

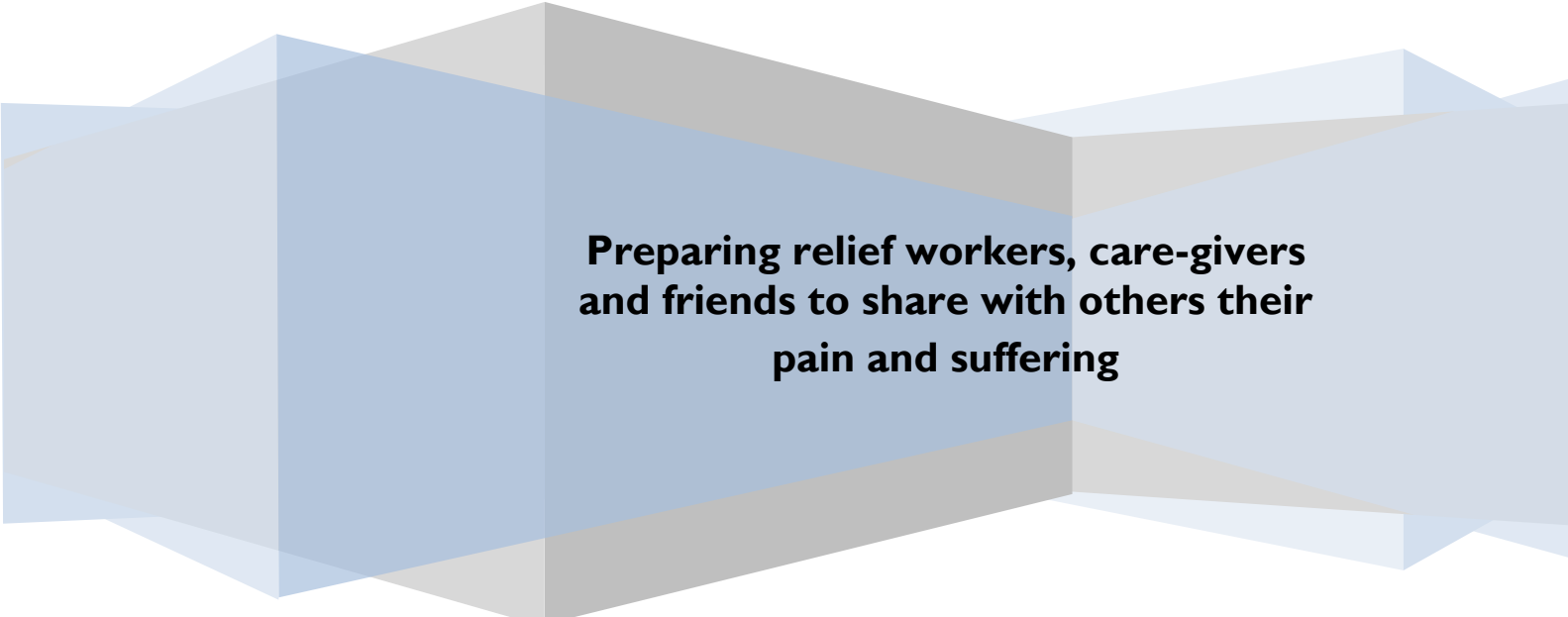
# **Suffering and Grace**

**A workshop on preparation for suffering**

**Don't be caught off-guard by chaos**

**A rough guide to the impossible:  
Christian Formation for Suffering**

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**Preparing relief workers, care-givers  
and friends to share with others their  
pain and suffering**

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## **Introduction and How to Use this Material**

World Vision exists to address suffering. “*Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.*” Our calling is to respond to the most extreme expressions of evil, injustice, suffering and oppression. We should be experts on suffering.

Of all people in the world we should be well-equipped for response. There is no human being who isn't suffering in one way or another, yet our calling is to respond to the most extreme expressions of evil, injustice, suffering and oppression. We should be experts on suffering. In fact, our preference for work in contexts of the deepest poverty and precarious social stability means we are specialists in working in places of risk, suffering and vulnerability.

But when it comes to grief and suffering, regardless of how professionally equipped we are for response, emotionally we are all amateurs. It is always hard and at times overwhelming. Often it's too hard, especially too hard when we move from one suffering person and extreme circumstance to another. Our hearts and minds become littered with memories and pain. We've seen and experienced far more than most people but don't know what to do with all we carry. The events stored up in our hearts—minds—souls feel like the individual chunks of a stained glass window randomly filling us without any shielding leaden protective edges. As a result every time we turn they cut into us. Unpredictable events trigger memories and new wounds painfully slice across our hearts.

It's easier to simply move on to the next crisis whose adrenalin generating intensity temporarily dulls our pain and whose overwhelming demands capture our attention and keep us from remembering or even feeling.

Even spiritually, suffering poses our most troubling theological questions. Every humanitarian crisis, even every personal tragedy is also a spiritual crisis. People instinctively turn to spiritual resources for explanation and/or comfort. Why did God allow this to happen? Where are you? Why were some spared and others not? Is this sign of God's election, preference, wrath or judgment? Every religion and every religious leader offers more or less adequate and comforting answers to these deep, troubling questions.

For us, as followers of Christ, believers in a God of sovereign, redeeming love who is active in history and human life, the questions become compounded:

*How do people whose hearts and minds have been wounded by suffering come to feel and know the redeeming power of God's gracious love?*

*Does the gospel have anything to say in a world deeply broken by violence, a world which God deeply loves, and a world that is confused and wearied by words?*

*How can God's gracious, redeeming love be felt, known and enjoyed in tangible forms?*

*How can God's grace be concretely enacted in our lives and world in ways that demonstrate it is more powerful than all the forces of evil, violence and suffering?*

My faith and theology have been hammered out lying twice on intensive care room hospital beds with the doctors having told my wife that I might not make it; standing helplessly as the lifeless boy of a Cambodian foster son was wheeled away to the morgue; watching the endless queues of refugees in Khao I Dang waiting, usually waiting in vain, for hope; weeping in futility as Israeli bulldozers wiped out Palestinian homes. If the Gospel doesn't have something to say there then it has nothing to say at all.

**So here is our topic.** *What does the gospel have to say to suffering? And even more, if we've heeded the call to allow our hearts to be broken by the things that break God's heart—to be people who live in the power of the broken-hearted God, how can we live perpetually as people with broken hearts and still have the strength to offer help and hope to our traumatised world?*

Grace is not the assurance of a neat, orderly ending. Rather it is the irrepressible insistence that love is stronger than all that fragments and unravels our lives.

### **Format of this study**

#### **We will explore this through three sessions:**

1. Nourishing our capacity for tears
2. Encountering God when it seems God has failed
3. Living comfortably in a world of pain

#### **How to use this study:**

This is designed to be a personal study. It's not just an essay. Rather it is an opportunity for guided reflection about what can give you the capacity to cope with perpetual encounters with suffering. It is designed for individual use, but suffering is best dealt with when it's shared. So, the intent is that it will be discussed in small groups.

On your own, read through the biblical reflections and respond to the reflection questions. Each session will probably involve 30 to 45 minutes of reading and response

Gather as a small group to discuss the reflection questions and engage in the recommended activities (30 to 45 minutes)

You might find the additional resources provided to be good catalysts for further reflection and discussion:

3. A one page guide to a Christian theology of suffering
4. Responses to "Frequently Asked Questions" about suffering

**Goal:** By the end, participants will have had the opportunity to 1) recognise God's presence in their own experience of suffering, and 2) clarify ways they want to live in order to continued to be strengthened to serve in contexts of trauma

Before going further, participants are invited to engage in the following individual reflection:

**Individual reflection:** Write on different coloured post-it notes memories you carry of tears you and others have cried; disappointments, betrayal, suffering, sorrow endured; and times feeling alone, orphaned, abandoned.

In small groups, each share 1

Pray together as a group for God to be present in this time together and to guide your reflection and discussion.

## **Witness and Suffering: The Fellowship of Tears**

### **I. Life is hard.**

There's no getting around it. Suffering strikes us all. None of us are protected from pain throughout our entire life. If we are tempted to think someone else's life is easy, we simply do not know them well enough. To live faithfully and fruitfully for Christ, and not be swept off our feet when life gets hard, then we must learn how to deal with difficulties. If we can't face suffering, we can't fully face life. If we can't cope with – and even make the most of – adversity, we'll be imprisoned behind the walls we build in futility to attempt to ward off suffering.

What's our reaction when suffering strikes? Commonly, we try to stop the pain, or spread the blame: God, why did you allow this to happen to me? Yet all suffering is like physical pain - a symptom that something's wrong. Without pain, we might bleed to death without knowing it. Merely deadening pain doesn't solve our problem - in fact, it might deaden us. Rather, pain catches our attention. It alerts individuals and the community to a need to rally resources for change.

So it is with suffering – it alerts us to the obvious fact that life right now isn't what God intends it to be. Suffering demands a response. People who have learned how to bring comfort to others who are suffering have learned one of their reasons for living.

### **2. Love implies suffering.**

When we love, we make ourselves vulnerable to others. We open up our lives —to great joy and great sorrow, to deep pleasure and deep hurt. Our choice isn't between suffering and not suffering, but between love and no love. The word "compassion" means literally "to come alongside in suffering". To have compassion, to love, means to be able to embrace suffering - our own, and others'.

Suffering, rather than robbing us of life as it seems to threaten to do, opens an opportunity for God to work in us to rob suffering of its destructive power. Instead of being diminished through suffering, we experience God's strengthening us, so that even suffering can bear good fruit. This is why Paul says we can rejoice in suffering. Not one pain needs to be wasted. *"God causes all*

*things to work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purposes” (Rom 8:28).*

**God is no stranger to suffering.** In Christ, God not only has carried our suffering through death and into resurrected life - God continues to carry us in our present suffering until we complete our pilgrimage to that farther shore. There is one distinctive and even scandalous Christian answer to the horrific problem of suffering: Christ crucified. Christ bore and redeems our pain - and can still be found amongst people bearing their sin and shame, their pain and sorrow (see 1 Cor 2:1-2: *“I sought to know nothing among you but Christ Jesus and him crucified”*).

We would never embrace senseless suffering. But part of the emotional freedom we experience as Christ redeems our suffering is that it is no longer senseless, and it needn't separate us from God or from others. Through whatever pain we encounter, we participate in the life of our Lord at his deepest moment of agony. We experience solidarity with Christ's people, for the one circumstance we are guaranteed to share in this life is suffering. In a great spiritual Mystery, our suffering is joined to Christ's suffering, and together our sorrows and our response to sorrows play some bigger part in the great drama of the universe than is yet evident in human dimensions of space and time (see Job). *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts (literally: “come alongside with strength”) us in our suffering, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves receive from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” (2 Cor 1:3-5)*

**A new reason for living.** Scripture presents a radical revision of our reason for living. Career, success, impact, significance and security all wither in comparison as tiny goals. We are free to find joy in all that jostles and jolts us, plagues and pains us, for the Bible claims that in suffering, we find God. *“I sought to know nothing among you but Christ Jesus, and him crucified”* - Christ carrying our burdens. In knowing him, we are enabled and qualified to bear the sufferings of others.

Oppression, chronic poverty, and humanitarian emergencies are theological crises. Behind tears of grief and cries of fear, questions about the nature of God are sometimes shouted (though often whispered). *Why do you allow this horror? Why me? Why don't you stop this? Or, What have I done to deserve this?* Even insurance policies call natural disasters “Acts of God”. What kind of

God acts this way - afflicting seemingly innocent people with famines, hurricanes, floods, droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanoes?

People who live in relief settings are almost always victims, because they dwell in vulnerable places, with already-overloaded or non-existent infrastructure to mitigate loss of life and resources. Harm comes to them by the blind power of nature or the corrupted power of people. The world echoes with the tragic repetition of natural and human-caused slaughters of innocents.

In most ways, response to injustice, poverty or humanitarian emergencies is not distinguished by the religious faith of those coming to others' aid. Tents, food, medical care, latrines and child-friendly spaces don't have religious identities. Victims need care, good care, and prompt care, and rightly go to whomever seems able to provide for their needs. Thus people in need are vulnerable to manipulation by the ideology of providers of aid. As a Christian organisation, World Vision is called to be reliable, effective, prompt, and trustworthy in not exploiting people's need to promote conversion to our faith. This is the first call of a relief organisation—Christian or not.

In what ways does our faith mark and shape the work we do as World Vision in our work with those who suffer from poverty, oppression and disasters?

**Ordinary steps as witnesses to the Kingdom.**

What steps can we take individually and corporately to grow in this partnership and live out this kind of spirituality in our engagement with suffering?

***We serve as a sacred calling.*** Biblical faith proclaims that the suffering of all people, especially the innocent, outrages God. God's will is for humankind and all of creation to flourish, and for people to respond with compassionate care for those who suffer. Relief of suffering is a holy calling, divine work. It is a very sacred form of service.

Suffering, rather than revealing an absence of God, is precisely the circumstance where we are most likely to encounter God's presence. Rather than being an expression of divine judgement, we discover in suffering the expression of God's compassion. The crux of the Gospel - Christ crucified - most profoundly reveals the depth of God's identification with suffering. The Apostle

Paul describes God as the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our suffering that we might bring comfort to other people in theirs (2 Cor. 1). Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Comforter (John 16) - the One called alongside us to comfort. When we are comforting others in their affliction, we are participants in the work of God.

**We deal gently with people's sorrows.** Even tears are sacred. We understand we're encountering the deepest longings and wounds of human hearts. Any reasonably competent organisation can provide tents, food, medicine, water and sanitation. The sacred nature of our calling demands more from us - that we care tenderly for the people we are serving. The proof of our being Christian and the sign of the truth of our religion is our love for widows, orphans and those in distress (James 1:16-17). Christian love is not fully expressed through kind words spoken or kind deeds given to unknown crowds of people - but through tangible care for known individuals. We know the names of the people who are touched by our lives, deeds and words. In the rush to provide relief assistance to masses of people, we are ever attentive to the individuals within the crowd. God's love is searchingly personal.

**We celebrate our commonality with those we serve.** Though we may have passports enabling us to exit the disaster, though we're not trapped in that particular situation—we know the utter depth of our commonality with those we serve. We know that without God's intervention in our lives we would be trapped in our own personal disasters, in our own fears and devastation, exhaustion, loneliness and pride, our sin and folly. We know that all of us are helpless, needy and in some way - large or small - suffering.

Thus our service is not charity or benevolence. It's not condescending kindness. It's an act of justice – as we seek a “fair balance” in the resources with which people have to live (2 Cor 8:13-14). There is no power differential between helper and recipient, resourced and resourceless. In World Vision, we know the goods we distribute are donated and not our own. These are gifts we steward - just as God's grace is freely given in Christ and is not our own nor ever deserved. Like the people we serve in a humanitarian emergency, we always, daily come empty handed before God and one another in need of help.

Suffering levels the ground. Suffering removes all pretense and pride - and usually also diminishes dignity. Desperate people don't care about dignity any more. They're focused on survival.



Frantic parents will succumb to any humiliation to receive help for their children. Therefore World Vision is prompt to guard the dignity of people we serve.

Child protection is a divine mandate. World Vision, rather than dumping relief supplies in the laps of passive recipients, does all we can to empower child victims to be agents of hope and healing in their own communities. We employ older children and heads of households to rebuild their own and others' homes. We give victims of disaster jobs to distribute food and emergency supplies. These aren't simply cost-effective managerial methods, but actions rooted in the biblical call to treat people - made in the image of God - with respect. In releasing people's capacity to care for themselves and others, we reaffirm their identity as children of God and point them to God's purposes for their lives.

For the same reasons, we seek to build bridges between people of all faiths. We don't suggest that all faiths, or opinions of any kind, are equally valid. We don't attempt to gloss over real differences in communities' varied belief systems. But we also don't give preference to people who happen to be born into particular cultures or belief systems that line up with our own. We don't only serve Christians and we don't only partner with other followers of Christ. Humanitarian emergencies are an opportunity for walls of religious differences to be bridged. We offer a cup of cold water to whoever is thirsty. We serve without any sense of superiority, or any other agenda except to provide water. We partner with everyone whose hearts are broken with the things that break the heart of God. In working together to alleviate suffering we point to the character and presence of the suffering-bearing God found in Jesus Christ.

***We recognise the sacramental quality of our service.*** The Bible proclaims that God is present in suffering. Jesus himself said, "*I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me*" (Mt 25:31-46). These foundations of our faith are worth repeating. Paul says that he sought to know nothing among those he served but Christ crucified - bearing their sin, sorrow and suffering - Christ carrying the ravages of demonic and human evil and injustice (1 Cor. 2:2).

If this is true, then there's something sacramental about serving those who suffer. A sacrament is an outer and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace. A sacrament is a tangible expression of the presence of God. Believing that God is present bearing the pain of those who suffer, our

service in Christ's name is an outer and visible sign of Christ's inner and gracious presence. When we touch the suffering - we are participating in a holy sacrament.

Therefore, rather than fleeing from suffering, or expecting our faith to protect us from suffering, we are propelled by the Spirit of God to enter in and share others' suffering. As the Father sent the Son into the world to bear sin and suffering and to defeat evil, so we are sent by the Son in the power of the Spirit (John 20:21). We are sent to participate in God's work of alleviating pain, soothing suffering, providing food for those who are hungry, replacing tears with clean water, bringing reconciliation to conflict, inspiring hope in those who've lost their future. Our deeds of love become sacred deeds. And sacred deeds provide evidence of God's presence in the midst of hopelessness, despair, suffering and even death.

To choose to serve in the deserts and conflict of Darfur and Somalia, the devastation of Haiti, in flood/earthquake/conflict ravaged Pakistan, or the chaos of Afghanistan obviously entails significant self-sacrifice, often on the part of entire World Vision families rather than just an individual humanitarian worker. The real cost, and sense of loss, is a suffering our staff share with community members who also suffer loss and extended familial separations due to economic devastations or other circumstances. The way of the cross is the way of sacrifice - but it is also the way of Communion. Sacrifice creates not emptiness, but opportunity for us to become tangible expressions of the "broken body and spilled out blood" of Christ for the needy. Our engagement in relief becomes a form of communion both for us and for those we serve.

**We persist with resilient hope.** Christian faith proclaims that suffering, evil and injustice are not the last word in human existence. We know that one day, all sorrow will cease, all suffering will end, all evil will be vanquished and all tears wiped away (Rev. 21:3-5). We live now, in the meantime, when all of creation is groaning in travail awaiting the fulfilment of the world's redemption. But we live now in light of the certain future.

This is the non-aggressive confidence in which World Vision serves. Tender hope marks our lives and work. We want to serve with a gentle joy, knowing we are engaged in a holy privilege when we care for those who suffer. We touch eternity hidden beneath the time-wounded horrors of war, disaster and famine-ravaged human lives. Our small service is given as a sign that

## *Formation for Suffering: A Short Theology of Suffering*

one day this suffering will cease. We are providing evidence of the future when “all will be well and all manner of things will be well,” in the ancient words of Julian of Norwich.

Because we are reaching out to touch eternity, we can't help but engage spiritually with people. We ask our staff to engage in constant, though usually silent, prayer for those we work alongside and for our own endurance and wisdom. We pray for the Father of mercies, the suffering-bearing Saviour, and the Comforting Spirit to sustain us all. We pray for God's Kingdom to come against the forces of evil that contribute to people's suffering. Our spiritual engagement with people is enlarged as we provide opportunities for them to talk about the deeper questions and spiritual resources they may have—exploring together how they deal with the issues of faith and hope, forgiveness and the future. It's deepened even further when they invite us to pray with them.

This creates freedom for us to grow together in our dependency on God. When people see our dependency, we give them hope. Otherwise, they might be deceived into thinking our capacity to care stems from affluence and citizenship - rather than from our shared humanity, our common pilgrimage, our sense that the suffering of one region wounds the whole world and the healing of one brings greater health to all, our spirituality and discipleship, our dependency on Christ that nourishes our ability to serve. We want others to see that we stand together in common neediness. Through this, we extend to them equal access to hope.

World Vision's response to suffering, injustice and humanitarian emergencies expresses God's holy opposition to all that thwarts people from experiencing life in all its fullness. When faced with what appear to be intractable problems and insurmountable suffering, we serve with bold confidence that we are walking in the will and way of God.

## Session One

### Nourishing our capacity for tears. The God of grace drinks our cup of tears

Every humanitarian crisis, even every personal tragedy is also a spiritual crisis. Suffering poses our most troubling theological questions. People instinctively turn to spiritual resources for explanation and/or comfort. Why did God allow this to happen? Where are you? Why were some spared and others not? Is this a sign of God's election, preference, wrath or judgment? Every religion and every religious leader offers more or less adequate and comforting answers.

**In small groups:** list the most frustrating or inadequate common theological answers to why there is suffering.

(Bangkok Post, January 5 following tsunami)

#### **God's will**

*"It was as if God has unleashed his anger on the people" says Muslim victim Haji Ali, who lost everything "Allah has his own way...as humble humans there is no way we can comprehend his infinite wisdom. A true believer should believe that his fate and those of others are entirely in the hands of Allah. If their loved one were killed in the disaster and they survive, it is because of Allah's will", chairman of the Indonesian Council of Imams,*

#### **Human sin**

*"People are saying this phenomenon is the annoyance of god, but it is not so. It is a natural phenomenon which has manifested because of a multitude of human mistakes on sky, earth and water. Religious law says the natural forces change direction because of these mistakes. This kind of disaster also happens to tell the people of the existence of a superpower...The innocent and the sinful both get affected. It is not a test of faith." chief priest of hindu Temple in Tamil Nadu*

*"We have destroyed nature, being selfish and greedy and only aiming for more prosperity, but never realizing that we and nature are one. The tsunamis are a warning from nature that humans have been unkind to it." Buddhist scholar in Bangkok*

#### **Meaningless Event**

David Brooks, "The meaning of this event is that there is no meaning. Humans are not the universe's main concern. We're just gnats on the crust of the earth. The earth shrugs and 140,000 gnats die, victims of forces far larger and more permanent than themselves...Nature seems amoral and viciously cruel...This catastrophic, genocidal nature is a long way from the benign and rhythmic circle of life in the Lion King...This week images of something dark and unmerciful were thrust on a culture that is by temperament upbeat and romantic...The world's generosity has indeed been amazing, but sometimes we use our compassion as a self-enveloping fog to obscure our view of the abyss. Somehow it's wrong to turn this event into a good-news story...It's wrong to turn it into a story about us, who gave, rather than about them, whose lives were ruined...This is a moment to feel deeply bad, for the dead and for those of us who have no explanation."

Some religions thrive on provoking fear and offering elusive promises that if we believe, behave or give the right ways then God will bless us. Yet our own experience proves that this kind of equation nearly always fails to balance up. So our religious leaders (and ourselves if we're properly conditioned) usually find a way of blaming ourselves—we didn't believe hard enough, behave good enough, give abundantly enough. We get thrown back upon ourselves in an endless cycle of self-focused insufficiency—give more, love more, believe more, do more. There's very little good news in that kind of

religious life. We are always failing—and frankly—God too seems to be somewhat of a let-down. So we turn back to strengthening our security systems and emigrating to some land of greater opportunity.

**What do we say as followers of Christ?**

***If the Gospel doesn't have something to say here then it has nothing to say at all.***

**Two preliminary affirmations form foundational assumptions to this study:**

**1. There is nothing good about suffering or failure in itself.** However, suffering that has been reflected upon and placed in the hands of God can be redemptively woven back into our lives, so strengthening us by our scars that we cannot imagine life without them.

**2. Some wounds only heaven can heal.** The gospel may affirm that God can cause all things to work together for good—but that doesn't mean we will encounter the healing of all pain and the answering of all questions here, in this life.

**Luke 22: 39-53 In the Garden of Gethsemane** we encounter one of most mysterious moments in the life of our Lord. As we enter into it, we encounter a staggering insight into the nature of God and the life of faith. As profoundly and mysteriously as anywhere we see the incarnate Son's full descent into our humanity—carrying all weakness

Matthew and Mark note that three times Jesus admonished the disciples to watch with me.

Luke is more merciful to the disciples, condensing this into one reference.

**Lk 22: 45** The disciples stayed asleep and missed it— Jesus asked disciples to stay awake and pray—but they couldn't. There is so much each day that puts us asleep to the awareness of God in our midst: grief, fear, busyness, loneliness. When this happens to us, we risk wandering through life with an inadequate picture of Lord. At the heart of Gethsemane is a shocking scandal: the surprising way God deals with evil. We want a full on assault—surge, swords, cut off ears of adversaries. We want to call down the fire power of angels. We want God who exercises enemy annihilating power

**Lk 22: 40** Jesus called the disciples to pray you don't come into temptation. I think our deepest temptation—distrust sovereign goodness of God; Live as if god forsaken; forsake God. **Not having really seen God, we find it hard to trust God.** So Jesus says, *watch with me.* Beneath all other temptations (self-indulgence, pride, sexual manipulation, greed, fear, violence) is not believing that God can be trusted with depth of our needs and complexities of world's malaise. **We walk through day as if alone, up to me, on own.** When we don't believe God is trustworthy, we take up the sword; destroy others as a result. And so, like in Gethsemane, Jesus has to come along behind us and heal the damage we cause.

**We encounter in Gethsemane the tears of the God who can be trusted with depths of our need. Redeeming, world changing power of God hidden in apparent weakness.**

**Lk 22: 42 Father if possible let this cup pass** What was this cup? I don't think it was merely death. We all die, many die hideous death. Nor do I think it was simply the cup of Jesus' punishment on our behalf by the Father: as if God needed to smash someone for sin, so he smashed his own son. **Let this cup pass: not just the cup of death or wrath, but the cup of tears**

**Psalm 56:8** has the fascinating claim that God saves our tears in a bottle. Does God hold all the tears of human suffering? Did God pour these tears into the cup Jesus drank? Drink this cup bearing the full extent of human suffering and sin: the holocaust, AIDS orphans, 230,000 Haiti, 10 million killed in the past two decades in Africa's World War in the Great Lakes region, all the victims of rape, abuse, loneliness and divorce? All those tears! Drink this cup!

Jesus drank all the agony and sorrow and tears of humankind God had saved in a cup--tears over sin, evil and injustice for all humanity—every death, abuse, lonely night, cancer, divorce  
**Jesus was choosing in garden to drink it dry**

**Lk 22: 42 Not my will—thy will I will drink this cup, tears, world's tears, God's tears, pour it out on me, in me, through me.** Here is God—bearing our shame and sorrow, sin and suffering. No longer when suffering strikes do we need to feel God forsaken but God found! No longer abandoned but embraced by God. We encounter the fellowship of Christ's suffering in the midst of our tears.

We encounter in garden of Gethsemane the God whom we can trust with our deepest longings and darkest pains; He bore the full emptiness of our human life. Haitians have placed their faith in this God who understands betrayal, even with a kiss, and drank the cup filled with our tears. So they sing, pray, share and even dance.

In Gethsemane we encounter Jesus saying to us,  
*Come with me into the garden and watch in wonder as I choose to bear your sorrow and even your faithlessness. Watch in wonder as I choose to bear your temptation to disbelieve and distrust, your choice of your own way over God's way.*  
*I believe on your behalf; I trust on your behalf; I obey on your behalf. I resist on your behalf; I forgive all the perpetrators of your sorrow and suffering on your behalf. All of them. All the times you have denied, distrusted and disbelieved God, discredited the goodness of God by your dark behaviour—I have borne all that. I have carried all your small and great "no's" so that a sovereign and good Yes could resound through your lives and world*

**Jesus drank the cup filled with our tears that we might drink cup filled with his life.** Therefore tears become a place of communion with God rather than lament over absence of God. **In the tears of Jesus we encounter a God who can be trusted to the uttermost with all our grief and hope.**

On the hillside on the Mt of Olives above the Garden of Gethsemane is my favourite church in the world. It is a humble little chapel called **Dominus Flevit**: It's built in the shape of a tear drop, on the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. It's a chapel of tears, where the Lord wept. How many religions in the world have a church dedicated to the tears of God? I believe today, the Holy Spirit seeks to create in our hearts a cathedral dedicated to Jesus' tears—to be a place where we commune with the God who bears, and as we will see later, redeems all suffering!

**Our own and the world's deepest sorrows and sins meet God's transforming love and joy;** For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross. **Jesus drank our cup of tears that we might drink his cup of life.** The Spirit of God would fill us with this great, good Yes in the midst of the tears of the world.

**Activity**

Write on different coloured post-it note memories you carry of tears you have cried, pain you carry, disappointments betrayal, suffering, sorrow you have endured, and times you've felt alone, orphaned, abandoned.

For each one, drip water into cup—symbol of tear

Place post-its randomly on wall

Gethsemane: my cup, drink it dry, let me drink this cup, my cup

I Cor 2.2 sought to know nothing but

Pour water into basin, release

## Session Two

### Encountering God when it seems God has failed. The God of grace rewrites our story

Luke 24: 21 we had hoped.... broken/bruised hearts; not met expectations, nothing changed all of us on roads to Emmaus—journey which way going?  
--away from Jerusalem with broken hearts vs. 21  
--or toward Jerusalem with burning hearts vs. 32

How do we deal w/ broken hearts, crushed dreams; life not what expected what transforms people of broken hearts—hopeless into people of burning hearts--undaunting? not based on feeling, circumstances, act of will; based on fact: act of truth suggest two qualities of xn faith, change hearts from broken to burning; change culture of despair into Kg of joy

In vs. 15-16, Jesus walks up alongside the disciples who were fleeing from Jerusalem after Jesus' death, escaping toward Emmaus. He chose not to confront them but to come alongside. Their grief and disappointment, fear and confusion kept them from recognizing him. Some people don't see **not** because they don't want to—but because they are not able to. We are more like Christ if we walk alongside others than if we confront them. People need fewer experts and more fellow travellers.

In vs. 17-19 Jesus begins by asking questions—not because he needed to know but because they needed to talk. Jesus did not start by providing answers. We are more like Christ if we are someone to whom others can share their hearts than if we are professionals who give the right answers. If we want to communicate to others the “heavy” truths of life, we need to build a bridge of relationship that is strong enough to bear them.

striking, Scriptures--record doubts, ?s; freedom ask Risen Lord--don't you understand? If God is God of truth--passion to know truth. We've given up asking ?s of truth--only ask utility; my relig. works for me, yours for you: all relative; no truth, no absolutes, no convictions, no passion when see it surface: fanatics, violent, terrorists, fascist; not like it, so return to our relativism Gospel unique--ok to ask hard ?s

As Jesus continues his journey with these fleeing disciples we see that even for those in crisis, there is a time to give the right words, even words of confrontation. In vs. 25-27, Jesus actually called the disciples “foolish” and “slow of heart”. Strong words! He then went on to explain from Scripture about the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah. Mere confrontation isn't sufficient. Jesus gave careful documentation to support the truth.

Jesus left room for response. In vs. 28-29 he acted as if he was going farther, but the disciples urged him to stay. People who are experiencing challenges don't need to be “talked at”. Jesus did not press for a decision asking, “Who do you say I am?” He gave them space. If we are to journey in the way of Jesus, after we have done the deeds of love and voiced the words of faith, we may need withdraw and give others room to form their own convictions.

To authenticate the meaning of his words, Jesus gave a physical sign. In vs. 30-32 we see that the disciples' eyes weren't opened by Jesus' sermon but by the way he broke bread at the meal. Suddenly, they thought of the Last Supper they had with Jesus a few nights early. Through this act, the Spirit broke through their grief and discouragement, and their hearts burned.



**We can't help but share what we've received.** In vs. 33-35, the disciples immediately left and returned to Jerusalem. They had to tell others what had just happened. Journeying with Christ provokes a compulsion to share with others.

road to Emmaus--originally: walked with eyes down; --stranger meets them: asks ?s  
people of broken heart, by walking on road w/ Risen Lord, transformed into people of burning heart vs. 25-27: slow hearts: open Scripture  
what direction are you walking? away from Jerus: hopes dashed; twd Jerus: hopes deepened  
whichever way--hope is Person, J walk with you; not walk alone on road--2 together w/ J, share walk; open eyes--see him

together: are not our hearts burning as walk with him?  
Sent into brokenness rather than delivered from it, not spared but sent, not protected but propelled—sent back into very city from which fled  
Run back into city of danger and despair, disappointment and disbelief  
This is role of GRRT, penetrate pain and problems with presence of future, new life

God enters into the endless replay tape of memories of wounds that control and distort both our imagination and our life in God's image, liberating our lives from captivity to a mandala's endless cycle of pain and struggle and setting us on the journey from Emmaus back to Jerusalem

A journey of presence, disclosure, redemption and new life. Jesus walks with us, unrecognised by grief. Jesus listens to us, allows our lament and even anger: enters into our struggle, bears it, not alone, not abandoned, not unloved, not on own shoulders. Jesus breaks bread: not endless loop of fractured imagination—see differently, recognise

A story with a plot line not set by our circumstances but by Christ's cross and resurrection, outpouring of HS in ultimate consummation. This frees us to walk the road in trust, gratitude  
Not just story of pain but encounter with transforming presence, rewriting the end of the story, giving us capacity to sing in present and be thankful actually for all things. Nothing is wasted  
Everything can be woven by redeeming grace from emptiness and vanity: fog and empty wind to glory and grace: rushing Spirit and flames of life

Not just empty-ending. Not just endless repetition. Not just cross but resurrection. Not alone, on own, pointless. Create something beautiful, my small part woven into larger whole

**Activity**

Take post-it notes, groups of 3 or 3, reorder into a pattern/picture of beauty  
Gather around bread—give to others, may you recognise Christ in our midst  
Candle—burning hearts

## **Session Three**

### **Learning to be comfortable in a world of pain. A lifestyle shaped by God's grace**

How can this be our lifestyle? How do we live so as not to inflict further suffering on ourselves—or on those we love? Rather than reflecting on how to achieve a mythical, unattainable work/life balance—as if work and life are two things in conflict, we are called to a way of life that nourishes comfort in the midst of pain, peace in the midst of perplexity, and laughter in the midst of tears. How does this happen?

Some religions thrive on provoking fear and offering elusive promises that if we believe, behave or give the right ways then God will bless us. Yet our own experience proves that this kind of equation nearly always fails to balance up. So our religious leaders (and ourselves if we're properly conditioned) usually find a way of blaming ourselves—we didn't believe hard enough, behave good enough, give abundantly enough. We get thrown back upon ourselves in an endless cycle of self-focused insufficiency—give more, love more, believe more, do more. There's very little good news in that kind of religious life. We are always failing—and frankly—God too seems to be somewhat of a let-down. So we turn back to strengthening our security systems and emigrating to some land of greater opportunity.

We are the people called to choose living and working in high risk, high vulnerability and low security contexts. This involves far more than better security systems. It requires a different lifestyle. God calls us as the people of Christ to live boldly in the midst of terrifying circumstances.

Is there a way to live in the midst of pain that doesn't inflict pain/suffering on self or others). To ask how to achieve work-life balance is to ask the wrong question. It implies that "work" and "life" are two different and even opposing things. We don't work in order to live. Living includes working. To be in God's image is to work. So my first recommendation is to dispense with all this talk about work-life balance. It's neither possible nor desirable. To pursue it is to chase an illusion.

The goal isn't to achieve some kind of balance between two conflicting forces—work and life—but to live with a life-giving rhythm. This requires being comfortable: able to live with strength. Are you comfort-able? Comfort doesn't depend on the absence of pain any more than joy depends on the absence of suffering. To be comfortable is to be able to be strengthened so as to give strength to others

2 Cor. 1.2-3 "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be...the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort...who comforts us..."

GRACE Christ bearing our humanity so that by the Spirit we can share in his divinity

PEACE God knitting together our broken lives, relations and nations

"Our hope is unshaken" 2 Cor 1.7-9 though utterly, unbearably crushed, Despaired of life itself,

Discomfort—which literally means "loss of strength" isn't caused by what our circumstances bring to us but what we bring to our circumstances

**Inadequate nourishment: spiritual starvation**

--feasting daily on scripture, prayer—not discipline but desire, hunger; cultivate skill  
 --weekly Sabbath—celebrate, rest, recreation

**Inadequate relationships: loneliness**

--community; created for intimacy b/c in image of triune God  
 --priority of people: succeed where most imp't; communication, accountability, creativity

**Inadequate purpose: frustration & pointlessness**

--abide by priorities; not be imprisoned by position/job  
 --connect my life to purposes of God; intersection  
 --creativity (e.g. train)

**Inadequate approach to weakness: control or flight**

2 Corinthians 4: 7-12 **We take comfort with weakness.** We are but jars of clay. (v. 7)  
 God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. The extraordinary power of God is equally available to all. (v. 7) **We receive courage in difficulties.** (v. 8) It sounds somewhat like clinical depression. Yet depression with a difference—laced, permeated, penetrated with hope.

Afflicted in every way	But	Not crushed
Perplexed	But	Not driven to despair
Persecuted	But	Not forsaken
Struck down	But	Not destroyed
<b>What makes this possible?</b>		
Always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies		

**Inadequate source of hope: circumstances and security**

--**We live with confidence in the face of death**—for it is already behind us. Paul describes us as sharing in Christ's death. (2 Cor 4: 10-12) Someone who has died has no rights, no control, no fear, no risks. We don't live from life toward an approaching death but from death toward ever more life. If we're afraid of the smaller death that is before all of us then we are imprisoned in the life we now have. If we have passed through the greater death already then we can freely treasure every moment of the life we live now.

Hope—stretched two points, intersection, when standing there bring evidence of heaven to earth. Not simply providing relief  
 Refuse to allow broken dreams and shattered promises to prevail  
 Recognise an ultimate good is coming, confident b/c guaranteed by past, see it in face of Christ  
 Must let others see this great good that draws all our present pains toward wholeness

**Activity**

For whom does heart burn? Who like know, experience, deep, great, good love of God  
 Face from past, member of own family, yourself? Nameless faces or specific people  
 God knows their name; God present with them  
 On heart-shaped notepad, write name, situation as prayer—envision goodness flooding  
 String, connect one end to pictures made from post-its, connect other to YES  
 Take cups that used to hold tears, candle, light one another's—know fire of God's love

## A Quick Guide to a Christian theology of suffering

When suffering strikes, we seldom have time for long explanations. Time is precious, attention is strained, energy is depleted. We need a concise summary of what we believe to carry us through and to strengthen others.

1. **We lament over suffering and injustice.** We lament the evil, injustice, suffering and oppression that plague our world and thwart people and creation from flourishing. This suffering falls upon the righteous and the unrighteous alike, but we're especially outraged by the suffering of those in poverty and especially children and women.
2. **We are drawn to the God of the broken-hearted revealed through the biblical faith.** By the Spirit we are drawn into relationship with the God of the biblical faith who shares in this lament. God grieves over the suffering of his creation. Suffering, injustice, oppression and evil are not God's will, God's intention for creation, nor the consequences of God's decree. God is not the author of suffering, evil and injustice. We share in fellowship with God's grief: *"Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."*
3. **We entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ who bears and redeems suffering, sin, evil and injustice.** God does more than grieve over suffering. God has acted decisively and surprisingly in Jesus Christ to take into the very life of the triune God all evil, injustice, sin and suffering--sharing in all human brokenness, experiencing the full assault of injustice and evil—dying under its weight. Therefore, God is present in all suffering. Rather than suffering separating us from God or expressing our abandonment by God, we can encounter God's presence in its midst. However, in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, God does more than bear suffering. God defeats it. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power behind all sin, evil, injustice and oppression to separate people from God and to thwart the fulfillment of God's purposes.
4. **We are empowered by the Spirit to participate in God's triumph.** Rather than fleeing from suffering, oppression, poverty and injustice we are propelled to enter in. There we actually encounter the presence of God and experience the fellowship of Christ's suffering. In small, tangible ways, the Spirit empowers us not only to encounter God more fully in the midst of suffering but to participate in God's overthrow of both the symptoms and causes of suffering. The Spirit creates a community enriched by the differences of every culture and context where the power of love overthrows the love of power through the transforming life of Christ. Our very diversity enhances our pursuit of the well-being of children.
5. **We exist in hope of the coming Kingdom and through us the Spirit bears the fruit of joy.** Though incompletely experienced now, God's work through us points to the day when all evil, injustice, sorrow and suffering will cease and the reign of God is fully established in a renewed creation. Our work now makes evident signs of God's kingdom. Therefore, the Spirit of God empowers us to face evil, suffering and injustice with prayerful tears, with compassionate presence (suffering bearing love), with creative engagement (seeing its causes changed and its consequences redeemed), with resolute hope (because we know it is defeated and only temporary), and with undaunted joy because we know that all things work together for good in the love of God.

## **Responses to Frequently Asked Questions about Suffering**

### **Why does God allow suffering—and where is God in it?**

All complex humanitarian emergencies are also complex spiritual crises. We may ask hard questions of God at a time like this, but the best answer begins in lament over people's suffering and is expressed through the demonstration of love and compassion in action. World Vision (and the entire Church) was born in pain and exists because of hope; we are anchored in the pain of the world around us and the hope of a promised future Kingdom where that pain is defeated. In our tears of empathy and lament, our actions of service and justice, and our prayers of intercession and testimony, we point people to the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort found in Jesus Christ.

#### **Is it wrong to question God at a time like this?**

The Bible is full of accounts of people in despair asking, "Where are you God? Why did you allow this to happen? Why us? Why are some spared while others aren't?" Many of the most profound occasions of God's self-revelation occur in response to such questions. From King David and Job in the Old Testament, to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, heroes of the faith have asked God why He allows suffering, and often received a measure of revelation in return.

#### **Does the Christian God enjoy making us suffer?**

The Gospel proclaims that God's will for people is life, not death and suffering. God grieves over human sin and suffering. Jesus wept over the destruction coming on Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41). Suffering is contrary to the good will of the God of all goodness. Ezekiel proclaimed that God "takes no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18: 32).

#### **Why is there suffering?**

There are myriad causes of suffering: natural calamities, the short and long-term consequences of human sin and evil, political and economic injustice, oppressive customs. Seldom is there a single source. Furthermore, we don't know why some are spared and richly blessed, while others experience unimaginable sorrow and suffering. We don't know all the explanations for "why suffering happens", but we do know the answer to "what should be done about it." We know is that no pain is unimaginable to God, for God has borne it all in Jesus Christ. Our calling is to steward the life and resources with which we've been entrusted so as to enter into the depth of human suffering and allow the Spirit of God to pour out through us tangible expressions of God's trustworthy love—in food, shelter, health care, advocacy, economic development and structural changes that address many of the causes of suffering.

#### **Can't God do something about all this?**

The Bible indicates that God's triumph over suffering has been secured in Christ's life, death and resurrection, but it won't be completely realised until the New Creation. We live in a time stretched between the pains of the present and the promises of the future. We live between God's good original creation, its fallen brokenness, its redemption in Christ—and its fulfilment in the coming Kingdom. In this mean time, God chooses to work through people as expressions of God's love and compassion.

#### **Doesn't God care?**

Yes, personally and intimately, in every expression of pain. No one, Christian or not, is exempt from experiencing the brokenness of creation, the ravages of sin and the assaults of powers of evil, with results including disease, disasters and death. God usually doesn't overturn natural law,

or the consequences of creation's fall. "All of creation is groaning in labour," awaiting the fulfilment of our corporate redemption—then creation too will be set free (Romans 8: 18-25).

**How should a Christian respond?**

We respond to suffering with lament and tears. If we have lost our capacity to cry, we have lost our right to respond to others' pain. At the same time, hope frees us to live in joyous rebellion against all that keeps life from becoming what God intends it to be. "The Father of mercies and the God of all comfort comforts us in our affliction that we might be able to bring comfort to those who suffer with the comfort we have received", says the Bible (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4). We have the privilege of allowing the Spirit of God to pour out the love of Christ through our hearts and hands. In our tears of empathy and lament, our actions of service and justice, and our prayers of intercession and testimony, we point people to the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort found in Jesus Christ.

**How can we keep on hoping?**

Hope in the Hebrew language is a wonderful picture word, describing the tension placed on a spider's web. When disconnected from one end or the other, it can bear no weight. When firmly anchored between two points and stretched tight, the web can bear great weight. Hope is to be stretched between two places—firmly anchored in both the present and the future. The strands in a web become the pathway for hope.

As followers of Christ, we choose to be firmly anchored in the pains of the present while holding on tightly to the promises of the future. As the Bible says (Hebrews 6:18-20), "The hope that we have in Jesus Christ is an utterly reliable anchor for our souls, fixed in the innermost shrine of heaven, where Jesus has already entered on our behalf".

One day, God "will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21: 3-5). We believe that God is able to redeem any situation, whether personal or national. In Jesus Christ, God does more than grieve. "I have come that you might have life in all its fullness," he says (John 10: 10). God enters our broken lives and carries our pains, judges our sin and destroys the power of the Devil (Isaiah 53: 4). He not only carried our pain, God triumphed over all that keeps us from experiencing fullness of life (Philippians 2: 5-11).