

# The Biggest *Question*

Why does God allow suffering?

**Leaders' Guide**

# **The Biggest *Question***

**Why does God allow suffering?**

**Leaders' Guide**

© Focus Radio 2016

First published in 2016  
by Focus Radio  
54 The Avenue  
Southampton  
United Kingdom SO17 1XQ

ISBN: 978-0-9935168-1-8

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

© 2016 Focus Radio

Focus Radio's right to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems, without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

# Contents

|    |                     |    |
|----|---------------------|----|
|    | Introduction        | 4  |
| 1. | The choices we make | 8  |
| 2. | God's wake-up call  | 12 |
| 3. | A God who suffers   | 17 |
| 4. | A greater good      | 22 |
| 5. | A different purpose | 28 |
| 6. | Our choices matter  | 32 |
| 7. | Keeping going       | 36 |
| 8. | The hardest choice  | 40 |

## **Introduction to the Leaders' Guide**

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.

This book is the Leaders' Guide. It's designed to help you lead your group through the course. If the group has more than one leader, each leader needs a copy of this guide. Each member of the group needs a copy of the Members' Guide.

The course takes eight sessions to complete. When you use it with a group, each session is designed to last about 50 minutes. This is so the group will have time to do other things together too (pray, talk, eat and drink...).

Each session includes some Bible passages to look at, and two or more short videos from ‘The Biggest Question’ series to watch (on the free DVD that goes with this guide). You will need a DVD player set up to watch the videos.

## **Each session includes:**

### **Purpose**

A brief explanation of the purpose of the session – what group members should learn through this session. This is for you as the leader – don’t share it with group members at the start of the session.

### **Getting started**

Each session begins with a short video in which one of the series contributors tells their own story, and one or more questions to help the group start thinking and talking about the key issues.

### **The Bible**

This section is the heart of the course. It includes some Bible passages to look up and some questions to help group members think about them, as well as another video from the DVD.

The questions are there to help draw out what the Bible passage teaches about suffering. We are not trying to explore everything

that each passage says. In talking about the passages, it is important for the leader to keep the discussion focussed on the question of suffering.

We have included suggested answers to some questions, but not all. For 'open-ended' questions, you as the leader may be happy to let the discussion go in whatever direction it takes. However, for some of the questions, the answers given here include important points to draw out during the discussion.

*The questions and Bible readings are here to help you, not to tie you down! Feel free to leave out some of the questions or Bible passages, or to add your own questions. Only you know what will work best for your group.*

## **Real life**

This section includes one or more questions to help group members think through and apply what the Bible says to our lives today. This course is meant to be very practical, so it is important for you as the leader to focus strongly on the application. Be as specific as you can and encourage the members of the group to think through what they will *do differently* because of this session. It would be good to end the session with a brief time of open prayer, so that group members can pray through what they've learned and apply it to their lives.

## Going deeper

Each session also includes some extra material for members of the group who want to go into the subject in more depth at home. This section is not meant to be included in the group study.

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

Email: [biggestquestion@focus.org.uk](mailto:biggestquestion@focus.org.uk)

Mail: Focus,  
54 The Avenue,  
Southampton,  
United Kingdom SO17 1XQ

# 1. The choices we make

## Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members reflect on the place of *human choices* in causing much of the suffering in the world.

## Getting started

1. Take a few minutes to share your own experiences of suffering, or the experiences of people close to you.
2. Watch ‘**Robin’s story**’ (chapter 1 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/yjfoJ8NkK6Y>). How would you feel in Robin’s situation? Would you be able to forgive the killer?

## The Bible

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

**Stay on track:** *In Genesis 1, everything that God makes is good. But in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve disobey God, and as a result, God judges humanity, with a promise of pain and toil (Genesis 3:14-19). At the most basic level, suffering and death are the consequences of God’s judgment following Adam and Eve’s disobedience.*

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

**Stay on track:** *Evil existed before Adam and Eve disobeyed God – there was a serpent in the Garden! The Bible never gives a complete answer for the origin of evil – but it does make it clear that we are caught up a cosmic conflict between good and evil, between God and the Devil.*

5. Watch ‘**The choices we make**’ (chapter 10 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/6MeSLoiN7e8>). Think back to the situations you identified in question 1. What (or who) was the *cause* of the suffering?

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

**Stay on track:** *People can know God through the natural world he has created. But we reject this knowledge - we do not worship him, or thank him. Instead we choose instead to suppress the truth that we could have known.*

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

**Stay on track:** *God ‘gives us up’ to the outcome of our wrong choices. We choose to suppress the truth that we could know*

*about him, and to rebel against God. We hurt and harm each other. He lets us discover the results of this in our own lives.*

## **Real life**

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?

***Stay on track:*** *Suffering takes us right to the heart of the Christian message, in a way that nothing else does. It shows us the destructive and damaging results of our moral choices – our choices to reject what we can know about God, to disobey him and rebel against him (what the Bible calls ‘sin.’) It shows us that our greatest problem is not just our suffering, but our sinfulness.*

Spend some time praying for the people you know who are facing suffering at the moment.

## 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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members to think about how suffering can be a wake-up call and a warning from God. As C S Lewis says: *'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'*

### Getting started

1. Watch '**Hilary's story**' (chapter 4 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/9yNxMp3XDA4>). Think about both the huge opportunities Hilary has had, and the huge difficulties she has faced. Would you change places with her? Why, or why not?

### The Bible

2. Read **Luke 13:1-5**. Jesus is presented with the stories of two groups of people. One group had been killed by Pilate's soldiers – their suffering was a result of human evil. The other group had died when a tower collapsed – a 'natural disaster.' How do we naturally respond to these kinds of tragedies?

**Stay on track:** we're often moved to **sympathise** with those who have suffered, to **blame** those who have caused their suffering, and to **question** why God has allowed it.

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

**Stay on track:** Jesus does not **sympathise with the victims** - as if they were particularly unfortunate. He does not **excuse God** - as if God is to blame for what has happened. He does not even **condemn Pilate**. Jesus treats what happened as a **warning of future judgment**. 'Unless you turn back to God, you will all likewise perish.'

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

5. Watch '**God's wake-up call**' (chapter 12 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/tpNYvo3dIMg>). Can you think of situations where suffering has caused someone who had been indifferent towards God to think about him?

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

**Stay on track:** They assume that suffering is always a direct result of sin.

7. How does Jesus reshape their thinking?

**Stay on track:** *Jesus rejects their assumption: the man is not blind because of his own sin or the sin of his parents. Suffering is sometimes directly related to sin, but not always. It may be 'so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'*

*There is a very important practical point here: when we see someone suffering, we cannot - and must not - say that it is because God is judging them for something they have done. It may be because God has some purpose in their lives, or in the lives of others around them. Or it may simply be because of the general brokenness of the world that results from human rebellion against God.*

*God may sometimes judge people here and now – but not always. And in any specific situation, we don't know what God is doing, or why he is doing it. However, we can be confident that God will judge perfectly in the future.*

*(This was also the mistake Job's friends made – they thought they knew what God was doing. But we simply do not know enough to say this.)*

## **Real life**

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

**Stay on track:** *We saw in session 1 that suffering takes us into the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ: much suffering is a direct result of human rebellion and disobedience against God. Our greatest problem is not just our suffering, but our sinfulness. In this session, we've seen that God may use suffering as a wake-up call and a warning to avoid coming judgment.*

*The Bible has a great deal to say about God's judgment – in fact, it is one of its central themes. The idea that God judges people is massively unpopular today. But judgment is the other side of salvation. You can't have one without the other – if God is going to prevent injustice, the purposes of evil people **must** be frustrated. If he is going to bring about justice, evil acts **must** be punished.*

## 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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members to reflect on what the Bible says about God suffering *with* us, and to grasp more clearly what the Bible says about God suffering *for* us in Jesus Christ.

### Getting started

1. Watch ‘**Nick’s story**’ (chapter 3 on the DVD or [https://youtu.be/rtHOSPB\\_-pw](https://youtu.be/rtHOSPB_-pw)). A single moment completely changed Nick’s life. Can you think of other situations where a single moment has changed someone’s life – perhaps yourself, or someone close to you?

### The Bible

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 what he suffered. Was there ever a time when Jesus was less than perfect? What does it mean to say that he was made perfect through what he suffered?

**Stay on track:** *The word used here for ‘perfect’ can mean ‘full grown,’ ‘mature,’ or ‘complete,’ as well as perfect. As the son of God, Jesus was never imperfect. But as a human being, he could grow in maturity and in the completeness of his obedience. God has suffered, in the person of Jesus Christ. Because of this, he knows, not just theoretically, but in experience, what it is like when we suffer.*

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?

**Stay on track:** *the main ways these verses describe the purpose of Jesus’s suffering:*

- *‘Taste death for everyone’ (9b)*
- *‘Bring many sons to glory’ (10)*
- *‘Destroy him who holds the power of death – the devil’ (14)*
- *‘Free those who were held in slavery by their fear of death.’ (15)*
- *‘Make atonement for the sins of the people.’ (17)*
- *‘Help those who are being tempted.’ (18)*

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

**Stay on track:** *The purpose of the high priest was to represent people to God. As such, he needed to be able to identify fully with the people, but he also needed to be able to communicate with God. We can come to God through Jesus, knowing that he understands what we go through, and sympathizes with us in all of it.*

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

**Stay on track:** *Trusting and obeying God was a battle for Jesus, just as it is for us. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed ‘Not my will, but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42). Once again, we see how suffering brings us to the heart of the Christian message – the good news of Jesus Christ: According to the Bible, when Jesus died on the cross, he wasn’t just suffering with us. He was suffering for us. Jesus paid the price for our wrong choices and rebellion against God, and made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. He took on himself the judgment that we deserve.*

7. Watch **chapter 13 – A God who suffers**. Scholars sometimes talk about the ‘impassibility of God,’ by which they mean that God cannot suffer (because he is God). Yet the Bible often talks about God suffering. Is this just a picture, or does it

describe something real about God? How does the suffering of Jesus change the way you think about God?

## **Real life**

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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members think about the way God can use the suffering in our lives to achieve some greater good - in particular, an eternal good. As the Nobel-prizewinning author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn says, *‘The meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering but in the development of the soul.’*

**Note to leaders:** This session has more questions than usual. This means that it is more important than ever to keep the discussion focussed, and not to spend too much time on any one question!

### Getting started

1. Watch ‘**Mavis’s story**’ (chapter 6 on the DVD or <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?

### The Bible

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

**Stay on track:** Paul describes the future in terms of glory (18); God's children being revealed (18); being set free from bondage to decay (21), and the glorious freedom of the children of God (21).

3. What is his attitude to our present sufferings?

**Stay on track:** He takes it for granted that we will experience sufferings in the present, but he says that they aren't worth comparing with the glory that is to come – they don't matter, by comparison.

4. We don't often think like this! Why do we find it difficult to say that our sufferings don't matter by comparison with the glory that is coming?

**Stay on track:** could it be that we find it difficult because the coming glory does not feel very real to us?

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

**Stay on track:** Paul describes the future in terms of eternal glory (17).

6. How does he describe the present?

**Stay on track:** *He describes it in terms of outward wasting away (16); inward renewal (16); and troubles that are light and momentary / temporary (17).*

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

**Stay on track:** *our sufferings **change** us – they do something to us.*

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

**Stay on track:** *Paul says that fixing our eyes on the unseen future will enable us not to lose heart. As in Romans, we find this difficult because it is ‘unseen’ and not very real to us.*

*Suffering re-focusses our hopes: we come to realise that our life in this world is never going to turn out as good as we thought it would be, and this prompts us to set our hopes on the world to come.*

9. Watch ‘**A Greater Good**’ (chapter 9 on the DVD or <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?

## Real life

10. In Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says that our present sufferings – however great they are – are short-lived and insignificant when we compare them with the eternal glory that is to come. Yet in our experience, this does not seem to help much, because 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?

***Stay on track:*** *As we have seen many times already in this course, suffering takes us to the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. In this session, we've reflected on the great hope that lies ahead for those who believe in Jesus. If we want to get our suffering in perspective, we need to spend more time thinking about this eternal glory that awaits us. But this doesn't come easily to us, precisely because it is 'unseen,' while our present sufferings are very much 'in our faces.'*

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 suffering 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 from two different viewpoints. 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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members to reflect on the part suffering plays in God's purpose of making us like his Son.

### Getting started

1. Watch 'Ed's story' (chapter 7 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/E3n3k1CaDu4>). In this session we're thinking about the purpose of our lives. How would you describe your ambition / goal / purpose?

### The Bible

2. Read **Romans 8:18-30**. People often quote verse 28 'God causes everything to work together for good.' Who does this verse apply to?

**Stay on track:** *The Bible specifically says that it is people who love God, and who have been called according to his purpose. (This is not two distinct groups of people, but one!)*

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

**Stay on track:** *Our purpose is usually to find happiness in some way here and now. God's purpose is not only to save us, but for us to become like his Son Jesus, so we shall be happy with him for ever. It would be more accurate to say that God's purpose is not only to save us from his judgment, but to save us from becoming the kind of people we would become, without God's forgiveness and the work of his Spirit.*

*In verse 28, Paul says that God causes everything to work together for good for his people. In verse 29, he explains what this means - being made like God's Son. In verse 30, he describes the **same** process in terms of being called, justified, and glorified. It is vitally important to grasp that when he says that God causes everything to work together for our good, he is **not** talking about us being healthy or wealthy or happy here and now, but about us becoming the kind of people he wants us to be.*

4. Watch '**A Different Purpose**' (chapter 14 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/49tojOTJjkk>). The new creation will be centred on God and his glory, and on lives characterised by his goodness. Do you think you would enjoy being directly conscious of God's presence? Why, or why not?
5. Read **1 Peter 1:1-9**. In these verses, what does Peter say is the purpose of suffering?

**Stay on track:** Peter says that one purpose of suffering is the testing of faith, so that it will be proved genuine, and will result in praise, glory and honour.

6. How does suffering test our faith?

**Stay on track:** Suffering may have the effect of showing whether our faith is genuine or not. It may also have the effect of purifying us from attitudes and desires that are not in line with genuine faith.

## Real life

8. 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?

**Stay on track:** Once again, we see that suffering takes us to the heart of the good news: God's purpose is not just to save us from sin and death and judgment, but to make us like his Son – to make us ready to share eternity with him. Suffering plays a deep part in this, as we shall see next time.

Spend some time praying for the specific people you know who are facing suffering at the moment.

## 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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members reflect on the part played by our choices in God's purpose in our lives – of making us like Jesus. As Dumbledore says in Harry Potter: *'It is our choices, Harry, that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities.'*

### Getting started

1. Watch '**Miryam's story**' (chapter 2 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/BIi5iaF9oOo>). How is Miryam's experience different from your own? Are there any ways you can identify with her story?

### The Bible

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

**Stay on track:** *We do not rejoice because of the suffering itself. But we can rejoice because suffering changes us – it produces perseverance and character and hope – hope that will not let us down.*

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

**Stay on track:** *In both passages, suffering and trials produce perseverance, and perseverance leads to character formation – described in James as being ‘mature and complete.’ God uses our sufferings to change us, to grow us as people.*

4. How does suffering produce Christ-like character?

**Stay on track:** *It is as we persevere in the face of suffering that our character is formed. So how we choose to respond to our suffering plays an important part in our spiritual growth: our choices matter.*

5. Watch ‘**Our Choices Matter**’ (chapter 15 on the DVD or <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?

**Stay on track:** *God allows us to be put in tough situations. His purpose is that we will grow to be like Jesus. But this doesn’t just happen automatically. We can choose how we respond – either by lining up with God’s purpose, or by rejecting it.*

## Real life

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 go through suffering, 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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members identify specific things that will help them to keep going when they face suffering. As Tim Keller says: *‘Nothing is more important than to learn how to maintain a life of purpose in the midst of painful adversity.’*

### Getting started

1. Watch **‘Eric’s story’** (chapter 5 on the DVD or <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?

### The Bible

2. Read **Psalm 13**. Psalm 13 is an example of a ‘lament.’ Many of the Psalms are laments – cries to God because of suffering, perhaps caused by the attacks of an enemy. How does the writer respond to his sufferings, in verses 1-4?

***Stay on track:*** *The writer is honest with God about how he is feeling, and God does not condemn him for this. The idea that*

*God always expects us to be strong and positive is a dangerous lie. (See for example 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).*

3. How does the Psalm end?

***Stay on track:*** *Psalm 13 ends with expressions of trust in God's goodness, and confidence that he will deliver. In this, Psalm 13 is typical of the lament Psalms – they move from cries for help either to expressions of praise that God has delivered, or to expressions of confidence that he will deliver.*

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?

***Stay on track:*** *Psalm 39 does not have a 'happy ending.'* *There is no expression of praise or confident faith.*

6. What can we learn from this?

***Stay on track:*** *We do not always get to a happy ending in this life. There are some situations of suffering and grief and loss that just go on and on. We can continue to cry out to God for*

*relief. We do not have to pretend that everything is always alright, or be super-strong Christians.*

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

**Stay on track:** *Both James and John encourage us to keep going! – to be faithful and persevere.*

8. What reward do they both foresee?

**Stay on track:** *The reward mentioned by both James and John is the crown of life.*

9. Watch ‘**What Keeps You Going?**’ (chapter 19 on the DVD or [https://youtu.be/WQLM7\\_Us49c](https://youtu.be/WQLM7_Us49c)). What specific things do the contributors 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?

**Stay on track:** *The contributors identify things that help them keep going such as nature, the Bible, prayer, realistic expectations, and avoiding isolation.*

## Real Life

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**' (chapter 16 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/EZwivRIZvbk>), and '**Doubting God is Good**' (chapter 17 on the DVD or <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**' (chapter 18 on the DVD or [https://youtu.be/Z\\_EvBFQz33g](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

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to help group members recognise that – when we have said all that we can say - there is still much about suffering that we do not understand. In the face of suffering that is often awful and unjust, the most important decision we have to make is to trust God – that he is good, that he is in control, and that he knows better than we do.

### Getting started

1. Watch ‘**Why Me?**’ (Chapter 8 on the DVD or <https://youtu.be/Sw6q-Rnmlic>). What situations of suffering (either situations that you see in the news or situations known to you personally) *most* leave you doubting God or asking questions about why God allows them?

### The Bible

2. Read **Job 38 & 39**. Job had lost everything. He knew that he hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet God seemed to be punishing him. His ‘friends’ said all sorts of things that *sounded* wise, but God’s verdict was that they had not said what was true

about him (Job 42:7). At the end of the book, how does God respond to Job's questions about his suffering?

**Stay on track:** *God doesn't answer Job's questions about why he has gone through awful suffering. Instead, through a series of questions and illustrations, God gives Job a new vision of his greatness and wisdom and power. Job comes to understand that he isn't big enough to understand what God is doing.*

*Job's suffering was not a punishment at all! It was the result of a challenge to Satan by God. Job's suffering was caused by 'the Satan' (the accuser). But Satan can only do what God allows. We know what was going on behind the scenes, but Job never knew this – even at the end of the story.*

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

**Stay on track:** *Here at the end of the book, Job acknowledges that he is too small and too limited to understand what God is doing, and that the appropriate response is trust and worship.*

4. Watch '**The Hardest Choice**' (chapter 20 on the DVD or [https://youtu.be/\\_EKtxMs2AsE](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. We have talked several times in this course about the importance of our choices. When we are faced with suffering that we cannot understand, we have a choice, either to trust God (his goodness, his power, and that he knows what he is doing) or to insist on trying to understand. 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. People sometimes accuse Christians of exercising 'blind faith.' They say that faith is 'believing something without evidence,' or even in spite of the evidence. However, faith is not blind! We have good *reasons* to believe that God is there, that he is good, and that he is wise and powerful, so suffering need not *contradict* our faith, even when it *challenges* our faith. 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?

***Stay on track:*** *In the videos, we mention the evidence in the **creation** that points towards a creator – see, for example, Psalm 19, and Romans 1:18-23. We also mention the evidence in **history** – in the life, and death and resurrection of Jesus. There is enough evidence that we can be confident in the truth. So even*

*in the middle of awful suffering, when we can't see how God's goodness is at work in our lives, it still makes sense to trust him.*

## **Real life**

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

***Stay on track:*** *Faced with awful and unjust suffering that we do not understand, the most important and practical decision we have to make is to **trust God** – that he is good, that he is in control, and that he knows better than we do. It is very important that we don't start to think that we understand more than we really do about what God is doing.*

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

Spend some time praying for the specific people you know who are facing suffering at the moment.

## 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?

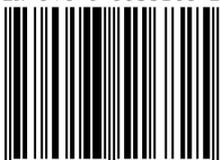
For many people who are not Christian believers, all the suffering and evil in the world is their biggest objection to the Christian message. Many Christians ask the same question. Others are confused by the false teaching that God always wants his children to be healthy, wealthy, and happy.

**‘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.

ISBN 978-0-9935168-2-5



9 780993 516825 >

Focus  
54 The Avenue  
Southampton  
United Kingdom SO17 1XQ



*godnewevidence*

*www.focus.org.uk*