



Christian Reflection  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**

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The Center thanks the  
Cooperative Baptist Fellow-  
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## Study Guides for Suffering

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore suffering's mysterious role in a Christian life, and how it should mold our response to human agony in the world. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use. They are especially appropriate for study during the season of Lent.

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### Focus Article:

📖 Power Made Perfect in Weakness  
(*Suffering*, pp. 11-19)

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# Power Made Perfect in Weakness

How do we express courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? While our culture idolizes strength in adversity and tough self-reliance, courage has another side that is revealed when our vulnerability is greatest and our strength is exhausted.

### Prayer<sup>1</sup>

Nothing can trouble.  
Nothing can frighten.  
Those who seek God shall never go wanting.  
God alone fills us.

### Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

### Reflection

Though he asked three times to be relieved of a personal pain or difficulty — the mysterious “thorn in the flesh” that he endured — the Apostle Paul received from the Lord this startling response: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). In the Hellenistic world, being sufficient (the word used here is *arkeō*) meant overcoming hardships and shortcomings by one’s own power. Yet Paul discovered “that courage is not finally about trusting our *own* strength,” writes DeYoung. “When our own strength is exhausted by suffering, we see most clearly that true strength is rooted in God’s power, and true courage inspired by his love.”

This radically different understanding of strength and power, exemplified in the person and life of Christ, gives us a new perspective on the virtue of courage. We discover that courage:

- ▶ *endures suffering*. We need not avoid pain at all times and places. For all its horror, suffering is not the greatest evil. It is worse to *do* evil than to *suffer* it. Indeed “we need not fear weakness,” DeYoung notes, for “suffering can be a crucible of self-transformation, an opportunity for new vision. Like Job, it is precisely when we are bent low from desperate weariness and pain that we are most likely to learn to say, ‘My ears had heard of you, but *now my eyes have seen you*’ (Job 42:5, NIV, emphasis added).”<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ *is an enabling virtue* that “doesn’t realize the good itself, but rather serves as an indispensable aid when the good is threatened.” Suffering isn’t good itself, which means that courageously enduring it has no value unless there is something worth suffering *for*. “The suffering the Christian is called to bear is most often the result of trying to love others in a world full of sin and wretchedness. Great love almost always involves suffering, whether it is in small doses of self-denial or great dramatic losses,” says DeYoung. “When we endure suffering, we say by our endurance that we are waiting for something better, and we believe it is still coming.”
- ▶ *is a spiritual strength*, not a physical power. Unlike the typical American action hero who conquers the bad guys on his own, a courageous person may be weak and vulnerable to harm. But courage doesn’t allow fear and suffering to stop us from doing the good. “Especially in his moment of greatest vulnerability, Christ showed us the source of true strength — the love of God.



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The power of God's love far exceeds the limits of any human power, yet it can become our own."

- ▶ *is a virtue for all of us.* The ancient Greek ideal of battlefield courage "disqualified women and children, the sick and disabled, the foreigner and the socially disenfranchised" from the virtue. But "if courage can be expressed in the endurance of suffering, then it is no longer open only to those who excel in human strength and physical power. It is a virtue for all of us, even those who may never count as powerful; in fact, it may be especially available to the weak and the wounded."

We hold fast "to God's promise to help us stand firm against fear, and to stand with us when we are powerless to avoid suffering, so that love—not fear—has the last word in our lives."

### Study Questions

1. What are some examples of courage in the life of Christ?
2. Comment on DeYoung's observation that "If someone is suffering injury or pain because he doesn't love or respect himself, because he has been beaten into submission and self-hatred, then suffering can deaden the soul, not enliven it. The martyrs died out of great love, not out of despair."
3. Enduring suffering is a scary idea. Do you agree with the three reasons DeYoung discusses in the section entitled "Why is endurance so difficult?" Are there more reasons?
4. If "true strength is rooted in God's power," then how do we get in touch with God's power when we are suffering?

### Departing Hymn: "How Firm a Foundation" (verses 1, 2, 6, and 7)

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!  
What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
to you, who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

In every condition, in sickness, in health;  
in poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;  
at home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,  
as your days may demand, shall your strength ever be.

Even down to old age all My people shall prove  
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;  
and when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,  
like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;  
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

*John Rippon's A SELECTION OF HYMNS (1787)*  
Suggested Tune: FOUNDATION

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the poem "Nada de Turbe" by St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.



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### Focus Article:

📖 Suffering Servants  
(*Suffering*, pp. 20-28)

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# Suffering Servants

In the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus, the suffering of those called into God's service becomes clothed with ever deepening significance. Their suffering is not glorified, but it is endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.

### Prayer (Psalm 138:8)

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.  
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

### Scripture Reading: Acts 8:26-39

### Responsive Reading (Isaiah 53:5-8, 10)

But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
**upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.**

All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
**and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.**

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
**like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.**

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?

**For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.**

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.  
When you make his life an offering for sin,  
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;  
**through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.**

### Reflection

Beginning with the servant song of Isaiah 53 that the Ethiopian Eunuch is reading, Philip shares "the good news about Jesus Christ." Imagine just how *good* the news sounded to the Eunuch, who was prevented by his condition from joining the covenant community (Leviticus 21:18-20; Deuteronomy 23:1) though he could hope for the day when even foreigners and eunuchs will be gathered into God's household (Isaiah 56:3-8). "About whom is the prophet speaking?" the Eunuch asks when he reads about the shorn and scorned servant. "Is it himself or someone else?"

"From its earliest beginnings, the Christian Church has interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus by means of the servant-paradigm of Second Isaiah," notes Janzen. His suffering:

- ▶ *is prophetic*. Jeremiah, the quintessential suffering prophet, faced rejection for his prophetic message and "pre-lived" his people's coming Divine judgment and exile (Jeremiah 16:1-9). Likewise, the Isaianic servant and Jesus suffer rejection and "pre-live"



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God's judgment. Beyond enduring rejection, Janzen writes, the servant "embraces in a spirit of gentleness, meekness, and submission the wide range of suffering that marks the human condition," and the same applies to Jesus.

- ▶ *vicariously bears the rebellion of others.* God called the nation of Israel to be a "light to the nations," a prophetic witness to the world. Now the servant obediently takes up the task the nation has failed to accomplish (49:3) and accepts the consequent suffering unto death (50:4-9; 53:1-11a). "God's new move consists of not rejecting Israel for failing as a people to follow the call to be God's servant (42:1-4), but 'reducing God's expectation' of Israel's obedience to the obedience of *one* person and accepting it as vicarious for the people."
- ▶ *extends God's salvation to all.* He lives out the "servant's total calling...to be 'a light to the nations' and to 'restore the survivors of Israel' (49:6). Jesus not only atones for the sins of both through his suffering and death, but also extends God's salvation by reaching out to those suffering in many and various ways." Thus, Matthew 12:15-21 (citing Isaiah 42:1-4) links Jesus to the servant on the basis of his healing ministry.

These texts apply to us as disciples. "If opposition and suffering result from obedience to our call [to proclaim the gospel], this too...may make our lives a witness to the world around us," Janzen writes. In a "post-Christian" world, "God's commission can be carried out by a small remnant, and this is due to God's grace that accepts such a remnant...to represent before God, in its suffering and rejection, 'the many' who have turned away."

### Study Questions

1. In Janzen's view, who is the (suffering) servant—the nation of Israel, a remnant group, or an individual—in each of the four Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12)?
2. As you read each phrase of the fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), what images of Christ's suffering come to mind?
3. In 1 Peter 2:18-25 what does the servant-paradigm suggest to people who must "endure pain while suffering unjustly"?
4. Are Christians called to prophetic suffering today?

### Departing Hymn: "I Lay My Sins on Jesus"

I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God;  
He bears them all, and frees us from the accursèd load;  
I bring my guilt to Jesus, to wash my crimson stains  
white in His blood most precious, till not a stain remains.

I lay my wants on Jesus; all fullness dwells in Him;  
He heals all my diseases, He doth my soul redeem:  
I lay my griefs on Jesus, my burdens and my cares;  
He from them all releases, He all my sorrows shares.

I long to be like Jesus, strong, loving, lowly, mild;  
I long to be like Jesus, the Father's holy Child:  
I long to be with Jesus, amid the heavenly throng,  
to sing with saints His praises, to learn the angels' song.

Horatius Bonar, *SONGS FOR THE WILDERNESS* (1843)



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### Focus Articles:

- 📖 We Have Never Seen His Face  
(*Suffering*, pp. 29-35)
  
- 📖 Transcending Cultures  
(*Suffering*, pp. 36-37)
  
- 📖 My Redeemer Lives  
(*Suffering*, pp. 38-40)

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# We Have Never Seen His Face

How we depict the face of Christ reveals both whom we follow and who we are as his disciples. Shusaku Endo's celebrated novel, *Silence*, challenges us to see "one who 'suffers with us' and who allows for our weakness."

### Prayer (from John 1:14b)

O God, we confess that "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 22:1, 14-18

### Responsive Reading<sup>1</sup>

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

**Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.**

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

**Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.**

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

### Reflection

Why do we recoil from depictions of Jesus' suffering? Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is controversial, not least because many would agree with critic Roger Ebert's view, "This is the most violent film I have ever seen."<sup>2</sup> He warns, "You must be prepared for whippings, flayings, beatings, the crunch of bones, the agony of screams, the cruelty of the sadistic centurions, the rivulets of blood that crisscross every inch of Jesus' body."

Ebert, who was raised as a Catholic, recalls praying at the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. "For we altar boys, this was not necessarily a deep spiritual experience. Christ suffered, Christ died, Christ rose again, we were redeemed, and let's hope we can get home in time to watch the Illinois basketball game on TV," he writes. "What Gibson has provided for me, for the first time in my life, is a visceral idea of what the Passion consisted of." Unlike those Hollywood biblical epics that look "like holy cards brought to life," this film doesn't turn "Jesus and his disciples into neat, clean, well-barbered middle-class businessmen."

How we depict Jesus can shape us morally. Brett Dewey explains how Shusaku Endo (1923-1996), the famed Japanese novelist and Catholic Christian, reproached "western Christianity for failing to depict in Christ's face the terrible suffering and sorrow that are so much a part of God's incarnation into the fullness of human experience." He believed that Western forms of faith based on "those Sunday school images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Jesus that attempt to portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine...[have] promoted a triumphal missionary strategy and underpinned Western cultural hegemony. The church sought to imitate that Sunday school Jesus by being attractive, powerful, and heroic to the point of trying to save native peoples from their 'undeveloped' cultures. The problem was that these people were transferred into a new culture not of kingdom freedom, but of western dominance."



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### Study Questions

1. Recall the central action of Shusaku Endo's *The Silence* – the temptation of the young missionary Rodrigues to trample on the face of Christ. Why does Rodrigues trample?
2. How, according to the appendix of *The Silence*, did Rodrigues' action shape his Christian ministry? How did it help form the secret Christian community in Japan?
3. Compare Stradano's *Crucifixion* (cover), He Qi's *The Crucifixion* (p. 36), and Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* (p. 38). How does each artist depict Christ's suffering?
4. A motley group of people surrounds the dying Christ in He Qi's painting "Crucifixion" (p. 36). What would Christ's death on the cross mean to those persons?
5. What does Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* (p. 38) suggest about the role of interpreters, indeed layers of them, in helping us to understand the suffering of Christ?
6. The departing hymn originally was titled "Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ," for it is a meditation on Paul's pledge: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). How does Isaac Watts' text carry us into the Apostle's strange idea?
7. Does your congregation display crucifixes or empty crosses? What hymns do you sing about the Crucifixion? What do these teach members about discipleship and suffering?

### Departing Hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (verses 1, 3, 4, and 5)

When I survey the wondrous cross  
on which the Prince of glory died,  
my richest gain I count but loss,  
and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down!  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,  
spreads o'er His body on the tree;  
then I am dead to all the globe,  
and all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small;  
love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Isaac Watts, *HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS* (1707)  
Suggested Tunes: HAMBURG or O WALY WALY

<sup>1</sup>From "Were You There?" J. W. Johnson and J. R. Johnson, *American Negro Spirituals* (1926)

<sup>2</sup>Roger Ebert, "The Passion of the Christ," February 24, 2004, ([rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040224/REVIEWS/402240301/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040224/REVIEWS/402240301/1023)).



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📖 My Father's Hands  
(*Suffering*, pp. 76-83)

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# My Father's Hands

Whether facing the twisting agony of arthritis or numb despair of leprosy, her father's response was the same: to take the hands of a person gently in his own, to become intimate both with their disease and with them. Renowned hand surgeon Paul Brand knew that we can use our hands to tell people in pain something about themselves: that they are not alone.

### Prayer†

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 8:40-56

### Reflection

The eighth chapter of Luke accents Jesus' astounding power – the windstorm and waves on the Sea of Galilee obey his rebuke (8:22-25) and a legion of demons flee from his voice, escaping their distraught human host to enter a herd of pigs (8:26-39). By sandwiching these miracles between a list of Jesus' prominent followers (8:1-3) and the twelve disciples being commissioned with "power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases" (9:1-2), Luke implies that Jesus' power is available to the disciples "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal."

But Luke 8 is not all spiritual pyrotechnics. Two stories, always woven together in the synoptic gospels, reveal the personal side of Jesus' healing power – he *receives the touch* of the woman suffering with hemorrhages for twelve years and he *clasps the hand* of Jairus' dead twelve-year-old daughter. "It is a startling idea, as mysterious as magic: that God Himself drew on the power of physical closeness as a healing tool," notes Pauline Brand Nelson. "The implication, for those of us who call ourselves His servants, is that we too need to put ourselves within arm's length of the suffering around us. The same side of the fence, close enough to risk being affected. What else can it mean when we are instructed in the laying on of hands for healing?"

Brand recalls when her father, when the treatment of leprosy with drugs was in its infancy, carefully examined a man's leprosy-damaged hands and discovered the untapped muscular strength in them. "I wondered, recently, whether I ought to feel indignant that he decided to take a risk that indirectly exposed the rest of the family to the possibility of infection," she writes. "I found that I could not even begin to consider the question – partly because I was doing so from the position of the health I enjoy today, but more so because the man I knew simply could not have done anything else. There would have been no 'decision.' The act of examining that man's hands...was instinctive, a reflex made inevitable by the forces that shaped his character between his first encounter with leprosy as a child, and his second as a young surgeon – the forces of passionate curiosity, tenderness towards his fellow man, and a longing to serve God."





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### Study Questions

1. "Thank God for pain!" Dr. Brand would exclaim. How did his study of leprosy confirm that a capacity for pain is good?
2. Do you agree that appropriate personal presence and physical touch is important to those who are suffering or grieving?
3. "It is true that we no longer put people with leprosy behind fences," says Nelson. "However...we have developed subtle and efficient ways to isolate ourselves from each other." How do we often distance and protect ourselves from people who are suffering?
4. In what ways, in Gillette's hymn "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch," should we be present to those who are suffering?

### Departing Hymn: "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch"

O God of life, your healing touch  
brings wholeness and salvation!  
In you, this world you love so much  
becomes a new creation.  
Through Jesus Christ you blessed the poor,  
unleashed your gifts of healing.  
You gave new sight, new strength, new life—  
to all, your love revealing.

O Christ, the loving healer still,  
you gather us for mission  
to serve your people who are ill,  
whatever their condition.  
You send us to the suffering  
with medicine and caring;  
now make our lives an offering  
to those who are despairing.

Lord, by your Spirit, may we hear  
the truth of others' stories.  
May we respect their doubts and fears,  
their hopes and dreams, their worries.  
And when their ways are not our own,  
Lord, give us understanding:  
our faith cannot be fully grown  
when we are too unbending.

How long, Lord, shall we serve the poor—  
a week, a month, a season?  
We ask the question, hoping for  
a limit to our mission.  
But open wide our hearts anew  
and show us, as we're giving,  
your life-long call to serving you  
in daily, generous living.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2004  
Suggested Tune: KETY

<sup>†</sup>*The Book of Common Prayer* (1979)



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### Focus Article:

📖 Healing Presence  
(*Suffering*, pp. 68-75)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Not in the Medical  
Records  
(*Suffering*, pp. 61-65)

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# Healing Presence

Congregations – through fear, ignorance, or prejudice – may forsake members with severe suffering. How can our friendship increase abundance of life for people with physical and mental health problems?

### Prayer<sup>1</sup>

Holy Spirit, open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts, that we may grow closer to you through joy and through suffering. Be with us in the fullness of your power as new members are added to your household, as we grow in grace through the years, when we are joined in marriage, when we turn to you in sickness or special need, and, at the last, when we are committed into the Father's hands. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Mark 1:40-45

### Responsive Reading<sup>2</sup>

I want Jesus to walk with me.

**All along my pilgrim journey**

**I want Jesus to walk with me.**

In my trials, Lord, walk with me.

**When the shades of life are falling,**

**Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.**

In my sorrows, Lord walk with me.

**When my heart is aching,**

**Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me**

In my troubles, Lord walk with me.

**When my life becomes a burden,**

**Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me**

### Reflection

In our highly medicalized culture we tend to see illness as the presence of a disease. We want to identify a discrete “bad spot” in a person's body or mind and then excise or cure it. But ill-health and suffering are much more complex. How we experience an illness depends on many factors in our history and relationships. Thus “suffering is personal,” says David B. McCurdy. “It has to do with the meanings that illness (and treatment) holds – for *this* person. Ultimately, a key ingredient of suffering is the person's experience of a threat to integrity or ‘intactness’ – in any or all dimensions of life, the bodily among them.”

When Jesus heals the man's skin disease, from a medicalized perspective he is simply “‘the great physician’ who breaks into natural history and miraculously removes the bad spot – in this case leprosy – in order to return the person to health...” Swinton notes. “Of course, the healing was an act of compassion that freed the man from his disease – and at this level we rightly may compare contemporary medicine to Jesus' action.” But there is more to the healing event. The man's illness made him ritually “unclean” – unworthy to participate in Temple rituals. By touching him, Jesus enters the man's stigma and social isolation. “By sharing in the social exclusion



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of those whom society had marginalized, Jesus *shifts the margins*: those previously marginalized people now form the heart of God's coming Kingdom," writes Swinton. "When Jesus enters into relationship with the marginalized and shares in their 'social death,' he initiates a process of resurrection for people like this man with leprosy. They become full persons and are reintegrated into the community, which itself is necessarily transformed by his healing actions."

Do diseases marginalize people today? Swinton thinks so. People with profound mental health problems like schizophrenia are "alienated, stigmatized, often friendless, and, interestingly, often prevented from expressing [their] spirituality." He calls schizophrenia "a totalizing illness," for "unlike someone with influenza or measles, a person diagnosed with schizophrenia loses their personal identity and actually becomes the illness: a 'schizophrenic.'" We see them, even their spiritual experiences, through the lens of negative cultural assumptions about their illness. Indeed, evidence suggests "mental health services tend to exclude spiritual expression as pathological and they actively seek to disengage spirituality from the therapeutic process."

Congregations can become places of healing by standing with people who have been isolated from others by mental or physical diseases. "Forming friendships with people who are marginalized and different is not an easy task," Swinton admits. "Yet, if we can create forms of community with 'safe space' for people to develop such friendships, even if these friendships are transient, then we will have moved some way towards faithfulness and Christ-likeness."

### Study Questions

1. What factors in our history or relationships make suffering such a *personal* experience, in the sense that one person suffers from an illness differently than other people?
2. What does Swinton mean by a "totalizing illness"? Are some mental or physical diseases "totalizing" in our culture? Why is this so?
3. "The friendships that Jesus formed with persons during his ministry both revealed and initiated their friendship with God," notes Swinton. How were Jesus' friendships qualitatively different from friendships motivated by social exchange and likeness? What sort of friendship will draw us into relationship with people isolated in their suffering?
4. What important experiences of Stephen Schmidt's are "not in the medical records"? How do these experiences shape his encounter with and personal response to Crohn's Disease?
5. How is God's love embodied for Schmidt by his wife and by the chronic illness group at Grace Lutheran Church?
6. How can your congregation work together with health experts to create "space" for forming friendships with people with profound mental and debilitating physical disease?

Departing Hymn: "Why Have You Forsaken Me?"



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo  
(*Suffering*, pp. 56-60)

### Suggested Article:

📖 How the Soul Grows Through Loss  
(*Suffering*, pp. 84-89)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

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# Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

In a little Salvadoran hamlet, the memory of villagers' suffering during a long and terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. They remind us there are many "crucified peoples," and we need to ask "Who put them on the cross?"

### Prayer†

For the poor, the persecuted, the sick, and all who suffer; for refugees, prisoners, and all who are in danger; that they may be relieved and protected, we pray to you, O Lord.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 57

### Responsive Reading (from Lamentations 5)

Remember, Great God, what has happened to us.

**See our disgrace.**

Our inheritance is given to strangers,

**Our homes given to aliens.**

We have become orphans with no father,

**Our mothers are like widows.**

We must pay for water to drink,

**We must buy our firewood.**

We are driven hard with a yoke on our neck,

**We are weary but are given no rest.**

We get our bread at the peril of our lives,

**Our skin is scorched from the heat of famine.**

The joy of our heart has ceased,

**Our dancing has turned to mourning.**

Because of these things our hearts are sick,

**Our eyes have grown dim because Mt. Zion lies desolate.**

**All: Restore to us yourself, Great God, that we may be restored.**

### Reflection

"I encourage first-time visitors to El Salvador to go to the rural village of Santa Marta where folks are willing to talk about their past," says Yvonne Dilling. "In this village where mother and grandmother still cook delicious thick white corn tortillas from scratch on a clay griddle over a wood fire, all you need to do is give people a leading sentence—such as 'They say the people suffered a lot before they fled through the hills to Honduras'—and some personal or family experience rolls right out, as though the mother awoke that morning thinking about it. And maybe she did."

In a nearby hamlet of Valle Nuevo, Dilling joins villagers each year to commemorate the Lempa River crossing in 1981. She calls "it a 'crossing' [not a 'massacre'] because, even though fifty people were slaughtered by the army, five thousand others survived." How do they cope with terrible memories of suffering?

- ▶ *They reclaim the "river that produced death[,]...pronouncing it a river of life."* For years villagers walked to the river to observe a Mass in honor of those who died there, enjoy a picnic with the survivors and their descendants, and swim in the river.



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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► *They re-enact the Stations of the Cross.* When older members could no longer trek to the river, the community chose to commemorate in the village. “Women and men who had *never* gone to the river because their memories were too painful began to participate,” Dilling says. “At each station, they reflected on how Christ suffered there again with the Salvadoran people during the war. These villagers...were blessed with some mental healing as they recalled that God was with them in Christ through those long and terrible years.”

Phyllis Kersten notes that encountering the triune God in the midst of our suffering is also a theme in the lives of Gerald Sittser and Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost family members in tragic accidents. “No matter how deep the pit into which I descend,” Sittser reports, “I keep finding God there. He is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. He is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world.”

“It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live,” writes Wolterstorff. “I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see [God’s] sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor.”

### Study Questions

1. “Some grief is too deep to bear,” Stephen Schmidt observes. Rather, “it is endured, it is challenged, it becomes the stuff of reconciliation or transformation.” How are the villagers of Valle Nuevo dealing with their grief? Is it significant that they are dealing with it *together* as a community?
2. According to Dilling, what is the difference between a victim and a martyr? Both may endure terrible and undeserved suffering. Which are the people in Valle Nuevo?
3. “Our biblical mandate is two-fold: to respond immediately to alleviate the suffering of others, and to work to change policies that cause suffering,” Dilling suggests. “Our works of mercy are important, but so is political advocacy. To *not* take action to transform political structures that cause suffering is to side with the oppressor.” Do you agree?
4. Discuss Gerald Sittser’s insight: “I was empty of energy and desire. All I could do was *let God love me*, even though I hardly believed that he loved anyone, least of all me.... I learned through that experience that nothing can separate us from his love – not even our inability to love him in return!”
5. Wolterstorff finds that looking “at the world through tears” enables him to “see things that dry-eyed [he] could not see.” How can our suffering reshape the way we see and respond to the world’s agony?
6. Do members of your congregation share their grief and suffering with one another, or do they deal with them alone? How does your congregation respond to suffering in the wider community?

Departing Hymn: “Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

<sup>†</sup>*The Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# Power Made Perfect in Weakness

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To take Christ as our exemplar and to define the virtue of courage in relation to his person and life.
2. To consider why enduring suffering is so difficult for us.
3. To explore how God's power provides strength when we must endure pain and suffering.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "How Firm a Foundation," locate the tune FOUNDATION in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with an Story

"Several years ago, a young couple was featured in the newspaper, holding a picture of their 21-month-old daughter Macy, whom they had buried the day before. She died of a rare genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy. These parents went through a lot caring for Macy in her short life, but they knew exactly what they were up against. The same disorder had also claimed the lives of Macy's older twin brother and sister just two and a half years earlier. The twins were diagnosed when they were six months old. They too died before their second birthday.

"You might expect parents in a situation like this to be bitter, angry, and hardened by their experience. Macy's mother and father freely admit how difficult life has been for them, how many questions they have for which they can't find answers. As her father put it, 'When they first told us this was a fatal disease, we didn't know the half of what we were getting into.' Even the blurry newsprint on the front page of the paper conveys faces marked by wounds that are fresh and deep. It is plain from the article, however, that their love for their children is greater than their pain. "We see Macy as a dancing angel," said her mother. "She is in heaven, able to breathe freely, playing with her sister and brother." The couple is not sure whether they will try to have another baby or adopt. But they do know they want to be parents again'" (*Suffering*, pp. 11-12).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for someone close to them who endures physical, mental, or spiritual weakness. Then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study begins with the Apostle Paul's startling idea that our "sufficiency" is a gift of God's power in our lives, rather than our own accomplishment. He suggests this in 2 Corinthians 9:8 ("And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having *enough* of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work") and says it explicitly in 2 Corinthians 12:9. By employing in each verse the word for self-sufficiency, *arkeō*, which the NRSV translates "enough" and "sufficient," Paul challenges the Hellenistic ideal of the self-sufficient hero.

Paul's radical idea, DeYoung suggests, begins to make sense if we take Jesus, rather than a battlefield hero like Achilles, as our exemplar of courage. On this model, courage (1) *endures* suffering, (2) is an *enabling* virtue, (3) is exhibited in *spiritual* strength, and (4) is available to all persons. The first two points stand in some tension: though we may often be called to *endure* rather than battle suffering, we must not begin to seek out pain or to think suffering is good in itself.

The third study question invites members to explore the cultural assumptions that make it so difficult for us to endure suffering.

### Study Questions

1. Members may mention events in Jesus' public career — e.g., *confronting* angry townspeople in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30; cf. Matthew 13:54-58) or moneychangers in the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13 and parallels), *touching* people who were ritually unclean like people with leprosy (Matthew 8:1-4 and parallels) or the woman with a flow of blood or the child who was dead (Mark 5:21-43), *enduring* snide public attacks on his character (Matthew 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-35) or misunderstanding by his own disciples (Matthew 20:20-28, etc., and parallels). His enduring betrayal, rejection, and death on the cross are defining acts of courage. Why did Jesus do these things? Encourage members to discuss the love of God that led him to persist despite fear and suffering.
2. DeYoung is distinguishing those who endure suffering out of courage from others who suffer self-inflicted pain or endure out of despair. St. Augustine defines courage as "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the object beloved." The motive is crucial.

Members may know people who suffer out of despair or who seem to enjoy self-pity. How is their suffering qualitatively different from that of people who endure hardship, difficulty, and pain out of love for the good and true?

3. DeYoung mentions three reasons: (1) We must suffer and endure pain when *we are in a position of weakness* and cannot strike back or control the situation. "The pain is bad enough, to be sure; what makes it unbearable is the feeling of powerlessness that goes with it. We must endure pain because we cannot prevent or alleviate it." (2) *Our emotions are debilitating*. We feel anger, but it "is powerless to help us... when we can't fight the pain and make it go away." We also experience "the extra burden of sorrow, the emotion we feel when evil is already here with us." Courage must stand firm against these inner emotions as well as outward threats. (3) "Endurance *implies suffering for a long stretch of time*." In our culture, we expect to fix things quickly, but we do not have much control over how long we must suffer.
4. Encourage members to share their experiences of God's power to endure suffering. They may mention baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, prayer, singing hymns, reading scripture, mutual accountability to other Christians, Christ-like service, and witness as practices that transform our lives and mediate God's strength to us. They may have experienced God's care and strength mediated through family members, friends, congregation members, health care professionals, ministers, and even strangers.

Paul announces, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). This gospel (good news) includes the power of Jesus' resurrection, which when appropriated in our lives through baptism, frees us from sin and condemnation and begins to reshape our lives into conformity with his character (6:1-14; 8:1-4, 21-25).

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Suffering Servants

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Peter 2:18-25
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss 1 Peter 2:18-25
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching goals

1. To explore the mysterious role of suffering in the four Servant Songs in Isaiah.
2. To see how the early Church used this servant-paradigm to understand Jesus' suffering.
3. To consider how Christians are called to prophetic suffering today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "I Lay My Sins on Jesus" locate a tune, WHITFIELD or AURELIA, in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

Despite the suffering caused by a brutal civil war and policies that oppress the poor, "there are still little pockets [in El Salvador] where hope can be found," Yvonne Dilling reports. "I am reminded of an interview with Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest and university professor, shortly before he was slaughtered in 1989 along with five of his brother priests and their cook and her daughter. Giving an overview of the economics of a war fueled by rigid U.S. ideologies, the priest painted a very pessimistic view of the future. After a poignant silence, someone in our group asked him, 'Is there any hope?' With a small, but triumphant smile, he raised a hand with one finger pointing upwards to emphasize his soft reply: 'I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful.'

"Martín-Baró understood that Christ did not come to suffer and die, but to announce a project of life – the building of a kingdom of love, a project in which we are invited to participate. This glorious project has many enemies and its construction workers inevitably experience suffering just as Jesus did. Indeed, they can bear their pain better if they understand the structural aspects of their suffering and its relation to the work of building the kingdom of God. Because they know that God does not will their suffering, in a spirit of gratitude they remain open to the comfort God provides in times of suffering, to the hope of a radically different future, and to God's continuing invitation to be involved in the kingdom" (*Suffering*, pp. 58-59).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for an individual or a group that endures suffering due to their witness for Christ. Then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 8:26-39 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Tracing the great trajectory within Scripture of the ever deepening significance of the suffering of those who are

called into God's service, Waldemar Janzen reviews (1) the lives of the prophets (especially Jeremiah), (2) the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah, and (3) the person and life of Jesus Christ. This study guide 'works backwards' through the same trajectory, beginning from Philip's interpretation of Jesus' life and death by using a Servant Song and its references to prophetic suffering. Janzen concludes, "The trajectory we discover in these texts must not stop, however, before we ourselves identify with the 'we' of Isaiah 53:1-11a and the equally astonished post-resurrection disciples of Jesus." We should ask two crucial questions: "In what sense was their suffering 'for us'?" and "How should we endure suffering that comes as we are called into God's service?" Horatio Bonar responds to these in the hymn, "I Lay My Sins on Jesus."

If you decide to extend the discussion to a second session, members might reflect with the author of 1 Peter 2:18-25 on how our suffering can be prophetic.

### Study Questions

1. Janzen suggests that in the first Servant Song (42:1-4) the servant is the nation of Israel. "Elected by God and endowed with the spirit, the servant (Israel) will, in a gentle and unobtrusive but persistent way, bring justice (*mišpat*) to the nations, who are awaiting God's teaching. Yet Israel apparently fails to see or disregards God's commission."

In the Second Song (49:1-6), the servant may be an individual who was first mentioned in 48:16b. "[T]his human speaker tells of his earlier prophetic commissioning (1b-3), reminiscent of Jeremiah's call, together with his lack of success in carrying it out (4a)." In the third Servant Song (50:4-9), this individual servant "emphasizes his obedient acceptance of suffering...and his unwavering confidence in God's help and triumph."

In the final Servant Song (52:13-53:12), others describe this individual servant – in 52:13-15 and 53:11b-12 the speaker is God, while in 53:1-11a it is a subgroup of persons in Israel who now perceive the vicarious nature of the servant's suffering.

2. Meditating on the Servant Song through the lens of Christ's life does not reveal the only or the original meaning of this passage, but it reshapes our imagination (just as it formed the early Christians' imagination) with a deeper appreciation of Christ's suffering.

Members may recall images of Christ's Passion – the mock trials, insults from the soldiers and crowd, beatings by soldiers, physical abuse on the cross, and burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Isaiah 53:6 may remind them of Jesus' teaching that the people are "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34), that he is "the good shepherd" who seeks lost sheep (John 10:1-18; cf. Luke 15:4-7), and that his disciples are to "feed my sheep" (John 21:16-19) though this involves suffering. His cousin, John, echoes Isaiah 53:7 when he proclaims Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. 1:36).

3. Though Christians are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9), they still live in earthly empires. In families with or as slaves to unbelievers, they may suffer for their faithfulness. How do they "live honorably among the Gentiles, so that...they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (2:12)? How do they live prophetically? Their standard is God's judgment: "live as free people, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as slaves of God" (2:16).

The passage is addressed to slaves, who were a third of the population in the Roman Empire. For background information on ancient slavery, see S. Scott Bartchey's "Slave, Slavery" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1098-1102.

4. Members may mention people who face political discrimination, physical dangers, or death for being Christians. Discuss the situation closer to home. In our culture, do Christians endure suffering for taking prophetic stances in regard to racial equality, care for the environment, economic protection for the marginalized, or opposition to sinful practices? Put another way, on what issues do we fail to courageously confront our society?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# We Have Never Seen His Face

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Galatians 6:11-18
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss paintings and hymn
Questions 1, 2, and 7	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 7	Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To ask how we depict the suffering of Christ.
2. To explore how these depictions reflect both who Christ is and who we are as his disciples.
3. To discuss how Scripture, Christian artwork, and hymns either inform or distort our interpretation of Christ's suffering.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," locate a tune, either HAMBURG or O WALY WALY, in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

"The great good news of the Gospel, theologian Herbert McCabe says, is this: 'If you do not love you will not be alive; if you do love effectively you will be killed.' Jesus is evidence that loving effectively leads to death. He 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried,' the earliest confessions declare in the briefest of summary. Jesus refused to set up an earthly regime or to abuse the power that was his as Son" (*Suffering*, p. 35).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer of confession in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 22:1, 14-18 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Ask members to recall paintings, films, and stories about Jesus' suffering that "portray the Savior as attractive, heroic, and pristine." Do they agree with Shusaku Endo's point that how we depict the face of Jesus not only reflects who Jesus is, but also who we are as his disciples?

Since it brings into conversation several pieces of art, this study has sufficient material for two rich sessions. The group might discuss Endo's novel and Watt's hymn in one session and the three paintings by Stradano, He Qi, and Carpaccio in a second session.

## Study Questions

1. Briefly introduce the main characters: the missionary Rodrigues, his mentor Ferreira, and his treacherous guide Kichijiro. Describe the scene of the Christian peasants facing torture in "the pit" if they do not re-

cant their faith by trampling on the *fumie*. The central action of Rodrigues' trampling the *fumie* occurs after his vision of Christ, whose "face was different from that on which the priest had gazed so often in Portugal, in Rome, in Goa and in Macao." The irony is that Rodrigues tramples Christ's face not out of fear or even compassion for the Japanese peasants (since he values his reputation above their welfare), but "in obedience to the Christ" who says "You may trample. I allow you to trample."

2. Rodrigues discovers that Christ "takes on the pain of the world in his mission to fulfill the will of the Father," and calls us to share his suffering by sacrificing our pride of place. "Endo does not depict his suffering as a social strategy, as an efficient way to accomplish his witness or share the Gospel," Dewey says. "It is not good in itself, and is not the way life is supposed to be. Yet suffering with God is a matter of fidelity, even when, in a dramatic irony, Rodrigues' accepting the stigma of apostasy becomes his route to faithfulness." Later Rodrigues marries a Japanese woman and leads the Christians as "Apostate Paul." Ferreira is "Apostate Peter." Kichijiro is restored. "Their church is a place for weakness and forgiveness; its leaders are redeemed Sauls, and Peters, and Judases. Theirs is a broken community, whose triumph consists in participating in God's mission of sacrificial love to the world."
3. Stradano follows the biblical accounts more closely and depicts them more realistically than He Qi or Carpaccio. Yet Christ's body is stronger and his face more composed in Stradano's painting, even though he depicts the last events before Jesus' death (cf. Mark 15:33-37). How is Jesus' suffering represented in He Qi's and Carpaccio's works? Consider the distress on the faces of those around Jesus, for his suffering may be "reflected" in theirs.
4. Many of the people suffer separation and loneliness. The imprisoned man is separated from the town and the other people, his jail cell floating in the space behind the cross. From opposite directions two single women come to the cross – one who is naked (the woman caught in adultery?) may be shunned, and the one grieving for a dead child is alone in her suffering. The injured man at the foot of the cross seems to be abandoned. All find themselves outside the distant town now. Several suffer physical disability or illness, while others endure legal guilt or social shame and alienation. For how long have these people suffered?  
Jesus bears their suffering on the cross. Notice how his hands, like theirs, are exaggerated. His are marred by the open wounds caused by the nails.
5. St. Jerome and Job together interpret Christ's death amid the larger wreckage and decay of the world, and from the frailty of their own bodies. They meet with viewers in one space and at one time, allowing us to learn from each of them. Carpaccio suggests we cannot know the meaning of Christ's death without taking into account all of this rich perspective.
6. Paul adds a summary note in his own hand (6:11). Those who are urging the Galatians to be circumcised and adopt ritual signs of Jewish distinctiveness do not want to "be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12). Perhaps this means they want to earn their standing with God and are embarrassed by Christ's suffering for them, for it is a reminder of their sin and need. Paul says the Crucifixion changes everything, from how we value ourselves to how we see others. Watts hymn leads us from "foolish pride" to submitting our will to God.
7. Members may mention carvings, sculptures, paintings, posters, or emblems depicting the Crucifixion or the cross that are on display in places of worship or study. They may mention publications with photographs or drawings. When do members notice these? Are they referred to in public worship, or are they noticed privately? What hymns or songs about the Crucifixion are often sung? Does the hymnal have other hymns about Christ's suffering that are rarely sung? Are these used as meditative readings? Some places of worship today look as though no suffering ever goes on. By looking around the church building and grounds and by hearing the hymns sung, would visitors know that the church (in N. T. Wright's words) is where we "learn to suffer and pray at the place where the world is in pain, so that the world may be healed"? Would young children in the church know?

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# My Father's Hands

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 or 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To study the role of physical closeness in Jesus' healing ministry.
2. To consider how we distance and protect ourselves from people who are suffering.
3. To introduce the pioneering work of Dr. Paul Brand in the care of people with leprosy.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Download a PDF version of the departing hymn, "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch," from the Center's website, [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws). Go to the Ethics Library, select "Search by Format," and "Hymns."

## Begin with a Story

Pauline Brand Nelson recalls this event from the 1960s when her parents were on the medical staff of a leprosy hospital in Carville, Louisiana. "At [age] eight, having absorbed the lessons of my parents' research, I was carelessly confident of the fact that leprosy was not as destructive or contagious as people had once believed it to be.... [Yet] despite all the advances in drugs and surgical techniques, the fear of leprosy remained.... Around the grounds of the hospital, encircling the houses of staff and patients alike, ran a ten-foot-high chain-link fence....

"Outside the fence was a section of the River Road that almost nobody ever drove down, although now and then people drove slowly along its length, peering in curiously at the grounds of the hospital. On one such occasion I saw a couple looking at me with the intensity of birdwatchers glimpsing a rare species. They were trying to tell whether or not I was a patient. I felt the familiar anger boil up in me, and I walked to the fence holding my hands up in a gross caricature of the clawed position I had seen so often. Was this what they had come to see? Then I would give it to them! Their faces registering obvious horror, they sped away.

"At the time, I felt proud of myself, seeing my actions as evidence of courage in the face of the enemy. Now I recall the episode with shame, knowing that the evil lay not in the couple but in the fence itself, because it kept them at just the right distance to maintain their fear and ignorance. Like their forbears in medieval cities, they were able to observe the trials of their fellow man from a safe distance, but unable to respond in any meaningful way to that suffering" (*Suffering*, pp. 80-81).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read 8:40-56 from a modern translation. They should alternate, with one member reading 8:40-42 and later 8:49-56 (the healing of Jairus' daughter), and the second member reading 8:43-47 (the healing of the woman suffering from hemorrhages).

### *Reflection*

The two stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman are woven together in the synoptic gospels (cf. Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43). Jesus incurs ritual defilement by touching a woman with discharge of blood (Leviticus 15:25-30) and a dead body (Numbers 19:11-14). "Many kinds of defilement could scarcely be avoided" in daily life, Stephen Westerholm notes, and they did not violate biblical law "provided that steps were taken for purification" (see "Clean and Unclean," in Joel B. Green, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 125-132). Our fears of pain, disease, and death spring from different concerns than those in the Old Testament purity laws, but they still make it difficult for us to be personally present to those who are suffering.

Nelson reflects on the work of her father, Dr. Paul Brand, who pioneered hand surgery techniques for patients with leprosy. Misconceptions and fear still linger about leprosy, or Hansen's disease. For an introduction to the disease and its successful treatment, a description of the physical damage it causes to the eyes, hands, and feet, and information about its worldwide distribution, see the American Leprosy Missions website ([www.leprosy.org](http://www.leprosy.org)).

### *Study Questions*

1. Leprosy is a bacterial disease that damages the peripheral nerves and nerves in the skin, leading to loss of ability to feel pain. When a person cannot feel burns, cuts, or damaging pressures to the hands and feet, they do not respond quickly to normal injuries. "Indeed, one of my earliest memories from my Indian childhood was of learning that a young victim of leprosy had impressed his friends by putting a thorn all the way through his palm without flinching," Nelson writes. Ask members to consider what bodily damage they might suffer were they to lose normal pain response in their hands and feet.

By the way, other leprosy symptoms are cracked and dry skin due to loss of sweat and oil gland function and loss of strength or "clawing" in hands and feet due to nerve damage.

2. Encourage members to reflect on their experiences both as caregivers and as those who receive care. Have they experienced the power of physical closeness as a healing tool? Nelson suggests that we put ourselves on "the same side of the fence, close enough to risk being affected" by those who suffer, for "our presence alone does battle with the isolation and fear that so magnifies all human suffering."  
"Just as the cells of the human body respond to the alarm bell of pain in ways that help to heal the injury, so we must be people who respond to, rather than merely observe, the suffering of our neighbor," she writes. "There is no other way for the body of human society, and especially the body of the church, to stay well."
3. "Much of the pain we witness these days," Nelson notes, "happens on the far side of a television screen: a million children starve before our eyes in the Sudan, a family spills the ugliness of its hatred on Jerry Springer." Indeed, we are "no more than helpless voyeurs to other people's suffering. Even when the need is close to home, the temptation is often to distance and protect ourselves. We create barriers of busyness or self-consciousness; we remind ourselves that there are people 'more qualified' to deal with our widowed neighbor's grief, as if what was required of us was anything more complicated than our company."
4. Christ commissions us to tend "to the suffering," which requires not only "medicine and caring" but also comforting and being present with "those who are despairing." Stanza three reminds us that other people's suffering is shaped by "their doubts and fears, their hopes and dreams, their worries," which may be different from our own. So we must be open to hearing "the truth of others' stories," even "when their ways are not our own." In the final stanza, Gillette addresses our urge to solve problems quickly and turn away from the suffering that endures. Instead, we are called to serve Christ "in daily, generous living."

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Healing Presence

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 9:1-6
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss Stephen Schmidt's story
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To sketch a richer account of illness that explains how suffering is a *personal* experience.
2. To discuss the “totalizing” nature of certain mental and physical diseases in our culture.
3. To explore how congregations can offer friendship to those with profound health problems.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

John Strauss, a psychiatrist, describes a young man who has been through the ravages of schizophrenia: “This 28-year-old man had had the first onset of his schizophrenia ten years previously. He had spent three years in hospital, and then from the period between seven and five years before my interview had been able to manage outside the hospital. However, five years before my interview, he had been readmitted to hospital and had remained there since. As part of our interviews, we try to delineate the various general levels of illness, at several times in the past. We then determine levels of social relations and work functioning, symptoms and hospitalization during those times and plot a time line of course of disorder. This line is generated by rating scales of established reliability. In this particular study, we also enquire about the worst year the person has had since becoming ill. I expected that when I asked that question of this young man he would say that it was one of the times when his functioning scores were lowest, his symptoms highest, and when he was in hospital. He said the worst year was about six years ago, a time when by our scores he was doing fairly well and was not in hospital. He said that he had been living with his mother and then finally had been kicked out of her house and was living in an apartment. About two weeks after leaving her house he called home. She answered the telephone. He started talking, but when she heard his voice, she said ‘You have the wrong number’ and hung up. He said that was the worst year of his life. My heart sank as he told his story. It was not difficult to understand what he meant, but the worst year according to him and the worst year according to our rating scales were very different. Who was right?” (quoted in *Suffering*, pp. 69-70).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Mark 1:40-45 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## **Reflection**

We tend to reduce a disease to an isolated problem in the mind or body to be repaired by medical treatment. Swinton thinks more broadly of damaged relationships, personal disappointment, and fears that intensify a person's suffering. The story of the young man with schizophrenia raises these issues; it has analogies with the biblical story of the man with leprosy.

The man's leprosy (*lepros* in Greek) was some form of infectious disease manifested in the skin, rather than Hansen's disease which is called "leprosy" today. Leviticus 13 details the rules for the social isolation and spiritual purification of persons with such illnesses. The important point, as Swinton notes, is that the man's condition was a "totalizing" disease.

To extend the discussion to a second session, focus on Schmidt's article and discuss the congregation's response to the isolation of totalizing diseases. The suggested scripture reading from Luke 9:1-6 reminds us that healing the sick was an essential part of the Apostles' mission.

## **Study Questions**

1. "Suffering occurs when we experience a loss of meaning, purpose, hope, and value that leads to a disintegration of our sense of self and our identity as a valued person," Swinton writes. When one person's purposes, hopes, and values differ from another's, they experience their loss differently. Imagine how a musician and a mechanic suffer differently from impaired hearing, or how loss of physical strength affects each one. Moving to a nursing home is never easy, but for people who have never depended on others, do not make friends easily, and value being in society, it is especially devastating, and so on.
2. A totalizing illness affects all aspects and relationships of our lives; others see us primarily as one who suffers from the illness. Members can brainstorm a list of such diseases. They may be totalizing because they are excessively feared as infectious (leprosy, AIDS), severely debilitating or disfiguring (Alzheimer's disease, obesity, mental retardation), incurable (forms of cancer), or destructive of relationships (severe depression, schizophrenia).
3. Often we become friends with people who can help us (social exchange) or who have similar interests and values (likeness). While these two motives lead to valuable relationships, they do not draw us to people who are marginalized and different from us. Jesus' friendships were based on grace and unqualified love. Have members been loved this way? Have they been motivated by grace to enter a friendship? As our relationships deepen, do we have more than one of these three motives for continuing them?
4. Schmidt describes "sacramental memories" of his infant sister's baptism, father's faith, and paternal grandmother's graceful death. In them God's grace is present to him in two ways: he sees God's presence in the remembered events and experiences God's grace currently as he remembers the events. Because these memories mold who he is and what he values, they influence how Schmidt responds to "dark questions" and endures his physical disease.
5. Schmidt finds compassion that allows him "to rebuild a world, re-envision [his] place with others, and seek real intimacy." He mentions his wife's faithfulness, refusal to encourage self-pity and excessive sadness, and passionate intimacy. The chronic illness group is faithful, honest, forgiving, and trusting. They hope, pray, grieve, and laugh with one another.

Swinton urges congregations to employ "mental health chaplains and parish nurses...[as] facilitators of friendships for people with profound mental health problems. However, to suggest that professionals be liaisons for relationships is not to suggest that they do the befriending on behalf of the church community. Collaboration between a community and mental health professionals has the mutual goal of accompanying individuals as they find their way into the community and to provide support that will enable the church community to rejoice in the newfound diversity. The church's task is to provide a physical and spiritual space where people perceived by society as 'different' can find a home..."

## **Departing Hymn**

"Why Have You Forsaken Me?" is on pp. 42-43 of *Suffering*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 6	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand how God can be experienced in the context of our suffering.
2. To explore how we can deal with grief and suffering *together* within a faithful community.
3. To examine how we respond to the agony of victims and martyrs in the world.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Yvonne Dilling recounts this conversation with a Salvadoran woman who survived the Lempa River massacre in 1981: "Rosario looked out over the hills, but I knew she was not seeing the cultivated corn as she said, 'They shot my baby in my arms and wanted me to fall into the river and be swept away in the current just like those five-hundred who were swept away at the Sumpul River massacre. I carried my baby all the long hike to Los Hernandez. All the while I was thinking, "I can't bear this." The women there had to forcibly take her out of my arms that night and I watched them bury her just as she was, wrapped in a cloth.' Other details emerged as she recalled how that night changed her life. A few months later soldiers killed her husband. After several more months, Rosario gave her remaining child to her mother and joined the emerging guerilla group. They fought for seven years until the armed forces, unable to defeat the rebels, finally accepted a U.N.-sponsored opportunity to negotiate peace.

"When Rosario finished her remembering, I cautiously ventured: 'Visitors from other countries often wonder how you could still believe in God after all the unjust suffering you have endured. Why aren't there more atheists here?'

"The suffering did not produce atheists; what did was the church's failure to defend the people in the face of the injustice, and the outright collusion of the bishops when they blessed the army,' she responded. 'Not even that, really,' she continued on a new train of thought, 'it produced folks who will not participate in that church but who still believe in God.'"

"I felt that God was always with me,' Rosario said,... 'If I hadn't felt that, I could not have borne the suffering'" (*Suffering*, pp. 57-58).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading aloud the responsive prayer in the study guide (the leader begins and the group responds with the line in bold print).

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 57 from a modern translation.

### **Responsive Reading**

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

### **Reflection**

“Though the loss of a loved one is always deeply personal,” Phyllis Kersten reminds us, “the spiritual insight that can emerge from reflection upon it can be of great benefit to the wide community of faith.” This study highlights some similarities among the responses to grief and suffering by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Gerald Sittser, and the people of Valle Nuevo, El Salvador.

For background information about the Lempa River crossing, see the colorful banner commemorating the event at [www.plowcreek.org/esbanner.htm](http://www.plowcreek.org/esbanner.htm). A timeline and brief history of the Salvadoran civil war is available online at [www.pbs.org/itvs/enemiesofwar](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/enemiesofwar), the website for the PBS documentary *Enemies of War*.

### **Study Questions**

1. The villagers symbolically challenge their grief by commemorating the river crossing each year. They are transformed and reconciled to their enemies in the Mass and by walking the Stations of the Cross. Encourage members to discuss the value of facing grief with the support of others, especially with people who share the same (or similar) suffering.
2. “Victims are people who are caught in the world’s cross fire, who are unfortunate to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the pedestrian who crosses the road in front of a drunken driver,” says Dilling. “Martyrs are those who act out of faithfulness, even though they know their actions could bring them suffering and death.” She sees the people at Valle Nuevo as martyrs for resisting a politically and economically oppressive government. It is important to recognize that victims (like Wolterstorff’s son or Sittser’s wife and children) as well as martyrs endure *undeserved* suffering. The difference is that martyrs, when they are faithful to God in a just cause, call us to “choose sides” morally. “We need to ask ‘Who put them on the cross?’ That is, we have to do political analysis. This will lead us to the question, ‘As a follower of Jesus, what am I going to do to help get them down from the cross?’”
3. Dilling notes that “many laws in the Old Testament are based on sensitivity to the poor.” Amos delivers God’s judgment on the policies of Israel’s neighboring countries (Amos 1:2-2:3). Brainstorm a list of specific political and economic policies in your city, state, and the United States that cause suffering among the poor or diseased today. Discuss how members could work through the government and with other agencies to change these policies.
4. We may struggle against others loving us because we want to be self-sufficient, or do not want the responsibility that comes through personal relationship. Only when we are “empty of energy and desire” do we let them love us. Sittser says he had stopped loving and trusting God, which threw up another barrier.
5. Wolterstorff speaks of his sympathy for the world’s wounds being enlarged. Sittser says “sorrow enlarges the soul,” until it “is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world’s pain and hoping for the world’s healing at the same time.” He has reevaluated his priorities as an individual before God and as a parent. He’s grown more dependent on God, having given up the effort “to be a perfect parent,” but inviting “God to be their parent through me.” Does sorrow always enlarge the soul, or do some people become self-focused in sorrow and reduced in self-pity? What makes the difference, do you think?
6. Encourage members to discuss how they become aware of grief and suffering in the congregation and in the wider community. Are announcements made in worship? Are concerns discussed in small groups? Then evaluate how the congregation responds. Are the responses episodic (with visits, counseling, service) or ongoing (with support groups, recurring ministries). Are long-term as well as immediate needs being met? Do members respond on an individual basis, or are their efforts coordinated by a minister, leader, or group? Does the congregation partner with other congregations or agencies?

### **Departing Hymn**

“Why Have You Forsaken Me?” is on pp. 42-43 of *Suffering*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.