Perspectives on Suffering

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Study 1: FAITHFUL IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

Study 2: PURPOSE IN SUFFERING
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

Study 3: HELP ALONG THE WAY—SUPPORT IN SUFFERING
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Study 4: SONGS IN THE NIGHT
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Study 5: LONGING FOR HOME
Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide
Followers of God suffer, but they also remain faithful.

Suffering is inescapable in this fallen world, and it is integral to being a Christ follower. A balanced understanding of Scripture demands that we form a theology of suffering, not simply a theology of victory and healing. We must understand the Bible's teaching so that when we suffer we will not be jolted from the faith. Understanding will help us remain faithful.

This study explains that trials should be expected, but that we can persevere. How can we finish our Christian pilgrimage when the road is arduous? The answer from Job is not to be caught off guard when trials come, since God sanctions suffering and allows the innocent to suffer. We can remain faithful as Job did.


Based On: “The Long and Winding Road,” Series Builder by Jeffrey Arthurs, Preaching Today Sermons
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

Humans are fascinated by journeys. From the odyssey of Ulysses and his adventures with the Cyclops, to the shenanigans of Bill and Ted as they bounce through history in their “Excellent Adventure,” something about traveling grips us. Willie Nelson can’t wait to be on the road again, The Beatles escape on their Yellow Submarine, and after six or seven seasons of being lost in space (does that sound familiar?), Star Trek Voyager finally got home. They finally got home. That’s what grips us—the desire to get home.

Dorothy may see the wonders of the Emerald City, but there’s no place like home. Maybe the most famous and profound of the journey stories is Pilgrim’s Progress. Christian winds his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, trying to get home. By God’s grace, each person doing this study will make it home. God can enable us to walk the long and winding road of our pilgrimage and persevere in the faith until the final day.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Have you ever been lost? What did it feel like?

[Q] Have you ever traveled for a long period of time? What did it feel like to finally get home?

[Q] What is the most difficult journey you’ve ever been on? What made it hard?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Sometimes the innocent suffer.

Job was a man whose road was the longest and most winding of all, but he made it home. In a short period of time, he lost his wealth, family, and health (Job 1–2). His friends thought that only the guilty suffer, but they were wrong, because Job was innocent. Read Job 1:1; 29:12–17; 30:25; 31:1, 5–11, 16–40.


But some suffering is not a result of our sin, as we see in Job, John 9:1–3, and 1 Peter 2:20–21.
In what ways can people suffer because of their sin?

**Leader’s Note:** Be sensitive to the fact that some in your study may currently be suffering because of their sin. Some examples might be: extramarital sex may lead to STDs; breaking the law can lead to a prison sentence or fine; uncontrolled anger can lead to estrangement from loved ones; heavy smoking, drug or alcohol abuse, or undisciplined eating can lead to a host of health problems, and so on.

Can you think of any modern-day examples of someone whose suffering has nothing to do with their sins?

Why must we be careful not to judge someone who is suffering?

**Teaching Point Two: God does not blame us if we lament.**

Read Job 1:20–22. Job’s immediate reaction was to tear his clothes, shave his head, and fall to the ground. Obviously this was a man in deep grief. Anyone around him could see that he was in great pain.

Since God created our emotions and sent his Son to suffer on this earth, he understands even better than we do how grief devastates us.

Besides Job’s physical response to his circumstances (torn clothes, shaved head, and prostration), what do these verses say was his attitude? What did he do when he fell to the ground (v. 20)? How can we worship in the midst of our pain?

What strikes you most about Job’s lament in verse 21? What must have been Job’s everyday thoughts, considering he was able to respond this way?

Why is it so hard to respond to suffering as Job did in verse 22?

With which statement do you find yourself agreeing most:

1) When bad things happen to me, I ask God why.

2) When bad things happen to me, I ask God what he’s trying to teach me.

3) When bad things happen to me, I get angry with those around me.

4) When bad things happen to me, I simply trust God.

Explain why you chose the statement you did. What difference does it make which way you react to suffering? Are there ever stages in our responses?
Leader’s Note: Psychologists recognize there are stages of grief. We may have to go through several of the above responses to end up at #4. God is patient with us and more concerned with where we end up in response to him than where we start out. Note David’s grief in the Psalms.

Teaching Point Three: God sovereignly sanctions suffering.

The fact that God sanctions suffering raises both the problem and the hope: The problem because God sanctions our suffering; the hope because God sovereignly sanctions our suffering.

The Chaldeans and Sabeans—evil murderers and thieves—as well as a natural disaster (the whirlwind) caused Job immense suffering. Behind them was Satan. Behind Satan was God. God said to Satan: Go your way. I’ll lengthen your choke chain a bit. Do your worst, but I will not permit you to try Job beyond what he can bear. I already know the end from the beginning. Job will come through this trial like gold.

Some people can’t accept this teaching from Job. Their theology says that God is cruel (author Elie Wiesel) or that God is limited (author Harold Kushner), but these conclusions are not biblical. Read Job 2:9–10, Ecclesiastes 7:14, Isaiah 45:7, Amos 3:6, and 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

[Q] How do we know that God is love, even though he allows pain and suffering?

Leader’s Note: See 1 John 4:7–18. We know that God is love because of the pain and suffering of his Son on our behalf.

[Q] How do the verses we just read refute the idea that God is limited in his power?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: To help us see God’s love behind our suffering.

Activity: Ask three individuals to read aloud the case studies below. Ask the group to discuss how the person in each case study could understand God’s love in the midst of his or her suffering. Make sure the group does not try to solve their problems, but rather share how this person could trust that God loves him or her.

• Josie has just found out she has multiple sclerosis. Her husband works long hours and they have two young children.

• Richard lost his teenage son in a car accident.

• Angie lost her job two months ago. Her savings are almost gone, and she has no prospects for a new job.
Teaching Point Four: Why the innocent suffer is often a mystery.

What then is the answer to why God brings suffering into our lives? The Bible offers many reasons, which we will explore further in our next study in this series. But even when all of those biblical reasons are spoken, there still remains an element of mystery. God never tells Job about Satan’s challenge. In the climax of the story God swats Job with lists of eloquent rhetorical questions (38–41), and Job responds not with, “Ahh, at last I understand,” but rather with, “I repent” (42:1–6). He did not repent of sins that allegedly brought on his suffering, but of an attitude that demanded an answer for everything.

[Q] Evidently it is more important to God that we trust him than that we understand what he’s doing. How does that fit with what Jesus tells us about becoming like a little child (Matthew 18:2–4)?

[Q] What does Job 1:22 tell us about what God values in our attitude?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

All of this tells us that the pursuit of God can (and should) take place without expectation of prompt reward. He’s worthy of our devotion, even if it does not seem to profit us.

[Q] Can you name any songs or hymns that support the idea that God is worthy of our worship, even when we cannot understand what he is doing?

[Q] Share a time that you remained faithful in the midst of suffering. What did it do for your faith?

[Q] Close in prayer for anyone in your group who is currently suffering.

—Study by Jeffrey Arthurs, with JoHannah Reardon
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Suffering is inescapable in this fallen world, and it is integral to being a Christ follower. A balanced understanding of Scripture demands that we form a theology of suffering, not simply a theology of victory and healing. We must understand the Bible’s teaching so that when we suffer we will not be jolted from the faith. Understanding will help us remain faithful.

This study explains that trials should be expected, but that we can persevere. How can we finish our Christian pilgrimage when the road is arduous? The answer from Job is not to be caught off guard when trials come, since God sanctions suffering and allows the innocent to suffer. We can remain faithful as Job did.


Based On: “The Long and Winding Road,” Series Builder by Jeffrey Arthurs, Preaching Today Sermons
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Even though we love to travel, the desire to get home grips us. Dorothy may see the wonders of the Emerald City, but there’s no place like home. Maybe the most famous and profound of the journey stories is *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian winds his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, trying to get home. By God’s grace, each person doing this study will make it home. God can enable us to walk the long and winding road of our pilgrimage and persevere in the faith until the final day.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One:** Sometimes the innocent suffer.

**Teaching Point Two:** God does not blame us if we lament.

[Q] With which statement do you find yourself agreeing most:

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2) When bad things happen to me, I ask God what he’s trying to teach me.
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—*Study by Jeffrey Arthurs, with JoHannah Reardon*
Understanding why God allows suffering will help us persevere in trials.

Why we suffer may ultimately be a mystery, but this does not mean that God says nothing about it. Rather, he says much about it. This study presents intellectual perspectives on the problem of evil that can help believers persevere in trials. None of these reasons alone explains the whole problem of evil, but understanding these perspectives provides preventative medicine. In other words, gaining God’s perspective can fortify us before suffering comes.


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Intellectual perspectives about suffering provide “road signs” or information that keeps us on track. Emotional perspectives are “rest stops” which give us a break from the road. And social perspectives are “inns”—not hotels but old-fashioned inns, where everyone gathers around the fire in the great room to tell stories and sing songs; at the inns we bear one another’s burdens.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] How does knowledge and wisdom about God keep us on track?
[Q] How do we keep our emotions in perspective? How does that allow us to rest?
[Q] How do other Christians give us perspective?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Pain itself is not necessarily evil.

To our hedonistic society, pain is an evil that must be avoided, but some pain is actually necessary for happiness—for example the “pain” of a diet, earning a degree, or getting in shape.

We need to change our perspective on suffering. The Bible tells us that we should count it joy when we face trials, since those trials are part of a larger plan designed for our good. As the hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father” says:

Though he giveth or he taketh,
God his children ne’er forsaketh,
His the loving purpose solely
To preserve them pure and holy.

Read James 1:2–8.

[Q] How can we be joyful when we face trials (v. 2)?
Teaching Point Two: God uses suffering to conform us to his image.

Sometimes God sends suffering to correct us. Read Hebrews 12:4–11. The biblical writer describes this passage on pain and discipline as a “word of encouragement” (v. 5). This helps us to see discipline as positive rather than negative. God cares enough about us to discipline us. Some suffering prevents us from falling into sin or getting off track, so that we stay focused on what’s important. Read Psalm 119:71, 2 Corinthians 1:8–9, 4:17–18, 12:7–10, and 1 Peter 1:6–7.

Our society wants everything to be instant—a pill, a book, a seminar, a gimmick—but being conformed to God’s image takes a lifetime, and he uses suffering in that process. Suffering is one of God’s tools to make us like himself.

[Q] How can suffering correct wrong behavior? What does the Hebrews passage tell us about the emotions we go through when God disciplines us?

[Q] Even Paul, the greatest missionary of all time, needed suffering in order to become Christlike. Name an example of how God has used an instance of suffering to keep you on track.

[Q] According to 2 Corinthians 1:9, what was the purpose of the great suffering Paul and his colleagues went through?

Teaching Point Three: God uses suffering so that we can reveal his glory.

Suffering isn’t always about us; sometimes it is simply for God’s glory. God uses suffering so that we can reveal his glory.

Read John 9:3 and 2 Corinthians 4:7–11.

[Q] According to these verses, what good thing can come out of suffering? Why is this so important?

[Q] What kind of problems can arise if we always think God is trying to discipline us by our suffering?
Leader’s Note: Those who are always looking for discipline become paranoid about every hardship that comes their way, fearful they are doing something wrong. It also causes a judgmental attitude towards others, as we see in John 9.

Optional Activity:

Purpose: To help us see how God can be honored by our suffering.

Activity: Form groups of three to four people. Give each group a newspaper. Ask each group to find an example in the paper of someone who is suffering. Imagine the person in the article is a Christian. How might their suffering honor God? For example: 1) A convicted thief may publicly repent of his sin and give honor to God for the change in his life. 2) A hurricane victim may share how she lost her home, but that God protected her life. 3) An accident victim might share about how his injuries caused him to slow down and listen to God.

Teaching Point Four: God withholds more suffering than we’re aware of.

The smallest child instinctively looks to his father for protection. We have a heavenly father who is constantly protecting us. Consider this story, called “Earth’s Big Brother,” which appeared in the St. Paul Pioneer Press:

Have you ever wondered whether a giant asteroid might hit our planet, like the one that may have wiped out the dinosaurs on earth?

The planet Jupiter “is our first line of defense” says Allan Boss, an astrophysicist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. “It is something like 99.9 percent efficient at throwing dangerous space junk, asteroids, and meteorites back out to interstellar space.”

How does that happen?

Jupiter is 318 times heavier than earth. Because of its mass, Jupiter creates a huge gravitational field that acts as a giant cosmic vacuum cleaner, drawing the “junk” that floats into the gravitational field toward it and away from other planets.

Jupiter displayed its protective power six years ago when a monster comet broke into fragments and bombarded the planet Jupiter with more destructive power than all the atomic bombs on earth. Not all space particles get deflected by Jupiter, but living in Jupiter’s gravitational field minimizes the destructive forces that enter the earth’s atmosphere.

Considering Jupiter’s protective role, the ancient Romans unknowingly named the mighty planet well. In Old Latin, Jupiter means “Sky-Father.”

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3–7.
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Purpose in Suffering

Leader’s Guide

[Q] What about these verses reveals God as our protector?

[Q] How do these verses reassure you about your suffering?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

In summary, God uses pain in our lives to conform us to his image and reveal his glory. He also is our protector, Father God, who withholds more suffering than we’re aware of.

[Q] In light of this study, which statement is correct?

1) God allows us to suffer to turn us from our sin.

2) God allows us to suffer to mold our character.

3) God allows us to suffer to bring him glory.

4) God prevents more suffering than he allows.

5) All of the above

Leader’s Note: All of these statements are true according to this study. They are not all true at the same time, but are all true for different situations.

[Q] How can we evaluate the reason for our suffering?

[Q] Why must we be careful not to judge why someone else is suffering?

Leader’s Note: We don’t know the mind of God. We can attempt to figure out why we are suffering in order to correct anything that is wrong in our lives, but we must be careful about judging why someone else is suffering.

—Study by Jeffrey Arthurs, with JoHannah Reardon
Purpose in Suffering

Understanding why God allows suffering will help us persevere in trials.

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Pain itself is not necessarily evil.

Teaching Point Two: God uses suffering to conform us to his image.

Teaching Point Three: God uses suffering so that we can reveal his glory.

Teaching Point Four: God withholds more suffering than we’re aware of.

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Help Along The Way—Support in Suffering

In our last study we looked at the intellectual approach to the problem of evil. This study presents emotional and social perspectives.

Using the metaphor of a journey, the emotional perspectives are “rest stops” (they give us a break from the road), and the social perspectives are “inns” (not hotels but old-fashioned inns, where everyone gathers around the fire in the great room to tell stories and sing songs). At the inns we bear one another’s burdens.

Scripture: John 11:35; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4; 12:7–10; Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 2:10; 5:8; 12:4–11; 13:3

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Part 1 Identify the Issue

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As we discovered in the last study, we have to learn to think rightly about why God allows suffering. However, we are not only intellectual beings. We are also social and emotional; therefore God also meets us in our feelings and our relationships, using both to help give us strength and hope on the long road.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Have you ever known something intellectually, but couldn't put it into practice? Why?
[Q] Name a time when someone encouraged you when you were disheartened. What did that person do that helped the most?
[Q] Has God's Holy Spirit ever comforted you when you were down? How?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God can use suffering to help us sense his presence.

John C. Ortberg shares this story in Theology, News, and Notes (Fall 2002), p. 3:

Princeton professor James Loder wrote movingly how his life was redirected by a near-death experience as a result of an auto accident. In reflecting on this, he began to consider what happens to people who stand in the borderland between life and death. A typical case, he writes, is a man who commutes to work every day by train. At the station one morning, he suddenly slips and gets wedged between the train and platform. In desperation and pain, he cries out to God that he will do anything if he can be saved—then a few people arrive to pull him free.

Later on, in the safety of a hospital room, he decides that his “promise” was merely an expression of panic and, therefore, nonbinding. “Is it possible,” Loder asks, “that he was closer to the fundamental reality of his existence while being crushed in pain against the platform than when he was reclining in that hospital bed?” This doesn’t mean that life can only be understood and lived when we are at its extremities. It does suggest, however, that
Perspectives on Suffering

Help Along The Way—Support in Suffering

Leader’s Guide

“God’s presence can be discovered at the center of life all the more vividly, all the more precisely, because of his appearance at the extremity.”

It’s at the extremities, even in a relatively secular society, when we are most aware of our need for God.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.

[Q] In verse 8 of this passage, Paul said that he asked three times for God to take away his affliction. What does that say about how we should pray about our difficulties? What is the line between believing God for a miracle and acceptance?

Leader’s Note: Paul gives us freedom to pray for healing or relief from trials; however, at some point (for Paul after three times), we have to trust that God wants to use our troubles in our lives instead of taking them away.

[Q] According to Paul, why did God continue to allow his affliction?

[Q] How do our weaknesses actually become strengths as cited in this passage?

Leader’s Note: We realize our need for Christ, who is so much greater than we are. He gives us his strength to do above and beyond what we could do in our own strength.

Teaching Point Two: Jesus shared our experience and grieved over suffering.

Lee Eclov shared this story: “There is a vivid picture of Christ’s sacrifice for sin in Mark Twain’s novel A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. The story tells the adventures of an ordinary man (the Connecticut Yankee) from the 19th century, who is transported back to the medieval world of King Arthur. At one point he convinces King Arthur to dress like a peasant and take a journey through his kingdom. The results are generally laughable as the king, completely oblivious to life in the trenches, tries to carry on with all the pomp of the court while those around him simply think he is crazy. But chapter 16, ‘The Smallpox Hut,’ describes how the king and his companion happen upon a beggar’s hovel. The husband lies dead, and the wife tries to warn them away.”

“For the fear of God, who visits with misery and death such as be harmless, tarry not here, but fly! This place is under his curse…”

The king replies, “Let me come in and help you—you are sick and in trouble.”

The woman asks the king to go into the loft and check on their child.

“It was a desperate place for him to be in, and might cost him his life,” observes the Yankee, “but it was no use to argue with him.”
The king disappears up a ladder looking for the girl. There was a slight noise from the direction of the dim corner where the ladder was. It was the king descending. I could see that he was bearing something in one arm, and assisting himself with the other. He came forward into the light; upon his breast lay a slender girl of 15. She was but half conscious; she was dying of smallpox. Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth-of-gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king’s bearing was as serenely brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now; sublimely great. The rude statues of his ancestors in his palace should have an addition—I would see to that; and it would not be a mailed king killing a giant or a dragon, like the rest. It would be a king in commoner’s garb bearing death in his arms.

“There is Jesus on the cross! A king in commoner’s garb bearing sinners in his arms.”

Read John 11:35 and Hebrews 2:10, 5:8.

**[Q]** Why does it comfort us to have a maker and ruler who understands our suffering? Should we expect more privileged treatment than Christ?

**[Q]** Respond to each of the following statements. Do you agree with all of them? Any of them? Why?

1) Because Jesus went through suffering, I shouldn’t have to. He already paid the price.

2) Because Jesus went through suffering, I should expect to also.

3) Because Jesus went through suffering, he understands my suffering.

**Leader’s Note:** 1) Jesus paid the price for our eternal suffering, but never guaranteed we wouldn’t have to suffer in this life (Mark 8:34–35). 2) Peter tells us that since Christ suffered in his earthly body, we should expect to as well (1 Peter 4:1–2). 3) Christ experienced all the hardships of being human (Hebrews 4:15).

**Teaching Point Three: Discipline is a sign of God’s love.**

Bible commentator Matthew Henry says, “Sometimes Christ sees that we need sickness for the good of our souls more than healing for the good of our bodies.”

Charles Kimball tells this story:

A Norfolk-Southern train was rolling down the rails of Indiana at 24 miles per hour. Suddenly the conductor, Robert Mohr, spotted an object on the tracks roughly a city block...
away. Initially the engineer, Rod Lindley, thought it was a dog on the tracks. Then Mohr screamed, “That’s a baby!”

The baby was 19-month-old Emily Marshall, who had wandered away from home while her mother planted flowers in her yard.

Lindley hit the brakes. Mohr bolted out the door and raced along a ledge to the front of the engine. He realized there was no time to jump ahead of the train and grab the baby. So he ran down a set of steps, squatted at the bottom of the grill, and hung on.

As the train drew close to Emily, she rolled off the rail onto the roadbed, but she was still in danger of being hit by the train. So Mohr stretched out his leg and pushed her out of harm’s way. Mohr then jumped off the train, picked up the little girl, and cradled her in his arms. Little Emily ended up with just a cut on her head and a swollen lip.

Sometimes, like this train conductor, God must hurt us in order to save us.

Read Hebrews 12:4–11.

**[Q]** Why does God’s discipline show that he loves us? Have you ever been around an undisciplined child? How did it make you feel? How does an undisciplined child usually behave as an adult?

**[Q]** Verse 5 admonishes us to not make light of the Lord’s discipline and not to lose heart. How do we do this in everyday life? Give examples.

**Optional Activity:**

**Purpose:** To help us see God’s love behind his discipline.

**Activity:** Give everyone an index card and pencil. Ask them to write down one instance of when God disciplined them. Then ask them to write down the good that resulted in their lives as a result of the discipline. After about five minutes, reconvene and ask anyone who is willing to share what he or she wrote.

**Teaching Point Four:** Those who suffer can minister to others who suffer.

Jack Hayford shares this account in *How to Live Through a Bad Day: Powerful Insights from Christ’s Words on the Cross*:

On January 17, 1994, 10,000 freight trains seemed to be thundering through our house as the Northridge earthquake hit Los Angeles. When it was over, our family was safe and our home virtually untouched. Yet in the days following the disaster, I was gripped with a fear I had never known.
After four days, I desperately sought God in prayer. “Lord, I can’t understand myself! I am not afraid for my life, and I am not in doubt of your presence and protection. Is there something wrong with me?”

Instantly, I sensed an inner whisper: My son, there is nothing wrong with you. I allowed you to experience the depth of the trauma and fear that has gripped multitudes so that you might comfort them beyond their fears.

It was the words of 2 Corinthians 1:3–4. God uses his children who have endured difficulty to become strength to others experiencing the same trial. We comfort others not from the foundation of our superior faith, but from the commonality of our mutual struggles.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, Galatians 6:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, and Hebrews 13:3.

**[Q]** Why is it so comforting to talk to someone who has been through the same difficulty you have? Share a time that you saw 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 work.

**[Q]** What are some practical ways we can carry each other’s burdens?

**[Q]** How do our difficult experiences help us to encourage the timid and help the weak?

**[Q]** How does Hebrews 13:3 help us to be compassionate toward others?

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**Part 3 Apply Your Findings**

When we first become Christians, we have a rather simplistic view of God. But he uses suffering to teach us how complex he is and how much more he knows than we do. In opposition to what we would think, God uses suffering to help us sense his presence and disciplines us to show us his love. He sent us Jesus, who shared our experience and grieved over suffering. And perhaps most amazing of all, he trusts us to minister to others who suffer.

**[Q]** Which of our four teaching points do you understand the best? Which one do you need to understand better? How do you think you can gain that understanding?

**[Q]** Has this study stirred in you a desire to help another who is going through a difficult time? What do you think God is impressing you to do? Ask the group to pray that you will follow through.

—Study by Jeffrey Arthurs, with JoHannah Reardon
Help Along The Way—Support in Suffering

Emotional and social perspectives on suffering help us persevere in trials.

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God can use suffering to help us sense his presence.

Teaching Point Two: Jesus shared our experience and grieved over suffering.

[Q] Respond to each of the following statements. Do you agree with all of them? Any of them? Why?

1) Because Jesus went through suffering, I shouldn't have to. He already paid the price.
2) Because Jesus went through suffering, I should expect to also.
3) Because Jesus went through suffering, he understands my suffering.

Teaching Point Three: Discipline is a sign of God’s love.

Teaching Point Four: Those who suffer can minister to others who suffer.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

When we first become Christians, we have a rather simplistic view of God. But he uses suffering to teach us how complex he is and how much more he knows than we do. In opposition to what we would think, God uses suffering to help us sense his presence and disciplines us to show us his love. He sent us Jesus, who shared our experience and grieved over suffering. And perhaps most amazing of all, he trusts us to minister to others who suffer.

—Study by Shane Hipps, with JoHannah Reardon
Lament helps us remain faithful to God.

Lament is a biblical mode of communication, but it is largely neglected in American church culture. Rather than avoiding it, or being afraid of it, we should use it privately and corporately. The purpose of this study is to convince us that lament is appropriate, and thus to begin to change the culture or attitude of the church and to encourage transparency.

Scripture: Numbers 14:9; Jeremiah 12:1; Psalm 57; 77:1–3; Matthew 28:17; Luke 7:19; Hebrews 5:7–10

Based On: “The Long and Winding Road,” Series Builder by Jeffrey Arthurs, Preaching Today Sermons
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

We walk a long and winding road. Sometimes the road is smooth; sometimes it’s full of potholes. Sometimes it’s uphill; sometimes down. Sometimes we have companions; sometimes the road is vacant as far as we can see in either direction. Sometimes we walk in the day, sometimes at night. In the daytime we can sing songs of praise. What should we sing at night?

Followers of God have been asking that question from the beginning. The answer the biblical authors gave may surprise you. They lamented. The psalms of lament are the largest category of psalms. There are over 50 of them, plus the book of Lamentations and the prophets who lamented.

The biblical authors said things that cause us to cringe. Lament is biblical, but it is also foreign to us. This study will give some biblical perspectives on lament.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] What do you think it means to lament? Have you ever done it? Have you ever heard another do it? How did it affect you?

[Q] What do you think the purpose of a lament would be? How might it help our relationship with God? How might it promote unity?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Complaining is sin, but lament is not.

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines the word complain as: (1) to express pain; (2) to find fault; (3) to make an accusation or bring a formal charge against.

The Hebrew words that we translate complain have three different meanings:

Reeb means to grapple or wrangle, thus it came to mean “verbal wrestling with legal overtones” as in “to bring a complaint against” (read Jeremiah 12:1). This kind of complaining is not condemned in the Bible.
Perspectives on Suffering

Songs in the Night
Leader’s Guide

Siah means to meditate, muse, or rehearse in one’s mind, sigh or complain (read Psalm 77:1–3). Such sighing is acceptable to God. It is not condemned.

Lun means to “lodge,” “stop,” “spend the night,” thus “to stand obstinately, murmur, grumble, grudge.” All references to this word (except Joshua 9:18) are in six chapters: Exodus 15, 16, 17 and Numbers 14, 16, 17. The character of lun is open rebellion against God (read Numbers 14:9–12), a stubborn refusal to believe his Word and miraculous works. It is an act of disbelief and disobedience.

Wrestling and sighing are normal parts of our experience of God. Lun is sin. It is hard-hearted unbelief.

Therefore complaining or grumbling is sin (Philippians 2:14, 1 Corinthians 10:10), but lament is different than complaining.

[Q] What turns our wrestling and sighing into complaining? How can we avoid that?

Leader’s Note: The difference seems to be the inability to move on and ultimately trust God.

[Q] Why would it be healthy, both individually and corporately, to lament?

[Q] How does lament please God instead of offending him?

Teaching Point Two: Lament does not open the door for a slide into despair.

Jesus modeled lament (read Hebrews 5:7–10). He died with a psalm of lament on his lips (Matt. 27:46). Hannah lamented and left encouraged (1 Sam. 1:16, 18). David continually lamented in the Psalms.

Lament is actually a cry of faith. The reason we lament is because we love God and believe he is good. The psalms of lament end with affirmations of faith.

Dan Allendar says in “The Hidden Hope In Lament” (Mars Hill Review 1/1, p. 27):

A lament is truly asking, seeking, and knocking to comprehend the heart of God. A lament involves the energy to search, not to shut down the quest for truth. It is passion to ask, rather than to rant with already reached conclusions. A lament uses the language of pain, anger, and confusion and moves toward God.

Rather than opening the door for despair, the biblical writers seemed to draw strength from honest expression of their discouragement.
Ask a good reader to read Psalm 57 aloud.

[Q] What is the tone of David’s lament in this psalm? How does he start out? How does he end?

[Q] What is David’s attitude toward God in this psalm?

[Q] Which statement best describes you:

1) When I’m in pain, I keep my chin up and keep moving ahead.
2) When I’m in pain, I become angry.
3) When I’m in pain, I crumble.
4) When I’m in pain, I distract myself.

Which of these are healthy responses? Why? Which ones are unhealthy? Why? How could God use our different responses to pain?

Teaching Point Three: If we lament, it encourages rather than discourages others.

In Bible times, they used to sing psalms of lament corporately. This form of communication is one of God’s resources to help us remain faithful. Lament promotes accountability. When the whole church tells the truth (laments), we have no excuse for withdrawing from fellowship under the guise of “no one understands.”

Lament promotes authenticity and solidarity—real people living in the real world who remain faithful.

[Q] What does it do to our relationships to allow those we love to lament?

[Q] How could our lament encourage another person?

Teaching Point Four: We don’t lament because we are afraid that it is wrong to question God.

We walk the fine line Job walked. God does rebuke Job, but not for questioning. He rebukes him for supplying an unacceptable answer—that God is not just. Laments are a cry of pain, a cry of confusion, and a cry of faith. Laments are expressions of faith, or at least expressions of the faithful hanging on by their fingernails. To question God is not necessarily an act of unbelief.
Great followers of God often wrestle with God. For example, look at John the Baptist (read Luke 7:19) or the disciples (read Matthew 28:17). Bainton, in Here I Take My Stand (283), says of Martin Luther, “His whole life was a struggle against [depression and doubt], a fight for faith.”

[Q] How can questioning God actually strengthen our faith, rather than destroy it? Can you think of a time when you or someone you know stepped over a line into sin in questioning?

[Q] What is the difference between questioning God and accusing him of evil?

Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To illustrate the difference between questioning God and accusing him of evil.

**Activity:** Imagine that a man named John has lost his job and has no prospects for another one. Ask the group to demonstrate how he could complain and sin in his attitude by accusing God of evil. Then ask the group to demonstrate how he could lament the loss without sinning.

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Part 3 Apply Your Findings

We need to reinstate the healthy, biblical practice of lament, both individually and corporately. Until we are honest with God and ourselves, we won’t be able to move ahead spiritually, nor will we be able to help each other in our struggles. We must recognize that we are emotional beings, and throw those emotions in all their chaos upon God for him to straighten out, bringing the order that only he can bring.

[Q] What situations have you experienced in life that you could have lamented about? How might that have helped you? If you did lament, how did it help you?

Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To begin to practice lament.

**Activity:** Provide each person with a pen and paper. Ask them to individually write a lament, such as Psalm 57. You could also suggest they read Psalms 59, 60, and 63 as further examples. Those who would like to may share after about 15 minutes.

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—Study by Jeffrey Arthurs, with JoHannah Reardon
Longing for Home

Suffering helps us long for home.

As with the other studies in this series, this study’s overarching purpose is to help us remain faithful in trials. This study comforts and inspires us with the truth that a better day is coming. Suffering will not last forever. An eternal perspective helps us persevere in trials.


Based On: “The Long and Winding Road,” Series Builder by Jeffrey Arthurs, Preaching Today Sermons
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

We all have an instinct and desire for heaven. But our desire to know exceeds our capacity to know. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, “He has... set eternity in the hearts of men.” We have the ability to imagine what could be—a perfect world—and when things don’t seem right, we ask why. He’s made us questioners, a race of seekers. “Yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” He has given us longing, but not satisfied that longing entirely.

Why has he made us this way? Why has he put eternity in our hearts? So that we will long for home.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] How old were you when you first spent time away from home? What was the occasion? Camp? Visiting relatives? Was it easy or hard for you? What did it feel like to finally come home?

[Q] How could that experience be like our longing for heaven?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Suffering compels us to focus forward.

Suffering compels us forward even in mundane occurrences. For example, the pain of the last set of reps on the weight machines makes us long for the end of the workout.

It’s also true in profound situations. For example, the chronically ill person goes through difficult treatment in the hope that good health is around the corner.

When the road is smooth, we rarely think about heaven. But when the road twists and heaves, then we think, “There’s got to be something better than this. Justice must win someday. Pain must cease. Reunions have to take place.”

The good news is that our instincts will be fulfilled.
On old sailing vessels, the captain would greet the night watch with the words, “What cheer?” It meant, “What’s up? Status report, please.” It also meant, “Any good news? What cheer as we journey on this vast sea?” On our own journey we often ask, “What cheer?”

God’s answer is: Great cheer. A better day is coming. Heaven is in sight.

What will heaven be like? What do we have to look forward to? These verses give us a clue.

1. Read Luke 23:43 and Revelation 2:7. According to Easton’s Bible Dictionary, our word paradise is taken from the Persian word pardes, which means a “pleasure-ground” or “park” or “king’s garden.” It came in the course of time to be used as a name for the world of happiness and rest hereafter. How do you picture paradise?

2. Read Hebrews 8:2. What would it mean that heaven is a sanctuary?

3. Read Hebrews 11:10, 16, and 12:28. These verses paint images of a city, country, and kingdom. What kind of picture does that give you?

4. Read Psalm 23:6 and John 14:2. What does it mean that heaven has houses with many rooms?

5. What do you look forward to most about heaven?

Teaching Point Two: In heaven we will experience community.

In heaven God will undo the effects of the Fall. We will no longer be self-centered, sinful human beings. On earth we long for true community, but we never quite experience it as we’d like. But as Christians, we know it’s coming. The communion of saints will be fully realized. In the meantime, he’s given us a glimpse of heaven in the church.

1. Read 1 Corinthians 13:12. What about this verse shows that even our imaginations fail in thinking about heaven?

2. Read Hebrews 12:22–24. What strikes you most about this description of heaven? Name the things that will be changed in human nature, making us better to be around.

Teaching Point Three: In heaven we will rest.

Read Hebrews 4:9–11 and Revelation 14:13. The idea of rest includes security. There will no longer be anything to worry about. The idea of rest does not mean cessation of activity or soul sleep. Our rest will be like the rest of reaching the Promised Land. There were no opposing forces.
[Q] Does a place of rest mean that we sit around and do nothing? What did Adam have to do in the Garden of Eden before the Fall?

**Leader’s Note:** He named the animals, picked fruit, and ruled over all creation. Just from this small glimpse, it seems our work will be creative, enjoyable, and responsible.

[Q] With which statement do you find yourself agreeing most:

1) In heaven we will sit around on clouds, playing harps.
2) Heaven will be one long worship service that never ends.
3) In heaven I’ll have endless pleasures and meaningful things to do.
4) Heaven will be mostly boring.

Explain why you chose the statement you did. What difference will which one you believe make to your Christian life now?

**Leader’s Note:** You may want to spend some time talking about why some of us have misconceptions of heaven.

**Teaching Point Four: In heaven we will see and know God directly.**

At the end of the long and winding road of Christian experience is heaven. Eternity will not only be in our hearts, it will be all around us. And we will be satisfied. As the old hymn “The Sands of Time Are Sinking” says:

*The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom’s face*

*I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace*

*Not at the crown he giveth but on his pierced hand*

*The Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel’s land.*

The greatest joy of all will be seeing and knowing God as he really is. Read 1 John 3:2 and Revelation 21:1–4, 22–23.

[Q] Why will seeing God be such a powerful and fulfilling experience?

[Q] What gets in our way of understanding God now with our finite minds and sinful hearts? What do you think it will be like to be rid of those failings?
Part 3 Apply Your Findings

We all have an instinct and desire for heaven. But we get so wrapped up in earthly concerns that we would give heaven little thought unless we had suffering to compel us to focus forward. In heaven we will experience community, without our sinful natures, and we will rest while doing meaningful work. But best of all, in heaven we will see and know God directly.

[Q] What do you long for that can't be completely fulfilled on this earth?

[Q] Has anything in this study changed your thoughts about heaven? What? Will that make a difference in how you live your life now?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: To help us get a realistic view of heaven.

Activity: On a poster board or whiteboard, make two columns labeled Heaven and Earth. Under Heaven list:

• No sin
• Perfect community
• Rest
• Meaningful work
• See God clearly

Under Earth list the corresponding thing that most frustrates you here on earth. So it might look like this:

• No sin • My temper
• Perfect community • My rebellious son
• Rest • Overstressed and overworked
• Meaningful work • Bored in my job
• See God clearly • Doubts, fears, and confusion about God

After you've compiled the list, close in prayer thanking God for the joy of looking forward to heaven.

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