

Study Guide for
Painful Questions
Facing Struggles with Faith

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Chapters 1 – 3

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Painful Questions

Summary: The problem of human suffering arises from the conflict between the world we have and the world we want, the world that is and the world that ought to be. Often this problem is seen as a purely intellectual puzzle. But the question "Why me?" is at least three different questions in one:

First, it is a *fact-finding question*. This is the intellectual component. All who suffer would indeed like to know why bad things happen to good people.

Second, it is a *fact-stating question*. When we question the fairness of the world, we are actually stating something about ourselves. We are claiming that our dignity has been offended and that we demand a hearing. In doing so, we are revealing our deep conviction that the world ought to be different.

Finally, it is a *fact-changing question*, a cry for help. When we are hurting, we want not only answers, but comfort. When those around us are hurting, we want to do more than talk; we want to stop their pain.

These three types of questions about suffering provide the framework around which the remainder of the book is organized.

Related Scriptures: Job 7; Psalm 13; 2 Cor. 1:3-7.

Discussion Questions

1. *From where do we obtain our sense of how the world "ought to be"?

2. *Recall a time when you asked the question "Why me?" What, specifically, did you mean by this question? If you were to rephrase the question, how would you put it?
3. What is the difference between a fact-finding question and a fact-stating question? Which do you believe is more important when dealing with the problem of suffering?
4. The doctor told the student diagnosed with diabetes "why" he developed it. As a response to his question "Why me?" was it a satisfactory reply? Explain your answer.
5. What is so fearful about the idea that there may not be any "reason" why bad things happen, that the world might just be purposeless and chaotic?
6. Why do we have such a strong need at times to complain about what has happened to us, and to tell our "sad stories" to those around us?
7. How do you feel when you see a person treated unjustly? Do we have any reason to believe that the world ought to be fair?
8. Note the relationship between the father and his two-year-old daughter having her ears examined. In what way is this relationship parallel to the one between God and us?
9. Why is the presence of another person sometimes comforting to us even if that person cannot solve our problems?
10. In what ways is it helpful to recognize that people who use the same words (e.g., "Why me?") may be asking different questions? What problems might be caused by not recognizing this?

Journal-Reflection Suggestion: During the next week, pay particular attention to your reactions to the frustrations and problems that come your way. Listen to the things you say aloud or think to yourself. What questions do these situations raise for you about God, the world, and you?

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Chapter 2

Chapter 2: Of Plans and Puzzles

Summary: This chapter introduces two ideas that run throughout the book. The first idea is the analogy of the picture puzzle. This analogy suggests that searching for the answer to the problem of human suffering is not as precise an activity as solving an equation. Instead, it involves fitting together a variety of irregular pieces, to gain a sense of the overall picture

taking shape.

The second idea is that any satisfying answers to our questions will have to arise from the faith, hope, and love that reside within us. The fact-finding question requires a response of faith. The fact-stating question requires a response of hope. And the fact-changing question requires a response of love.

Related Scriptures: Heb. 11; Rom. 8:18-25; 1 John 3:23-24; 1 Cor. 13:13.

Discussion Questions

1. *What aspect of life and its struggles do you find particularly puzzling? What signs or hints have you seen that might provide the beginning of a solution to this puzzle?
2. Why do you think a small child might continue to work on a puzzle again and again even though she was not successful?
3. Can you remember a time when you kept trying to solve a problem or find an answer even though it was difficult and frustrating? What encouraged you to continue?
4. *Why do some people give up sooner than others when looking for answers to their questions or problems? Is it just because some people have more or larger problems?
5. What types of events cause us to question whether there is any rhyme or reason to what happens in the world?
6. How did Jean react to her situation in life (pages 24-25)? What words would you use to describe her?
7. How would you define "hope"? Is hope something we are taught, something we learn from experience, or something innately present within us? Why do you think this?
8. The word "love" is used in many ways. Can you define the meaning of the word "love" as illustrated by the story of Father John Powell (27-28)?
9. Faith, hope, and love have been called theological virtues, and virtues can be defined as "good habits." In what sense are faith, hope, and love good habits?
10. The end of this chapter suggests that the question of human suffering is less like an equation to be solved and more like a puzzle to be pieced together. What does this distinction mean?

Journal-Reflection Suggestion: In the coming week, ask yourself, "When am I called upon to exercise faith, hope, or love?" Note whether these theological virtues are only used in connection with the specifically spiritual side of life, or whether they come into play in other areas. If you are willing, come prepared to share with the class an experience in which one of the virtues was needed.

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Chapter 3

Chapter 3: Who Is to Blame?

Summary: Throughout history, a popular answer to the question of human suffering has been to point to human freedom and responsibility. Within limits, this time-tested approach is quite helpful, and it surely supplies us with an important piece of our puzzle. Since we do not want to part with the freedom we experience, we must be ready to accept the responsibility that comes with it.

The reason freedom is so important to us is that it enables us to care and to be cared for—to find meaning in life. For this reason, we are often willing to risk much for freedom. In other words, we know that freedom is costly, but we are willing to pay the price. Is it possible, therefore, that God has also been willing to pay a price for freedom?

Related Scriptures: Ps. 10; Rom. 1:18-32; 3:23; Gen. 3.

Discussion Questions

1. *Why do we have a desire to blame someone for our suffering? What does this tell us about ourselves?
2. Why is God often the object of our blame? What is it about God's nature or his relationship to the world that encourages us to hold him responsible for painful events?
3. What does the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City teach us about human freedom (37-38)?
4. *Suffering caused by human beings (e.g., murder) is often called "moral evil." Suffering that comes from other sources (e.g., earthquakes) is often called "natural evil." Can you think of any suffering that does not fit neatly into either of these categories?
5. Note the story about the child who was asked to help his father in the garage. What does this story suggest to us about our need for freedom?

6. Why is your freedom important to you? What would life be missing if your freedom were taken away? (We are talking here about freedom of choice, not political freedom.)

7. Can you think of specific times when you have been willing to "take a risk" to maintain your own freedom or to grant freedom to someone else? Describe this experience to others in the group.

8. This chapter suggests that there is a strong connection between freedom and caring? Do you agree with this? Why, or why not?

9. Can you imagine a world in which pain (physical or emotional) was not possible? Do you think such a world could contain freedom?

10. Are there any good reasons why God would grant us freedom even though God was aware of the dangers and risks involved? Was the gift of freedom worth the risk?

Journal-Reflection Suggestion: Try to pay close attention this week to both the value and the risks that arise from our freedom. Describe at least one specific time when you consciously made a free choice to do something and at least one specific time when you allowed someone else freedom to act. How did you feel about the results of these experiences?