

NIGHT FOUR

Opening: We are so glad you are joining us, whether you are in the room with us, or joining us on the other side of the screen online. Over the next four weeks we will explore some of the tough questions that confront Christianity. This is an exploratory process and one that will hopefully encourage you and edify you as we wrestle with these questions in light of Scripture, history, philosophy, and culture. Maybe these barriers to belief in Jesus are actually signposts. Maybe tough questions are healthy and help us pursue God and truth. This handout and Rebecca McLaughlin's book will provide the content to help us go deep.

1. Session 5 | Ch.11 How Could a Loving God Allow So Much Suffering?

- a. **Recap of last week** the goal here is not just to gather information, but to discover truth and meet God so that we can know Him and trust Him, which inevitably leads to our Transformation. The goal is to progress from Belief -> Truth -> Knowledge -> Faith. Last week we saw that there is real evil in this world and that we all contribute to it and thus are all culpable and guilty. A good God who is both loving and just, rather than look at us as criminals, looks at us as lost children and longs for us to be found. Yet, Jesus is the way that we can be found and forgiven. It is our choice to follow Jesus and allow His sacrifice on our behalf to atone for our sins and evil. This then, allows us to access life with God forever. The alternative is hell. Separation from His presence. Hell is so offensive to us and scary, but it is the only option if we really want a place where God is not present.

- b. **Suffering** 3 million Africans forcibly transported by the British slave trade. 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. The Rwandan Genocide. The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims. The trafficking of more than 2 million children this year in the global sex trade, while 1.5 million children died of diarrhea. Famines in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, and Yemen. The quiet stealth of cancer. Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist looks at this world and declares that our universe "has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good thing, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." (p.193) How can we reckon with suffering? Does all this suffering torpedo the Christian faith?
 - i. As McLaughlin says, Suffering is not the wrecking ball that knocks Christianity down but rather the cornerstone on which, painfully, brick by brick, it has always been built." (194)

- c. **Suffering Minus God** It may seem like getting rid of God actually helps us in dealing with the problem of suffering. There is no meaning, no reason, no hope; this even seems mature. Don't look for the grandpa in the sky to help you. Stephen Hawking, the famous theoretical physicist said "there is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers... that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark." If the world is a product of random

chance and has no meaning, value, or purpose then the products of that chaos will also be meaningless, valueless, and purposeless. So, we walk around and live life with the assumption that life is saturated with MVP. Why? This bleak view actually erodes the foundations on which we balance life and humanness itself. If there is no good or evil why do we lament?

- i. To be honest I see so much gross hypocrisy when it comes to this. We see an intellectual assent to nihilism or secularism, but still assume MVP.
 - ii. If our sense of self as humans, as moral agents evaporates then so does the meaningfulness of life in the face of suffering. Suffering is an illusion itself. We cannot cling to a delusion of universal meaning without God. Without Him we are computers with delusions of personhood.
- d. **A Buddhist Approach to Suffering** The well-trodden path for disillusioned Westerners. According to McLaughlin, Buddhism offers refuge from the bleakness of atheism without the strictures of “organized” religion. It begins with suffering and offers a way to cope. This combination is attractive. Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* says, “when I began writing this book, I thought that Buddha would be a strong contender for the ‘Best Psychologist of the Last Three Thousand Years’ award. To me, his diagnosis of the futility of striving felt so right, his promise of tranquility so alluring. But in doing research for the book, I began to think that Buddhism might be based on an overreaction, perhaps even an error.” (p.196)
- i. When the Buddha reached enlightenment, he proclaimed that life is suffering and that the only means of escape is to break the ties of attachment that bind us to life. However, Haidt’s research shows that people in deeply undesirable circumstances tend to be more satisfied than dissatisfied with their lives.
 - ii. Robert Biswas-Diener, interviewed people in hard situations, including sex workers living in the slums of Calcutta. He concludes, “While the poor of Calcutta do not lead enviable lives, they do live meaningful lives.”
 - iii. Perhaps the key to facing suffering is not detachment and removal but meaning and love.
 - iv. Nonattachment shields us from suffering, but to love requires vulnerability.
 - v. Haidt also says nonattachment shields us from our greatest joys.
- e. **Christian Perspective on Suffering** Arguments have been offered down the centuries that reconcile a loving God with Suffering. I have spent a lot of time studying those arguments. Arguments dealing with moral evil and natural evil. Yet Jesus and the reality of the Gospel story is what I and most cling to in the face of suffering.

- f. **Mary, Martha, and Lazarus** In John chapter 11 we have an amazing case study of suffering among Jesus's friends while He is present. Let's take a look at it and then draw some conclusions that might help us.
- i. **Jesus Didn't Come** Mary and Martha dial 911 for Jesus. He stayed two days longer. Dude healed strangers, healed long distance. This is a reality. The Bigger picture. Jesus sometimes doesn't come...and this was for people John says specifically, Jesus loved.
 - a. When my Dad died suddenly at age 60 and I turned to Jesus for answers, hope, and my wrath and grief. There is nothing like a Savior who suffered to relate to you in the midst of your suffering. This is where I think Jesus is incomparable and absolutely worth our pursuit.
 - b. I think many of us struggle as C.S. Lewis did when his wife died of terminal cancer after only a few years of marriage. He says, "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like.'" (198)
 - ii. **When Jesus Comes** Lazarus in the tomb for 4 days by the time Jesus comes. Martha comes out and we can relate. What about now Jesus? Why won't you heal now? In the midst of pain and suffering, we are more like children than philosophers. We know there is ultimate hope, future resurrection and the world will be put right. Yet, this does not do it for us in the moment. Yet Jesus responds. "I am the resurrection and the life." It's almost like Jesus is saying to Martha that as you grieve and are in need of your brother, you actually need me more than anything. He is making some grandiose claims here. He is Life in the face of suffering and death!
 - iii. **Jesus Wept.**
 - iv. **Lazarus Come Out!** Jesus' power of death is absolute. It is our only hope in the face of our inevitable end. Notice how Lazarus is not even the focus of the story. It isn't about him. The narrative draws our gaze to profound questions that connect to our life in the midst of suffering. Why, if Jesus planned to heal Lazarus, did he not just do so in the first place? Why did he let Lazarus die and leave Mary and Martha mourning for days? Why not tell Martha what He was planning to do right away? The story is stretched in a way that pushes us to wrestle and connect with Marth and Mary. We can get a clear glimpse of the whole biblical framework for suffering. "The space between Lazarus' death and Jesus' calling him out of the tomb is the space in which Marth sees Jesus for who he really is: her very life." (p.202)

1. “This story illuminates both suffering and prayer. We often see prayer as a means to an end: God is a cosmic vending machine; insert prayer and expect results to drop into your hand – or kick the machine in anger when they don’t. But the story of Lazarus upends this idea. Jesus is not a means to an end, a mechanism through which Martha can change her circumstances. He is the end. Her circumstances drive her to him. It’s not that her suffering or our suffering doesn’t matter: it matters enough to bring tears to the eyes of the Son of God! But it matters like a first meeting matters to marriage, or like birth matters to motherhood. It is an entry point to relationship, a relationship formed through suffering as much as through joy. If, as Jesus claims, the goal of our existence is relationship with him, finding him in our suffering is the point.” (p.203)
- g. **Suffering and Sin** Recognizing this role of suffering in our relationship with Jesus helps us see through some misconceptions about suffering from a Christian perspective. We are tempted to always look at suffering as punishment for sin. Be wary of this. The Bible is clear that while sin and suffering are clearly connected and living in rebellion against God can cause us heartache now, the amount of suffering someone endures is not proportional to his or her sin. This is evident in the Scriptures and our own lives and the lives of others.
- i. This helps us also to distinguish between other religions and perspectives. Karmic systems and reincarnation for example.
- h. **Suffering and Love** Biblically, we have to reject this idea that if God loves us, he cannot intend for us to suffer. This notion crumbles on every scriptural page. Those He loves do suffer. This world is broken, sinful, and full of evil. We are to overcome evil with good does not mean we do not get bruised or scraped by this life. Look at Jesus, Paul, the martyrs. The suffering of Jesus even leads to salvation. Suffering is even a part of the story or eternal life!
- i. One of Rebecca McLaughlin’s friends, whose teenage son was brain damaged in a sporting accident shared his perspective on suffering. He said, “People often think that the reality of suffering is an embarrassment to the Christian faith. But I think suffering is the greatest apologetic for Christianity there is.”
 - ii. There is hope in the story, hope for a better end. Death and pain are not the end. There is even intimacy now with the One who suffered to bring an ultimate end to suffering altogether. Suffering is not an embarrassment to the Christian Faith.
- i. **Let’s Get Practical** The Bible begins and ends with Happiness, but the meat of the story is raw. In stories, if there is happiness throughout with no struggle or adversity, characters rarely develop. Often, they regress or become the villain. When there is

suffering and struggle, transformation and character can develop. With fellowship in suffering, there is often a bond and real relationships forged. Our best stories reflect this. Lord of the Rings is one of my favorite stories of all time. In it, every character suffers and struggles and develops and overcomes. They become who they were meant to be through the struggle. They form eternal bonds of friendship with those who they fought and struggled with. And as we attach ourselves to Jesus, we can then throw ourselves into fellowship with other sufferers.

- j. "Believing that Jesus is the resurrection and the life is not a one-time posture of the mind. Rather, it is a daily battle of the heart. As with a kid riding a roller coaster, all our senses scream otherwise. I'm routinely tempted to believe that something or someone else is in fact my life. I look to things I desire to fill me up. And those things, those people, can feel so real compared with this impossible God who calls me to crucify my desires and throw myself into his arms. In those moments, when I don't believe, I recall Martha's story. Her heart yearned for her brother. His restoration felt like life to her. But Jesus stood before her, looked into her eyes, and said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' Sometimes I win the battle. Sometimes I lose. At times I feel Christ's presence flooding my meager heart. At other times I cling on for dear life, not knowing the end of the story. But I must stake my life on this claim: that Jesus is the resurrection and the life." (p.208)