

FINDING GOD IN SUFFERING

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE





EPISODE 1

The Meaning of Human Suffering

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Introduction, Chapters 1–2

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 5–13

Invitation to Prayer

Luke 10:25–37

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

It can be said that man suffers whenever *he experiences any kind of evil*. In *the vocabulary* of the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 7)

Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises *the question: why?* It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning. [...] Man can put this question to God with all the emotion of his heart and with his mind full of dismay and anxiety; and God expects the question and listens to it. (*Salvifici Doloris*, nos. 9–10)

In order to discover the profound meaning of suffering . . . [w]e must above all accept the light of revelation not only insofar as it expresses the transcendent order of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, as the definitive source of everything that exists. Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 13)

Romances of John of the Cross no. 7

“My will is yours,”
the Son replied,
“and my glory is
that your will be mine.
This is fitting, Father,
what you, the Most High, say;
for in this way
your goodness will be more evident,
your great power will be seen
and your justice and wisdom.
I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word

of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
I will go seek my bride
and take upon myself
her weariness and labors
in which she suffers so;
and that she may have life,
I will die for her,
and lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to you.”

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. What comes to mind as you consider suffering? How do you think about your own suffering, that of others, or the reality of suffering in general? How have these realities affected the way you engage with your faith?
2. What is your reaction when you hear that your suffering could become a sharing in the suffering of Jesus Christ? Does this possibility seem overwhelming, or comforting?
3. Have you honestly confronted God with the question of “Why?” If not, is there something that might be holding you back? If yes, how have you sensed God responding?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. Pope John Paul II says that the Cross of Christ is itself the answer to the meaning of suffering. How would you explain this?
3. Was there anything you learned or reflected on from this video that surprised you, challenged you, or encouraged you? Are there any insights from this that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, you created us in love and made us for yourself. Our bodies and souls are a gift from you and you direct our lives so that we may share in your love and your life. In those places where we feel the wounds of the brokenness of this world, give us your strength and the healing that we long for. Help us to recognize you in the midst of our pain, and to know that you are near. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 1, pg. 13)

EPISODE 2

Saint Paul and the Experience of the Cross

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Chapters 18, 20, 21

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 1–2, 18, 24–26

Invitation to Prayer

Matthew 11:28–30

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

The answer which comes through this sharing, by way of the interior encounter with the Master, is in itself *something more than the mere abstract answer* to the question about the meaning of suffering. For it is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: “Follow me! Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my cross.” Gradually, *as the individual takes up his cross*, spiritually uniting himself to the cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering *descends to man’s level* and becomes, in a sense, the individual’s personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 26)

Man hears Christ’s saving answer as he himself gradually becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 26)

The parable of the Good Samaritan belongs to the Gospel of suffering. For it indicates what the relationship of each of us must be toward our suffering neighbor. We are not allowed to “pass by on the other side” indifferently; we must “stop” beside him. *Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person*, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own. The name “Good Samaritan” fits *every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others*, who “is moved” by the misfortune of another. If Christ, who knows the interior of man, emphasizes this compassion, this means that it is important for our whole attitude to others’ suffering. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 28)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Colossians 1:24)

But he was pierced for our sins,
crushed for our iniquity.
He bore the punishment that makes us whole,
by his wounds we were healed. (Isaiah 53:5 NABRE)

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. What stirs in you when you hear that Christ wants you to personally take part in his work of redemption? What would a full response to this invitation look like?
2. Like the Good Samaritan, have you ever felt God was calling you to reach out to someone who was suffering and not to “pass by on the other side”? How did you respond to this call? How can you reach out to someone you know who is suffering now?
3. As you continue to contend with the mystery of suffering in your own life, what is one concrete resolution you desire to make for the journey ahead?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. Pope John Paul II said that the meaning of suffering is found “at the end of the long road” (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 1). What are some of the insights you have learned on the “long road” or journey of your own sufferings, or in accompanying others?
3. Was there anything you learned or reflected on from this video that surprised you, challenged you, or encouraged you? Are there any insights from this that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, Almighty Father, we thank you that you have called us to participate in the life of Jesus, your Son. Thank you that he who is fully human and fully divine draws near to us in our suffering and gives us consolation and strength. Help us to hear his voice and respond generously to his call to intimacy and a sharing in the work of the redemption. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 18, pg. 146)

EPISODE 3

The Search for Meaning; the Discovery of God

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Chapters 3, 5, 9

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 13–17

Invitation to Prayer

Philippians 2:5–11

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understand how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. (Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 57)

But in order to perceive the true answer to the “why” of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists. Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery: we are conscious of the insufficiency and inadequacy of our explanations. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the “why” of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 13)

If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist? To this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question: the goodness of creation, the drama of sin and the patient love of God who comes to meet man by his covenants, the redemptive Incarnation of his Son, his gift of the Spirit, his gathering of the Church, the power of the sacraments and his call to a blessed life to which free creatures are invited to consent in advance, but from which, by a terrible mystery, they can also turn away in advance. There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 309)

Down shadowy lanes, across strange streams
Bridged over by our broken dreams;
Behind the misty caps of years,
Beyond the great salt font of tears,
The garden lies. Strive as you may,
You cannot miss it on your way.

All paths that have been or shall be,
Pass somewhere through Gethsemane.
All those who journey, soon or late,
Must pass within the garden's gate;
Must kneel alone in darkness there,
And battle with some fierce despair.
God pity those who cannot say,
"Not mine but thine," who only pray,
"Let this cup pass," and cannot see
The purpose of Gethsemane.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "Gethsemane," in *Poems of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*
(Edinburgh: W. P. Nimmo, Hat and Mitchell, 1889), 168.

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. Consider the three "meanings" of suffering (Result of Sin, Classroom, Divine Love). How have you experienced each of these? How might you open yourself more to receive divine love in a new way?
2. Have you ever experienced a new beginning or healing after suffering and loss? Do you sense God's work of restoration in your life at this time? If so, how? If not, what obstacles might you be facing?
3. When did you last allow Christ to apply his saving love to you in the Sacrament of Confession? Might it be time to consider approaching the sacrament again soon?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. Pope John Paul II says that Jesus' suffering "annihilates this evil in the spiritual space of the relationship between God and humanity, and fills this space with good" (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 17). Have you ever seen goodness, hope, or meaning break through in the midst of an experience of suffering? How would you explain this?
3. Was there anything you learned or reflected on from this video that surprised you, challenged you, or encouraged you? Are there any insights from this that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, Almighty Father, your Son willingly embraced the cross to save us and to bring us new life. Our own experience of the cross is often difficult and even overwhelming. Help us to recognize Jesus in the midst of our suffering, and to know that he is with us. Grant us the courage and the generosity to unite ourselves to him and to participate in the redemption that transforms the world. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 10, pg. 72)

EPISODE 4

The Mystery of Love and Redemptive Suffering

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Chapters 7, 8, 10

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 19–20

Invitation to Prayer

John 16:28–33

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love. (Saint John of the Cross, “Letter 26,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 760)

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

In the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 19)

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13 NRSV)

Rood is my name; once, trembling, covered with blood,
I bore the great King.
They drove me through with dark nails:
on me are the deep wounds manifest,
wide-mouthed hate-dents.
I durst not harm any of them.
How they mocked at us both!
I was all moist with blood
sprung from the man’s side
after He sent forth His soul.

(“The Dream of the Rood,” in *The First Poems in English*,
trans. Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 31)

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a time when love was freely added to a difficult situation? How did it change the situation or the outcome?

2. Has an experience of the cross in your life ever surprised you or caught you off guard? How did you respond at the time? Is there anything you would choose to do differently now?
3. Where do you see God in the daily circumstances of your life? Is it easier or more difficult to recognize his presence in times of suffering?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. Pope Benedict XVI speaks of how friendship with God is possible because of Jesus' suffering for us. Through Jesus' Passion, he says, human friendship has also come to encompass giving one's life for others. How do you see the connection between suffering and love in your relationship with God or with others? Have you ever experienced a time when suffering for or with another person deepened your capacity for friendship with that person?
3. Was there anything you learned or reflected on from this video that surprised you, challenged you, or encouraged you? Are there any insights from this that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, Almighty Father, sin wearies us and sorrows weigh us down as we struggle to find our way to you. Often we struggle to find meaning and purpose and we seek to know your consoling presence in our lives. Help us to recognize you in the daily circumstances of life, teaching us that you have come into the world not to condemn, but to save and give new life. Give us the courage to walk in the freedom of the children of God. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 5, pg. 40)

EPISODE 5

Thorns in the Flesh

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 21–24

Invitation to Prayer

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

The path of Paul is clearly paschal: *sharing in the Cross* of Christ comes about *through the experience of the Risen One*, therefore through a special sharing in the Resurrection. Thus, even in the Apostle's expressions on the subject of suffering there so often appears the motif of glory, which finds its beginning in Christ's Cross. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 21)

Those who share in Christ's sufferings have before their eyes the Paschal Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection, in which Christ descends, in a first phase, to the ultimate limits of human weakness and impotence: indeed, he dies nailed to the Cross. But if at the same time in this *weakness* there is accomplished his *lifting up*, confirmed by the power of the Resurrection, then this means that the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's Cross. (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 23)

The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth. (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 13)

"I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this love. And so my life is good." (Saint Josephine Bakhita, quoted in *Spe Salvi*, no. 3, Pope Benedict XVI)

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. Have you ever asked God to remove your suffering or to give you a different cross? Is there an area in your life where God might be calling you to resist suffering? Is there any cross he might be calling you to accept?
2. Has an experience of evil ever made you doubt God's existence? What is your reaction to Saint Thomas Aquinas' argument that the existence of evil proves the existence and goodness of God?

3. What are some helpful ways you have found to “begin again” after failure or disappointment? Is there anything you would like to do differently going forward?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. Saint John Paul II says that in the Church, the Body of Christ, “Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer” (*Salvifici Doloris*, no. 24). How can we as a Church encounter and accompany those who suffer? How can our response to the crosses in our own lives have a “ripple effect” on the people around us?
3. Was there anything you learned or reflected on from this video that surprised you, challenged you, or encouraged you? Are there any insights from this that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, Almighty Father, you are the Author of our faith and our salvation. When we encounter evil we often falter and are beset by doubts. Help us to know that you have created us for good and that you have a plan for our lives. May we recognize that Christ came to give us the true freedom of the children of God. May we trust you in all the circumstances of life. Illumine the path before us and allow us to become the men and women you have always created us to be. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 12, pg. 90, and Ch 13, pg. 100)

EPISODE 6

Bringing Light to the Dark

Suggested reading from *Finding God in Suffering*: Chapters 11, 16, 19

Suggested reading from *Salvifici Doloris*: nos. 27–31

Invitation to Prayer

Matthew 4:12–22

Quotes to Discuss or Ponder

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:1–2)

[God] has said, “I will never forsake you or abandon you.” Thus we may say with confidence:
“The Lord is my helper,
[and] I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”

Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Hebrews 13:5–8 NABRE)

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1817)

Questions for Reflection or Journaling

1. What place in your life or in the world would you identify as a “land of deep darkness”? Is there any way you can see Christ shining a light into that darkness? What do you imagine that would look like?
2. How has God been faithful to you in the past? Can you recall any particular moments when he guided you and helped you to find true peace?

3. How might God be inviting you to grow in the virtue of hope? How can you live out the virtue of hope in a practical way at this time?
4. Choose one of the above and spend a few minutes in conversation with God about the topic. Allow some moments of silence to listen for what he may be telling you.

For Group Discussion

1. What word or phrase from the Scripture passage stands out to you? Is there anything you feel moved to share about what is resonating in your heart about that passage?
2. What do hope and suffering have to do with one another? How are we called to exercise the theological virtue of hope even within circumstances that cause suffering? Can you think of some concrete examples?
3. How has this video series affected the way you think about suffering, or about God? Is there any insight or encouragement you have gained that you would like to share now?

Closing Prayer

O God, Almighty Father, we sometimes feel like we are in the land of darkness and we long for your light and love. You sent your Son to dwell among us and to take on our suffering and sorrow. Teach us to recognize your Son in the sufferings we experience and help us to offer ourselves to you in love through all the contradictions in life. With you as our guide may we find true peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Finding God in Suffering*, Ch 16, pg. 129)

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