light shine before others, so that they

may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). People are watching you. They’re witnesses of your life. And whether you suffer or thrive, your *good* works, the work of God, will point them to your heavenly Father.

Many people in the church have been hurt by views of suffering and anxiety that attempt to remove it from the basic, daily practice of the faith. Just as [anxiety can be a tool in the hands of God](#), so can all [suffering](#). But more than this, suffering isn’t an obstacle meant to be pushed aside so that we can find the “better” life. In fact, the Apostle Paul portrays suffering as a Christ-given path for all of us. That’s why he says he wants to share in Christ’s suffering (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; cf. Rom. 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 12:9). Given that truth, our first concern for Christians who are suffering or are in the throes of anxiety isn’t, “What did you do wrong?” or “Why isn’t your faith stronger?” but “What great thing is God about to do in your life?” Do you see how much more encouraging that is?

Suffering is a path to walk.
It takes us deeper into Christ,
Who calls us close to hear him talk,
And ushers resurrection life.



03

What to Practice

What do we do in the midst of suffering and anxiety? We ask the right sorts of questions and seek God's answers in faith. This conforms us to the image of Christ, drawing out the beauty of our hidden wood grain.

Practicing in the Pain

What do we do when faced with suffering and intense anxiety? That's the real question, isn't it? It's one thing to talk about the broader purpose of our struggles, but something else entirely to talk about how we go through the day with them. If suffering and anxiety tear us open, like a rough cross section of a tree, then there is beauty in the grain waiting to be exposed. What brings out the beauty are the questions—not *why* questions but *how* questions.

Why frustrates; how works.

Scripture has one definitive answer to the *why* questions we ask in our suffering and anxiety. Why did my dad die of brain cancer? Why did I develop an anxiety disorder. Why do I always doubt myself? Why, in short, are things hard for me on any given day?

Here's God's answer to every *why* question: "Because this is part of how I'm shaping you to my Son." That's what Paul tells us is God's ultimate end. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). You and I are destined to be conformed to the image of God's Son. Let that sink in. We can think of a thousand things we'd want from life, but do we think of *this*? That we would be made like the Son of God? How amazing and mysterious is that?

John Murray once wrote that God's love "moves determinatively to nothing



less than the highest goal conceivable for his adopted children, conformity to the image of the only-begotten Son.”¹ Did you get that wording? *The highest goal conceivable*. That’s God’s great purpose for our suffering: Son-shaping. That’s the great answer to every *why* question.

Yet, as encouraging as that is, we need a strategy for growing into that image. And one strategy we might take is to change our *why* questions to *how* questions. Many times, *why* frustrates, but *how* works on us. Let me explain what I mean.

We often want a more specific answer to our *why* questions. “Conformity to the image of Christ sounds glorious . . . but why does it have to happen *this way*? God, couldn’t you have found a different way to shape me?” Of course, we don’t find answers to those specific *why* questions, which is how frustration emerges (along with doubt, despair, anger). And then we get stuck.

But *how* questions set us up to study ourselves and God’s work in us. Look at the difference this question makes. “God, *how* do you want to conform me to Christ’s image through my anxiety?” If I ask that question, I can start speaking to God, reading his words, and looking for an answer from the Spirit. It may be that God wants to teach me how to depend

on him more than on anything or anyone else. It could be that God wants to show me what it really means to have strength *through* weakness (2 Cor. 12:10). It may be that God wants to show me how inwardly focused I am, and how I can use my anxious energy to focus intensely on someone else. God, in fact, *has* taught me each of these things through [my anxiety](#). I asked the *how* question. Then I went searching for the answers in my daily life, pressing hard on God’s word and praying for the Spirit to lead me. He *always* does. Always. Let me say it again. *If you pray to the Spirit to help you answer your how questions, he will answer*. We just have to keep ourselves rooted in Scripture as we seek that answer, since that’s where God speaks to us.

How questions will lead you to specific ways you can be shaped to the Son’s image each day. By asking and answering them, you will get a front row seat to your own Spirit-driven Christ-conformity. It’s amazing to see, even if we wish the process wasn’t as slow as it often is.

In the midst of the pain, we practice the *how*. God calls us into a speaking relationship with him as he leads us to the answers. Ask. Speak. Listen. God will work.

I know the *why* you call me to.
Show me the *how* to pull me through.

1. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2022), 306.



04

Fighting the Lies

We're constantly battling lies about who God is, who we are, and why we're experiencing hardship. Each day, we wage war against the lies.

Don't Live Lies

John Mark Comer's [Live No Lies](#) was a welcome breath of fresh air for me. I loved it. Why? Because I had already learned through [my anxiety](#) that many of the thoughts and assumptions I had were false. They were lies. In a [panic attack](#), for instance, my body screamed at me. "You're going to stop breathing! Run! Run or you'll die!!" False. Othertimes, I'd feel deeply threatened by darkness, especially by driving at night. If I got into the car after sunset, the thoughts poured in. "You're in danger. Don't do it. Go back. It's not going to be okay." False. I lived a life infiltrated by lies.

We underestimate the power of lies. Lies aren't just falsehoods—incorrect statements about reality. They are potent catalysts for our behavior. They change where we go and how we act. In fact, lies are very similar to *darkness*, to shadows. When we're surrounded by shadows, when we're immersed in the dark, we don't know where we are, and we act irrationally. Try shutting yourself in a room with all the doors and windows covered and the lights off. You won't act normally. You'll grope around for something to lean on. You'll crawl towards a wall, looking for the door. Amidst the dark, we forget where we are, and where we need to go. That's how lies work. And here's the tough truth: lies are the devil's primary means of assaulting us. Jesus did call him, after all, the father of lies (John 8:44).

Comer noted that one way to look at lies is to think of them as mental maps of reality—maps that lead us to the



wrong places.¹ Or, if you want to think of lies as shadows, they're dark maps that lead us *away from* the light. And since Christ is the light of the world (John 1:5; 8:12), Satan aims to use lies to move you away from Christ, to put some sort of distance between you and God. Below are two types of lies (among many) that commonly lead us away from the light of truth. Combatting these lies each day requires rehearsing. When confronted by the light, we have to repeat the truth that God has given.

1. *God is not who he says he is.* God reveals much about himself with his own words. In Scripture, he reveals that he is an invisible Spirit (John 4:24), but what is he like? The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes what he's like by gathering the truth of Scripture (WCF 2.1). God is living, true, perfect, most pure, unchangeable, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, forgiving, and just. Anytime a thought enters your mind that challenges these attributes, it is a lie. And that lie can cause great damage to your spirit. For instance, in the midst of a panic attack, the idea that God is *not* in control of what's happening to me screams for attention. But God is almighty, wise, loving, and good.

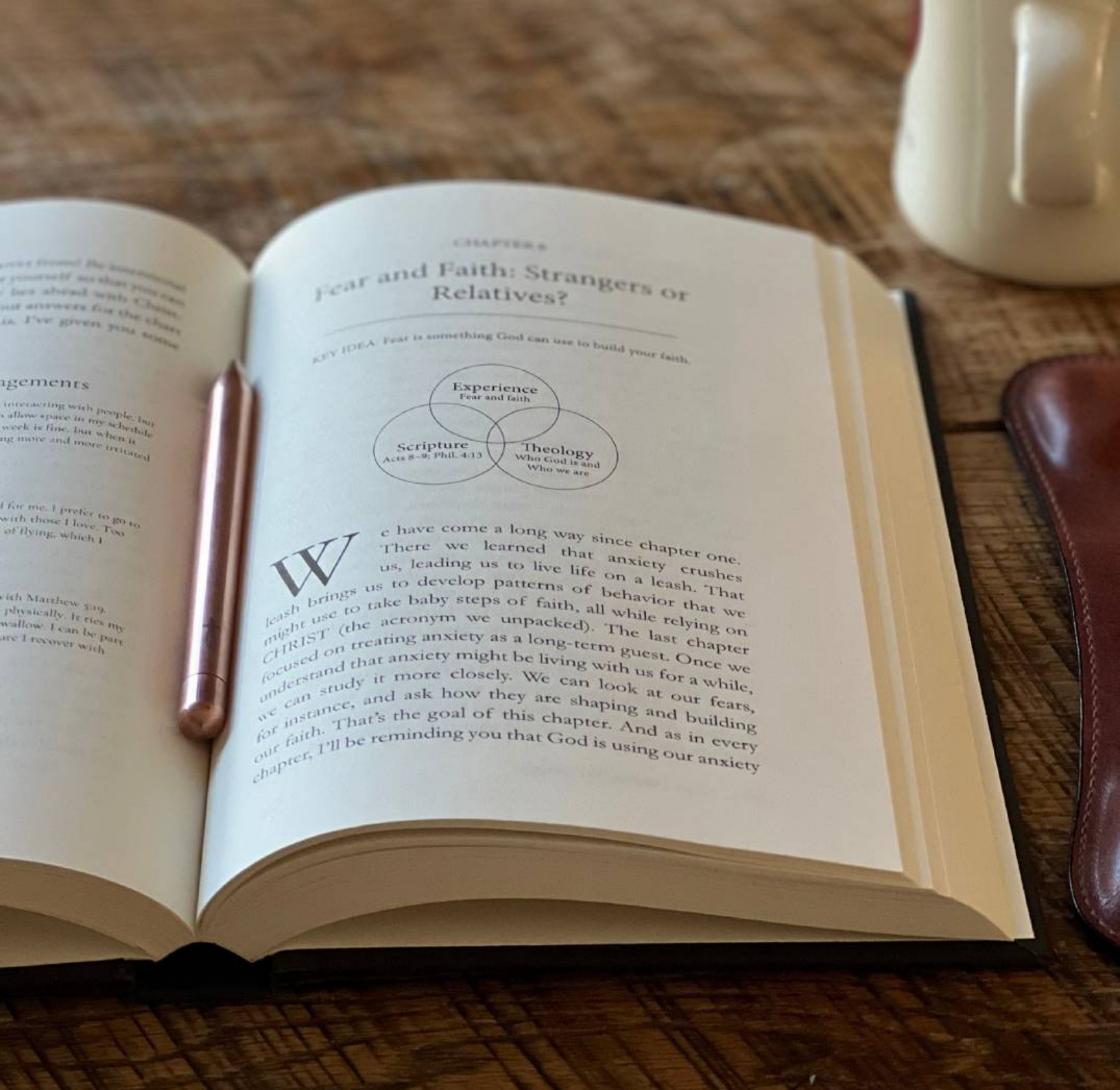
1. John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies That Sabotage Your Peace* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2021), 24–47.

He's in loving control and will use the terror in my life to train me. He is up to something *good*. He is teaching me. That's how I've learned to interpret anxiety. Nothing, in fact, can succeed against me when I'm in God's loving arms. As John Murray wrote, "there is no *against* within the orbit of the interests of the people of God."² My anxiety is spiritual medicine—it goes down bitter but always brings blessing. This is how I fight the lies with the truth.

2. *You are not who God says you are.* God has some amazing things to say about who we are in Christ Jesus. It's a bright and glorious portrait God paints. It's so bright and glorious, in fact, that we should be able to identify quickly any thought that opposes it. You are a child a light (John 1:9–12; 1 Thess. 5:5; Eph. 5:8), a grace-speaker (Eph. 4:29), fully redeemed (Luke 1:68; Gal. 3:13), predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Rom. 8:30). Any thought or person suggesting otherwise is caught in a lie. Above all, combat the lie that God is somehow punishing you with suffering or anxiety.

We have to fight the lies that fly at us each day. Satan wants suffering to tear us down. God will only ever use it to build us up so that we resemble his Son. In the midst of suffering, don't live lies.

2. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 310–311.



CHAPTER 5

Fear and Faith: Strangers or Relatives?

KEY IDEA: Fear is something God can use to build your faith.



We have come a long way since chapter one. There we learned that anxiety crushes us, leading us to live life on a leash. That we develop patterns of behavior that we might use to take baby steps of faith, all while relying on CHRIST (the acronym we unpacked). The last chapter focused on treating anxiety as a long-term guest. Once we understand that anxiety might be living with us for a while, we can study it more closely. We can look at our fears, for instance, and ask how they are shaping and building our faith. That's the goal of this chapter. And as in every chapter, I'll be reminding you that God is using our anxiety

05

Other Resources

Want to go deeper in your understanding and battle with suffering and anxiety? Here are some resources to get you started.

More Resources

As a writer, my passion is to craft words that encourage and inspire fellow believers in Christ. The areas of anxiety and suffering are particularly close to me, given the experiences I've had. What follows is a list of books, articles, and podcast interviews that I pray will encourage you. To receive regular writings and updates on what I'm doing, you can join my email list on [Substack](#). Thanks so much for reading!

Books



Articles

- [What To Say to Christians Battling Anxiety](#)
- [Abiding in Peace through Anxiety](#)
- [Finding New Life in Your Anxiety](#)
- [Making the Anxiety Cycle Work FOR You](#)
- [Suffering and Giving? The Connection](#)
- [The Secret to Spiritual Growth: The Suffering Circle](#)
- [God's Patterns and Our Problems](#)
- [What You Gain from Loss](#)

Podcasts

- [Mortification of Spin: Struck Down but Not Destroyed](#)
- [Laymen's Lounge: God's Plan for Suffering in Our Lives](#)
- [Sally Clarkson: Living through Anxiety with Grace and Hope](#)
- [Roger Lowther: Finding Hope in Hard Things](#)
- [Weird Christian Podcast: Responding to Anxiety](#)
- [How God's Generosity Changes Us](#)

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