



## Leader's notes

# why on earth... do bad things happen to good people?

In this session we ask how it's possible to have faith in God in a world where there is pain and suffering.

We look at how we can still put our trust in God, even if we don't have answers to all our hard questions.

**Needed:** Drinks, name/picture badges (if desired), Session Sheets, some pens.

**General Intro:** *why on earth...?* takes a look at some of life's hardest questions. Each session offers simple first steps in exploring a difficult subject. These are not final answers, just starting-points. Group members are invited to talk about their own thoughts and experiences with honesty. Then we explore Christian angles on the subject, and begin to think how these might apply in our own lives.

**Session Intro:** The question of pain and suffering is one of the hardest questions of all. It is particularly hard for people who believe in a good and loving God. How can God apparently let these things happen? In this session we focus on one person's experience of suffering: the biblical character of Joseph (known to many people from the popular musical). We find that Bible characters suffered just like us, but that God was with them. And we find God promises an end to suffering. It is possible to live a life of faith, trusting in God, and still live with unanswered questions.

## Starters (approx 30 mins)

- Drinks, welcome, notices, write name badge (if desired).
- A few passages in the session needs to be read aloud. Identify somebody who is happy to do this (alternatively, the leader can plan to read them).
- ICEBREAKER (*whole group*):  
Ask the group to imagine they are stranded on a desert island. Each person is allowed one special item that is meaningful to them, or something they enjoy (such as a musical instrument, pet, sports equipment, or type of food). Ask them to tell the rest of the group what they would have, and why.

- BACKGROUND NOISE (*in pairs*):

Ask group members to get into pairs. Hand out Session Sheets and invite everybody to look at the *Background Noise* picture.

Explain that we all carry thoughts and ideas in our head on a range of issues. These ideas may come from lots of places. In pairs, we are going to explore the 'background noise' already in our heads on the topic. Explain that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here: it's all about examining our own starting-points.



Explain that the thought-bubbles represent:

- > (School) School and upbringing
- > (People) Friends and family
- > (TV) TV and film
- > (Smartphone) Social media
- > (Question-Mark) Anything else

In their pairs, invite group members to share any thoughts on the subject of this session: Why do bad things happen in the world, and where do we think God is when bad things happen? What do other people say about this? Have we seen anything about it on TV or in a film? Use the thought-bubbles as a prompt. (*Note to leader: this discussion is not how we feel about suffering, but why suffering happens, and our feelings about God*).

After a few minutes, invite people to rejoin the whole group. Invite them to share anything they discussed if they would like to. Handle sensitively, as people may share difficult personal experiences.

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## Main Course (approx 45 mins)

- VIDEO
- ON SHEET: Ask group members to look at Video Recap, a summary of key points in the video:



**Joseph's story**



**No easy answers**



**All experience suffering**



**God loves and cares**



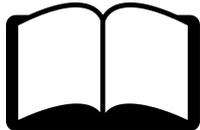
**God with us in the pain**



**Hope for the future**

- **DISCUSS (whole group):** Allow a few minutes to discuss the following question: What part of the video stood out for you?
- **EXPLAIN (read out):** The video says the question of suffering is a difficult one for people who believe in a good and loving God. But how can we know that God really is good and loving? This isn't the sort of thing you can prove, of course. But we do have some clues and pointers. Together, these tell us something important. Even though bad things happen in the world, they don't happen because God is bad.
- **ON SHEET (whole group):** Ask people to look at the *Pointers to a Good God* sheet. Ask somebody to read out all four sections, slowly (or the leader can read these out).

# Pointers to a Good God



## Bible Writers

All parts of the Bible, written across thousands of years, tell us God is good and loving, and God cares about justice:

'The Lord is good. When trouble comes, he is a strong refuge.' (Nahum 1:7)

'God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.' (1 John 1:5)

'This is what the Lord Almighty says: Judge fairly and honestly, and show mercy and kindness to one another.' (Zechariah 7:9)



## Jesus

The Bible tells us Jesus was God in human form. If we look at Jesus, we see a picture of what God is like.

Jesus loves, cares and heals. He spends time with people who feel lost and abandoned. He tells his followers that it is love that shows the world their faith is real.



## Right & Wrong

We all have a sense of right and wrong. Our built-in conscience tells us kindness is good and cruelty is bad.

Lots of people are convinced this comes from beyond ourselves – it points to a God who is good, and who gives us our sense of right and wrong, good and evil.



## People of Faith

As people go deeper in faith, they find they want to live caring and generous lives, because they believe God calls them to do this.

Churches provide food banks, advice centres, and so much more. Christians have always been in the front line of charity work, at home and abroad.

### DISCUSS (*in pairs*):

In pairs take a few minutes to discuss each of the following questions:

- What did you think of the four 'Pointers', and did you find any of them more convincing than others?
- Have you ever had a special awareness of God's goodness?

### ON SHEET (*whole group*):

- Ask somebody to read out *Text: God With Us*

The Bible tells us God loves and cares for people. He never abandoned Joseph, whatever life threw at him. And God never abandons us too. God doesn't make all our pain go away, but he promises to be with us in our pain.

Also, the Bible tells us God himself came to earth and felt pain. The heart of the Christian faith is that Jesus was God in human form. So when Jesus suffered and died, God himself was feeling human pain.

God is not cold and distant: he knows what suffering feels like, and God cares when we suffer.

- **DISCUSS** (*whole group*):

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions:

- Does the idea of God suffering change how you think about God?
- Where do you feel most supported and loved when life gets hard?

- **ON SHEET**:

Ask somebody to read out *Text: Joseph's Message to his Brothers* (or the leader can read this out).

'As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil. He brought me to the high position I have today so I could save the lives of many people.' (Genesis 50:20)

- **EXPLAIN** (*read out*): These words are said after Joseph has become prime minister of Egypt. In his palace, he meets the brothers who long ago sold him as a slave. When Joseph says these words to them, he is saying two things:
  - a) People may do bad things, but God can still bring good out of bad circumstances.
  - b) The bad things we go through can put us in a position to help others.

- **DISCUSS** (*whole group*):

Allow a few minutes to discuss each of the following questions:

- How do you think Joseph can be so positive, after all that has happened to him?
  - Do you know an inspiring story of good overcoming evil (from your own life, a news story, a film you have seen, etc)?
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## **Dessert** (*approx 15 mins*)

- Invite the group to join in either the Creative Prayer or Space to Think (as decided by the leader before the session). Then end by praying the Closing Prayer out loud.

### **1) Creative Prayer:**

- Invite the group to sit quietly, with eyes closed.
- Invite them to take a few moments in the quiet to picture their favourite place, somewhere they feel safe and happy.
- Invite them to imagine that Jesus comes and sits beside them there.
- Invite them to take a few moments to imagine a conversation with Jesus. With Jesus, they look back on the most painful times of their life. What does Jesus say to them?

**2) Space to Think:** time to reflect on words from the Bible, ending with the Lord's Prayer. Tell the group you are going to read out a few words from the story of Joseph in the Bible (below).

Say you are going to read the words twice, slowly.

Invite them to take a few minutes in silence to think what one word or idea stands out to them, and why.

Read the passage (twice, slowly):

'(Joseph's master) took Joseph and threw him into the prison where the king's prisoners were held, and there he remained. But the Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love.' (Genesis 39: 20/21)

*(Modern Version)*

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever. Amen.

*(Traditional Version)*

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Closing Prayer (read aloud):**

Lord God, when we are feeling low, be our hope. When all around is darkness, be our light. When we are weak, be our strength. When we are sad, be our comforter. We thank you that you love us and care for us, and know what it is like to feel pain. Help us put our trust in you, even when we don't have answers to all our questions. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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## **Takeaway**

**ON SHEET:** Ask somebody to read out the *Takeaway* section:

Either:

- This week see if you can make a list of groups in your neighbourhood set up to help others. This can include churches, charity shops, hospitals etc. Choose one and find out more about what it does.
- This week, look for good news stories in your neighbourhood. A good place to start might be a local newspaper or local radio station.