



What To Say Discussion Guide

Into the Word:

People take a lot of effort to avoid suffering. Services of all kinds promote human security and comfort, helping us to eliminate pain, noise, dirt, fear, and unhappiness. Yet even with all that protection, we are likely to suffer. Our bodies begin to decay, or an accident or crime brings physical trauma. Other people may hurt us emotionally and cause us years of grief. We may face spiritual torment when we confront our emptiness or face demonic oppression.

Coaches are fond of saying “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” What does that even mean? As God leads us through difficult times and painful challenges, we can become better people. This certainly is true, as Paul says in Romans 5:3–5. Yet one of the great challenges of spiritual life is to look beyond ourselves.

What are some examples of suffering in your life? Among family or friends? Involving natural calamities or political struggle?

Think of some cultural understandings about suffering. What advertising or marketing comes to mind that sells relief from suffering? What political or social movements are presenting alternatives to suffering? What might be some positive reasons for those approaches? What might be wrong with these approaches?

Jeremy shared with us the story of Job. The story of Job is one of a man who suffered in every conceivable way—and who wanted to speak with God about what had happened to him. His three friends tried to comfort him, but they brought him grief and anguish instead. Ultimately God answered Job’s prayer and spoke directly to him. Job yielded his suffering when he said in response, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). More than any man in Scripture, Job could identify with all sufferers—and experience the glory of God.

Several years ago, the NYC fire department faced some criticism for the hazing that their rookies faced from the veterans. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Tom Downey defended the hazing that firemen endure when they enter the ranks of that profession. New recruits earn the respect of veterans, he explained, “by enduring the silent treatment, tolerating jeers about their masculinity and bravery,” and performing menial tasks like taking out the garbage and cleaning toilets.

Like soldiers, he explained, firefighters see things that nobody else wants to: burnt bodies, anguished people who have lost their dearest possessions, best friends dead at an early age—and then these firemen have to somehow put these experiences on a mental shelf and go home and be good husbands and fathers. “Make no mistake,” Downey said, “this is a job that exacts a tremendous psychological toll.”

Add to that the physical toll of smoke headaches, sore joints, cuts and bruises from smashing in doors and windows, lungs filled with black mucus, and a nausea that can make a man bend over and vomit. He described one veteran who dragged a crib out of a room so hot that the crib melted in his hands, and another who badly scorched his lungs when he ran into a burning room without an air tank to save a young man.

Communities need men like these, men willing to risk life or serious injury in order to save others. “Amid all the hazing,” Downey wrote, “firefighters are really seeking an answer to a simple question: Is this the guy I want coming down the hallway for me if I get trapped in a burning building?”

The banter that flies across the kitchen table at firehouses can be crude, and no doubt hazing in general can step over the line. But, Downey argues, the taunts strengthen and prepare the men for working in danger.

“A firefighter who can keep his cool in the kitchen,” he said, “is more likely to remain level-headed when things go horribly wrong at a fire.”

Read Philippians 3:7–11.

The apostle Paul counted every gain he had as loss for the sake of Christ. He aimed for the fellowship of suffering in Christ’s death so that he also may share in the resurrection from the dead. Christ died for this needy world that struggles both physically and spiritually. Many of the difficulties that God sometimes directs and sometimes permits in our lives are not about us. God’s got the whole world in His mind, and He is looking for people who are keeping that world foremost in their minds, too.

The world is filled with suffering, and that spiritual maturity is not about what help and hope Christians can find for themselves, their family members, and their friends; it is about what they have learned so they can share with others in a needy world.

Apply the Word

In what ways does the Book of Job relate to contemporary life? When God met Job, what became of Job’s suffering? How could Job relate to others who suffered? What do you imagine he could have said to them? How could he have helped them? How do Job’s words and example minister to people today?

Do you agree with Galli that suffering might be a way of hazing believers to help them reach out to a world in pain? Why or why not? Does Galli’s approach suggest that God sends suffering, or that suffering just happens? What are some spiritual issues you have with the concept of godly hazing?

How do you respond to Paul’s assertion that his position, his vast knowledge, his Hebrew roots, and his zealousness meant nothing for the sake of Christ? Why might suffering provide more comfort and strength than apparent abundant blessing?

What is it like to become like Christ in his death and to share in his sufferings? How do we become more effective disciples and evangelists as a result?

How have you learned from your suffering or the suffering of others? In what ways has that learning helped you in your spiritual life?

Prayer Time-

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on his suffering as a prisoner of war held by the Nazis. Imprisoned for 10 years, he wrote prayers for his fellow prisoners so they could endure suffering with greater grace and hope. In a prayer for the morning, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Thou hast granted me many blessings: Now let me accept tribulation from thy hand.

Thou wilt not lay on me more than I can bear. Thou makest all things work together for good for thy children.”

Take a moment to reflect on what ways that we can help someone that has been through what we have experienced and how we can help them.