



A Study Guide
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A note from the authors:

Pain and suffering is more than just a theoretical subject to be studied and analyzed. It is also an intensely personal and practical topic that affects all human beings, regardless of worldviews and beliefs—we all hurt. In *What's Good about Feeling Bad?* we focus on a far more practical and existential aspect of pain: the positive values and lessons we can learn through suffering. This book is meant to be read and reread, to be interacted with and digested. Although this book is certainly suitable for individual use, we believe that a group study format, maximized by the use of this study guide, will provide the greatest opportunity for readers to glean the messages found in the book as well as learn from the experiences of others. Blessings!

John C. Thomas

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Section One: The Pain of Suffering

Chapter 1: The Perils of Pain

Key passages: Hosea 7:14; Romans 6:9-10; 8:36; John 11:25-26; 16:33; Isaiah 1:18; 53:4; Hebrews 2:10; 5:8-9; 11; 1 Corinthians 12:23-28; 2 Corinthians 7:10.

Example: Nathan Sours

Six realities of suffering:

- *Reality #1: Suffering is universal.* Until modern times, suffering was assumed to be a constant of life. Today, with improvements in medicine, radical advances in technology, and significant progress in so many fields of knowledge, suffering has come to be seen as an anomaly. Nevertheless, the signature of suffering is written on every human heart.
- *Reality #2: Suffering is painful.* There is nothing more central to the human experience than our capacity to feel, and no aspect of this is as deep as our capacity to suffer. To some degree, every person has experienced a wound or hurt. Yet as frequent as physical and emotional pain seem to be, we react as if trouble is unexpected and alien to our lives.
- *Reality #3: Suffering is personal.* Although certain aspects of human suffering are common, the experience is truly an individual process. Our reaction to pain is influenced by many factors, including the nature of the suffering, previous experiences with suffering, one's personality and environment, and present circumstances.
- *Reality #4: Suffering is unnerving.* Seemingly cruel circumstances often leave us feeling stunned and blindsided, and we experience a shock to the systems, a laceration of the soul, and a wound to the spirit. Despite our attempts to devise a world where we can predict, contrive, and control the outcome, we find that our best efforts most often fail and we're reminded once again that life is beyond our control.
- *Reality #5: Suffering is mysterious.* Much like being in a disorienting maze, it is difficult to find one's way out of suffering, and the inescapability of the pain can be overwhelming. Although we yearn to feel normal again, we know that normalcy is forever lost.
- *Reality #6: Suffering is biblical.* First, God used suffering to perfect His Son. Second, suffering teaches all of us obedience. Even the heroes of faith like David and Abraham, along with apostles like Paul, experienced suffering.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 1:

1. What was your reaction after you read the story about Nathan Sours? What part of the narrative touched you the most? Why?
2. Do you believe that suffering is universal? Are Christians exempt from suffering? Why or why not?
3. How have you responded to the suffering of others who were close to you? Would you do anything differently?
4. Has an experience with suffering unnerved you? Explain.
5. How would you summarize the nature of biblical suffering?
6. *Jesus said that life would not be easy. But we can take confidence and find delight in the hope that we have in and through Him. Christ's triumph over Satan is cause to find peace. Because Jesus conquered pain, He can use our pain to accomplish His plan in and through us. (p. 14)*
How does this statement relate to your understanding of suffering?

Section One: The Pain of Suffering

Chapter 2: The Bedrock of Suffering

Key passages: Psalm 14:3; 51:5; 58:3; Romans 3:23-24; 7:20-21; 8:21; Job 16:12-14; 1 Samuel 1:4-28; 1 Peter 4:12-13; Ecclesiastes 8:14.

Example: The layoff

Three key beliefs that make up our attitudes and determine our reactions to adversity:

- *Key Belief #1: I deserve ease and comfort in life.* We have created a world in which we savor comfort and immediate gratification, replete with drive-up windows and ATMs. These things in and of themselves are not wrong. The problem is usually not the source of comfort but our passionate pursuit of it. Our earnest demands for comfort usually compel us to find ways to elude the undesirable consequences of our actions. Lying, abortion, and divorce are but a few ways to escape the pain and suffering that result from poor choices. As we live, we attempt to make life as comfortable and convenient as possible. It is this self-consuming nature that makes understanding God's purposes in suffering unreasonable.
- *Key Belief #2: I deserve a predictable world.* The belief that the world must be predictable is based on the assumption that misfortune is not arbitrary and that events are mostly positive in outcome. This attitude leads us to believe that if we train our children properly, they will not fall away from God; if we are good workers, we will not lose our jobs; and if we take care of our health, we will not get sick. Certainly such behaviors may decrease the likelihood of the negative outcomes, but they will not reduce the probability to zero. It is our embellished belief in control that contributes to our blaming victims for their tribulations.
- *Key Belief #3: I deserve a fair world.* We have a belief that life is intrinsically fair and that consequently, people's decency, morality, and goodness essentially determine what happens to them. We perceive outcomes as either a reward or punishment. When we assume that our world is fair, our ability to tolerate and accept calamity is dramatically affected.

Common questions in suffering:

- *Why me?:* Because we are self-centered people, we often think that the worst kind of suffering is our own. The more removed the tragedy is from us, the easier it is to deal with.

- *Why this?:* As part of our bent for control, we contrive a world that assumes that while certain things may happen to us, other things will not. Whatever the random event might be, most, if not all of us, believe that certain things “could not happen to me.”
- *Why now?:* We do not like or appreciate interruptions in life. Because we believe that things ought to be one way and we never expect them to be different, we react adversely to crises. When our true beliefs are brought to the surface through calamity, we can strive to align them with Scripture. But often, we fight to maintain our view of life.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 2:

1. Share out loud: At what time was your overall attitude determined by your reaction to adversity? What underlying assumptions shaped your response?
2. Did you ever experience a huge shift in your overall outlook on life due to an experience of suffering, either yours or someone else's? Were you ever tempted to change your view of God?
3. How has your life experience shaped your desire for ease and comfort? In what ways do you see yourself as balanced or imbalanced? Why do you believe this is the case?
4. How do you react when your expectations are not met to your satisfaction?
5. Do you deserve a fair world? Why or why not?
6. Recall a time that you were treated unfairly. Explain why you believe this occurred and your response to the situation.
7. How can God love us and still allow suffering in our lives?

Section One: The Pain of Suffering

Chapter 3: Suffering and the Hand of God

Key passages: Job 1:1-12; 2:1-7; 19:25-27; 38:4-41; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Romans 6; 8:22; 10:9.

Example: Job

A Theology of Suffering: While we believe that the Bible is without error, our theology is not inerrant. Thus, when thinking about a theology of suffering, the main question is whether or not we have one that is as biblically accurate and coherent as possible. We think that the following precepts are biblically bound governing principles that give us a theology of suffering:

- *Precept #1: Everyone will suffer.* God created man and woman with the capacity to transgress against their Creator. Hence, God programmed into His creation the possibility of suffering. Since the first sin, fear and alienation have plagued us. Sadly, the resulting curse has affected everyone, the godly and ungodly alike. No one is exempt from pain; it is a common denominator for all of us. As members of the human race, we all experience suffering.
- *Precept #2: All suffering has meaning.* Suffering is not accidental. Nor is it incidental. Suffering is not the result of randomness or chaos. It is allowed by God because suffering is purposeful. Thus, our responses to it are very important.
- *Precept #3: Suffering comes from multiple sources.* God seeks to accomplish different purposes through suffering. Some are tied directly to the reasons that we suffer. Sometimes it is important to understand what might be causing us to suffer in order to know how we need to respond.
 - *We encounter suffering because we live in a broken and fallen world:* Philosophers refer to this as pain and suffering due to natural law. Because this world is not what God designed it to be, we will experience disease, disorder, disillusionment, and despair.
 - *We encounter suffering because of supernatural causes:* Job's suffering was the result of Satan's intervention. Both Satan and his demons can create great discomfort in the human life. Although Satan's accusations may have led in some sense to Job's suffering, God allowed and permitted it. The truth of the matter is that when we face tragedy, God knows that we hurt and cares that we hurt.
 - *We encounter suffering because of other people's choices:* Suffering may result from the choices and behavior of both Christians and non-

Christians. We may be hurt either intentionally or unintentionally by other people.

- *We encounter suffering because of the choices that we make:* Even as we face the consequences of our own actions, all too often we point our finger at Satan, others, and even God, blaming Him for our pain. But the truth is, the choice to defy God's will, defy common sense, or defy God's calling will inevitably lead to suffering.
- *Precept #4: There is no all-inclusive answer about suffering.* There are no pat answers when it comes to pain and suffering. We can search the pages of Scripture, and we will not find one verse that completely and fully explains God's purpose for suffering.
- *Precept #5: God is not obligated to give us a reason.* Sometimes we may never know why God allowed suffering in our lives. The humbling reality is that God is not obligated to give us a reason. God's ways and thoughts do not compare to ours.
- *Precept #6: God knows our pain and is with us when we suffer.* Part of our confusion lies in not understanding what God's role is in our suffering. We simply do not understand how an all-powerful God could sit by and let us hurt. Jesus, God's only Son, knows the extent of our suffering. No suffering has ever come to us that has not first passed through the heart and hand of God.
- *Precept #7: God is always at work.* God's presence during suffering is like a backstage worker in a drama—active, involved, and working to fulfill the ultimate thrust of the play, although usually hidden from the audience's view. But He is just as involved as ever.
- *Precept #8: God can redeem suffering.* Even suffering can have a redemptive purpose. Even in the midst of his own confusion and pain, Job contended that he knew his Redeemer lived.
- *Precept #9: There is an end to all suffering for the believer.* The Bible states very clearly that those who don't believe will perish and suffer eternal damnation. For Christians, a time will come when every tear will be wiped away from our eyes. There is an end only to all suffering endured by the believer.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 3:

1. The story of the man who was blind from birth is recounted in John 9:1-38. How does this relate to the idea that all suffering has meaning? How did the blind man respond? How do you think you would have responded in the same situation?
2. How is suffering redeemed? What evidence have you personally encountered that bears witness to the truth of this statement?

3. If God is all-powerful, how can suffering come from anyone but Him? What reasons can you provide to show that God did not actually *cause* suffering?
4. What is it about suffering that makes its existence valuable?
5. As our omnipotent Creator, how can God really know our pain? How does God's presence help us when we suffer?
6. What does the promise that there will be an end to suffering mean to you? How does this knowledge impact the way you live each day?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Inward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 4: God Desires a Purified Faith

Key passages: 1 Peter 1:6-9; Romans 5:3; 10:17; Hebrews 11:35-38; 13:8; 1 Kings 17:1-24; 18:20-40; 19:1-8; 2 Corinthians 1:9.

Example: The hiker and the lumberjack.

Key points:

- *God values faith.* The resurrection of Jesus provides the foundation for our ability to cope with trials. Peter added that this heavenly hope cannot be taken from us or otherwise lessened. Having endured tremendous suffering while serving the Lord, Paul realized that the end result of pain would be soul-making perseverance.
- *A life of faith.* God also allows suffering and testing to purify and increase our faith. In essence, faith is a commitment to abandon all reliance on our own efforts. It is not so much the absence of doubt as it is experiencing uncertainty in such a way that we come to know and depend on God more deeply.
- *The blessings of trials on faith.* The trials and tragedies we experience reveal our true “god,” and crises have a way of exposing who or what we depend upon for life. Failure to trust God in the alarming moments of life is evidence of a weak faith.
- *Dependence upon the Provider, not the provision.* It is through our difficulties that we come to understand God’s presence and power over despair. Most of us rely on what God does for us rather than upon God Himself. When we become focused upon the things that God has given us, He may choose to remove those distractions so that we can see Him more clearly and redirect our attachment from the things of this world to God Himself.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 4:

1. What is wrong with desiring a life of ease? If possible, would you choose to end your suffering if it meant no spiritual growth? Why or why not?
2. How should we view our time here on earth?
3. Why is suffering a valuable part of life’s journey?
4. Look back at your own life. What has been your attitude as you have faced various trials or tragedies? Would you have done something differently if you were faced with the same situations today?

5. How may trials destroy faith? How may trials strengthen faith?
6. How is God revealed in suffering?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Inward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 5: God Desires a Humble Heart

Key passages: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Revelation 2:1-7.

Example: Bill

Summary:

Pride and self-sufficiency are recognized by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous as character flaws that harm relationships. A biblical view of pride is that it not only affects our relationships, it also distances us from Christ. In other words, pride is not just a character flaw but sin. Through the spotlight of suffering, the pride that lurks in the shadows of our souls is illuminated. By being confronted with the reality of our hearts, we, like Bill, can allow God to remake our souls for His glory.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 5:

1. How has the crucible of suffering illuminated pride in your life or the life of someone that you know?
2. How do we recognize the difference between self-sufficiency and taking personal responsibility for our actions? Which do you typically choose when faced with suffering?
3. How does one move from self-sufficiency to taking personal responsibility?
4. Why is it important to illuminate pride and self-sufficiency?
5. What will you do with this knowledge?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Inward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 6: God Desires to Test Our Faithfulness

Key passages: Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Psalm 119:71,78; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Genesis 12:1-20; 16; 22:12; Hebrews 11:8-9.

Example: The sponge

Summary:

God's inward work of making the soul through suffering not only exposes our weak and sinful sides, but also reveals what is good and godly. Perhaps our pain and affliction is God's way of testing the quality of our faith. We could ask ourselves if we are all that we pretend to be. We should give further thought to what it takes for us to crack under pressure. Like Abraham, we may have to fail and fail and fail before finally acing the final exam.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 6:

1. In view of past trials, which characterizes you best: I have the *appearance* of quality or I *am* quality? Share why you chose one response over the other.
2. What does the story of Job reveal about our suffering?
3. What does the story of Abraham tell us about failure in the face of trials?
4. Why was Abraham referred to in the New Testament as a man of faith?
5. How do we move from the *appearance* of quality to the *presence* of real quality in our lives?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Inward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 7: God Desires Well-Behaved Children

Key passages: Hebrews 12:5-13; Galatians 6:7-8; Numbers 12; 1 Samuel 15:22; 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Acts 5:1-11; 22:24; Psalm 103:8-10; 119:71; Leviticus 26:14-21; Judges 2:7-16; Jonah 4:2; Proverbs 20:30; Habakkuk 1:5-11, 2:20; 1 Peter 1:16.

Example: The cassette player

Why God disciplines us:

- to teach us obedience
- to bring about confession and repentance
- to demonstrate His love
- to help us know Him in a personal way
- to make us holy

Summary:

God sometimes uses suffering to protect us from ourselves, especially from disastrous choices that could destroy our testimonies, our families, and ourselves. Moreover, God grieves when we sin because it means that He also loses out on fellowship with us. In love, He may even need to pick up a can of paint and splash it across the sinful masterpiece we are creating in our lives. Suffering redirects our eyes to our wrongful inner passions so that we might correct them and mature into godly adult children.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 7:

1. Why does God discipline Christians?
2. Based on the biblical analogy of parenting, what do you think might be God's perspective regarding the disciplining of His children?
3. How has God used discipline to shape your own life? Looking back at various times and circumstances, what reason(s) do you believe may have motivated God to act in particular ways? Was His intervention successful in terms of achieving His goals? Why or why not?
4. How do love and discipline complement each other?

5. What happens when we misunderstand God's discipline? What are some of the unfortunate circumstances that could result from our negative or misplaced responses to Him?
6. Taking some hints from Hebrews 12:5-13, list some of the benefits that may ensue from the proper understanding of God's discipline. Explain how the discipline could accomplish much more as an end result?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Forward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 8: God Desires to Mature Us

Key passages: Hebrews 2:17-18; 5:8-9; Romans 5:3-5; 1 Peter 5:10.

Example: The gym

Summary:

The cocoon of the emperor moth is flask shaped. In order for the perfect insect to appear, it must force its way through the neck of the cocoon after hours of intense struggle. Once, someone witnessed this insect's labor and out of pity snipped the cocoon's confining threads to make the insect's exit easier. Soon the moth emerged, but it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. Because this man had unwittingly eased the moth's struggle, its wings never developed. It spent its brief life crawling instead of flying through the air on rainbow wings. The man, in his kindness, did not understand that the moth *needed* the struggle in order to force fluid from its body into the wings so that flight would be possible.

In the same way, we would not develop the emotional and spiritual maturity we need if God removed all the struggles from our lives. Suffering is not meant to be fun or easy. Without discomfort in our lives, we would never develop a life of righteousness. No suffering or pain is needless. It all works to mature our souls and build inner beauty. May God use our struggles and trials to propel us forward so that we will develop fully and completely in Christ.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 8:

1. What does Hebrews 5:8-9 tell us about Jesus' suffering? How do you react to learning that Jesus apparently also needed to suffer in order to learn certain lessons about obedience?
2. How did Jesus respond to His own suffering? Does Hebrews 12:2 provide any hints of His victory?
3. Why do Christians sometimes believe that their lives should be pain-free, even though the Bible tells us that Jesus suffered?
4. Isn't one of the primary lessons of Hebrews 11 that many godly saints also suffered, even unto horrible deaths? How should that great chapter affect us? How should our beliefs and actions change as a result?

5. How does God expect us to respond to the struggles that we face? How have you responded during these times?
6. What portion of this chapter resonated within your heart? What are you going to do about it?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Forward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 9: God Desires for Us to Be Christlike

Key passages: 2 Timothy 3:17; Hebrews 2:10; 12:11; 13:21; Acts 4:13; Galatians 4:19.

Example: The lump of coal

Summary:

Becoming Christlike must be intentional, though it may not necessarily be actively pursued. God may use difficult circumstances, even suffering, to push us in that direction. Suffering is not always virtuous, but what it produces is. When suffering has performed its work in turning our characters of coal into the character of diamonds, we will more naturally do what Jesus does. When we ask, “What would Jesus do?” the answer will be clear and decisive. We desire to grow our souls so that we will aspire to make choices, think thoughts, and feel feelings that are in harmony with a Christ-centered life regardless of the road conditions.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 9:

1. Why is the promise of Romans 8:28-29 given to Christians only?
2. What is it that allows our pain and suffering to be changed from seemingly negative circumstances to positive results?
3. Why should a Christian pursue becoming more Christlike if such a pursuit is likely to include suffering?
4. Is it possible for a Christian to grow without suffering? If so, then why does God so frequently use suffering? Explain your answers.
5. How do you respond to God’s transformation process?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Forward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 10: God Desires for Us to Have a Personalized Faith

Key Passages: Job 42:1-6; Psalm 6:9; 34:17; 42:1-2; Exodus 32:11-14; Jeremiah 29:11-13; Romans 8:26-27; 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Example: The Titanic

Summary:

Even in the midst of incredible torment, we can find rest in the warm, comforting presence of our Savior. If the trials of a concentration camp were not enough to hinder Corrie ten Boom's Christian walk, what does that say about our own suffering? In actuality, God uses trials of different sizes and shapes to remake our souls. Suffering moves us forward by drawing us into a more personalized faith through prayer.

Discussion Questions for chapter 10:

1. How does adversity cause us to long for God?
2. Why do we hesitate to lay our struggles and hurts before God when we know that He is already aware of our innermost thoughts and feelings? How do you think God responds when He sees our hesitancy to talk with Him?
3. What do you think prompted God to react the way He did when Job questioned Him? How did God's challenges affect Job? Does God react the same way toward you?
4. How does adversity affect prayer?
5. What impacted you the most as you read this chapter? Why?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Outward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 11: God Desires to Build His Kingdom

Key passages: Acts 16:25-34; Philippians 1:13; Luke 22:42; Daniel 3; 2 Timothy 2:8-10.

Example: The missionary's loss

Summary:

The furtherance of the gospel was the heart's passion of Paul's life. Suffering not only provided an opportunity to advance the gospel but also to advance his soul. Suffering has an outward impact on others. Through hardships, our souls are revived as we watch others come to Christ by seeing the hope and joy in our lives amidst the pain.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 11:

1. While in prison for preaching the gospel, how did Paul view his circumstances? How did Paul's suffering impact those around him?
2. Why did the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego profoundly affect Nebuchadnezzar?
3. What circumstance(s) in your life challenges you to both proclaim and demonstrate the truth of the gospel? Would you be as effective without suffering?
4. If you struggled to answer the question above, why are you unsuccessful at communicating such a vital message? Do you find the comments of the Romanian pastor to be true? Why or why not?
5. When trials come your way, how do you see them? Do you "seize the day"? Or do you become angry, bitter, and ineffective? If any of the latter are true, what can you do to change your perspective?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Outward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 12: God Desires a Strong and Caring Church

Key passages: 1 Corinthians 12:7-31; Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:1-2; Acts 2:44; 12:5-16; Galatians 6:2; Proverbs 17:17; John 13:35.

Example: Solitary confinement

Summary:

The Christian life is not a spectator sport. We actively participate with one another on the field of play. When a fellow player is wounded, it's up to us to spring into action in whatever way we are led or are able. Pain and suffering often have healthy effects upon the sufferer and others alike. As the body of Christ, when we are aware of others who are hurting, we are to respond to the wound with love, comfort, encouragement, and support. In this way, the benefits found in pain move outward into the lives around the sufferer, validating our need for each other.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 12:

1. Why should you turn to other Christians for care and support? How has this worked for you in the past? What did you learn from your experience?
2. What prevents people from offering love, comfort, encouragement, and support to others when they are hurting? What prevents you?
3. How *do* you respond to those around you who are hurting? How *should* you respond?
4. What was the response of the early church to the suffering of those around them, particularly that of fellow Christians?
5. What is your response to fellow believers who are suffering? What if they are suffering as a result of sin? How would you want others to respond to you if the situation was reversed?
6. How does suffering strengthen the church?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Outward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 13: God Desires to Minister through Us

Key passages: 2 Corinthians 1:3-6

Example: Tom and Maria Whiteman

Godly Comfort: In 2 Corinthians 1:3-6, we find a wonderful promise: there is no trouble that we go through in which the comfort of God is not available to us. Even when our miseries are the result of our own poor choices, God offers Himself as our Comforter. Then we are told to take this same consolation to others who are hurting. This is one of many texts on this topic that merits our deep meditation.

A Ministry View: Without experiencing trials, it would be impossible to personally know how God can minister to a broken heart. One of God's expectations, however, is that we not become overly preoccupied with ourselves during times of suffering. He desires that we share His comfort with others who are also in need, giving out of the resources that have been provided to us. Paul emphasizes that we need not have experienced the same problem in order to be helpful to a person in need. Because we ourselves have experienced the ministry of God's comfort, we can comfort those in *any* trouble.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 13:

1. How has God ministered through you to meet the needs of someone who was suffering? Do you think you were effective? Why or why not?
2. How have you been touched in the midst of your own suffering by another person? Why was it meaningful to you?
3. What is it about sharing the suffering of others that touches both the giver and the receiver in meaningful ways? Describe your thoughts on why this process can be so exhilarating to the one offering the consolation to others. What could account for this delight?
4. Why is it possible to minister effectively to those who are currently suffering, even if we have not experienced that same sort of pain?
5. Do you think that someone who has undergone a similar kind of suffering has an advantage in dealing with another individual with a related hurt? Would you suppose that this is generally the case?
6. Why do(n't) you believe that Scripture alone is enough to comfort those in need?

7. Have you ever gone out of your way to begin a relationship with a hurting person who has had very few encouragers in his or her life? If so, how would you compare this to other cases?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Upward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 14: God Desires That We See His True Character

Key passages: Job 2:10; 16:6-22; 38–39; 40:4-5; 42:1-3; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Mark 4:35-41.

Example: Belinda

Summary:

If God lavishes mercy on the wounded, we should certainly do the same. Sin is sin and should never be condoned, but sinners need a Redeemer, and our Redeemer saves by loving.

When we, like Job, see God for who He is, we can stop blaming Him for our pain and suffering. We learn to accept both good and bad from the hand of the Lord. We come to know God's power when we see Him move in an impossible situation and meet our personal need. Possibly St. Augustine had this in mind when he exclaimed, "In my deepest wound I saw your glory, and it dazzled me."

Discussion Questions for Chapter 14:

1. How do you view God when you are in the midst of suffering? What are the words that describe your attitude toward Him during those moments?
2. Why should we view God as loving and compassionate when He may appear at times to be cold and callous when seen through the lens of suffering?
3. Have you concluded that God has wronged you? How honest are you being with yourself when you contemplate this question? How have you dealt with such emotions?
4. What enables a person to move from blame to growth?
5. How do we experience the power of God to overcome the storms of life? Why is the best seat in the boat and never on the shore?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Upward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 15: God Desires to Prepare Us for a Blessing

Key passages: Job 1:21; 42:10; Genesis 50:19-20; Ecclesiastes 7:8.

Example: God's blessings for Job's faithfulness

Summary:

The character of God compels Him to be a generous lover. He deliriously desires to bless His children. His blessings are never to be seen as indulgent. No. At the same time, our God knows that an ungrateful heart is ill prepared for His unimaginable blessings. Unless He prepares our hearts and remakes our souls through the sting of suffering, we might selfishly bask in His blessings without any sense of humility or gratitude. Those who have either never faced serious suffering or who have reacted to their pain in less than constructive ways may find it difficult to get past Job's actual circumstances. But when we meet people like Charles (introduced in chapter 14) who are so marvelously transformed as a result of their suffering, we get a small glimpse of what wonders God works through those who are willing to grow.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 15:

1. Why do you think that God was displeased with the advice given by Job's three friends? Can you imagine yourself offering similar advice to a suffering person as they did to Job?
2. Why did God bless Job at the end of his struggles? Why was Job so pleased when God never provided the ultimate answer to his question regarding why he suffered in the first place?
3. Did God owe Job an answer? Why or why not?
4. What heart attitude do you think Job exhibited after he repented before God, prior to receiving God's blessing? What was his attitude after he received God's restoration and blessing?
5. How do you think Job viewed this story from what he may have thought was his deathbed? What lesson(s) would he have passed on to his children, based on his experience with God?

6. What is God trying to teach us about Himself through Job's story? Is the phrase "the patience of Job" relevant to the biblical story? Why or why not?
7. How has your perspective been shaped by Job's suffering?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Upward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 16: God Desires to Give Believers Dying Grace

Key passages: Philippians 1:20-23; Romans 8:30; 12:1; Luke 9:23; 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4; Isaiah 55:8-9.

Example: Death from a child's perspective

Summary:

Some may see death as a step backward. In fact, our human tendency is to pray that a loved one will live. But Paul reminds us that suffering may actually be God's way of bringing a Christian home to heaven. He wants us to understand that death is not a step backward but a step upward. This fact may be hard to accept, but God's ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. Truly, God's purposes are greater than our own concerns and needs.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 16:

1. What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Christ?
2. What do you desire most in life? What is your driving passion?
3. Paul's heartfelt passion was not that Caesar would spare his life but that Christ would be honored. What would be your focus if you were faced with similar circumstances?
4. How did Paul have this perspective?
5. Why is death the ultimate healing?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Upward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 17: God Desires to Reward Those Who Endure

Key passages: James 1:12; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; Acts 7:54-56.

Example: The roller coaster

Summary:

Crowns symbolize royalty, authority, honor, victory, and reward. God, the ultimate Promise Keeper, has promised a crown for those who endure suffering. The symbolism is not lost on us when we consider the fact that God's Son, Jesus Christ, wore a crown of suffering.

As Christians, we must expect occasional mistreatment and suffering. More and more, our culture seems to be becoming anti-Christian, and there's a good chance that in this lifetime, we *will* undergo ridicule, affliction, and possibly persecution simply because we bear Christ's name. Suffering is a natural consequence of a consistent Christian witness. It is not easy to suffer, especially when we believe there is no justifiable cause. But our Lord was abused without cause, and we can expect nothing different. God takes pleasure in how we respond to suffering, and He has promised us a reward for our suffering.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 17:

1. Is all persecution physical? How many different categories of such mistreatment can you recall from the pages of Scripture? How many more examples can you add from recent accounts of persecution?
2. Why should we endure suffering in this world? And *how* should we bear it, especially during times when it may be very painful and ongoing?
3. What happens when we focus more on our worldly comfort than we do on heaven? Isn't the former quite natural?
4. How does an individual's loss of hope often impact his or her future? What did Viktor Frankl observe about this subject, based on his own experiences in a German concentration camp?
5. How does implementing an eternal perspective change our view of our present circumstances?

6. What perspective did the heroes of the faith, such as those in Hebrews 11, have regarding their future? Why did they tenaciously grip this faith in God rather than holding on to their own lives?
7. Comment on Hebrews 11:16. How does such a longing contrast with the typical desires often expressed by Christians in our culture?

Section Two: The Purposes of Suffering

The Upward Direction of Suffering

Chapter 18: God Desires to Be Glorified

Key passages: 2 Corinthians 4:6, 15; John 9:1-3; 11; 21:18-19; Matthew 8:5-13; 15:21-28; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Proverbs 13:12; Revelation 4:11; Psalm 50:15.

Example: Underwear Man

Summary:

Believing that God can be uplifted through the sufferings of His people is one of the greatest paradoxes. Yet consider the words of the psalmist who penned the heart of God, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”

When we glorify God, our souls are uplifted. Even though we may not have a special talent or be some exclusive person like Underwear Man, God can do something in us beyond our imagination. As we become people changed by the glory of God, we find ourselves able “to enjoy Him forever.”

Discussion Questions for Chapter 18:

1. What is the underlying idea behind the desire to be someone else?
2. Relate a situation when the “what ifs” have caught hold of your thoughts. How did these ideas impact your life?
3. What does “glorify the Lord” mean? Why should we glorify God?
4. How do we move from the “what if” attitude to a “glorify the Lord” attitude?
5. On page 173, this statement is made: “Yet if we allow it to, adversity can open us up to a greater, deeper future and a new sense of God in the present.” What do you think this means? How does this happen?

Section Three: A Pathway through Suffering

Chapter 19: Probe Your Beliefs about Suffering

Key passages: 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Daniel 3:19-30; Isaiah 53; Matthew 5:45; 26:36-46; John 5:39-40; 14:16-18; Romans 12:15; Job 38:21; Genesis 3:4-5; Philippians 4:11-13.

Some myths about suffering:

Myth # 1: Spiritual people don't experience suffering.

Example: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Job.

Myth # 2: Reading the Bible solves every problem.

Example: Tennis and the Tennis Association's rule book.

Myth # 3: You can handle it alone.

Example: "No man is an island."

Myth # 4: God owes us.

Example: Max

Myth # 5: Pain and suffering are of no value.

Example: Roy Campanella

Myth # 6: The God of love would not allow us to suffer.

Example: Corrie ten Boom

Summary:

It might seem that God has abandoned you. Your head may know better, but your heart still challenges those beliefs with immense force. If this is where you are today, it is necessary to really assess what you truly believe about suffering. Consider your current or past trial, particularly one that you deem undeserved. Maybe, like Corrie ten Boom, you believe that God has abandoned you. Perhaps you believe that if you had been good enough, you would not have felt such dreadful hurt. It could be that fallacious beliefs about suffering are programmed into your heart.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 19:

1. What role does faith, or the lack of it, play in suffering? What does the book of Job teach us about the relationship between sin and suffering?
2. How does reading the Bible prepare the Christian to face adversity? Identify the areas where the Bible alone is not enough to face suffering. What emotional and spiritual strengths must be utilized in combination with the Bible in order for Christians to successfully navigate adversity?
3. Rugged individualism is prized by many in American society. When viewed from a Christian perspective, what does this say about our view of God and our relationship to fellow believers?
4. How is Proverbs 3:5-6 used to justify a “heaven’s reward” concept (p. 184)? What do the final chapters of Job reveal about a “righteous man” and his relationship to God? Why do we elevate our perspective above God’s?
5. Why does a God of love allow us to suffer?

Section Three: A Pathway through Suffering

Chapter 20: Assign Your Suffering to God

Key passages: Psalm 6:6-7; 44:12; 55:4-5; 88:2-4, 8, 14-16, 18; 143; Job 1:22; 3:3, 11; 6:8-9; 7:11; 10:3, 10, 18, 20-21; 13:3; 14:19; 19:7; 23:4-5; 38.

The seven Rs:

- *Release your feelings to God*
 - Get real (Ps. 143:1-2, 4): The point is not that we *need* to get angry with God, but that we *do* get angry with Him. We must trust God with the truth of our feelings.
 - Understand the truth about feelings: It is important to remember in facing our feelings that they, too, were affected by the Fall. Not every feeling or thought is sinful, but they have the potential to take us in directions away from God.
- *Review the nature of your suffering*
 - Examine why you are suffering: Is it because of the actions of others? Is it due to your own issues?
 - Examine yourself: God wants us to uncover areas in our lives that are not completely turned over to Him.
- *Recognize the ways God works to accomplish His plan*
 - God is unchanging: God's purposes never change, but our understanding of Him does.
 - God is untamable: God continually shatters our understanding of Him. After all, a God we can understand completely is not a God at all.
 - God is mysterious: As we struggle to see God in a new light, we can once again draw close to Him and move through our pain.
- *Reaffirm your desire to know God*
 - Do you long to know God? It is impossible to fully trust anyone we do not know deeply.
 - Do you really know God? Often, we don't even embrace the God who is portrayed in the Bible.
- *Reassess your dependency and trust in God*
 - What is my real God? While we cannot control our circumstances or God's purposes, we can control our trust and dependence in and on Him.
 - How can I trust God? God's goodness doesn't change. This same God, who has the power over death, is still good today even when we hurt.
- *Relinquish your destiny into God's trustworthy hands*

- Five helps to trusting God:
 - Get to know God
 - Accept what happens as God’s way of helping you to grow
 - Focus on your response to the problem rather than the cause of it
 - Focus on God’s presence
 - Make a willful decision to trust the Lord
- *Rejoice in how God may use your suffering*

Discussion Questions for Chapter 20:

1. What were your thoughts when you read on page 191, “For God to accomplish His plan, we must turn our suffering over to Him”? What does your visceral response indicate about your attitude toward suffering and God’s role in it? Why do you think you reacted to this concept as you did? What makes it difficult to truly let God have our troubles?
2. How did you feel when you read on page 193, “The point is not that we *need* to get angry with Him, but that we *do* get angry with God”? Is it okay to become angry with God? How do we, as His creatures, express our inner anger towards the Creator? Do we unjustly elevate our own view of the universe?
3. What ignites your personal passion? How would you rate your passion for God? What blocks you from having the most passion for God that you can possibly achieve?
4. How do you approach suffering that you do not cause? How do you approach suffering that you do cause? What role does self-examination play in assigning your suffering to God?
5. What is wrong with the “grin and bear it” (p. 193) approach to suffering? How does such an attitude impact our relationship with God?
6. Identify and share a time when God used suffering in your life as a means of developing a more intimate relationship with you. Which of the five helps to trusting God was most beneficial in your journey and why? How has this impacted your life?

Section Three: A Pathway through Suffering

Chapter 21: Apply a Plan of Recovery

Key passages: Psalm 119; Philippians 3:12-14; 2 Timothy 4:8

Example: The counselor and the elderly lady

Strategies:

- *Purpose your heart*
 - Accept reality: dealing with hardship requires that we gain awareness of what happened and accept the reality of it.
 - Decide to grow from pain: while we may have been victimized, we do not have to remain victims.
 - Develop lines of communication with God: when we communicate with God, we need to do so with intensity, honesty, and humility.
 - Use your support system: social support plays a powerful part in our psychological and spiritual well-being because we were created as interpersonal beings.
- *Change your perspective*: the circumstance itself has little or nothing to do with our attitude.
- *Examine your attitude*
 - Have a grateful attitude: think about what life would be like if we considered what we have, rather than what we don't have.
 - Have a teachable attitude: to be teachable, we must be open to learn.
 - Maintain a sense of humor: fun is not what you do, but how you experience what you do.
 - Let heavenly rewards motivate you: the reality of heaven's reward should arouse our hearts' deepest hunger, soon to be satisfied with the most extravagant meal.
- *Change your emotions*
 - The problem with feelings: neither indulge your feelings, nor run from them in order to distract yourself from your internal pain.
 - How sufferers experience emotions: instead of allowing your emotions to get the best of you, keep them in the proper perspective. Various exercises can be very helpful here.
- *Change your thinking*
 - Don't minimize your pain to the point where you deny it and fail to deal with it.

- Don't see yourself as the perpetual victim and respond with self-pity.
- *Examine your expectations*
 - Make sure that your outlook is realistic.
 - Make sure that your outlook is biblical.
- *Have a proper perspective on your life*
 - Focus on today.
 - Focus on eternity.
- *Prevent undue stress*: this is not the time to make major life decisions or take on additional responsibilities.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 21:

1. How do you cope with adversity? What strategies have you been employing as you deal with life's suffering? Why do you believe these strategies have been successful or unsuccessful?
2. Why is facing the reality of a situation a healthy response to life's challenges? How does this acceptance move us from attempting to change our circumstance to allowing the circumstances to change us?
3. What was your response when you read Frankl's absolutely amazing observation that "prisoners' attitudes and outlooks on life were the result of a decision, not concentration-camp influences" (p. 221)? Do you think that this is true? How can such an outlook be maintained even in the face of heartbreaking adversity?
4. What do the authors mean when they write, "It is not just the frequency or fervency that is an issue with prayer. *What* we pray is most important" (p. 224)? How does prayer benefit the sufferer?
5. How does the use of a support system benefit the sufferer? Why does talking about a problem provide a positive experience for the afflicted individual? Relate an experience when this was true in your own life.
6. What role does your perspective on a situation play in shaping your attitude toward it? As you recall a time of suffering in your life, which of these perspectives did you embrace at the time? Relate how your perspective impacted your journey toward a healthy recovery.
7. What is the problem with feelings? Where do feelings originate? When you consider the source of feelings, how can you use this knowledge to control your emotions?
8. What was your reaction when you read, "One school of psychology believes that it is not so much what happens *to* us, as what happens *in* us; in other words, what we *think* has happened to us actually governs what *will* happen to us"(p. 237)? Have you found this to be true in your own life? Explain your reasoning.

9. How can our expectations impact our suffering? Why do you believe that this is so? What role does “locus of control” (p. 239) play in the process of changing your thinking?
10. How do you balance “focusing on today” with “focusing on eternity” (pp. 240–242)? How does such a balance enable you to move forward, regardless of the circumstances in your life?
11. Describe this thought in your own words: “With the right attitudes, all the hardships in the world cannot make us despondent. With the wrong attitudes, all the help in the world will not make us joyful” (p. 228).
12. Why should we “be still, and know that [He is] God”? How does this benefit the sufferer?

Section Three: A Pathway through Suffering

Chapter 22: Redeem Your Suffering

Key passages: Galatians 6:1-2, 5; 2 Corinthians 4:17; John 13:17

Example: Vietnam veterans

Strategies:

- *Redeem your pain*: we can redeem suffering by growing through it and giving it meaning in our lives.
- *Open yourself to others*: hidden suffering makes us feel even more isolated and alone.
- *Reach out to help others*: Ministering to others is a key to recovery. How could I possibly help?
 - Give the wounded individual the ministry of your presence.
 - The best help that anyone can render in a time of crisis is an empathic listening ear.
 - Accept what has happened to the individual and the way that person is responding to the trial.
 - Whenever it is expected or appreciated, you can still seek to instill hope.
 - Pray.
 - Be practical in your help.
 - Be aware of your attitude as you attempt to help another person.
 - Adopt an attitude of love and acceptance toward the hurting.
 - Stay in contact with the individual throughout the ordeal, as well as over the next year or so.

Discussion Questions for Chapter 22:

1. What does redeeming the pain look like to an outside observer? If you or someone you know has redeemed his or her pain, share your observations of this experience with those in your group. How does redeeming one's pain benefit the sufferer?
2. Why do hurting people sometimes choose to close themselves off from those around them? What reasons do the authors give? What are some of the results of hidden suffering? What can you do to help others who are choosing to hide their pain?

3. On page 247, the authors note that “psychologists have found that getting clients to see themselves as helpers and givers, rather than takers and receivers, produces healing.” Why do you think that this is so? What does God say about those who have been wounded and their relationship to others who have been wounded?
4. Review the section entitled “How could I possibly help?” (pp. 248–252), and identify the areas that match your personal strengths. Also, identify areas that need improvement. How will you move from “being a hearer” to “being a doer” of the things that you have learned?
5. Who came to mind when you began reading this section? How can you apply what you have learned in this book as you interact with this individual or group of individuals in a meaningful way?
6. How has this book influenced your view of suffering? What do you think about God and His role in the unpleasantness of life? What do you think about your role in the suffering of those around you?

Very special thanks to Greg Mears for his efforts in pulling together many of the elements of this study guide.