

Small Group Curriculum

Still Wondering • Week 6 • How can a good God allow all this pain and suffering?

All of humanity can perhaps agree on this one statement: Suffering is the worst thing a person can experience in his or her lifetime. Whether experienced as loss, injury, sickness, war, famine, homelessness, injustice, abuse, addiction, depression, anxiety, relational brokenness, financial hardship, natural disasters, and the list goes on, suffering drives us into despair, anger, and hopelessness. The world offers varied lenses by which to view our experiences of hardship, efforts to cope and make sense of things. But Christianity implores us to let suffering drive us into God's deep love for us through Jesus Christ, both here and now and into eternity.

REMINDERS

- Boundaries: a nine-week summer study offering practical help, encouragement, insight, and wisdom to anyone who seeks to live a healthy and balanced life. *Mondays June 1-July 27, 6:30-8pm, at the Awakening Office.*
- All upcoming events can be found [here](#).

ICEBREAKER

IF GOD IS GOOD, THEN...

(TO THE LOGIC AND RHYTHM OF "IF YOU GIVE A MOUSE A COOKIE")

Are you familiar with the children's picture book, *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie*? Basically, it starts off with the phrase "If you give a mouse a cookie" and then goes on into a series of silly and ridiculous series of "if-then" events. (If it's helpful, check out the text online.)

As a group, create a similar "if-then" narrative that starts with "**If God is good, then...**". Pick a person to start and each one will build upon the other's sentence. Be ridiculous and crazy and silly!

Here's an example:

person 1: *If God is good, then He would make me win the lottery.*

person 2: *If I win the lottery, then I will buy France.*

person 3: *If I own France, then everybody will love me... and I mean everybody, including Meryl Streep.*

person 4: *If Meryl Streep loves me, we will become besties and she will ask me to co-star with her in *Devil Wears Prada 3*.*

You get the picture. Have fun with it!

AWAKENING

INTRODUCTION

At some point in our lives, we inevitably come to the difficult intersection of making sense of the goodness of God and the reality of our pain and suffering. It makes absolute sense for our experiences of hardship to challenge God's character as He reveals it, especially in light of His infinite sovereignty and might. (*God, You can! So why don't you?!*) All the questioning, wrestling, and doubting, whether in humility or in sheer rage, are welcome at His table for these are necessary to our faith formation. Eventually, by His grace and the power of His Holy Spirit within us, we come to understand that suffering does not contradict God's character. And it is absolutely not the end of the story. There is in fact a path that brings much needed comfort, hope, and meaning, cultivating within us a deep resolve that suffering magnifies His immeasurable love and goodness, now and forevermore.

REFLECTION

1. Bring to mind a past or present personal suffering. How would you articulate this experience as contradicting God's character of being loving and faithful? Just and good? In what ways did it / does it magnify His character?
2. Grace dictates that there is room for everything that you hold in your suffering, even the angry pointing finger at God. How does this establish you in love, security, comfort, and freedom in the midst of your suffering?

DISCUSSION

READ ALOUD: 1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:1-5

1. Verses 1 and 2 point us to the **willing suffering of Jesus Christ** so that we can have peace with God and access to His grace. Spend a few minutes in silence and prayer, sitting with this Truth. Then regroup and share if you are willing. What came up for you? How is it changing your perspective on suffering?

BONUS: When is delivering this truth more harmful than helpful to a person in the midst of suffering?

2. In His teaching, Steve Clifford shared a theology of suffering that insists on five key pivots we need to make while we are in the thick of it: **Not if, but when. Not why, but what. Not around, but through. Not grumble, but groan. Not evil, but good.** Which

AWAKENING

of the five is the hardest to do for you? How does the hope of the gospel help you make these necessary pivots in your experience of suffering, even the hardest one?

BONUS: Is there anything in Steve's teaching that you disagreed with? Why?

3. Verse 3 starts off with a bold position we are to have as Christians- to glory in our sufferings! (*Ha! Easier said than done, Paul!*) But notice how there is a trail of goodness to follow in the succeeding verses... suffering produces perseverance, produces character, produces hope, all evidence of God's love poured into our hearts and His Holy Spirit given to us. Why is it important to not let suffering be the "end all, be all" of our stories? How does God's love poured into our hearts and His Holy Spirit within us help us to persevere, be formed in Christ, and have unreasonable hope in the midst of suffering?

RESPONSE

Suffering is hard and heavy, and oftentimes, simply impossible to endure. It could easily take an entire life's journey to bring ourselves to the position of glorying in our sufferings in light of God's love and faithfulness. But God's grace is expansive and everlasting. He makes gracious room for this very journey you are in. And He loves you just as you are, right where you are.

ANSWER (gather in pairs): So, where are you? In your personal suffering, where are you at in knowing, believing, and understanding God's love for you? Where do you feel stuck? What is one small gentle step you can make to move towards God's love and faithfulness? How can the body of Christ help and support you in taking this step?

PRAYER

Name your sufferings before the Lord, either out loud to share with the group or silently in your heart and mind. Let Psalm 23 guide your time of closing prayer together.

***The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***