

Week Four:

If God loves us, why do we suffer?

In this lesson we will:

- *Explain how evil and suffering came into the world, according to the Bible*
- *Identify cultural beliefs, teaching about God, and personal experiences that can make it difficult to believe in God's love when we suffer*
- *Learn how to respond to doubts about God's love Do a Biblical exercise to help us express our hearts*

Questions to begin to think about:

1. What have I been believing God says about me (as a whole or in this painful situation)?
2. How has my religious background impacted the way I view my personal suffering?
3. What do I think God would want to say to me here in my pain?

Listen to the story ~

The story of Pastor Ben

A little boy named Ben grew up in the city. His mother was not married but she did her best to look after Ben. When he was three years old, she died suddenly. It looked as though Ben would have to go into foster care, but his mother's sister, Anne, offered to take him in. She and her husband Dan already had three children, older than Ben, and Dan did not really want the responsibility of another child.

Ben was frightened and upset when he was taken to Anne and Dan's house, and he showed these feelings by behaving badly. Dan decided he needed discipline and often hit him, but that just made Ben's behavior worse. The other three children resented how much time their mother spent on Ben and bullied him when the adults were not around.

Things got a bit better when Ben started school. As Ben grew older, one of his friends invited him to come to his youth group at church. There Ben heard for the first time that Jesus had died for him and wanted to be his friend. After some weeks he prayed to receive Christ into his life.

As Ben was finishing high school, the youth pastor told him about an inexpensive Bible school. Ben spent three happy years there, then got a job pastoring a small church. Soon he married a lovely Christian girl, Julie, and eventually they had two sons.

Ben and Julie's house was near the church. Gradually gangs began to take control of their neighborhood. Rival gangs had huge fights nearly every week. Ben saw innocent people being shot—including children. Several of the young girls in his church had been raped. Other families were robbed at gunpoint. The area had become like a war zone.

Ben was at the church one day preparing for an evening service when he got a call from his wife. His five-year-old son Peter had been hit by a stray bullet. By the time Ben got to the hospital, it was too late. The doctors were not able to save little Peter's life.

Today, Ben still believes in the Bible, but he keeps asking why God has let him and his community suffer. He is angry with God and feels that God has deserted him. Sometimes he thinks that maybe God is not strong enough to stop these things from happening. When he thinks of God as his Father, he cannot imagine a loving father. In his experience, he only knew a father who was absent and an uncle who beat him.

Back in high school, a number of his teachers had been atheists. In his heart, Ben knows that God is with him, but sometimes he wonders if his teachers were right. Other times, when he sees the terrible things some of the people do, he thinks that maybe God is punishing the whole community. In his sermons he emphasizes the judgment of God and he rarely talks about God's love. When he preaches that God understands what we are going through and is with us, he feels like a hypocrite since God seems far away.

What has happened in the story?

What feelings is the main character experiencing?

What seems to be the hardest part?

How is the main character coping?

What do you think they might be believing about themselves, others, or God?

Can you think of a time you felt a similar way? Jot it down if you have time.

Why is there evil & suffering in the world?

The World Says

The Word Says—

Scriptures

Scripture is full of teaching and encouragement regarding suffering. Let's take a look at a few passages to help us shore up our thinking about suffering:

The Sources of Suffering:

GROUP 1

1 Peter 5:8-9

⁸ Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1 John 3:8, John 8:44

GROUP 2

Genesis 3:6-7

⁶ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Romans 5:12. Romans 3:10-18. 1 Peter 2:20-22.

GROUP 3

Gen. 3:17-18

¹⁷ To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

Romans 8:19-22

¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Genesis 1:31. Romans 8:19-22.

God's Character in Suffering:

Psalms 34:3, 8, 15, 17-18

Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance

Isaiah 53:3-5

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Exodus 2:23-25

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Psalms 18:19

He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me.

Which verse speaks to you personally today? What would you like to remember from these verses?

A challenged faith

What we know to be true from God's Word and what we experience can often collide. What are some experiences that might cause us not to trust God?

Experiences with the Church

Experiences with our Parents/Family of Origin

Experiences with other relationships

Others??

A lament ~

*What do we *do* with our suffering?*

Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

*2 How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?*

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

*3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
4 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.*

*5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.*

*6 I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

Parts of a lament ~

- ~ Address to God*
- ~ Review of God's faithfulness*
- ~ A complaint*
- ~ A confession of sin or claim of innocence*
- ~ A request for help*
- ~ God's response (often not stated)*
- ~ A vow to praise or statement of trust in God*

Can you identify the parts of a lament in Psalm 13?

Psalm 22 and Psalm 44 are passages of lament. What other laments can you find in scripture?

My lament ~

Zephaniah 3:14-18

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion;

shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,

Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment,

he has turned back your enemy.

The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;

never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day

they will say to Jerusalem,

“Do not fear, Zion;

do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you,

the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He will take great delight in you;

in his love he will no longer rebuke you,

but will rejoice over you with singing.”