

SUFFERING IN THE PLAN OF GOD

Session Topic

In God's sovereign plan Christians will encounter some amount of suffering.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. What was the most recent piece of bad news that really bothered you? Why did it make you so upset?
2. What is the most challenging aspect that you can recall from your own past experience of adversity? Why was it so difficult?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What did Jesus predict in Matthew 5:10–12?
2. As used in John 15 and other places in the New Testament, what does the term *world* refer to?
3. What truth about today's culture is reflected in what Paul observed in Acts 17?
4. What biblical concept is the key to having a clearer perspective on suffering?
5. What does Genesis 22 illustrate in regard to the reasons for trials and suffering?
6. How should we assess Paul's reaction to his unidentified infirmity in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10?
7. What does Jesus warn against in Matthew 6:24? How is this especially applicable to contemporary society?
8. What does Hebrews 11:24–26 say about Moses' example?
9. What incentive should Romans 8:18–25 give us in regard to our dealing with suffering?
10. What significance does Luke 14:26–27 have concerning the purpose of suffering?
11. Reread Hebrews 5:7–10 and Philippians 2:8–9. What do these passages say about what Jesus learned from suffering?

Focus on Prayer

- Ask God to help you resolve any doubts you may have concerning the reality of His sovereignty over all things.
- Thank the Lord for His plans for your future well-being (Rom. 8:18–25).
- Pray that the other members of your group will be strengthened when they face suffering.

Optional Activities

1. Read James 4:13–16 and discuss what it says about presumption and our personal plans. Which of your plans would be most affected by unexpected adversity? Look at your schedule for the next week and commit each item on it into His care.
2. It is easy to be frightened at the prospect of persecution. But 1 John 4:4 tells us that we have adequate resources to face the sinful world system. Have you ever experienced persecution for your faith? If so, how did you react? How could you have been better prepared?

Assignment

1. Memorize 1 Peter 4:19.
2. Read chapter 2 of *The Power of Suffering*.

2

EXAMPLES OF FAITH IN THE FIRE

Session Topic

Through superior role models we can learn much about how to deal well with suffering.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. Who was the first role model you can remember? Did that person become a favorite example for you?
2. See if you can list at least five prominent people from the popular culture (music, entertainment, sports) whom you would consider as role models.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What were two key features of Stephen's ministry prior to his death?
2. Acts 6:15 says Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel." In what other ways could we describe and compare his facial expression?
3. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18)?
4. How did Daniel and his three friends adapt to their circumstances in Babylon?
5. How did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego display their inner convictions before the intense pressure of Nebuchadnezzar? (Read Job 13:15; Ps. 119:11.)
6. What does Daniel 6:4–9 reveal about the actions of Daniel's enemies?
7. What does Daniel 6:16 suggest about Daniel's relationship to King Darius?
8. If you knew that you were about to enter a period of suffering, how would you begin to prepare?

Focus on Prayer

- Set aside some time to pray for believers in other parts of the world who face opposition because of their stand for Christ.
- Reflect again on Stephen's life. Thank God for the testimony Stephen's life and ministry had on the church.
- Pray that God will give you the discipline to be more like Daniel and his friends in your Christian walk.

Optional Activities

1. Read 1 Timothy 3 and list the qualifications it mentions for church leadership. What qualities are you strong in? In which ones do you need to improve?
2. Think of the many excuses our society offers for not putting God first. Which ones do you think have the strongest influence? During the next month keep track in writing of the times when you felt tempted not to put God first in a particular situation. Read Luke 14:16–24 and meditate on its application for you.

Assignment

1. Compare and contrast aspects in the life of Joseph (Gen. 37—50) with the character traits of the men discussed here in chapter 2. Write down your findings.
2. Read chapter 3 in *The Power of Suffering*.

3

PAUL: A PROFILE IN SUFFERING

Session Topic

Because of his own experiences, the apostle Paul is a superb example of godly perseverance through all kinds of adversity.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. Do you have stick-to-itiveness? That's an old-fashioned slang term for perseverance. Do you tend to be easily discouraged when the going gets tough? Or are you more likely to look at the bright side and keep going? When do you most feel like quitting?

2. Do you find it easy or difficult to talk about death with a family member? Explain your answer.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What common trait is found in Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:4; and 1 Thessalonians 5:16?
2. What was Paul's status as he wrote to the Philippians (Phil. 1:7; see also Acts 28:30–31)?
3. How is Acts 16:22–33 illustrative and representative of the theme of chapter 3?
4. What are detractors? How did they affect Paul's ministry?
5. What distinct possibility does Paul allude to in Philippians 1:19–21?
6. How much confidence did Paul have in God's Word? Why?
7. What does Philippians 1:19 mean when it uses the word *provision*? How is it applicable to Paul and to us?
8. What promises of Jesus did Paul trust in?
9. What was Paul's strategy in figuratively comparing himself to a clay pot?

10. In 2 Corinthians 4:8–9, what four paradoxes in the midst of suffering did Paul list?
11. In what three ways was Paul able to realize endurance in suffering?

Focus on Prayer

- Are you dealing with a particular trial that is wearing down your endurance? Or perhaps you know of someone else who is in the midst of a trial or suffering. Spend some time in prayer each day this week asking God to strengthen you or the other person during this difficulty (Gal. 6:9).
- Pray for the pastor of your church that he will have spiritual stamina in carrying out his ministry.
- Pray that you will have an attitude of joy next week, no matter what challenges you face.

Optional Activities

1. Read a book about contemporary Christian role models who endured martyrdom (Jim Elliot, *Through Gates*

of Splendor) or suffering and hardship (Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Step Further*).

2. Memorize 2 Timothy 3:16–17 as a reminder of the confidence you can have in Scripture during any situation.

Assignment

1. Read John 15—16. Make a list of all the promises that Jesus made to His followers in these chapters. Make a separate list of the ones that apply most directly to trials and suffering.
2. Read chapter 4 of *The Power of Suffering*.

4

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMB OF GOD

Session Topic

Jesus Christ is the only role model Christians really need for how to deal with suffering.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. Think of a situation when you spoke out (perhaps defensively) when you should have kept quiet. How did you feel afterward? Is it always best to remain silent when criticized?

2. Of the various images that non-Christians have of Jesus, which one seems most common to you? How do you respond when you hear it mentioned?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What comfort is there for us as we face hostility from the world? Look at John 15:18–21 and Matthew 10:21–25 again. What are a couple of differences in detail that you see between the two passages?
2. What major misconception did Jesus' disciples reveal concerning the cause of suffering (John 9)? In spite of this, do you think they would have been better counselors to Job than his friends were? Why or why not?
3. The word *example* in 1 Peter 2:21 suggests the idea of following a model. How closely do you need to copy a model or diagram when you're building something? What happens if you disregard the model?
4. Do you agree with the statement "The first and most readily apparent place that sin shows itself is the human mouth"? Explain your answer.
5. What major character trait does Isaiah 53 reveal about the Suffering Servant? What other truths can be drawn from that chapter?

6. What one sentence do you especially appreciate in this chapter? Why?
7. What does Acts 23:3–5 show us about Paul? Would your reaction be the same in a similar situation?
8. Think of the many things in everyday life that we entrust our well-being and safety to. Most of us are also very trusting of other people in business contexts. How can 1 Peter 2:23 motivate us to entrust ourselves more fully to God?
9. With the example of Hugh Latimer as an inspiration, can you think of a time when you were able to encourage a fellow believer in the midst of a trying situation? What was the outcome?

Focus on Prayer

- Give thanks for Christ's willingness to suffer and die on your behalf.
- Ask God to give you a more Christlike attitude during those times when you encounter unjust criticism or opposition.

- Pray, asking the Lord through His Spirit to reveal to you areas of pride that would hinder your testimony in the midst of a personal trial.

Optional Activities

1. Read one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering and death. Note on paper the various ways He was the ideal example of how to react to suffering.
2. Study Job 1:1—2:11. Write a brief summary in your own words to show that this passage denies the notion that all suffering is caused by sin.

Assignment

1. Memorize Isaiah 53:7.
2. Read chapter 5 of *The Power of Suffering*.

5

PREPARING FOR SUFFERING

Session Topic

Christian discipleship is the crucial element in being prepared to face suffering and trials.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. How do you prepare for or look ahead to a typical week at work or school? What's one practical step you regularly take to ensure your success?
2. On a scale from one to ten (one being almost nonexistent, ten being as good as humanly possible), rate your

own spiritual preparedness. How does this correlate with your current level of discipleship?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a major natural disaster? What was it like? What would you do differently next time to be more prepared?
2. Think of someone, past or present, whom you have really liked as a teacher, coach, boss, etc. How could you apply the principles of Matthew 10:24 to that relationship?
3. Are you pursuing the goal of becoming more like Christ? Read and reflect on Philippians 3:14–17.
4. What common thread of truth runs through Proverbs 29:25; John 14:27; and 2 Timothy 1:7–8?
5. What comfort does Isaiah 26:3–4 provide?
6. What does Jesus warn of in Matthew 10:34–37? Will it happen to everyone?
7. What positive result comes from grateful prayer (Phil. 4:6–7)?
8. How would you define God's providence? State the main difference between it and a miracle.

9. What two basic elements are necessary for the Christian to be prepared for Satan's attacks (1 Peter 5:8–9)?

Focus on Prayer

- Spend some time in prayer asking God's Spirit to show you any areas in which your spiritual preparedness is weak. Ask Him for the strength to make improvements.
- Pray for your group that each member will be more fearless in his or her walk with God in the coming month.
- If you are dealing with spiritual opposition from some member of your family, ask God for wisdom and strength in coping with it. If you are not in that situation, pray for another person who is facing such opposition.

Optional Activities

1. Read *The Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges. (If you have already read it, read Bridges' sequel, *The Practice of Godliness*.)

2. Watch a Christian television channel several times next week or visit a Christian website that has current events and feature-story articles. Listen for (or identify) and make notes on how many times someone mentions the reality of spiritual warfare. Was the discussion or comment scriptural and balanced each time?

Assignment

1. Read Ephesians 6:10–18. Meditate each day next week on a different part of God's armor. Write down your key insights and ways God wants you to apply them.
2. Read chapter 6 of *The Power of Suffering*.

6

DEALING WITH SUFFERING

Session Topic

We need to have the right attitude as we deal with suffering.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. Name one aspect of your home or work situation that gives you the most struggle to maintain a good attitude. When and how did it last present a challenge?
2. How well do you handle surprises? What response first comes to mind when you're faced with an unexpected change of schedule?

Group Discovery Questions

1. In general, how well do you think the average believer does in applying what he or she learns from Scripture?
2. What does the “fiery ordeal” in 1 Peter 4:12 symbolize?
3. How could having joy in the midst of suffering or persecution lead to a pharisaical attitude? What kind of perspective on suffering would help prevent that?
4. Explain what Peter meant when he wrote about sharing in the sufferings of Christ.
5. How can dealing well with suffering be an incentive for us to welcome the return of Christ (1 Peter 4:13)?
6. Give at least three Old Testament illustrations of when God’s Spirit was shown to His people. How does the Spirit demonstrate His presence for us today?
7. Reread the excerpt about Thomas Cranmer’s death. What impresses you most about how he handled death?
8. What does the term *troublesome meddler* in 1 Peter 4:15 primarily refer to? What else might it mean?
9. According to 1 Peter 4:7, 17, how are we to understand the times in which we live?
10. Consider the original meaning of the word *entrust* in 1 Peter 4:19. What confidence does it give us in the trustworthiness of God, especially in suffering?

Focus on Prayer

- Pray that God will give you a proper, biblical attitude in everything.
- Take some time to praise and thank God for all His resources that help you deal with unexpected adversity.
- Pray that God will make you more discerning in the face of various trials and sufferings, not only in your own life but also in counseling others.

Optional Activities

1. Make a brief study of the pro-life movement. Look at some back issues of Christian magazines (*Christianity Today*, *Moody Magazine*, *World*) or past online articles that would have news reports or stories about various strategies used by different wings of the movement. Which strategy seems most biblical? Use Scripture to support your answers.
2. Send a note of encouragement to an individual or family you know who is enduring a difficult trial right now. If you don't know of anyone who is currently in a difficulty, share with a Christian friend one thing you learned in this chapter.

Assignment

1. Read Matthew 5:1–17. Reflect and meditate on all the ways this passage can be an encouragement in facing hostility from the world. Memorize two or three of the most meaningful verses.
2. Read chapter 7 of *The Power of Suffering*.

7

THE LESSONS FROM SUFFERING

Session Topic

We should not only be aware of the reality of suffering but also be eager to embrace the lessons that come from it.

Community Builder (*Choose One*)

1. Recall a frustrating experience when you had to relearn, perhaps the hard way, a lesson you should have grasped from an earlier trial. What do you remember most vividly about the second experience?
2. Do you think it's more difficult for a wealthy Christian to face suffering? What extra obstacles might he or she face?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What truth from chapter 1 does Horatius Bonar's quote reemphasize?
2. How has the strength of your assurance of salvation grown?
3. How would you define the term *greatly rejoice* in 1 Peter 1:6? Use your own words to clarify the idea.
4. Who and what guarantees our spiritual inheritance (Eph. 1:11–14)?
5. What example is used in 1 Peter 1:7 to illustrate how valuable a proven faith is?
6. Why is patience not the most important lesson to learn from suffering? What is a more far-reaching principle we need to understand?
7. How much did James and John understand about the future kingdom of God (Matt. 20—23)? What truth did Jesus need to clarify for them?
8. Can you recall an instance in which God's comfort was especially meaningful to you? Were you afterward able to comfort someone else in a similar fashion?
9. Can you identify with William Cowper? Why or why not?

Focus on Prayer

- Thank God that He has a purpose and plan for any suffering you will have to deal with.
- Ask the Lord for an opportunity within the next month to minister comfort to someone who is in, or has recently endured, a time of suffering.
- Pray that you and everyone else in your group would seek to have wisdom and humility as you all endure various trials.

Optional Activities

1. William Cowper's hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" is not in many modern hymnals. Write out each verse on an index card, and memorize one verse each week for the next five weeks.
2. Read and study Proverbs 1—3. Based on these chapters, compose a brief definition of wisdom, record your findings concerning the advantages of wisdom, and write down some of the main characteristics of a wise person.

Assignment

1. Memorize Romans 8:35–39 or James 1:2–6.
2. Complete one of the Optional Activities, which you may not have had time to do, from earlier in this discussion guide.

NOTES

Introduction

1. J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 67.
2. Ibid., 433.
3. David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University, 1982).

Chapter 1: Suffering in the Plan of God

1. A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1961), 20.
2. Ibid., 22–23.

Chapter 2: Examples of Faith in the Fire

1. John Woodbridge, *More Than Conquerors* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 9–10.

Chapter 3: Paul: A Profile in Suffering

1. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 219–20.

Chapter 4: The Silence of the Lamb of God

1. As quoted in Harold S. Darby, *Hugh Latimer* (London: Epworth, 1953), 237.
2. *Ibid.*, 247.

Chapter 5: Preparing for Suffering

1. Dan Jansen with Jack McCallum, *Full Circle* (New York: Villard, 1994), as quoted in *Reader's Digest*, November 1994, 228.
2. Rob Jameson, “Case Study: Orange County,” Ambit ERisk, www.erisk.com/learning/casestudies/orangecounty.asp (accessed June 30, 2011).
3. C. L. Feinberg, “Peace,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 833.

Chapter 6: Dealing with Suffering

1. Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 292.
2. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 142–43.
3. John Foxe, *Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World* (Chicago: Moody, n.d.), 506.
4. Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 195–96.
5. John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprint 1985), 5:621–22.
6. As quoted in Paul S. Reese, *Triumphant in Trouble* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1962), 119–20.

Chapter 7: The Lessons from Suffering

1. Horatius Bonar, *When God's Children Suffer* (New Canaan, CT: Keats, 1981), 30–31. Cited in Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 176.
2. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), 534–35.