The background of the entire page is a photograph of a rocky coastline. In the foreground, dark, jagged rocks are scattered across the bottom. A narrow channel of water flows between the rocks towards the center. In the background, a large, powerful wave is crashing against the shore, creating a massive plume of white spray that rises into the air. The sky is a warm, golden-brown color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is dramatic and powerful.

The Biggest *Question*

Why does God allow suffering?

Guide for group members

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Introduction

Welcome to ‘The Biggest Question’ course. This is designed for home groups and cell groups, Christian Unions and Adult Sunday Schools. You can also use it in youth groups, in schools, or for personal study.

For many people who are not Christian believers, the suffering and evil in the world is their biggest objection to the Christian message - ‘How could a good God let people suffer like that?’ For many who are Christian believers, suffering raises the toughest doubts and questions. In the face of evil and suffering, the goal of this course is to strengthen the faith of believers, and to equip us to respond effectively to the questions of our unbelieving friends and colleagues.

Each session includes some Bible passages to look at, two or more short videos from ‘The Biggest Question’ series to watch, some questions for discussion and reflection, and some additional material if you want to go into the subject in more depth at home.

We would love to hear how you get on with the course, and any suggestions for how it could be improved for future users.

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1. The choices we make

1. What experiences of suffering are you aware of in your own life, or in the lives of people close to you?

2. Watch ‘**Robin’s story**’ (<https://youtu.be/yjfoJ8NkK6Y>). How would you feel in Robin’s situation? Would you be able to forgive the killer?

3. Read **Genesis 3:1-24**. How did human suffering originate?

4. People often say that Genesis 3 is an account of the origin of evil. Is this really the case? Why, or why not?

5. Watch ‘**The choices we make**’ (<https://youtu.be/6MeSLoiN7e8>). What (or who) is the cause of the suffering in your own experience, or that of people close to you?

6. Read **Romans 1:18-32**. What do these verses say about people knowing God?

7. How does God respond? (Verses 24, 26, 28)

8. Think about the stories that are in the news this week that involve human suffering. In how many of these situations is the suffering *caused* by the choices people have made?

Going deeper

The 'go to' place in the Old Testament for the question of suffering is the book of Job.

Read **Job chapters 1 & 2**. Why did Job suffer?

Skim read **chapters 3 – 25** (or as much as you have time for).
Can you sum up the view of Job's friends, in one sentence?

What is wrong with their view?

We will come back to the story of Job later.

2. God's wake-up call

1. Watch '**Hilary's story**' (<https://youtu.be/9yNxMp3XDA4>). Would you change places with Hilary? Why, or why not?

2. Read **Luke 13:1-5**. Human evil and natural disasters – how do we respond to these kinds of tragedies?

3. How is Jesus's response different from ours?

4. How do you feel about Jesus's response?

5. Watch '**God's wake-up call**' (<https://youtu.be/tpNYvo3dIMg>). Can you think of situations where suffering has caused someone who had been indifferent to think about God?

6. Read **John 9:1-7**. What do the disciples assume about sin and suffering?

7. How does Jesus reshape their thinking?

8. How has this study changed the way you think about suffering and about God's judgment?

Going deeper

Read **1 Corinthians 11:27-34**. What was happening to the Christians in Corinth? (See verse 30)

Why was it happening? (verse 31)

What was God's purpose in what was happening to them? (verse 32)

Read **Hebrews 12:1-11**. What possible reason does this passage give for our suffering? (verses 5-6)

How is this kind of suffering different from God's judgment of unbelievers? (verses 7-8)

If we are believers in Jesus Christ, our sins have been forgiven through his sacrificial death. We shall not ultimately face the judgment of rejection by God (although we shall face a judgment of rewards for faithful service – 2 Corinthians 5:9-10). This means that while our suffering is sometimes God's discipline of us as his children, what God does in this life is always for our ultimate good – his goal is not to punish us, but to correct us and restore us.

Reflect on what you have read in 1 Corinthians 11 and Hebrews 12. What should these passages prompt us to do when we face any kind of suffering?

3. A God who suffers

1. Watch ‘**Nick’s story**’ (https://youtu.be/rtHOSPB_-pw). Can you think of situations where a single moment has changed someone’s life – perhaps yourself, or someone close to you?

2. Read **Hebrews 2:5-18**. What does verse 9 say about why Jesus is crowned with glory and honour?

3. Verse 10 talks about Jesus being made perfect through suffering. Was there ever a time when Jesus was less than perfect? What does it mean to say that he was made perfect through suffering?

4. How do these verses describe the purpose of Jesus’s suffering? (v9b, 10, 14-15, 17, 17b) Which of these means most to you in your situation?

5. Read **Hebrews 4:15-16**. Why can Jesus sympathize with us? What can we do as a result?

6. Read **Hebrews 5:7-9**. What does it mean when it says that Jesus 'learned obedience from what he suffered'?

7. Watch '**A God who suffers**' (<https://youtu.be/xQUoMO5eGco>). How does the suffering of Jesus change the way you think about God?

8. Think about the situations of suffering that you (or people close to you) face. Does the suffering of Jesus, with us and for us, make a difference to how you feel about them? How, and why?

Going deeper

Read **Isaiah 53:1-12**. Isaiah 53 is the best known of the ‘servant songs’ of Isaiah. (The others are in 42:1-4; 49:1-6 and 50:4-9.) It describes how and why God’s servant suffers.

Who is the servant? In some senses, the servant represents the nation of Israel, or else a specific faithful individual within the nation. But right from the start, Christians have understood it as speaking prophetically about Jesus.

As you read Isaiah 53, which verses speak specifically about the servant suffering? How do they describe the servant’s suffering?

Which verses speak about the servant suffering for us? In what sense does the servant suffer for us?

4. A greater good

1. Watch ‘**Mavis’s story**’ (<https://youtu.be/yGjGFnHetjA>). How has what has happened to Mavis changed the way she thinks about the future? When you think about the future, what do you think about?

2. Read **Romans 8:18-21**. How does Paul describe the future?

3. What is his attitude to our present sufferings?

4. Why do we find it difficult to say that our sufferings don’t matter by comparison with the glory that is coming?

5. Read **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**. How does Paul describe the future?

6. How does he describe the present?

7. What do these verses say about what our sufferings are achieving? How could this work?

8. What does Paul say will enable us not to lose heart? Why do you think we find this difficult?

9. Watch '**A Greater Good**' (<https://youtu.be/FFeO6IouPtQ>). Think about the situations of suffering in your own life, or in the lives of people close to you. How do you respond to the idea that God may use these sufferings to achieve a greater good?

10. The coming glory often does not seem very real to us. How can we change that? What could we do during the coming week that would help us?

11. What things, in your daily life, make it harder for you to fix your eyes on the unseen eternal reality? What helps you to focus on it?

Going deeper

We've seen that God can use sufferings to achieve a greater good – an eternal good. Sometimes, this suffering is caused by human evil. Does this mean that God is behind that evil?

Read **Genesis 50:15-21**. What had happened in Joseph's life? What does he say about it in verse 20?

Was God responsible for what Joseph's brothers did?

Was God responsible for what happened to Joseph?

Can you think of situations in your own experience (or the experience of someone close to you) where God has used someone's evil actions to bring about a good result?

Read **Acts 2:22-24**. In these verses from Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, he describes the cause of what happened to Jesus in two different ways. What are they?

Was God responsible for what happened to Jesus?

Was God responsible for the evil decisions of the Jewish and Roman authorities?

God is not responsible for human sin (James 1:13-15), but in his wisdom and sovereignty he is even able to use evil actions to bring about important good outcomes. He is not responsible for our evil decisions, but he may use these decisions to achieve his own good purposes.

5. A different purpose

1. Watch 'Ed's story' (<https://youtu.be/E3n3k1CaDu4>). How would you describe your ambition / goal / purpose?

2. Read **Romans 8:18-30**. Who does verse 28 apply to?

3. How does Paul describe God's purpose for our lives, in these verses? How is this different from our own goals and ambitions?

4. Watch 'A Different Purpose' (<https://youtu.be/49tojOTJjkk>). Do you think you would enjoy being directly conscious of God's presence? Why, or why not?

5. Read **1 Peter 1:6-7**. In these verses, what does Peter say is the purpose of suffering?

6. How does suffering test our faith?

7. How does what we've studied in this session change the way you think about your suffering? How does it change the way you respond to your suffering?

Going deeper

Read **Deuteronomy 8:2-5**. These verses are part of Moses' 'goodbye sermon' to the Israelites, before Joshua took over and led them into the Promised Land. How many different reasons can you find in these verses for why God led the Israelites in the desert for forty years?

What can we learn from this about the ways God uses suffering in the lives of his people?

How could this be relevant to your life?

6. Our choices matter

1. Watch ‘**Miryam’s story**’ (<https://youtu.be/BIi5iaF9oOo>). How is Miryam’s experience different from your own? Are there any ways you can identify with her story?

2. Read **Romans 5:1-5**. In these verses, Paul says that we can rejoice in our sufferings. Why?

3. Read **James 1:2-4**. Compare these verses with Romans 5. What sequence is in view in both passages?

4. How does suffering produce Christ-like character?

5. Watch **‘Our Choices Matter’** (<https://youtu.be/-t1xa5e1eh8>). How do you naturally respond when you are faced with suffering and difficulties?

6. In our growth to become like Jesus, what does God do? What do we do?

7. In your own experience, or the experience of people close to you, can you see situations where someone has grown spiritually because of the suffering they have faced?

8. In Romans 8:37, Paul says that we are ‘more than conquerors’ in the circumstances of suffering. Yet the reality is that when we suffer, most of us don’t feel like we are more than conquerors most of the time. What are we missing?

Going deeper

Here we will look briefly at two examples from the life of Paul, where he could see that God had developed his character through the things he had suffered.

Read **2 Corinthians 1:3-11**. What sufferings is Paul talking about here?

What does he see as the specific result of his sufferings, in verses 8-9?

Read **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**. What do we know about the specific suffering Paul is describing in these verses?

How has this suffering developed his character?

How does what Paul says about his sufferings change the way you view your sufferings?

7. Keeping going

1. Watch ‘**Eric’s story**’ (<https://youtu.be/IN1DBhFYNo>). Eric has faced severe pain for nearly twenty years, with multiple hospital admissions and surgeries. Try to imagine what this is like. In this situation, what would be your greatest temptation?

2. Read **Psalm 13**. How does the writer respond to his sufferings in verses 1-4?

3. How does the Psalm end?

4. We are not very good at lament in the church today. We tend to airbrush it out, and to want to move on quickly to songs of victory and deliverance. Why do you think this is?

5. Read **Psalm 39**. This is another lament Psalm. What is different about it?

6. What can we learn from this?

7. Read what James and John say in **James 1:12** and **Revelation 2:10**. What response to suffering do they call for?

8. What reward do they both foresee?

9. Watch **‘What Keeps You Going?’** (https://youtu.be/WQlM7_Us49c). What specific things do the contributors to these videos identify that help them to keep going? Which of these do you find most helpful / least helpful? Why? Are there other things that you have found helpful?

10. Identify one thing from this week's study that will most help you to cope with the suffering you face now, or may face in the future.

Going deeper

Watch '**Doubting God is there**' (<https://youtu.be/EZwivRIZvbk>), and '**Doubting God is Good**' (<https://youtu.be/UsNs-iwjaFQ>). When you face suffering, are you more tempted to doubt that God is there, or that God is good? Why?

What is there from this series of studies and videos that will help you to overcome this temptation?

Watch '**Good out of evil**' (https://youtu.be/Z_EvBFQz33g). Think of a particular situation of suffering that you face, or that someone close to you faces. Can you see specific ways that God has brought something good out of it?

8. The hardest choice

1. Watch ‘**Why Me?**’ (<https://youtu.be/Sw6q-Rnmlie>). What situations of suffering *most* leave you doubting God or asking questions about why God allows them?

2. Read **Job chapters 38 & 39**. At the end of the book, how does God respond to Job’s questions about his suffering?

3. Read **Job 42:1-6**. How does Job respond to what God says?

4. Watch ‘**The Hardest Choice**’ (https://youtu.be/_EKtxMs2AsE). How do you feel about the idea that we often don’t know why God allows suffering, or what he is doing through it?

5. What experiences have you had where you have had to trust God even though you don't understand?

6. What have you found most difficult about trusting God in this situation?

7. If someone asked you why you are a Christian, what *reasons* would you give? Are those reasons good enough to convince you, even in the face of suffering?

8. How does the end of Job's story change the way you think about suffering you don't understand?

9. Is there anything you would do differently in the future as a result of thinking about Job's story?

Going deeper

Some recommended books:

As you come to the end of these studies, why not take your thinking a step further with one (or more) of these books? We particularly recommend 'A Place of Healing' by Joni Eareckson Tada, and 'Walking with God through Pain and Suffering,' by Tim Keller.

'Why?' by Sharon Dirckx

'A place of Healing' by Joni Eareckson Tada

'God on Mute' by Pete Greig

'O Love That Will Not Let Me Go' by Nancy Guthrie (ed.)

'Walking with God through pain and suffering' by Tim Keller

'Invest your sufferings' by Paul Mallard

'The Life You Never Expected' by Andrew and Rachel Wilson

Books by contributors to this series:

By Eric Gaudion: 'Braving the Storm' and 'Storm Force'

By Hilary McDowell: 'Some Day I'm Going to Fly'

By Robin Oake: 'Father Forgive' and 'With God on the Streets'

By Ed Shaw: 'The Plausibility Problem: the Church and Same-Sex Attraction'

By Bob White: 'Who is to Blame? Disasters, Nature and Acts of God'

The Biggest Question: why does God allow suffering?

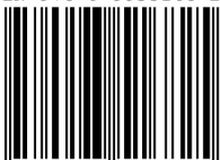
For many people who are not Christian believers, all the suffering and evil in the world is their biggest objection to the Christian message. Many Christians ask the same question. Others are confused by the false teaching that God always wants his children to be healthy, wealthy, and happy.

‘The Biggest Question: why does God allow suffering?’ is an eight week home group course which explores what the Bible says, and also hears from people who have been through all kinds of tragedies – hearing not just how their lives have been changed, but how their faith has been challenged.

The purpose of this course is to strengthen our faith as believers, and to equip us to respond effectively to the questions of our unbelieving friends and colleagues.

This course is designed for home groups and cell groups, Christian Unions and Adult Sunday Schools. It can also be used in youth groups, in schools, or for personal study.

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