



# FAITH *Questions*

## SESSION 4: SUFFERING



### Session Activities

**Aim:** To explore Christian ideas as to why there is suffering in the world, and how we can stand against that suffering to bring parts of God's Kingdom into the here and now.

**Leaders note:** Remember to be sensitive throughout this session, especially if you don't know the participants well. We all have times in our lives when this question stops being abstract and becomes a real, personal, experience. For some people in your group, this may be a distant memory, or it could be what they are living through now. Remember this as you encourage your group to engage with this material.

## INTRODUCING

Ask the group how we can tell what is good from bad in the world? Where do we get our definition of these things from?

- Your group may come up with a number of answers, or it may not be something they have thought about before. For some, it might be a well thought out philosophy, for others it might be an instinctive reaction to what's around them. Both of these are important views, but explain that you want to dig a bit more into where those ideas come from for everyone.
- Explain that for each of us, our ideas come to us from a variety of places. Use the (BACKGROUND NOISE) handout to get people to think about where they have developed these ideas.
- Introduce the video as offering a slightly different way to think about the problem of suffering.

# EXPLORING

## Suffering Script

A conversation we come back to again and again when we look at the world is;

### Why is there suffering?

*Even detached from any belief in God, this is a question that should bother us. Why aren't things in our world more fair? Why are some people able to have freedom and make choices, while others have these choices taken away? Why do the decisions made by some people impact so significantly on others?*

*In our contemporary world, where we hear about these things in almost real time, this is brought to the foreground even more. When we hear news about the climate crisis, we see the faces of those in the global south who will be most seriously affected. When we read news of wars and invasions, we see those fleeing violence for safety. We see those affected in ways that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. We hear their voices in the stories they share, and if we allow ourselves, we ask the question, Why is this happening?*

*If in our past we have had some involvement with faith or religion, we will also ask, Why isn't God doing anything about this? Why is this being allowed to happen?*

*If we are Christian we will turn to the Bible to find out what that has to say about God's presence, or absence, in the world when there is suffering. What we find there is far more interesting, engaging, and persuading than a logical essay explaining how God and evil exist in the world, instead we find stories of people wrestling with this very question. We find a people trying to understand why, throughout their history, they find themselves under the thumb of whichever empire is in power, from the Babylonians, to the Persians, to the Romans.*

*Where do they land in all this wondering? We get different ideas from different books, but which all point to an extraordinary view.*

*In Genesis we witness a conversation between Abraham and God about the suffering caused by two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. What these cities have done is not clear, but the impression we are given is of crowds of people intent on causing pain to others, and who don't care about the suffering or damage they cause to those who get in their way. God declares to Abraham that the city will be destroyed because of the evil in it, but Abraham's response is to ask God if*

*he'll go ahead with this destruction even if He find 50 righteous people, then 45, 40, and gradually smaller numbers of good people in the city. Abraham stops his countdown at 10, but at no point does God argue which makes us wonder what would have happened if Abraham continued counting down? Abraham pleads for the goodness in the city to be allowed to exist, alongside the evil, to give a chance for the goodness to grow.*

*We see the opposite of this in Jonah, a messenger from God to the city of Nineveh. This was, for a long time, the largest city in the world. It's people were known throughout the world for their cruelty and disregard of others. Jonah starts off by not wanting to go, because he wants to see God destroy the city. He wants them to pay for the things they have done to others, but God offers them the chance to change their ways and turn from evil. And they repent, they turn their back on the evil they have done and God relents. Jonah's response to this forgiveness is to be angry with God; he wanted to see the city destroyed, the good and the evil together wiped off the face of the earth.*

*Abraham knew who God was, Jonah had forgotten. Abraham knew that God would bring goodness, Jonah thought that God should bring suffering.*

*This reminds us, challenges us, that when we wonder about suffering in the world, we should wonder why we allow it? How do we stand with God against those who cause pain and suffering through their actions, how do we stand up for good, and bring love into the world through everything we are and do?*

## EXPANDING

Alongside this view of suffering in the Bible, it's worth reminding ourselves that our world can seem far more full of pain and suffering than the world experienced by previous generations. This is for two reasons, which can combine to leave us in a cycle of anxiety and seeming powerlessness.

Ask your group if they can see how the following reasons combine to create a feedback loop which encourage us to see the world as spiraling out of control:

- Ours news apps, timelines, newsfeeds, etc are filled with bad news stories from all over the world, interspersed with catastrophic events which are updated for us as they unfold.
- These bad news stories are never resolved, we never hear about the end of them.

### Answer:

We hear a bad news story, then a bad news story, then a bad news story, but because we don't hear how any of them finish, each of them is still going on in the background buzz of our minds.

On top of this, in the same way growing a tree takes years while chopping it down takes minutes, stories of progress are long term and gradual. The drop in infant mortality worldwide over the last 70 years is a good news story. Death by violence is far less likely in the world today than it was 50 years ago. Until a century ago, cities only grew because people moved to them from the countryside; the mortality rate was so high. These are all signs of significant, sustained, and meaningful progress, but most of us are unaware of them.

Ask the group: Are there any good news stories that you know about that you would like to share with the group?

### Leaders Note:

The above should not be taken to say we should be naïve and blasé about what is going on in the world. There is real suffering, pain and hardship going on, and we need to take seriously that there are places in the world where life is truly grim. The above should be offered as a balance to the view that the world is spiraling out of control, and that there are good things going on if we look.

### Going Deeper

At the same time as trying to take a balanced view of the good and bad in the world, Christians are called to work with God to bring goodness into the world. As described in the video, we need to remember who God is and walk alongside him like Abraham, rather than forget like Jonah.

But how do we find out what God wants us to do?

- There are two parts to answering this question:
  1. How do we see what God wants us to see?
  2. How do we do what God wants us to do?

Have a look at the following Bible passages and decide if they are helping think about question 1 or question 2 above, and how challenging or reassuring they are about our role in the world.

Romans 2:14

Romans 6:13

Romans 8:18-21

Romans 12:1-2

Romans 12:21

After the group have spent some time with the passages above in small groups, come back together and gather your thoughts on them using the following questions as prompts.

Seeing

- What is it about the world that God wants us to see clearly?

Doing

- What is it that God wants us to DO in the world?

Are there any steps the participants want to take off the back of this?

- Have the group think individually about whether they feel prompted by the things discussed in this session to take any actions or make any changes. It's not a problem if there isn't anything, but it would be good to feedback on anything you feel prompted to do.

## PRAYING

Print a world map for this next part of the activity. Have the group gather around the map, and explain that while we have been thinking about suffering and pain in the world, and how we can do our small bit to stand against it, it is only God who will bring suffering to an end for all time. Ask the group to highlight, either by speaking or by writing on the map, areas of the world that are particularly in the news at the moment because of the pain and suffering of the people there. Spend some time praying over the map for these places.

Once you have done so, pray over the group for God to go with them into the week and for them be prompted by God to see where they can work with Him to bring goodness and joy into the world as they go.