

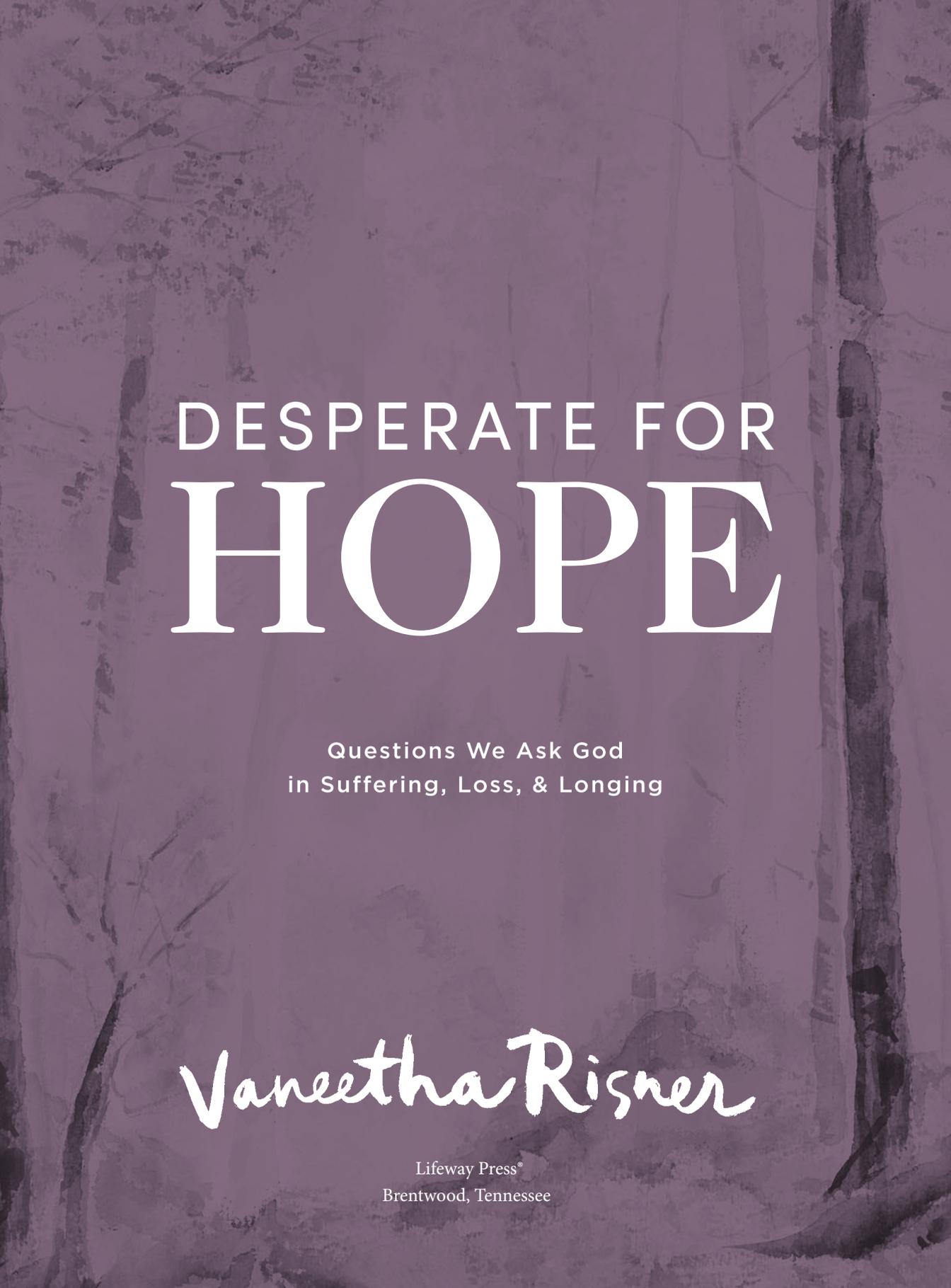
7-SESSION BIBLE STUDY

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DESPERATE FOR HOPE

Questions We Ask God
in Suffering, Loss, & Longing

Vaneetha Risner



DESPERATE FOR HOPE

Questions We Ask God
in Suffering, Loss, & Longing

Vaneetha Risner

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

About the Author.....	4
Before You Begin	5
How to Use	8
SESSION 1: Introduction	10
SESSION 2: If God Loves Me, How Could He Let This Happen?.....	12
SESSION 3: How Can I Know God’s Presence When He Feels So Distant? ...	40
SESSION 4: What if the Worst Happens?	68
SESSION 5: Why Is God Letting Me Suffer?.....	98
SESSION 6: How Can God Use My Suffering When I Feel Useless?.....	128
SESSION 7: What if This Never Gets Better?	154
Before You Go.....	184
Difficult Moments	186
Happy Moments	187
My Time Line.....	188
Endnotes	190



Vaneetha Risner writes and speaks about finding hope in suffering. *Desperate for Hope: Questions We Ask God in Suffering, Loss, and Longing* as well as her memoir, *Walking Through Fire*, encourage readers to turn to Christ in their pain. Vaneetha and her husband, Joel, live in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she blogs at vaneetha.com. She is a regular contributor to *Desiring God* and has been featured on *Family Life Today*, *Joni & Friends*, and *Christianity Today*.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN . . .

Where are you, God? Don't you care that I'm struggling? Why are you letting this happen to me? And why aren't you doing something, *anything*, to help me?

I've whispered, cried, and even screamed those questions to God. I felt so alone in my suffering, distant from God, wondering if my situation would ever change. I asked those questions, not only before I met the Lord but also after I'd walked with Jesus for years. But when my life fell apart, the foundations of my faith felt unstable. The Sunday School answers I could recite automatically made no sense now. I needed something more.

I wanted evidence that God loved me and was with me, that my suffering wasn't meaningless, that this relentless pain wouldn't last forever. Maybe you feel that way too. Maybe you want assurances and real help that is sturdier than what you've relied on in the past.

That's why I wrote this Bible study about the questions we ask God in our suffering. I had questions growing up with a disability, dealing with taunting and hospitalizations. I had questions when my son died after a doctor's mistake, wondering why God let that happen. I had questions when I learned my pain and escalating weakness would never stop, doubting that I could handle it. I had questions when my husband left our family, leaving me to raise struggling adolescent daughters by myself. These events all ignited questions about God—His love, His purposes, and how I would make it through.

Yet in asking these questions, God pushed me into a richer life with Him than I could possibly imagine. Rather than shaking my faith, asking questions confirmed and deepened my trust in God as I learned to live with uncertainty. The more uncertain my circumstances were, the more certain I became that God would never leave me. I would never have to face anything without Him.

Don't be afraid to ask God questions. He invites them.

So what do you want to ask God? Take a minute and write the questions that are currently on your heart. Don't filter what you say. Don't write what you think sounds spiritual. Be honest with yourself and with God. He already knows your heart.

In a similar vein, turn to page 186 and jot down the challenges you are facing right now—the pain, grief, fears, loss, and longings. They don't need to be monumental losses in the eyes of the world, but they can be. Many of our struggles are what my friend calls, "griefs that don't wear black." The losses that aren't on the prayer chain and no one makes a meal for as you deal with them. Childhood wounds. Feeling rejected in friendships. Loneliness. Concern for your children. A difficult marriage. Infertility. Betrayal. A dead-end job. Put everything you can think of on the list. If it matters to you, it matters. And most importantly, it matters to God.

Throughout this study I will talk about three anchors I cling to that have helped me make sense of my suffering. They are the 3 Ps I cling to in pain which remind me there are realities more important than my circumstances. The 3 Ps anchors are 1) Experiencing God's PRESENCE; 2) Knowing my pain has a PURPOSE; 3) Believing the PROMISE of heaven.

These anchors will provide a loose framework focus for the study:

SESSIONS 2–4: PRESENCE

SESSIONS 5–6: PURPOSE

SESSION 7: PROMISE

Through the pages of this study, I'm inviting you into my life. My real life, not the one that looks spiritual and pretty. I've included excerpts from my personal journal—both the raw questions and the ways God answered me. I've also included parts of my Christmas letters that I send to friends each year, in which I share the crazy and embarrassing things our family has said and done.

You may be wondering if you should do this study if you're not currently in a season of suffering. If that's your situation, I think *Desperate for Hope* will be helpful to you for several reasons. First, even if you're not going through trauma, I'm guessing you have things in your life you wish were different. The truths we'll learn in this study apply to everyday struggles as well as life-altering ones. Second, you probably have friends who are facing difficult things. You'll find the kind of encouragement they need in these pages. Third, you may have past losses that you need to process through a biblical lens. You'll find the means and space to do so here. Last, none of us know what tomorrow brings, and suffering may be around the corner for you. I don't say this to scare you but to let you know this study can help prepare you for what might be coming. I am praying that when trials come, you'll turn to God and not away and find that His loving presence will sustain you.

If you are suffering right now, I'm so sorry for your pain. I realize that even starting this study may feel daunting, so just do what you can. You won't magically move through your grief, and all your questions won't be answered in a neat package by the end. But my prayer is that you will encounter God in these pages and that encounter will revive your soul and permanently reshape your heart.

You are beloved.

Vaneetha

Welcome!

This study will attune your heart to the right view of God in suffering and help equip you to walk through your trials with joy and purpose. It will also better prepare you to assist, comfort, and encourage those around you who are walking through difficult times. Because we believe discipleship happens best in community, we encourage you to do this study together in a group setting. Or, if you're doing this alone, consider enlisting a friend or two to go through it at the same time. This will give you study friends to pray with and connect with over coffee or through text or email so you can chat about what you're learning.

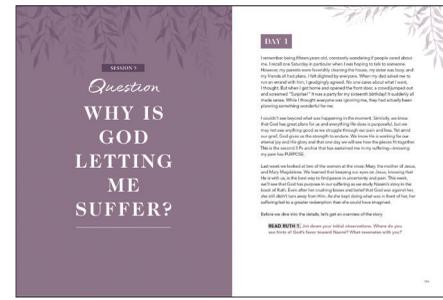
HOW TO WATCH YOUR VIDEOS

With the purchase of this book, you have access to teaching videos that provide content to help you better understand and apply what you just studied in the previous session. You'll find detailed information for how to access the teaching videos on the card inserted in the back of your Bible study book.

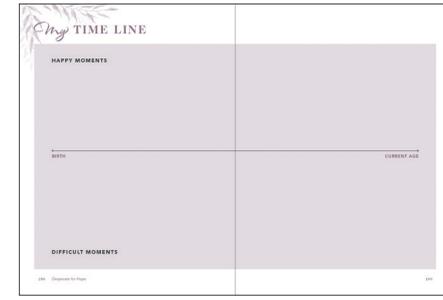
Here are some things you're going to find in the study:



VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: As you meet with your group each week, these pages provide a place to take notes from the video teaching and questions to discuss the video teaching. If you're doing the study individually, use the questions for personal reflection.



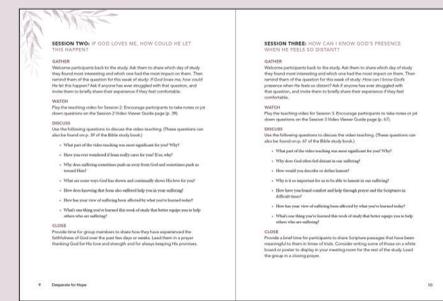
PERSONAL STUDY: Each week you'll have five days of personal study.



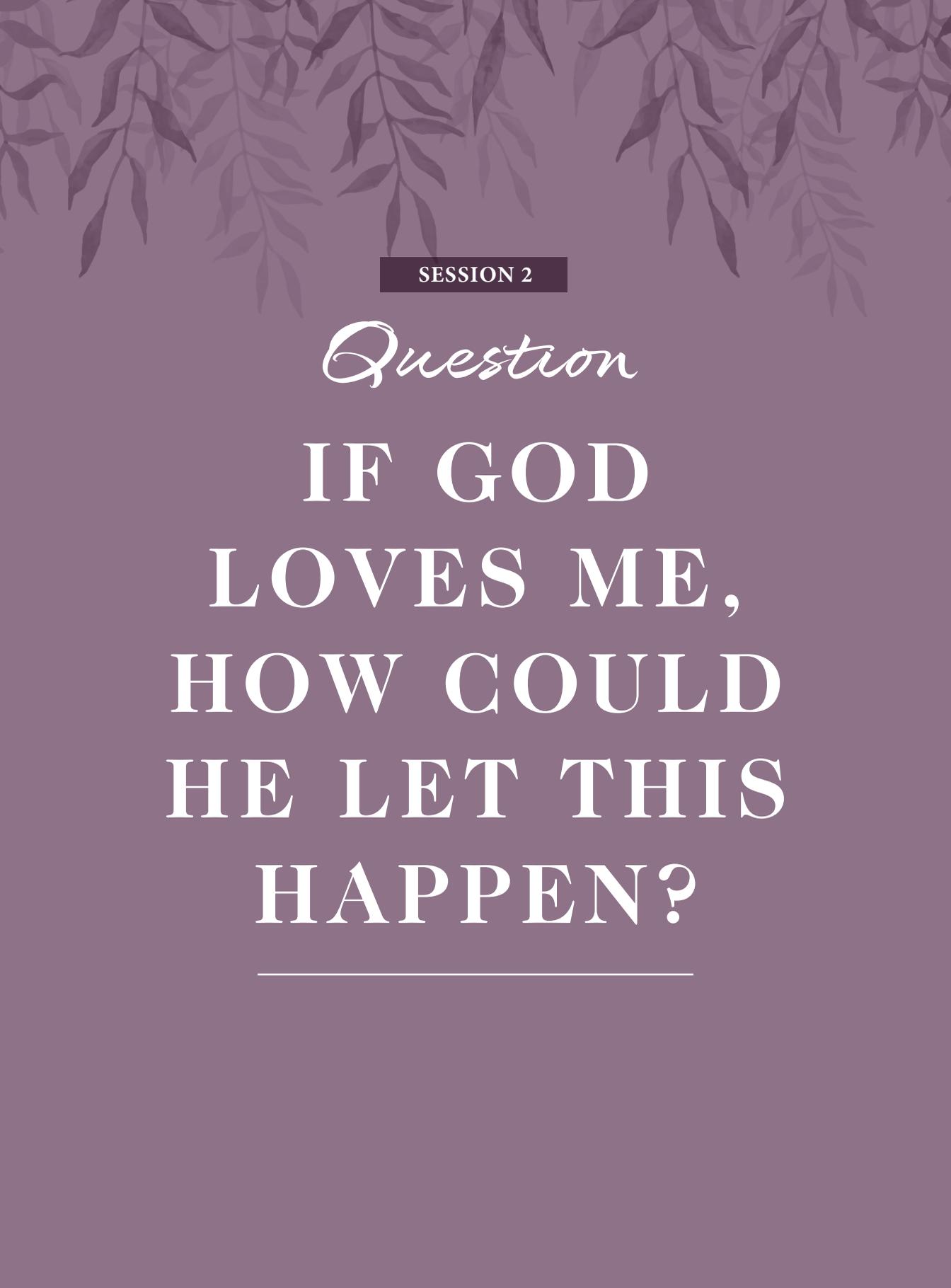
TIME LINE EXERCISE: Toward the back of the study, you'll find pages dedicated to a time line exercise. Instructions for how to use these pages will be provided in the content of the study.



DESPERATE FOR HOPE SCRIPTURE DOCUMENT: Because this study features many Scripture references, we've provided a downloadable document that contains the full text of every Scripture referenced in the study. You can find that document at lifeway.com/desperateforhope.



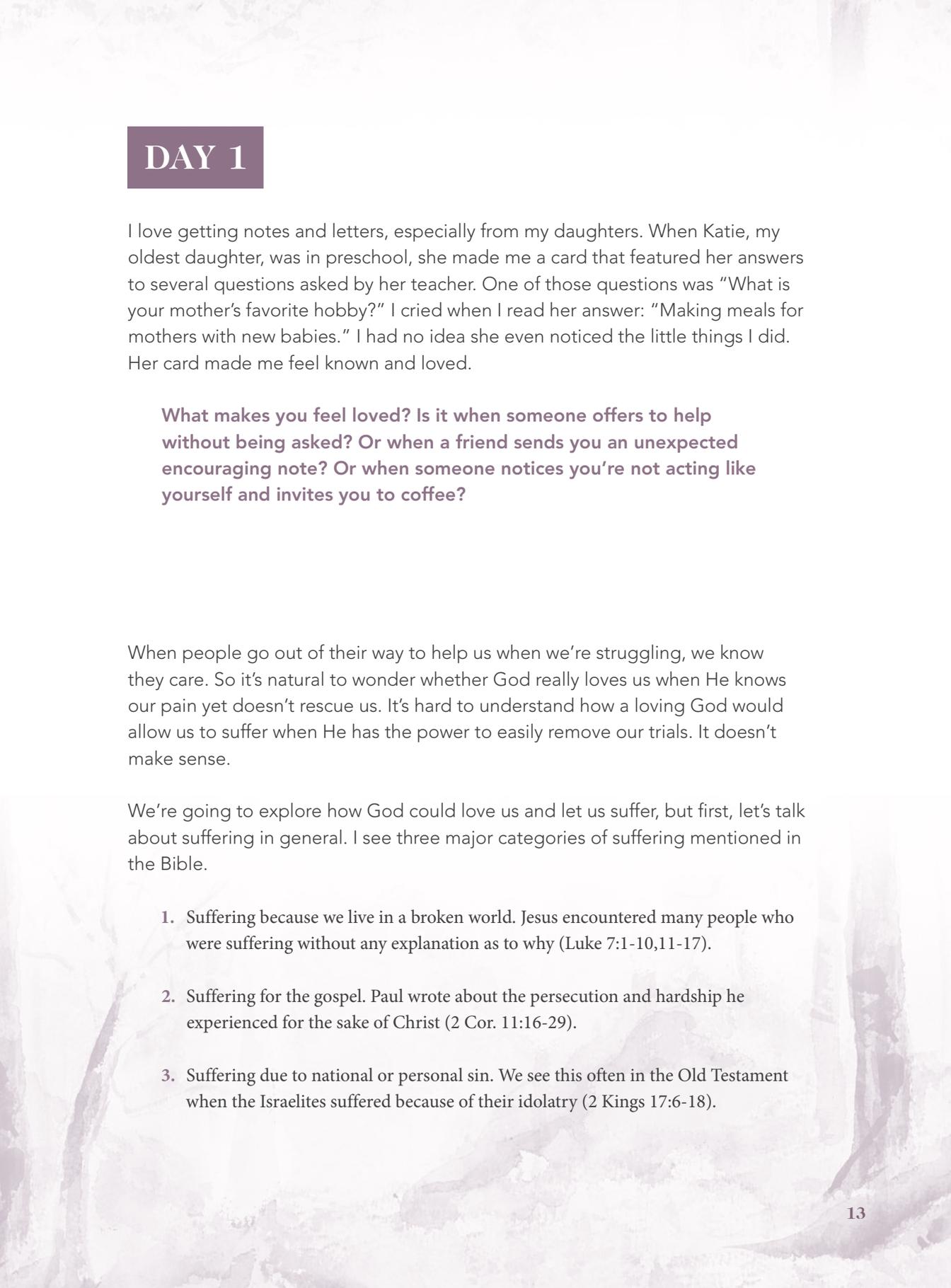
LEADER GUIDE: This downloadable document will help the leader prepare to lead the study and provide instruction for the content and flow of each group session. You'll find this document at lifeway.com/desperateforhope.



SESSION 2

Question

IF GOD
LOVES ME,
HOW COULD
HE LET THIS
HAPPEN?



DAY 1

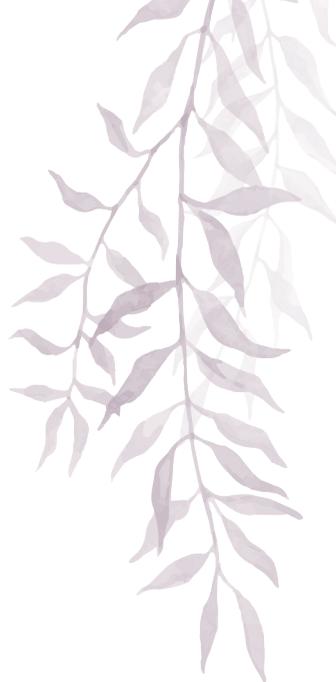
I love getting notes and letters, especially from my daughters. When Katie, my oldest daughter, was in preschool, she made me a card that featured her answers to several questions asked by her teacher. One of those questions was “What is your mother’s favorite hobby?” I cried when I read her answer: “Making meals for mothers with new babies.” I had no idea she even noticed the little things I did. Her card made me feel known and loved.

What makes you feel loved? Is it when someone offers to help without being asked? Or when a friend sends you an unexpected encouraging note? Or when someone notices you’re not acting like yourself and invites you to coffee?

When people go out of their way to help us when we’re struggling, we know they care. So it’s natural to wonder whether God really loves us when He knows our pain yet doesn’t rescue us. It’s hard to understand how a loving God would allow us to suffer when He has the power to easily remove our trials. It doesn’t make sense.

We’re going to explore how God could love us and let us suffer, but first, let’s talk about suffering in general. I see three major categories of suffering mentioned in the Bible.

1. Suffering because we live in a broken world. Jesus encountered many people who were suffering without any explanation as to why (Luke 7:1-10,11-17).
2. Suffering for the gospel. Paul wrote about the persecution and hardship he experienced for the sake of Christ (2 Cor. 11:16-29).
3. Suffering due to national or personal sin. We see this often in the Old Testament when the Israelites suffered because of their idolatry (2 Kings 17:6-18).



As I read Scripture, all suffering is a consequence of the fall in Genesis 3, which I think is confirmed by Romans 8:20-22. While we often don't understand why we're suffering, if we know Christ, we know that He is using our afflictions for our good and for His glory. For Christians, suffering is always interconnected with God's love.

In the first three weeks we will focus the study around the 3 Ps anchor of GOD'S PRESENCE. We'll start with the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11, which paradoxically begins with Jesus's absence. This account highlights the questions so many of us have asked, or wanted to ask, and most importantly, how Jesus responds. It is a story about feeling hopeless and abandoned, wondering why Jesus never showed up.

Let's start with an overview of the story.

READ JOHN 11:1-44. Jot down your initial observations. What questions do you have about the text? What resonates with you? What do you notice about Christ's love?

To provide a little background, the only family unit Scripture mentions whom Jesus had a close relationship with is Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Verse 2 refers to a later event detailed in John 12:1-4 describing a dinner they hosted for Jesus after Lazarus was raised from the dead.

In Luke 10:38-42, we see that Martha welcomed Jesus and the disciples into her home, busily serving them, though distracted and frustrated that she was doing all the work by herself. While Martha was serving, Mary sat listening at Jesus's feet.

Now let's take a closer look at this passage.

READ JOHN 11:1-6. What do we learn about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus from this text?

What verb is repeated in verses 3 and 5 of John 11 that indicates how Jesus felt about the family?

Clearly Jesus loved this family, but He didn't go to them when He first learned that Lazarus was ill. Mary and Martha probably expected Jesus to show up as soon as He heard Lazarus was sick or even to heal him from afar. They probably would have known about, if not witnessed, Jesus healing those in need that He encountered. Acquaintances and strangers. Jews and Gentiles. People who were ill, demon-possessed, and disabled. But He didn't heal His friend Lazarus.

What do you think Jesus meant when He said Lazarus's illness was for the glory of God (v. 4)?

The phrase *the glory of God* is hard to understand. While some scholars admit the phrase is as hard to describe as the word *beautiful*, to me, the glory of God is seeing and marveling at His invisible attributes and His character. When we see God's glory, we know that God is present.

When Moses asked God to show him His glory in Exodus 33:18-23, God said He would cause all His goodness to pass before Moses, and He would proclaim His own name. God would declare His ways, His essence, and character while hiding Moses in the cleft of a rock because no man could see God's face and live.¹ So part of seeing God's glory is experiencing those invisible attributes. When we see



God's glory, we move from mere head knowledge to an intimate experience of God's presence, love, and goodness that grounds our faith.

If you have any other questions about God's glory, write them here. It's an important concept we'll see throughout this week of study.

In the Greek, verse 6 begins with the word *οὕτως*, which can mean "consequently" or "so."² This means it is connected to the previous sentence. So verses 5 and 6 are linked.

To better understand the link between verses 5 and 6, combine them into one sentence using your own words.

Does Jesus's action, or rather, inaction, surprise you? Explain.

If Jesus responded this way to your suffering, how would you feel? Circle all that apply.

Angry or confused	Anxious for an explanation	Other: _____
Unloved, wondering if you were ever close to Jesus	Tempted to give up on the relationship	_____

While we do not know the specifics of their family situation, we know that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus all lived together. So their loss could have been layered—there would have been a lot to grieve. Missing their brother's daily presence. Potentially losing their income or home. Being afraid of the future. Feeling bewildered and abandoned by a friend.

Mary and Martha had to watch their brother die. Processing our own sorrow is one thing, but seeing the pain of someone else, especially someone we care for, can feel even harder to bear. We can't change their circumstances, change how they're interpreting things, or trust God for them. We can only watch and pray, often feeling helpless.

Perhaps Mary and Martha felt helpless as they watched Lazarus get sick and subsequently die. By not showing up for Lazarus, Jesus had not shown up for Lazarus's sisters. What was Lazarus saying and thinking in his last moments? Did he feel abandoned by Jesus? Were Mary and Martha trying to comfort him, while feeling the very same thing? Did they wonder if their relationship with Jesus was as solid as they once thought?

JOURNAL YOUR RESPONSE TO ONE OR ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS.

Have you ever felt let down by Jesus or watched someone you love feel let down by Jesus? Explain.

Have you prayed earnestly for something, trusting that God would answer you, but the answer you wanted never came? Explain.

Are you waiting now for something from God? Explain.

READ JOHN 11:7-16.

In John 10, Jesus told the Pharisees that He was the Christ. They considered that blasphemy and wanted to stone Him, but He escaped with the disciples to Bethabara. This place is also known as Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus's ministry began (John 1:28). (For further details, read John 10:22-42.) Bethabara was about twenty miles from Bethany—about a day's journey by foot. Given the time line, it is likely that when Jesus received the news about Lazarus from the messenger, Lazarus was already dead.

Why was Jesus glad that He hadn't been there when Lazarus died (v. 15)?

This first section of John 11 leaves us with heavy questions. We know what it's like to wait for Jesus to fix our situation, to keep waiting and watching, but He doesn't fix it. The answer never comes; God doesn't rescue us. Maybe, like Mary and Martha, our loved one dies. Or we have a wayward child. Or we receive a terminal diagnosis. Whatever it is, our nightmares come true. Perhaps people tell us that it's all for the best, that God will use it for His glory, or that other people may come to Christ through it. But sitting in the midst of our loss, those words can feel cruel and unfair.

Take three minutes and just sit with your feelings about all that has happened thus far in John 11. Feel free to record your thoughts below.

DAY 2

READ JOHN 11:17-27. When Jesus arrived in Bethany, what was happening at the home of Mary and Martha (v. 19)?

In those days, people were buried as soon as they died. Afterward, Jews would (and still do) *sit shiva* for seven days.³ This meant the family mourned in their home, sitting on the floor or a low bench, receiving visitors who mostly sat in silence interspersed with their tears and moans. Grieving was open and accepted.

How do you handle grief? Circle all the phrases that apply.

Don't talk about it unless asked

Show emotions like tears or anger

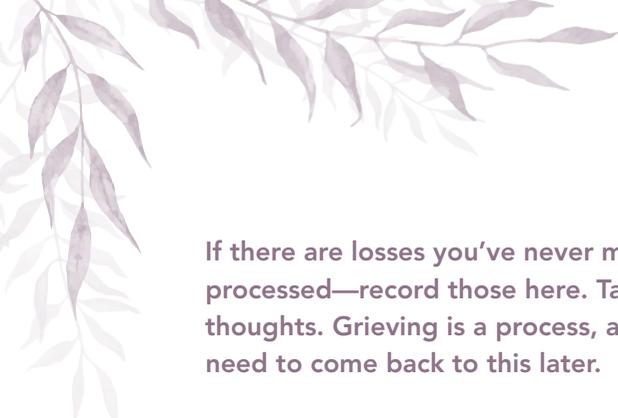
Process grief with activity or creativity

Talk about it frequently

Withdraw or pretend it never happened

Other: _____

Acknowledging grief is an important part of healing from a loss. While not everyone processes grief the same way—some internally, others externally—ignoring loss and pretending that it never happened isn't healthy. Yet stoicism is often admired in the Christian community, which implies that grief is a weakness. But in reality, it takes courage and hard work to grieve. Grief is not a frailty of character or a failure to trust God but rather a critical and God-given part of healing. It is the natural and proper response to the loss of something or someone that was loved or valued. It is necessary and can't be ignored.



If there are losses you've never mourned—times of grief you've never processed—record those here. Take a few minutes to journal your thoughts. Grieving is a process, and this is just the first step, so you may need to come back to this later.

When she learned that Jesus was coming, what did Martha immediately do (v. 20)?

Jesus's not coming sooner must have wounded and disappointed Martha, yet she still went to Him as He approached.

I wish my initial response to people when they hurt or disappoint me is to confront them directly. But usually, I'll do *everything but* go to them. I often try to ignore the problem, which can lead to avoidance, while I add to my running mental list (which I regularly review) of how they've wronged me. The relationship then grows distant until one of us is brave enough to start the conversation. Only when I have the courage to tell someone how I feel and hear that person's perspective as well, does our relationship become stronger.

Circle the following areas of life where you have felt hurt or disappointed by God. Briefly describe your experience beside the categories you circled.

FAMILY (MARRIAGE, CHILDREN, PARENTS, SIBLINGS)	
HEALTH	
CHURCH	
RELATIONSHIPS	
CAREER OR FINANCES	
UNFULFILLED LONGINGS/ THINGS THAT WERE NOT WHAT YOU EXPECTED THEM TO BE	
OTHER	

Think about the ways you've responded to people who have hurt you. Compare that to the way you respond to God in your suffering. How has your response to God affected your relationship with Him?

Martha understood doctrine. She immediately affirmed her confidence in Jesus's relationship to the Father, as well as her belief in the Old Testament doctrine of resurrection (vv. 22,24). But Jesus did not want her just to believe in resurrection on the final day; He was also calling her to believe in Him and His power to raise Lazarus that day. He was interested in Martha's proper theology and in her trust and faith.

Verses 25 and 26 are pivotal statements about the gospel. We can be assured of eternal life when we believe in Jesus. He is the resurrection and the life, and if we believe in Him, even when we die, we will live forever. These words applied not only to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in that day, but to all of us today.

At the end of verse 26, Jesus asked Martha: "Do you believe this?" How would you answer that question?

When life has dealt you a blow, are you like Martha, quick to run to Jesus and express your heart, and then listen for His response? Why or why not?

READ JOHN 11:28-37. What was Jesus's response to Mary (vv. 32-35)?

Verses 33 and 38 both contain the Greek word *ἐμβριμάομαι* (*embrimaomai*), which is usually translated "deeply moved."⁴ However, this Greek word literally means "to snort with anger" or to be moved with indignation. It is similar to outrage.

Why might Jesus have been outraged at this moment?

Pastor Tim Keller says that Jesus is outraged by death.⁵ It is a result of sin, and Jesus hates its effects in the world He created. Jesus wept with Mary (the Greek word is literally "shed tears") as He felt her pain over what had happened and was angry at how death had marred God's beauty.⁶ Jesus was not angry because His friend had died (He would raise him soon) but perhaps at death itself and all it brings. Death is not domesticated. It's often ugly. Our hope is knowing that all will one day be made new, but until it is, life can be indescribably hard. And cause for outrage.

Are you surprised at Jesus's anger at the tomb? Explain. How can Jesus's response be comforting?

Jesus entered into his friends' grief. He knew He would raise Lazarus, and yet He wept with Mary. The sisters had to watch their brother suffer and die, wondering if Jesus would come, while Lazarus experienced the pain of dying. This family that Jesus loved and was intimately connected with was not spared at all.

Anyone who has lost a loved one knows how excruciating that pain is. We shouldn't imagine that it was easier for Mary and Martha. True, Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead, but that didn't take away the pain of his death. And though we know our loved ones in Christ will be resurrected, the grief of their passing is real. Until Christ returns, we will all experience the full effects of death.

Does the bystanders' question in John 11:37 resonate with you? Explain.

In times of suffering or loss, have you been able to experience God's love and presence? What has that looked like for you? Explain.

What does Jesus's different response to each sister reveal about Him? Do you identify more with Martha who wanted to understand what was happening or with Mary who wanted comfort?

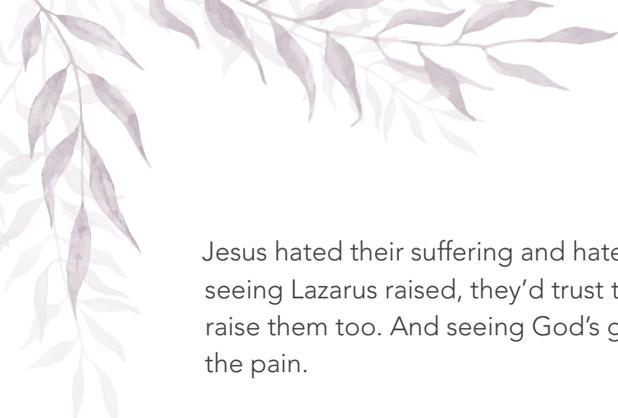
READ JOHN 11:38-44. What strikes you as you read this passage?

Write out verse 40. How is it related to verse 42 and verses 4, 14, and 25-26 from earlier? What is the connection between believing and the glory of God?

John 11 clearly shows that Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. So why didn't Jesus hurry to rescue them from suffering? Why did He wait?

One reason Jesus waited was to reveal the glory of God so that others would believe. While Jesus performed many miracles before this, He hadn't wanted His identity widely known. But now He had begun to openly show who He really was. Furthermore, according to rabbinic tradition, the soul left the body after three days; waiting four days would have emphasized that Lazarus had truly died and was brought back to life.⁷ So clearly, raising the dead would be an indisputable miracle to confirm His identity.

While I understand that Lazarus being raised displayed the glory of God, it once seemed heartless to me that a family suffered just for other people to see God. It didn't make sense until I delved into the text. While Jesus's actions brought others to faith (John 11:45), this miracle also solidified this family's faith in Him and deepened their understanding of who He was.



Jesus hated their suffering and hated the pain of death. Yet He knew that after seeing Lazarus raised, they'd trust that Jesus had power over death and would raise them too. And seeing God's glory and believing in Him would be worth all the pain.

Jesus knew that the most loving thing He could do for His friends was to strengthen their faith in Him. So it follows that one of the most loving things God can do for us is to show us more of Himself, even when that involves suffering. My friend Joni Eareckson Tada would agree. Joni is a Christian writer and speaker who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident, has had cancer twice, and lives with relentless, excruciating pain and sleepless nights. She encourages me to press into God in my own pain with the gentle reminder, "The more intense the pain, the closer the embrace."⁸ Like Joni, while I wouldn't choose suffering, I've experienced God's breathtaking love and presence in it. Through my suffering, I truly have seen the glory of God.

What have you learned about Jesus through this passage?

DAY 3

We just looked closely at John 11, understanding the passage in its context. Now let's listen to it being read and let the Holy Spirit speak to you through His Word another way.

Let's pray:

Dear Lord, speak to me through Your Word and show me something of Yourself that I need to see. Help me to clear away all distractions and let Your Word, which is living and active, penetrate my heart that I would encounter You.

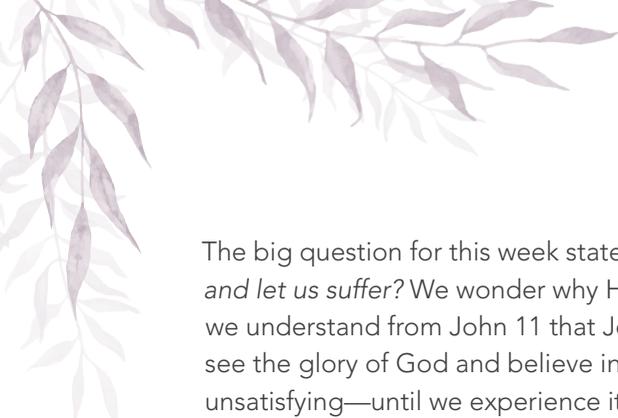
Use an audio Bible app or website to listen to John 11:1-44 being read aloud. (The YouVersion Bible app, Dwell Bible app, the her.bible website, and biblegateway.com are a few options.)

As you listen, put yourself in the story. What phrases do you notice? What do you see? Write anything that speaks to you from hearing the passage.

How has this Scripture affected the way you view your losses and longings?

How do you see Jesus differently from studying this story?





The big question for this week stated a little differently is, *How can God love us and let us suffer?* We wonder why He hasn't rescued us. As we noted yesterday, we understand from John 11 that Jesus didn't rescue His friends so they would see the glory of God and believe in Him. But for most of us, that answer feels unsatisfying—until we experience it.

When I was twenty-weeks pregnant with my second child, during a routine ultrasound they discovered that my unborn son had a rare heart condition that would require surgery at birth. On April 8, 1997, the day we learned of Paul's problem, I wrote in my journal:

April 8, 1997

It will turn out for the best—we just don't know what that is—but You do.

Paul's first surgery went better than anticipated, and I was sure that God had great plans for Paul's life.

When Paul was seven-weeks-old, we took him in for a routine checkup and saw a substitute cardiologist who took Paul off most of his medicine, declaring that Paul was healthy and fine without it. We were thrilled. Yet two days later, Paul screamed in the middle of the night and went limp in my husband's arms. We called 911, but it was too late. Paul was dead.

We were shocked. I wanted to process this pain with God, and I desperately wanted to hold onto Him in this loss.

The day Paul died, my journal entry read:

Please use this for good in my life and everyone's life that knew Paul or even knew about Paul. Give me your comfort because I feel empty inside . . . I just want to scream.

My husband and I spoke at Paul's funeral, declaring that God never makes a mistake. At the time I felt carried by God, but days later I wished I could pull those words back. I wondered why God hadn't spared Paul's life. Why had God let me hope with a successful surgery and then let Paul die in the end? What was

the point of faith if God wasn't going to rescue me? My Bible stayed unopened as I pulled away from God, wondering if I could trust Him anymore.

Four months later, I wrote in my journal:

I'm glad when people talk about Paul, but it's hard to hear that his death brought them closer to God. Did he have to die for everyone else's good? I feel empty and alone. I ache.

It bothered me that Paul's life and death brought people closer to God; Paul felt more like a principle, not a person. One day I was aimlessly driving, empty and depressed, and finally asked God to help me. I put on a worship song, and in an instant, the presence of God filled my car. When I turned off the music, the sense of God's presence intensified as I felt surrounded by the glory of God. He was everywhere, and I was overwhelmed by His presence. That moment changed everything—the truths about God's love and comfort that were once academic became breathtakingly real.

Through Paul's life and death, I understood that I was loved and held, but not rescued. I still don't understand why God chose to take Paul when He did, but I do know that glimpsing God's glory anchored my faith.

I told my dear friend, Christa Wells, about my experience with God's comfort amidst my questions and doubts with Paul's death. She encapsulated it in the song *Held*, which was later recorded by Natalie Grant.

The chorus says:

*This is what it means to be held
How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
And you survive
This is what it is to be loved
And to know that the promise was
When everything fell, we'd be held ?*

Write a letter to Jesus, telling Him all that is on your heart. Write your questions. Share your disappointments. Be honest. Talk about the times you've felt abandoned, wondering why He didn't rescue you. Both Martha and Mary began their encounters with Jesus by telling Him, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died" (vv. 21,32). Have you had similar thoughts about your grief and pain? Do you feel Jesus should have responded differently to you? Journal your thoughts.

Turn to your list of current struggles and losses on page 186. Add to that list the hardest events and lowest points of your life with approximate dates. On page 187, begin a list of the happiest moments and high points of your life with approximate dates as well. We'll be using these lists for an important exercise at the end.

DAY 4

My daughters didn't appreciate my input when they were teenagers, particularly when I was reminding them of things I thought they should do. Here's an excerpt from our 2012 Christmas letter:

The night before an away basketball game, I listed what Kristi needed to pack. Rolling her eyes, she said, "I got it! Stop bugging me and treating me like a child. I have what I need." Those of you veteran parents are wondering, "So when did she discover something was missing?" The answer is precisely fifteen minutes before the activity bus was leaving when I was out having coffee with a friend.

While Kristi didn't appreciate that I knew her as well as I did, we all long to be seen, known, and loved.

I moved multiple times before I turned thirty. While I liked the adventure, the first few months in a new place were lonely as I longed to be known. I still remember the first person who invited me to dinner in every city and got to know some of my story. That personal connection changed everything for me.

What makes you feel known? Why is this important?

God knows us better than anyone ever has or ever will. There is nothing about us that God doesn't know. Our fears. Our frustrations. Our fantasies. Our fleeting thoughts and our long-forgotten dreams.

Psalm 139 focuses on how well God knows us. When I visited a close friend who was in the hospital after a mental breakdown, I read Psalm 139 to her, inserting her name as I spoke. She said those words changed her as she understood for the first time that she was fully known, loved, and accepted by God.

READ PSALM 139. What does God know about you (vv. 1-4)?

REREAD VERSES 13-16. How does God know us so well? From these verses, what else can you add to the list of what God knows about you?

READ VERSE 17 IN THE TRANSLATIONS BELOW.

*"How precious also are Your thoughts **for** me, God! How vast is the sum of them!" (NASB, emphasis mine).*

*"How precious are your thoughts **about** me, O God. They cannot be numbered!" (NLT, emphasis mine).*

Meditate on this verse for a few minutes and journal your thoughts.

Does this interpretation/translation touch you as deeply as it did me? God thinks about me all the time, and I can't even count His thoughts toward me. They are as innumerable as the grains of sand.

As wonderful as that verse is, you may wonder, as I often have, how God could think about me and everyone else in the world at the same time. But when I read about a video camera that can film at ten trillion frames per second, it made more sense to me.¹⁰ If human beings can make a camera that can process that much information in a second, how much more effortlessly can God know everything we're doing and thinking every second.

God knows us and loves us. We must believe these truths to find real hope in our suffering. Romans 8:31-39 is a stunning passage reassuring us of God's steadfast love, which Paul emphasized through a series of rhetorical questions.

READ EACH QUESTION IN ROMANS 8:31-35, then answer or restate it in the affirmative. I did the first as an example.

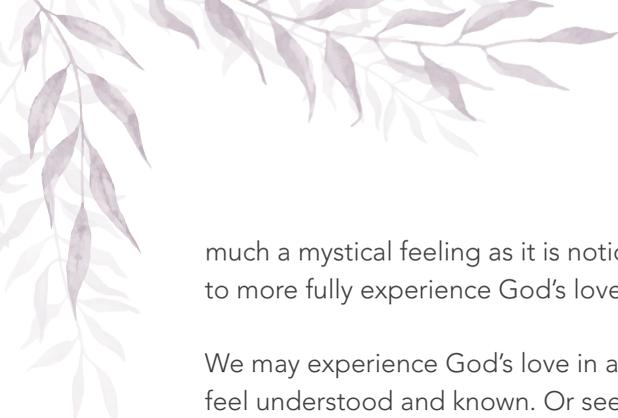
- ♦ Romans 8:31: No one can be against us if God is for us.
- ♦ Romans 8:32:
- ♦ Romans 8:33:
- ♦ Romans 8:34:
- ♦ Romans 8:35:

READ ROMANS 8:37-39. As you read through the list of what will not separate us from the love of God in Christ, what is most meaningful to you? Why?

READ EPHESIANS 3:16-19. List what Paul prayed for the Ephesians.

Paul was explaining the love of God and asking the Holy Spirit to give the Ephesians strength and power to understand it. That prayer implies we need God's help to know His love; we can't grasp it on our own. Furthermore, Paul uses the Greek word *ginōskō* for *know*, which means "to know by observation and experience."¹¹ To fully grasp God's love, we need to see it and experience it.

As Christians, we sometimes understand God's love purely intellectually. We know and memorize Scripture, but that can feel disconnected from our everyday lives. God's love is both a fact that grounds our faith and an experience that shapes our lives. It's not just being able to recite Bible verses about God's love but receiving His love in a concrete way. Knowing we are loved is often interconnected with sensing His presence—knowing He is with us. It's not as



much a mystical feeling as it is noticing how God shows up for us. In other words, to more fully experience God's love we must be on the lookout for evidence of it.

We may experience God's love in a deep conversation with a friend where we feel understood and known. Or seeing answers to prayer. Or being moved by someone's kindness. When we believe that every good and perfect gift is from above (Jas. 1:17), we can see signs of His love everywhere. Psalm 136 begins with: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" and then recounts how the Lord demonstrates His love to His people. Signs of His love are all around us. We just need to pay attention and specifically ask God to show us how He is loving us.

What are some ways you experience God's love?

Have you ever doubted God's love for you? Are you doubting it now? Explain.

If you were sure that God loved you, how would that change your view of your suffering?

The question: "If God loves me, why did He let this happen?" changes when we are certain that God loves us. It becomes: "Since God loves me, why did He let this happen?" This question takes us in the opposite direction of the first one. Now we are looking for a purpose, believing that God has brought these difficult situations into our lives for our good, out of His love for us. That shift in perspective was life changing for me.

God delights in you. God rejoices over you and sings love songs over you (Zeph. 3:17). He couldn't love you more or be more for you than He is right now.

But I recognize that in this moment you may not feel God loves you. While feelings don't define reality, they do frame how we view our lives, our suffering, and our relationships with God. If we don't feel seen, known, and loved, we will come to very different conclusions about what's happened to us. If you are unsure of God's love, reread the Scriptures we studied. Keep praying and asking God to show you that you're beloved. I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Dear Lord, on my own, I can't understand how much You love me, but You can make Your love real to me. Help me understand that in Christ You love me extravagantly and that nothing can separate me from Your love. Please make Your love evident to me this week.

This excerpt from Jan Richardson's poem "Beloved Is Where We Begin" beautifully states my desire for you.

*Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.*

*Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.¹²*

Beloved is where we begin.

DAY 5

We started this week asking the big question: *If God loves me, how could He let this happen?* Has this week's study helped answer that question? Explain.

How have you experienced God's love and faithfulness toward you this week? Where have you sensed His presence? Pay attention to signs of His love and presence through specific incidents like answers to prayer, unexpected peace, comfort after reading Scripture, and so forth.

How is God working in you? In your suffering?

READ PSALM 31:7. What do you see in this verse and what have you learned this week about being seen, known, and loved?

Is God's love more intellectual or experiential for you? Explain.

How has the Lord comforted you in your sorrow and difficulties over the last days and weeks? Where have you seen evidence of His love? Thank Him for that now.

Elisabeth Elliot said, "God never withholds from His child that which His love and wisdom call *good* . . . God's refusals are always merciful—"severe mercies" at times but mercies all the same."¹³ She also said, "God never denies us our hearts desire except to give us something better."¹⁴

What are your thoughts about these statements? Is it more comforting or confusing? Explain.

Read the following statements. Choose one, look up the verse, write that verse on a sticky note or note card, and put it in a prominent place to remind you of God's love.

God delights in me.
READ PSALM 18:19.

God cares about every detail of my life. He keeps track of my sorrows and collects all my tears.
READ PSALM 56:8.

Even when it looks like everything is falling apart, I can count on God's love.
READ ISAIAH 54:10.

God is for me. He will always give me what is best.
READ ROMANS 8:31-32.

Nothing will ever be able to separate me from God's love.
READ ROMANS 8:38-39.

SESSION 2: VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE

Final Thought

On page 20, I asked you to journal about anything you might be grieving or need to grieve. Grief can feel like a roller coaster, which is natural. It's rarely worked through all at once or resolved in a neat package. **Set aside a few minutes to reflect on your loss and how you could process it further.** Consider praying and meditating on verses we studied this week. Journal about your experience. Consider going to counseling, talking through it with friends, or joining a group like GriefShare® as future options. Or perhaps engage through non-verbal ways like music, art, taking a walk, sitting in the sunshine, cooking, or physical activity. Don't bottle it up or suffer in silence. Take the steps you need to take to allow the Lord to heal your brokenness.

Bonus Study

On page 15 we talked about the glory of God and on page 14 we tied God's love to His glory.

Does that make sense to you? Write any questions you have about it here.

Read the following Scriptures about the glory of God. How do they add to your understanding of God's glory?

- ♦ Exodus 33:17-23; 34:1-8
- ♦ Exodus 40:34-38
- ♦ Luke 9:28-36
- ♦ John 1:14-18
- ♦ John 2:11

IF GOD LOVES ME, HOW COULD HE LET THIS HAPPEN?

Watch the Session 2 video and take notes below.

GROUP DISCUSSION / QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What part of the video teaching was most significant for you? Why?

Have you ever wondered if Jesus really cares for you? If so, why?

Why does suffering sometimes push us away from God and sometimes push us toward Him?

What are some ways God has shown and continually shows His love for you?

How does knowing that Jesus also suffered help you in your suffering?

How has your view of suffering been affected by what you've learned today?

What's one thing you've learned this week of study that better equips you to help others who are suffering?

