



# Where Is God When Disaster Strikes?

*Where should we look for God in situations of tragedy or disaster?*

## Goal for the Session

Everyone faces situations of difficulty and suffering. We also watch world events such as floods, earthquakes, famines, and wars that show us suffering on a massive scale. It is natural for Christians to wonder about where God is in these situations. In this session people will have a chance to think about new ways of seeing God in the midst of disaster and also talk about spiritual practices that prepare us for responding to difficulty.

## Preparing for the Session

Notice whether there are any major news stories or local events that might make this subject particularly vivid or current. In my experience, it can be useful to find very concrete ways of making the toll of human suffering real. This can make it more difficult to retreat to glib answers and therefore more necessary to confront the theological issues in fresh ways.

If you feel energetic, you might make a collage of headlines that suggest a range of human suffering current in your community and the world at large.

If possible, have butcher paper or newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk available. It can be useful to write down ideas from members of the class as a way of remembering the conversation and also of affirming different points of view. It is not necessary to respond to everything that is said (especially if ideas are very off topic or difficult to integrate into the discussion), but by making note of the various contributions each person can feel heard. A list of points people make can also be a device for organizing the discussion, identifying major themes, or acknowledging differences of opinion.

If you decide to experiment with a practice of silent prayer (see below), you might try to get a chime or bell to ring at the end of a silent period. If neither is available, you can simply clap your hands softly or tap the table.

## Teaching Tips

- This session will give you a chance to think about responses to large collective disasters as well as personal suffering. Think about how you want to create space for people to share their own experiences if they feel inclined to do so. The session will also give you a chance to experiment with practices for responding to disasters. Decide how you as the leader want to divide the time, leaving more time for one or two of these three components (theological understanding of disaster, personal suffering, and spiritual practice), depending on your perception of the group's interests.
- Try to steer the group away from discussions or arguments about political or policy dimensions of disaster, and focus on how to understand the presence of God in these situations.

## Opening (10 minutes)

### 1. Start with a Prayer

If your group has a standard ritual for opening, by all means use that. Otherwise, you might offer this prayer:

Holy God, your face shines throughout the world on justice and injustice alike. There is nowhere and no situation where you are not found. We pray for your healing presence with those here and those around the world facing crisis, war, sickness, and death. As we study together now, guide our thoughts and

hearts as we seek to serve you better. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

## 2. Name Disasters

This study assumes people have not had the chance to read the Participant Handout. If they have, you may be able to get through the exercises quicker and add some alternative activities.

Invite participants to call out the names of big disasters they have known about in their lifetimes. On a sheet of paper or the blackboard, jot them down. If you have older adults in your group, it will be interesting to see how long the list can get in a short time!

## 3. Where Did People Say God Was?

On another piece of paper or section of the board, make three columns with these titles: "Not Helpful," "Helpful," "Not Sure." Invite participants to very briefly describe the various responses religious people gave as to where God was to be found in a particular disaster or why people said the disaster occurred if they included God as allowing it to happen. Allow the participant to decide in which column to put the answer he or she is describing. Don't worry about correcting people, and try to not get too sidetracked on any one disaster or column.

## Exploring (25 minutes)

### 4. Reflect on the Introduction

Allow a few minutes for participants to read (or review if they have already read) the "Introduction" in the Participant Handout. Spend a few minutes allowing people to react to the author's description of her experience in the gym. Does our culture suffer from a voyeurism of suffering and then cover it up with consumerism? Have people thought about this before? Is this description helpful?

### 5. Discuss a Disaster

Divide the group into two, or, depending on the size of your group, decide whether to divide into even more small groups of three to five people. If a group is too big, some people will not have a chance to participate. You will need an even number of groups.

Now allow the entire group a few minutes to read the sections titled "God's Answer to Job," "Finding Presence

Rather than Explanations," and "Christ's Example of Presence." After a few minutes of sharing general impressions, ask each group to pair up with another group.

Give the pairing of groups a minute to agree on a disaster they will discuss, perhaps one mentioned previously. Then assign one group the task of debating why God caused the disaster, using arguments people may have heard in the news or in churches. Assign the other group the task of arguing where God might be found in the disaster and where other people may have showed compassion. Allow a few minutes for a general discussion.

You may find people having a hard time with this. What seems so simple is not. Many have been taught all their lives that because God is all powerful, God causes everything to happen for a reason even if we do not know what it is. The purpose of this reflection is to point out that God never asked human beings to spend their time discerning who was to blame for some catastrophe. Jesus never did. Rather, the God we see in the Bible is a God who accompanies people through disaster, who consoles rather than judges. And that is our job as followers of Christ.

## Responding (10 minutes)

### 6. Learn about Our Challenge

Give participants a few minutes to read the final section of the handout. Suggest they spend five minutes reflecting on a situation they are aware of that is touching them. Perhaps it is a friend going through a crisis. Perhaps it is a community crisis or a world event. Invite them to spend this time thinking about how God may be present in that situation and how they, as followers of Christ, may be instruments of God's love. Encourage them to make a list or write a note to themselves if there is something they will want to do to follow up after the session.

## Closing (3 minutes)

### 7. Share This Prayer

Blessed and merciful Christ, lover of souls,  
Your world is so beautiful and the love we bear for  
one another is so precious to us.  
It is excruciating to see the world and its peoples  
torn, wounded, and destroyed.  
Our hearts cannot bear the contradictions of  
our faith, which calls us to love what must  
inevitably die.

Pour out on us the tender balm of your mercy, which gives us strength to bear what we must bear; Deliver us from our fear so that we might enter into compassion deeper than suffering; Be in our vision that we may see you in every face and in every circumstance. To the Holy Trinity we pray with confidence and love. **Amen.**

## Teaching Alternatives

- Sit in silent prayer for two to four minutes before beginning your discussion. If the group needs instruction in this practice, you can suggest that they try the following:
  - Count their breath, that is, very calmly inhale and exhale, focusing on the breath itself or counting each breath up to ten and then starting over.
  - Choose a simple word (*love, Jesus, etc.*) to hold in their minds as their minds wander and chatter. Simply call attention back to the word.
- As a way of “practicing” compassion in the midst of difficulty, see if this group can navigate its differences of opinion in ways that soften rather than reinforce these differences. Even if the group cannot agree, in what ways can it continue to witness to the love of God for one another?
- For a closing activity, consider inviting participants to pray for disasters that are on their mind. Take another two to three minutes for silent prayer.
- Conclude with a favorite hymn: “Be Thou My Vision,” “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Amazing Grace,” and so on.
- Talk about whether the group is interested in considering including regular spiritual practices as a way of teaching their eyes and heart to “see” God in whatever disaster strikes. Examples could be sitting in silent prayer for five minutes a day; offering a brief prayer for healing, forgiveness, comfort, or courage when a difficult news story comes on the TV or radio; noticing each time a harsh judgment of someone crosses one’s mind and spend a minute or less imagining what the person’s story might look like from his or her own perspective. What simple practices can the group think of to include in daily life?
- Read a story from today’s newspaper. Examine the story from several different angles: for example, the victims of suffering, the perpetrator(s) of suffering,

other people who are affected, the context in which such a situation can arise. Imagine seeing each part of this through the eyes of divine compassion, and imagine a retelling of the story from each perspective.

- Practice a kind of *lectio divina* in which you read a passage of Scripture and a narrative of recent disaster together. For example, you could take the story of Jesus with tax collectors or the woman at the well, the passion narrative, the account of Peter in prison, the parable of the Good Samaritan, a psalm, or passages from Isaiah or Jeremiah and transpose a current narrative into the Bible story and retell both in light of the other.
- Bring to mind a particular narrative of disaster. Then engage in a brief meditation practice; for instance, have the group meditate in silence by counting their breath or focusing on a single word for ten minutes. At the end of ten minutes, ring a chime or clap your hands. Sit quietly together for another minute, allowing the story to reenter one’s awareness in the midst of the quiet of prayer. In discussing the narrative after a practice of prayer, also consider how prayer allows the group to engage the story differently.

## For More Information

Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

Terence Fretheim, *Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987).

Ellen M. Ross, *Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

## Key Scriptures

There are many Scripture passages that speak to this subject, including the following:

Job 42

Psalms 18:1–6, 16–19 (and almost any other psalm!)

Jonah 4:9–11

Jeremiah 32:9–15 or 33:4–15

Habakkuk 3:17–19

Matthew 25:30–46

Romans 8:37–39