

Wisdom of the Bible ~ Suffering ~ Leader's Guide

1. Is suffering universal, i.e., do we all suffer? (Ezekiel 21:4, John 16:33)

A) Yes, everyone suffers. B) Most people suffer, but some do not.

The Bible says that *everyone* will suffer. It's inevitable.

Ezekiel 21:4 ~ Yes, I will cut off both the righteous and the wicked! I will draw my sword against everyone in the land from south to north. [New Living Translation]

John 16:33 ~ Jesus said, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. *Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.* But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

2. It seems that some people suffer more than others. Why is this? (Isaiah 55:8-9, Psalm 73:16-17, 135:6)

A) They were bad and God is punishing them. B) It is God's will, but not his punishment. C) You sow what you reap. D) They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. E) It is random chance. F) No one knows.

Many people think the answer is (B) and cite scripture verses such as Isaiah 55:8-9 and Psalm 135:6 to make the point. But, unfortunately, we just plain don't know why some people suffer more than others. We don't know why bad things happen to good people (and sometimes vice versa). See Psalm 73:16-17.

Isaiah 55:8-9 ~ ⁸"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. ⁹For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

Psalm 135:6 ~ The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.

Psalm 73:16-17 ~ ¹⁶When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me ¹⁷till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

3. Does the Lord sometimes desert you in your suffering? (Isaiah 41:10, Lam 3:19-24, Philippians 4:6-7) After all, if God deserted Jesus (briefly) when he was dying on the cross, why wouldn't he desert you? (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34)

God will always be with you if seek him and will always answer your prayers (even though you might not understand his answer).

Isaiah 41:10 ~ ¹⁰Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

Lamentations 3:19-24 ~ ¹⁹ The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. ²⁰ I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. ²¹ Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: ²² The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. ²³ Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. ²⁴ I say to myself, “The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!”

Philippians 4:6-7 ~ ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Did God actually desert Jesus during his suffering on the cross? It says in Mark 15:34, And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These words reveal how deeply Jesus felt his abandonment by God as he bore all the sin of the world and descended into hell. Jesus, of course, conquered the ultimate evil and rose from the dead on Easter morning, and later ascended into heaven where he sits on the right hand of God. Briefly forsaken, abandoned? Yes, but for the purpose of saving us all and with the result that God will never forsake or abandon any one of us ever again.

4. Is it sometimes good to suffer? Is there a benefit to it? Are there reasons for suffering? (Psalm 119:71, Romans 5:3-4, James 1:2-4, John 9:1-3)

This may be hard to swallow, but the Bible tells us in both the Old and New Testament that suffering is sometimes good for us. To make the point, there are a goodly number of instances where the Bible points out the reason for suffering.

Psalm 119:71 ~ It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Romans 5:3-4 ~ ³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. [New Living Translation]

James 1:2-4 ~ ² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

John 9:1-3 ~ ¹ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”

5. Could God possibly allow some pain and suffering to get your attention? (Psalm 94:12, 119:71)

Consider this story.

A man went to a barbershop to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed. As the barber began to work, they began to have a good conversation. They talked about many things and various subjects. When they eventually touched on the subject of God, the barber said, "I don't believe that God exists."

"Why do you say that?" asked the customer.

"Well, you just have to go out in the street to realize that God doesn't exist. Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can't imagine a loving God who would allow all of these things."

The customer thought for a moment, but didn't respond because he didn't want to start an argument.

The barber finished his job and the customer left the shop.

Just after he left the barbershop, he saw a man in the street with long, stringy, dirty hair and an untrimmed beard. He looked dirty and unkempt. The customer turned back and entered the barber shop again and he said to the barber, "You know what? Barbers do not exist."

"How can you say that?" asked the surprised barber. "I am here, and I am a barber. And I just worked on you!"

"No!" the customer exclaimed. "Barbers don't exist because if they did, there would be no people with dirty long hair and untrimmed beards, like that man outside."

"Ah, but barbers DO exist! That's what happens when people do not come to me."

"Exactly!" affirmed the customer. "That's the point! God, too, DOES exist! That's what happens when people do not go to Him and don't look to Him for help. That's one reason there is so much pain and suffering in the world."

Now let's consider what the Bible has to say about God getting your attention with suffering:

Psalm 94:12 ~ Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law;

Psalm 119:71 ~ It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

6. In addition to getting your attention, do you think God might allow suffering as part of his refining process? (Job 23:10, 33:14-20, Psalm 66:10, Proverbs 17:3, Isaiah 48:10)

Job 23:10 ~ But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

Job 33:14-22 ~ ¹⁴For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it. ¹⁵In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, ¹⁶he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, ¹⁷to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, ¹⁸to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. ¹⁹Or a man may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in his bones, ²⁰so that his very being finds food repulsive and his soul loathes the choicest meal.

Psalm 66:10 ~ For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

Proverbs 17:3 ~ The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.

Isaiah 48:10 ~ See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

7. Have you personally experienced suffering as part of God's refining process? How? When? Did it work? Did it last or is it something that God must repeat over and over? Why?