

*Study Guide for*  
***Painful Questions***  
*Facing Struggles with Faith*

by Gary L. Watts

**Chapters 7 - 9**

## **Chapter 7**

### **Chapter 7: The Demand for Dignity**

*Summary:* Our questions about our pain are more than intellectual curiosity. The question "Why me?" is also a cry to be heard, to state our case before God and the world. In this case, the only proper response is to listen. But if we are to listen well to those who are suffering, we must be brave enough to stand beside them in difficult times, and wise enough to avoid offering simplistic answers that trivialize their pain.

*Related Scriptures:* Matt. 10:29; Pss. 10; 13; 22; Mark 10:48-51; John 9; Luke 13:1-5.

#### *Discussion Questions*

1. Though we are free to decide to whom we will reveal our thoughts, we cannot guarantee how they will be accepted. Why not? What fears does this cause us?
2. \*Why do we so long for others to listen to us, to hear us out? What does this desire tell us about our human needs?
3. Do you think it is worse for someone to be angry with you and tell you so, or to ignore you? Explain why you think this is so.
4. Has the pain or suffering you experience ever made you feel guilty? If so, do you think that it should have?
5. What "simplistic" answers to the problem of pain and suffering have you heard that you

felt were more harmful than helpful?

6. What is problematic about suggesting that someone's pain is always a result of his/her own sinful behavior?

7. What approaches have helped you to listen well to those who are suffering? Which have you found most useful?

8. Why can it be dangerous to offer a ready-made answer to those who suffer?

9. \*Why do we sometimes find it hard to listen to those who are suffering?

10. This chapter tells the story of a man sitting in silence beside a friend who was lying in a hospital bed (115). What comfort can take place in and through silence?

*Journal-Reflection Suggestion:* In your own experience, what things were helpful of what people did for you or said to you during difficult times? What approaches were not helpful? After reflecting on this experience, list the ways that you feel you could best respond to those around you who are in pain.

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## Chapter 8

### Chapter 8: It Just Isn't Fair!

*Summary:* Painful questions are also fact-stating questions because they tell us something about the hope that is an essential part of our nature. Our willingness to face squarely the injustice of the world and to believe at the same time that things ought to be otherwise, creates a tension that seems to demand a decision. We must conclude either that the universe is simply blind to our concerns, or that our hope is a hint about the true nature of reality. We can find some guidance in making this decision by asking ourselves which conclusion we are capable of living with in the practical walk of daily life.

*Related Scriptures:* James 4:1; Gen. 37–50 (Joseph story); Rev. 21:4; Rom. 8:18-21.

#### *Discussion Questions*

1. \*Define fairness or justice. Does such a definition have to include the idea of seeing things from another's perspective?
2. Why is fairness so important to us?
3. Describe some ways in which the world does seem fair and some ways in which it does

not.

4. The person waiting for a seat on the airplane (119-120) was happy to obtain a seat when another passenger became ill. No doubt the sick passenger did not share that joy. Can you think of other instances in which "good" or "fair" seems only to mean "good for me" or "fair for me"?

5. Is the world completely just or fair if seen from God's perspective? Think of an example that supports your answer.

6. If the world is ultimately purposeless and chaotic, then we should not expect it to be just nor be surprised when it brings us pain. In what way does this point of view solve the "problem of suffering"?

7. Suppose we assume that the world just is the way it is, that there is no way it ought to be. What problems are created for us by this point of view?

8. \*Why do you think it is so hard for us to let go of the idea that the world ought to be different (e.g., that good people ought not to suffer, that innocent children should not die of disease)?

9. Are people who believe in God more interested in fairness than those who do not? Support your answer with examples or reasons.

10. On page 130, it is suggested that one mark of reality is the "stubborn refusal to go away." What does this tell us about our sense of "the way things ought to be"?

*Journal-Reflection Suggestion:* Describe your sense of "fair play." What events in the world (and even this very week) have offended this sense of fairness? Do you think you could suppress this sense of justice and just accept the way things are without anger or disillusionment?

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## Chapter 9

### Chapter 9: Some Wishful Thinking

*Summary:* The phrase "wishful thinking" is generally used in a negative sense. But in reality, almost all thinking that has led to progress in the world has been wishful thinking. This is true in the scientific as well as the philosophical world. We are willing to invest time and energy in research only if we believe the result may be worthwhile.

Viewed in this way, wishful thinking is neither "blind faith" nor "a leap in the dark." It is

merely the recognition that some paths of inquiry are more worthy of our time than others. Belief in God and in the ultimate triumph of goodness falls into this category.

*Related Scriptures:* Mark 1:17; 2:14; Rom. 6:4; Ps. 14:1; 10:3-4.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. What parts of life cannot simply be debated about or explained to us but must be experienced directly if we are to understand their reality?
2. Why is it not possible to deliberate forever about certain kinds of decisions?
3. \*How do we make decisions about matters that are very important to us, but yet very complicated or controversial?
4. What does it mean to suggest that belief in God is not so much a logical problem to be deliberated in the study as it is an invitation to a way of life?
5. Does science make use of concepts like faith and hope? If so, give a specific example. If not, explain why not.
6. Why do scientists continue for years to search for solutions to problems (disease, pollution, sources of energy), even when they have failed to find them many times?
7. What have you experienced and therefore believe in, though you cannot see, touch, or measure it in a purely material way?
8. \*What is the relationship between the pursuit of knowledge about the world, and the pursuit of knowledge about our inner selves?
9. Why is belief in God a hopeful way to look at the world?
10. Is it possible to "hope" that there is no God? Why would one do this?

*Journal-Reflection Suggestion:* Think about your own "journey of faith." How did it begin? As you have walked along this path, what experiences have confirmed that you are headed in the right direction? Why do you think there is good reason to continue?