

## CHRIST CHURCH SMALL GROUPS

### Where is God in all the Suffering? – Study Guide, Week 1 of Lent



**Instruction:** During the season of Lent, Small Groups are encouraged to reflect on our Lenten formation theme: Where is God in all the Suffering? To augment the conversation, we are reading the book of the same title by Amy Orr-Ewing. Each week, we will distribute quotes and questions for group discussion.

#### **Week 1 – February 20-26**

Asking “Why?” (Chapter 1)

#### **Important Quotes:**

**Page 9:** “Questions and doubts are not dangers to be avoided or suppressed but can be companions on a journey toward a relationship with God and a genuine expression of faith.”

**Page 21-22:** “Our human outrage at suffering points us beyond ourselves and prompts us to seek meaning and transcendence.”

**Page 22:** “If God is real and God is loving, pain will be the cost of love. Real love is simply not possible without freedom of choice—compelled love is never love. The possibility of love entails the possibility of pain.”

**Page 22:** “Our lives are essentially valuable because we bear the divine image...we are creatures of dignity.”

**Page 23:** “The Bible locates an explanation for pain, evil, and suffering in the context of people having the ability to love and so the ability to make choices.”

**Page 25:** “As human beings we have used our choices to harm as well as to love. That is why there is injustice, darkness, pain, and suffering in this world.”

**Page 26:** “The Christian faith understands darkness and suffering as having come into the world as a direct result of our human exercise of moral choice.”

**Page 26:** “But in the Christian story...we are introduced to a God who is with us in pain, a suffering God, a God who is for us in pain.”

#### **Questions:**

1. All humans have experienced suffering and pain at some point in their life. Has a personal (or global) experience of suffering or pain caused you to wonder why God permits such strife in this world? Is it right to ask tough questions of God?
2. The author says that pain is the cost of love. Do you agree? Have you ever loved without experiencing pain?
3. Is there a connection between human decisions and suffering? What Bible stories can you think of that link human choice with wider experiences of suffering?
4. When our actions hurt/wound someone we love, is it easy to seek forgiveness? When we suffer from someone else’s choices, is it easy to forgive?
5. What’s an example of God being present to those who suffer in the Bible? Have you had an experience of God’s presence being with you as you experienced suffering?

## CHRIST CHURCH SMALL GROUPS

### Where is God in all the Suffering? – Study Guide, Week 2 of Lent



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#### **Week 2 – February 27-March 4**

Sickness and Mental Illness (Chapters 4-5)

#### **Important Quotes:**

**Page 52:** “Sometimes serious illness can bring about real doubts in the hearts of the most fervent believers in God.”

**Page 53:** “If God is loving, why does our health go wrong?”

**Page 53:** “The possibility of loving relationships between human beings, and between human beings with God, requires a genuine decision-making capacity. True love cannot be forced.”

**Page 56:** “Suffering from an illness will have a deeper meaning than the physical experience of pain if our lives are created and sacred rather than random or purely material.”

**Page 58:** “God has not left us to suffer alone.”

**Page 61:** “A miracle is God’s to give, not ours to take.”

**Page 70:** “Depression is an affliction fracturing and dislocating our body, mind, and soul. Like other kinds of illnesses and suffering it is a very real and painful consequence of living in this fallen world. But it cannot, and does not, define a person totally and therefore there is hope.”

**Page 71:** Christians have the “ultimate assurance that things will be restored completely and decisively in the life to come.”

**Page 72:** “Where is God when depression hits? In the Bible he is close to those who are suffering; he offers an ultimate grounding for our worth and value, upholding our status as beloved and cherished people even though we experience darkness and depression as a result of living in this fallen world.”

**Page 78:** “Every life is precious and filled with redemptive possibility whatever our own feelings of hopelessness might say.”

**Page 81:** “Pain is a cost of love that God himself is willing to bear with us and for us.”

**Page 82:** “God offers to meet you in Christ. He offers us the ultimate safety of a loving, eternal relationship.”

#### **Questions:**

1. Have you ever experienced suffering through an illness or the illness of a loved one? What was that experience like? Did you feel loved? Was it a struggle to find connection to God? What gave you hope?
2. Has a sickness or illness brought you a deeper perspective on life and the sacredness of life?
3. Why are some people saved from their sickness while others perish? Is God with them?
4. We see people with mental health challenges in the Bible. How does God through Christ interact with them?
5. How does God demonstrate love in the Bible and how have you come to know God’s love in your life?

## CHRIST CHURCH SMALL GROUPS

### Where is God in all the Suffering? – Study Guide, Week 3 of Lent



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**Week 3 – March 5-11**  
Anger and Grief (Chapters 2-3)

#### Important Quotes:

**Page 31:** “The Bible actually gives voice to people in the midst of suffering and gives them the freedom to express frustration, grief, anger and disappointment including railing against God directly...It’s as if the scriptures are telling us that God is okay with us doubting him, being angry with him, and expressing our doubt to him when we are in pain.”

**Page 33:** “The early Christians had an experience of a God who loved them and had shown them mercy, and part of the deal in following Jesus was that those who had been forgiven by him must forgive others. They would not ignore cruelty including that which affected people they didn’t know; instead, they countered it by caring for the weak and the outcast, the widows and the orphans.”

**Page 34:** “Where is God in all the suffering? He is the one who grounds the sacredness of our loves and lives, so that when life is destroyed or a person we love is blighted, our instinctive outpouring of anger in these things points directly to him.”

**Page 35:** “There are whole books of the Bible devoted to crying out for social justice for the oppressed. There are songs and poems and stories that express both human pain and loss and the anger and outrage of God at human injustice and suffering. Christian faith does not shut down our rage at the violence or injustice of this world—*it explains it*. That kind of anger has a place in the Christian story—our heartfelt cries for justice and judgment echo the heart of the Christian story itself.”

**Page 36:** “Our human outrage when we see suffering or experience pain points to the fact that deep down, we sense that things are not as they should be.”

**Page 40:** “Grief can feel a bit like being a reluctant passenger on an accelerating roller coaster in pitch darkness: being thrown up and down, forwards and backwards, to the left and right, with no sense of what is coming next.”

**Page 41:** “Human suffering...is a consequence of love.”

**Page 43:** “Suffering loss is the cost of having deeply loved.”

**Page 45:** Jesus offers “comfort...and relational connection.”

**Page 45:** “God makes a promise about the end of time...The promise in Revelation is that just as a loving parent looks into the face of their child and dabs their crying eyes, so God will wipe away our tears.”

**Page 49:** “Where is God in suffering? He is right here...existing and offering us relationship even as we experience the reality of our deepest suffering.”

**Page 49:** “Our grief makes sense, and our sense of loss is validated and not glossed over. And in the midst of it all, we are offered connection, the presence of a loving God and hope for the future.”

**Questions:**

1. Have you ever experienced suffering through an illness or the illness of a loved one? What was that experience like? Did you feel loved? Was it a struggle to find connection to God? What gave you hope?
2. Has a sickness or illness brought you a deeper perspective on life and the sacredness of life?
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### Where is God in all the Suffering? – Study Guide, Week 4 of Lent



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#### **Week 4 – March 12-18**

Violence, Natural Disasters, and Systemic Suffering (Chapters 6-8)

#### **Important Quotes:**

**Page 85:** “If a loving God exists, why wouldn’t he intervene and stop an utterly evil thing being done to someone by someone?”

**Page 88:** “Human volition, which makes love possible in this world, also makes evil a possibility. If we exercise our decision-making capacity for ill rather than for love or prioritize love of ourselves or some other thing in the place of God, we end up with the world we see around us.”

**Page 94:** “In Christ, God himself has suffered violence and so if I suffer at the aggressive hands of others, I can turn for help and comfort to a God who is not remote or distant but one who is able to bear my sorrows with me.”

**Page 98:** “Earth is uniquely, it seems, a vessel for life, and this is in large part due to plate-tectonic movement. The same thing that causes volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis which kill people actually makes life possible at all...good things can have catastrophic effects...Plate-tectonic movement is also essential for sustaining life on earth and regulating the temperature of the planet.”

**Page 99:** “In other words, in order for life to continue to be possible on earth, we need the plate-tectonic movement that causes natural events like volcanoes, tsunamis, and earthquakes.”

**Page 102:** “Natural events are needed for the earth to be life permitting and life sustaining.”

**Page 104:** “We have good reason to feel outrage and sorrow but also a real mandate to respond with compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice.”

**Page 109:** “Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty.”

**Page 111:** “Jesus...is focused upon bringing justice, mercy, and goodness to the oppressed. And he seems to have expected his followers to do the same.”

**Page 116:** “Where is God in the systemic suffering of people? He is present in his followers, who are working to overturn such systems in the very midst of the darkness of the world and to bring the love, light, and truth of God’s presence to all who will receive it. He is present in the intuition of the sufferer and observer that this is not how things are meant to be. He was willing to be subjected to systemic injustice himself: to stand trial and be unjustly sentenced to death.”

#### **Questions:**

1. When something bad happens, why do you think God often refrains from intervening?
2. How do we offer “with-ness” (being present with someone) who has experienced the pain of violence?

3. Must natural disasters happen to sustain life? Couldn't God have created a world without natural disasters?
4. Does humanity also have a role in earth's natural disasters? Do our decisions around consumption and use of the natural world have a trickle-down effect on the environment and the generations after us? How can Christians be better stewards of the environment?
5. Are we implicated in upholding patterns of systemic injustice? Is indifference (or hindrance) to change part of what makes injustice possible?
6. What kinds of systemic injustices are present in our surrounding community? How can Christians be present to those who suffer most from systemic injustice?

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### Where is God in all the Suffering? – Study Guide, Week 5 of Lent



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#### **Week 5 – March 19-25**

The Suffering Servant (Chapter 9 and Conclusion)

#### **Important Quotes:**

**Page 117-18:** “The Old Testament tells of a ‘servant of the Lord’ who would willingly suffer pain and punishment for the transgressions of others...Some understood this servant to be a Messiah—a longed for anointed one—who was to come in history and suffer for the people. The suffering servant sounds so much like Jesus.”

**Page 119:** “A suffering God is central to Christian faith, and the cross of Jesus is at the heart of every expression and community of Jesus’ followers.”

**Page 121:** “The servant being described would bear and carry the sins of the world and the punishment for the sins of the world. This death of the servant was for others.”

**Page 122:** “The cross of Christ redefines everything because God in Christ has suffered pain voluntarily and purposefully for humanity. God in Christ did not brush over the issues and difficulties of human existence—he came into a world of darkness and suffering and dealt with the reality of evil, suffering, and selfishness by willingly experiencing crucifixion.”

**Page 122:** “Where is God in all our suffering and pain? God does not stay far off and observe our sickness and suffering from a distance. He himself has come. He has come to be with us and in his perfection to defeat evil.”

**Page 124:** “Suffering may be welcomed...embraced...accepted...and endured by a Christian.”

**Page 129:** “God can be found, known, and experienced in the midst of pain through his own suffering.”

**Page 130:** “Through his suffering, he can offer us redemption, forgiveness, safety, and community. His comfort, strength, and truth in our struggles and in our pain point us toward a hope-filled future; a home with him and beyond the grave where we can be with him, comforted and loved enjoying eternity beyond the reach of pain.”

#### **Questions:**

1. The first Christians were quite uncomfortable explaining Jesus’ death and resurrection. Gods aren’t supposed to die or be subjected to human pain and suffering inflicted by humans. How comfortable are you with Jesus’ suffering and death? Does Jesus’ death bring comfort or pain? Sorrow or triumph? Does it somehow bring and hold all these things together?
2. Did Jesus have to suffer or die? What does his suffering and death mean to you or for you?
3. Look at the quote from page 124. How are we to welcome suffering? Are we really to embrace it?

4. Orr-Ewing describes the Christian life as cross-shaped (page 123). One way to interpret this is to think of our relationship with God (upward, vertical) and each other (horizontal, across). Suffering as a Christian is a cross-shaped experience: God suffers with us, and we are to embrace and comfort each other in our suffering. How have you been present for people who have suffered? What types of outreach have been helpful for you when you have suffered?
5. What is one take-away you will have from this book or discussion? How will you choose to be present to the suffering in the world?