

THE GOSPEL IN SLOW MOTION

**A 9 STEP
SANCTIFICATION MODEL FOR
SUFFERING-BASED STRUGGLES**



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Being a Christian doesn't remove the experience of suffering. Yet, historically, the church's discipleship models for sin-based struggles have been more developed than our approaches to suffering-based struggles. It is just clearer to see how the gospel relates to sin—Jesus died for our sin and salvation removes the stain of sin—than it is to see how the gospel addresses suffering. In fact, it can sometimes feel like heaven is God's only remedy for suffering.

That's why this material may seem less intuitive than the nine-step model for sin-based struggles. But it also explains why this material is so needed. In a broken world, we will suffer in many ways. We need to understand how to minister the gospel to people who are suffering.

The nine-step model for suffering is both *sequential* (i.e., in steps) and *segmented* (i.e., those steps cluster together to create three stages of change). It will help orient you to this model if you keep these stages in mind:

- **Stage one:** Stabilize and understand the experience of suffering (steps one through three)
- **Stage two:** Identify and correct the narrative scripts that arise from suffering (steps four through six)
- **Stage three:** Engage healthily with life and relationships after suffering (steps seven through nine)

Now, we will explore generically what each G4 suffering-based curriculum (grief, trauma, depression, betrayal, etc.) covers with greater specificity. The goal is to give you the big picture and to help you understand the progression from one step to the next.

Step 1: Prepare Yourself Physically, Emotionally, and Spiritually to Face Your Suffering

When suffering has been long and hard, we feel exhausted in every way possible. Reaching out for help is an act of courage and should be honored as such. Just as the widow's mite was celebrated by Jesus because it was a gift from *financial poverty* (Luke 21:1–4), we want to honor asking for help as an act of faith expressed out of *hope poverty*.

Step 1 examines some relatively mundane parts of our life: sleep, eating habits, exercise, social support, and prioritizing key decisions. *Responding well to suffering requires endurance, and these mundane parts of life either aid or undermine our endurance.* In step 1, we honor the reality that we are embodied souls living in a world of high demands by thinking through how to care for our bodies and respond to these demands in a way that sets us up to complete this journey well.

Step 2: Acknowledge the Specific History and Realness of My Suffering

As we are using the term, *acknowledging, this means looking at the facts and calling things by the right name.* There are many barriers that may prevent us from acknowledging our suffering—barriers like shame, shock, past or present threats, lies from an abuser, confusion because of the age at which suffering occurred, loyalty, or denial as part of grief.

Different types of suffering create unique challenges to acknowledging the realness of our experience. Adultery is clouded with lies. Trauma is fragmented. Abuse involves blame-shifting. Grief is surreal. We can often start to feel crazy because of how our perspective fluctuates about what happened.

We will only make good application of the Bible when we rightly understand our experience. That's why in suffering the first step toward change is not asking “What does the Bible say?” but “What am I experiencing?” If we are wrong about the second question (assessing our experience), we won't make good use of answers to the first question (Bible interpretation).

It is important to realize that as we talk about these “facts and events” we are recalling them from within a story (step 4). But that narrative is the only way we know how to tell what happened. Realizing that the narrative we use to understand these events may not be accurate is scary and unsettling. But it is an important part of responding in wiser, healthier ways.

Step 3: Understand the Impact of My Suffering

Between facts (step 2) and story (step 4) is impact (step 3). Things happen, they make an impact, and then we make sense of that impact with a narrative. Use the following vignette of how a child narrates the experience of abuse to understand the relationship of steps two and three. We'll consider this vignette again in step 4.

- **Step 2: Facts**—Bad things happened.
 - Parent hits child because a toy was out of place.
 - Painful words were spoken, and the other parent leaves the room.
 - Child cries without comfort.
 - People slowly return, and life becomes “normal” again.
 - Wait for next explosion.
- **Step 3: Impact**—Suffering changes how we understand and respond to life.
 - Authority figures are viewed as unapproachable or dangerous.
 - Pain is viewed as something to be endured alone.
 - Pain is viewed as something that intrudes without reason or warning.
 - See others living “normal” lives and experience confusion, anger, or jealousy.
 - Every mistake, or potential mistake, carries the emotional weight of great pain.

Notice how the events—the facts of the abuse—are more than just painful memories. They have a broad, ongoing impact on the person who experienced them.

Some people will look at the bullet points above and think, *My suffering wasn't that bad because others have suffered much worse than me. But suffering is not a competitive sport.*¹ Recovering from knee surgery doesn't hurt less because someone else got hit by a truck. To interpret suffering rightly, we need to assess our suffering on its own terms, not comparing it to others' suffering.

Step 4: Learn My Suffering Story That I Use to Make Sense of My Experience

In this step, we articulate the destructive messages (you might call them stories, narrative, or scripts) we take from the facts (step 2) and impact (step 3) of our suffering to try to make sense of these painful experiences. To illustrate this, let's return to the example of an abused child and consider the kinds of suffering stories this child might take from their experience of abuse.

- **Step 4: Story**—We make sense of suffering in destructive ways
 - “I am a person who doesn't deserve to be protected.”
 - “I am living in a world that only plays by the rules for other people.”
 - “Love is a cruel joke that you can't live without but blows up in your face when you get it.”

We may theologically disagree with most everything we say on this step. But there is still value in putting these destructive scripts into words. *Just because how we make sense of our suffering isn't true doesn't mean the effect of that narrative isn't real.* In order to move our narrative toward truth, we must grapple with how we actually think.

Let's take the example of a child who is afraid to learn to swim. The child's fear is a *real* experience. They have an increased heart rate, pupil dilation, and a change in breathing pattern. But the story behind the fear—“I'm going to drown”—is *false*. However, it

¹ If you struggle with this mentality, consider reading the article “Making Peace with Romans 8:28,” which can be found at bradhambrick.com/romans828.

does a parent no good to try to truth bomb the child out of their fear—“If I was going to drown you, would I do it in front of this many people?” Instead, empathy toward the real experience—“This feels like a big deal, doesn’t it?”—builds trust so that the distortions in how the child is telling their story can be addressed—“You’re a strong kid who is good at learning new things.”

The Psalms often take this approach to untying the knots in how we make sense of suffering. The Psalms are unique in Scripture because they are a place where God gives us words to speak back to him during our best and worst times. Of particular comfort during times of suffering is the fact that God sometimes puts “heresy” in the Psalms. *God allowed untrue statements to be included in the Psalms because they capture our experience of living mid-journey in a broken world.*

- God is felt to be hiding from us in our troubles (Psalm 10:1)
- God is felt to be forgetful or uninterested in our suffering (Psalm 13:1, 44:24)
- God is felt to have forsaken those who cry out to him (Psalm 22:1–2)
- God is felt to be asleep and therefore unaware (Psalm 44:23)
- God is felt to have abandoned his people forever (Psalm 74:1)
- God is felt to have aggressively “spiked” an innocent person in anger (Psalm 102:10)

God is not agreeing with these false interpretations, but he is demonstrating his willingness to be compassionate toward the realness of our experience before he tries to correct our interpretation of what is true. God wants to transform our suffering story, but he is willing to enter it where we are and patiently transform our story from within.

Step 5: Mourn the Wrongness of What Happened and Receive God’s Comfort

Many of us probably feel like this step is out of place. After we articulate destructive thinking, we want to replace it with helpful thinking as soon as possible. Also, because we tend to think that mourning happens either at the beginning or end of a movie, not the middle, it seems odd for this to be a central step in our nine-step, suffering journey.

Mourning signifies a time of transition. We mourn at the major pivots of our life (good and bad). We cry at weddings and funerals because we recognize the profound transition that is taking place. In these nine steps, we are at a point of transition. This is the first time we can look at what really happened (step 2) and understand its impact (step 3) without embracing the destructive messages that were embedded with our suffering (step 4). We can finally “grieve clean.”

Notice that Paul offers his famous “weep with those who weep” advice in the passage on how to respond to suffering (Romans 12:14–21). *Paul did not try to meet suffering with an answer, but instead with empathy.* When we have removed the destructive messages from our suffering, we are able to receive compassion from God (Matthew 5:4) and friends without it feeling like they are validating those destructive themes.

Step 6: Learn My Gospel Story by Which God Gives Meaning to My Experience

Suffering does not get the final word on our life. Mourning is when we allow God to affirm that our suffering is real and that we matter to him. But compassion is not all that God has to offer.

God wants to help us make sense of our suffering through the grand redemptive narrative of the gospel, to the degree that we can before we experience the full redemption of all things in heaven. However, the segmented way we are prone to read our Bibles can impede God’s intent. In *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen write,

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits—theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story. All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for

understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should... If, as believers, we allow this story (rather than the Bible) to become the foundation of our thought and action, then our lives will manifest not the truths of Scripture, but the lies of an idolatrous culture.²

Looking to the Bible’s story as we process our suffering doesn’t mean that we get an answer to the why question we’ve asked so many times. It *does* mean we begin to answer the big questions of life in meaningful and satisfying ways in light of all that God has done in response to sin and the fall. These questions might include: Who am I now? Who is God, and where is he amid my suffering? What parts of this hardship am I responsible for, and what parts are “just suffering”? How should I think about the people who hurt me? Is love worth grief? What is worth living for in light of what I’ve been through?

Step 7: Identify Goals That Allow Me to Combat the Impact of My Suffering

Some of us resist calling our hardship suffering because we think this means accepting there is nothing we can do about it. *Just because something is not our fault doesn’t mean we are powerless to fight the consequences of what happened. Acknowledging suffering does not mean we have to be passive.* We can actively work to offset the impact of our suffering without accepting responsibility for the original hardship(s).

In this sense, step 7 is the mirror of step 3. In step 3, we gained an understanding of how suffering impacted our life. After step 3, we took an intermission to ensure that we were not making sense of our suffering in destructive ways (step 4 through step 6). Now, in step 7, we begin to do the work of offsetting the impact of our suffering.

Again, suffering comes in many forms, and each form can have a unique impact. The relational impact of betrayal is different from the physical impact of chronic pain, and the emotional impact of trauma is different still. Step 7 is when each G4 curriculum draws upon the best of Christian and clinical literature on that subject to offer subject-specific strategies to offset the impact of that type of suffering.

Step 8: Persevere in the New Life and Identity to Which God Has Called Me

Perseverance makes “better” become “normal.” When an aspect of suffering becomes life-dominating, the impact of suffering becomes part of the day-to-day normal of our lives. That means healthy emotions and relationships feel strange. We must reacclimate to the kind of life God wants for us.

While we acclimate to a healthy normal, we may experience anger, regret, or guilt as we begin to see the past for what it could have been. These emotions are unpleasant, but not bad. They are another opportunity to mourn (step 5). And they mean that this is an important time to continue the process of understanding our personal story as a part of God’s larger story of redemption.

Step 9: Steward All of My Life for God’s Glory

To “steward” something means to use it for God’s intended purpose. As the law of God is summarized in a positive command in Matthew 22:36–40—something to *do* instead of a “thou shall not”—then we must always end our battle against suffering by finding ways to run to God rather than merely how to run from the effects of suffering. *Life is not about what we avoid, but what we pursue.*

To help you assess how to steward your life for God’s glory, we offer the following nine questions so that graduation from G4 launches you to live on mission:

- I. Am I willing to commit my life to whatever God asks of me?

² Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 12.

2. What roles have I neglected that God has placed me in?
3. What are my spiritual gifts?
4. For what group of people am I burdened (age, struggle, career, nation, language, etc.)?
5. What am I passionate about?
6. With what talents or abilities has God blessed me?
7. What are my unique life experiences?
8. Where do my talents and passions match up with the needs in my church and community?
9. How would God have me bring these things together to glorify Him?

Conclusion

What did you get from this study?

- If you're a new participant in G4, you received the big picture of the G4 journey that is in front you. This study helped you understand how the nine steps of G4 work together so you don't get lost in the details of working one of the steps.
- If you're studying this in a small group, you received an overview of how you can more intentionally apply the gospel to any suffering-based struggle you or a friend are facing.

Either way, we hope you've been encouraged as you realized that regardless of where you are in your journey with suffering, God will meet you there. Your choices are “stay stuck” or “pretend things aren't that bad.” The gospel, as we've laid it out in slow motion, provides a map to help you determine what active reliance on God looks like in the next step of your journey.

Questions for Small Group Study: 9 Steps for Suffering-Based Struggles

When studying this lesson as a small group it is recommended that: (a) each participant read the lesson during the week, (b) watch the 15-minute video as a group, and then (c) discuss the following questions:

1. Big tasks are easier (not easy) when they are broken down into small steps. What is an example from your life or career where you have seen this to be true?
2. *Step One:* When have you tried something difficult without adequate preparation? How did it go?
3. *Step Two:* What is an example of something you treated as your fault that wasn't? When you called the challenge by the wrong name (sin instead of suffering) how did that detract from your ability to make progress?
4. *Step Three:* What is one of the more difficult experiences of suffering you have been through? How has it impacted you? How was the impact (aftereffects) different from the original experience?
5. *Step Four:* What kind of disruptive or destructive scripts do you tend to put on your experiences of suffering? How do these scripts begin to creep into and effect other areas of your life?
6. *Step Five:* How does the freedom to grieve hard experiences restore your voice? How does having God and friends validate this grief boost your morale to continue in the journey?
7. *Step Six:* Often our attempts to understand hard times through the lens of the gospel try to explain suffering away by finding a “silver lining” that is “worth it.” How is that different from finding honest, hopeful answers to the big questions of life that became clearer or more precious during our suffering?
8. *Steps Seven and Eight:* Look back at your answers to question four (Step 3). What kind of goals or approaches could you use to decrease the impact of these effects? How does focusing change on the impact of suffering give you a way to be active without asking you to take responsibility for your suffering (treating it like sin)?
9. *Step Nine:* As you look at the questions for how to steward your life for the glory of God, what do you feel compelled to invest in more? How does having something to pursue help in our effort to cultivate a meaningful, satisfying life in spite of significant suffering?

Appendix: What Is G4?

G4 is a group-based counseling ministry that provides a context for participants to invest a season of their lives in overcoming a life-dominating struggle of sin or suffering. G4 groups utilize a subject specific curriculum (addiction, depression, eating disorders, grief, trauma, etc.) built around one of two nine-step models of sanctification.

The goal of G4 is to see participants graduate back into the general discipleship ministries of the church, freer from their struggle and with a clearer picture of what it means for believers to support one another as the gospel transforms the most difficult parts of our lives.

Why the name “G4”?

“G” is for gospel. Too often in counseling groups, our struggle becomes our identity. The longer someone is in a group, the more their identity becomes “addict,” “depressed,” or “divorced.” G4 provides the benefit of a place to be known without the detriment of cultivating a struggle-based identity.

We place the “G” at the front of G4 to serve as a reminder that our identity is found not in our struggle but in our Savior—Jesus Christ. Yes, we struggle. Yes, it is freeing to have a place to be honest about that. But, no, our struggle does not define us. Through the gospel God tells us who we are and makes us more and more into the person he created us to be.

“4” is for the four types of groups that can be housed within a G4 ministry. Here is a basic definition for each of the four types of groups that can exist within G4:

1. *Recovery Groups* are for destructive, habituated life patterns, such as substance abuse, chemical addiction, or behavioral addictions (e.g., pornography or gambling).
2. *Process Groups* are for decreasing the disruption caused by difficult experiences or “sticky” emotions. They might address trauma or the aftermath of destructive relationships.
3. *Support Groups* are for mutual encouragement as participants persevere through difficult experiences that endure for an indefinite period of time, such as divorce, depression, or grief.
4. *Therapeutic Educational Groups* provide a better understanding of challenges that are often misunderstood and might provide a holistic Christian perspective on mental health or identify common challenges for blended families. <end numbered list>

G4 Series Curriculum

Sin / Responsibility Based Curriculum

1. False Love (sexual addiction and adultery) – bradhambrick.com/falselove
2. Gaining a Healthy Relationship with Food – bradhambrick.com/healthy
3. Overcoming Anger – bradhambrick.com/anger
4. Substance Abuse – bradhambrick.com/addiction
5. Anxiety/Depression³ – bradhambrick.com/anxiety

Suffering Based Curriculum

1. Anxiety/Depression – bradhambrick.com/depression
2. Navigating Destructive Relationships – bradhambrick.com/destructive
3. Taking the Journey of Grief with Hope – bradhambrick.com/grief
4. Trauma – bradhambrick.com/trauma
5. True Betrayal (processing a spouse’s sexual addiction or adultery) – bradhambrick.com/truebetrayal

³ Note: Depression-Anxiety are dealt with together so that each can be addressed from both a responsibility and suffering paradigm.