

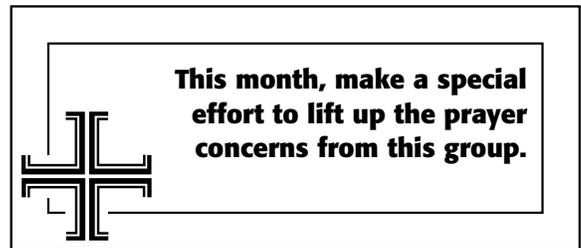
Suffering

Theme

The television networks unceasingly broadcast the hopeless state of the world economy, updates on conflicts throughout the world, mounting death tolls from a host of diseases, and unspeakably selfish actions by corporate and political leaders around the world. On the macro level, these stories usually don't mention the private suffering of the mentally ill person, the child raised by one parent due to death or divorce, the kid who is ignored by the other kids at recess and possibly by busy parents at home, the victims of crime, or those grieving a loss. When we open our eyes and look at the suffering around us, it can be unbearable. We ask, "Where is God in all of this suffering?" When God seems absent, how can we trust God's promise to be present with us, even when we do not sense that presence?



Throughout this session we will explore what it means to have faith during the tough times. We may be surprised to discover that the times of suffering can provide surprising insights about our lives and how we are loved and sustained by God even—and especially—in the dark days. In a world that seems to focus on pleasure, we can draw comfort from the fact that God is not only aware of our suffering, God understands human suffering because God has experienced it. God's radical gift of grace may be experienced most vividly in times of suffering.



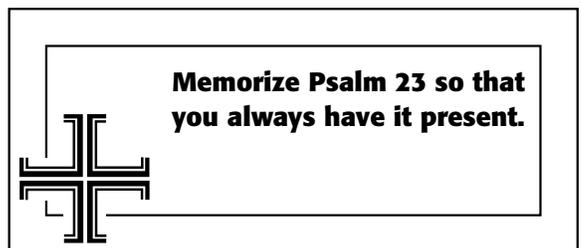
Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we know that you do not promise that following you will save us from suffering. We are thankful that you walk with us, especially when we suffer. Thank you for coming in the person of Jesus Christ to suffer and die so that we might be made righteous in your sight. Help us to remember this in our time of greatest need. Help us to see beyond the pain and hopelessness to the hope that we have in you. Please help us to be aware of the suffering of others and to show them your love during the tough times as you work through us to provide comfort and hope for everyone who suffers. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

What does the Bible say?

Romans 5:3-5

³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.



2 Corinthians 4:7-12

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Psalm 23:1-6

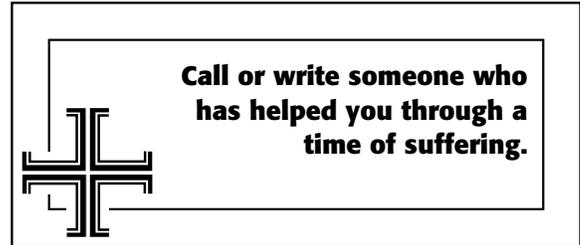
- 1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
- 3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Think About...

- Circle the words in these verses that provide the most hope for you today. Which words might you share with someone who is going through a tough time? (Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 4, Psalm 23)
- Tell about a person you know who has suffered with grace and hope rather than allowing it to overwhelm him or her. (Romans 5)
- What do you think Paul means when he talks about boasting in suffering? What might be the benefit of boasting in suffering? (Romans 5)
- Paul refers to our bodies as "jars of clay." In what ways does looking at our physical beings in this manner actually provide us with hope and allow us to more fully trust God's promises? How does this way of looking at our physical state compare to the way our culture regards our bodies? Which is more helpful for you? (2 Corinthians 4)

What do others say?

Psalm 23 is a passage that seems to speak across generations. For good reason, it is a favorite to many as it is filled with powerful images, bears a message of promise and hope, and is deeply personal in tone—especially as the language shifts from descriptions of the Lord to declarations to the Lord, from “He makes me lie down in green pastures” to “I fear no evil; for you are with me.”



Sadly, many people connect Psalm 23 primarily with funerals, largely, I think, because of the wording in certain Bible translations. In the Bible I received for Confirmation (Revised Standard Version), verse 4 spoke of “the valley of the shadow of death” but more recent translations—including the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and Today’s New International Version (TNIV)—say “Even though I walk *through the darkest valley*, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” It may be a subtle difference, but it is important because Psalm 23 is not only for times of death. Instead, it is the promise of God’s presence, comfort, and protection as we journey through the darker times of life—the threat may be real, but it is not to be feared, because even in the midst of it God will provide.

The amazing thing about the God we worship is that God is both particular and global. We know that Jesus suffered and died for the sake of the world (see John 3:16), but also for the sake of each of us individually. When it comes to our suffering, God has the capacity to simultaneously focus on each person as an individual *and* on the well-being of the world. The beauty of Psalm 23 is that it describes the many different ways that God is present with us, working to pull us through the darkest valley.

The challenge of suffering, of walking through the darkest valley, is that it is often there that we question if God is present with us at all. In those moments, it is essential to name our suffering to God or to another person. Naming the suffering, calling the thing what it is without censor, is often a source of relief, and some of the burden of it begins to lift. Naming the suffering doesn’t have to mean broadcasting it publicly, but instead allowing the community (or a few key people) to intercede on your behalf and it creates space for God to work through God’s people on your behalf.

As we walk through the darkest valleys in our lives, it is important to name the emotions we are experiencing without worrying whether it is wrong to feel hopeless, worrying that it makes us less “Christian,” or that having these feelings is an indication of a lack of faith. Telling God how we feel is essential. Sometimes yelling at God feels even better. Let it all out—God can handle it! In the darkness of suffering, we want to ask God, “Where are you? I need you” Conversations like this can be deeply healing because God has promised to be with us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

As Christians, we believe that God is especially present in our times of suffering. We are loved by a God who wasn’t afraid to endure the worst type of human suffering, death on a cross. How is it possible for God be present with us when we feel most alone at our lowest point? At these times, God often meets us through the community of believers. Naming our suffering to another person or to a larger group, allows the community to intercede on our behalf. It also creates space for God to work through others. It can be surprising to realize how much better we feel just having someone sit with us and listen to us during these times. Those who come to us in our times of deepest suffering bring God’s presence with them.

At these times, something extraordinary can happen—we can experience God’s blessing in the midst of the darkest valley as we experience “God with us” in unexpected ways. It may come through the gift of community surrounding us, through powerful and honest conversations with God in prayer, or through the promise of hope. The psalmist concludes, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.” Cling to this promise and watch for moments of God’s presence and grace. They are the fuel of hope that carries us through our darkest valleys.

Optional Reflection:

You may read a selection from *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton. Read the last two lines on page 81 through the end of the section on page 83.

See “Invitation to Solitude and Silence” by Ruth Haley Barton.
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Think About...

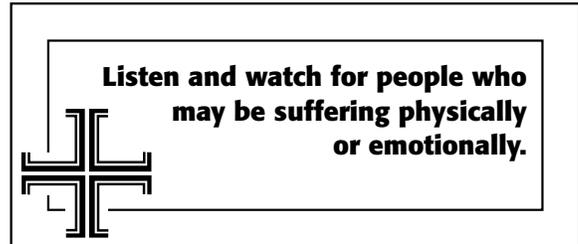
Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with ■◻.

- ◻ During times of broken-ness or conflict, what are some lessons, promises, or stories from our faith that can provide guidance, comfort, or hope?
 - When have you or someone close to you experienced the peace of God that can happen after a time of deep grief or sadness? How do these experiences support Psalm 23 and Paul’s comments from Romans and 2 Corinthians that we read at the beginning of this session?
 - Tell about something someone did for you or said to you that helped you more than they’ll ever know. How did that comment or action affect your day, your life?
 - What words of comfort have been meaningful or helpful to you during a tough time?
 - How do you care for yourself when times are difficult?
 - How have you been a support for others in different ways?
- ◻ Are people who are suffering more or less likely to come to a church? What does a faith community offer to someone in that situation? What might keep people who are suffering away from the church?
 - God has given us hope in many ways. What are some simple and ordinary (or significant and extraordinary) signs of hope in the world around us?
 - What Bible story or hymn brings you comfort and hope?
- ◻ Some people find comfort in their faith, others become angry or turn away from God. The Psalms are filled with examples of both. How would you respond to someone who seems to have turned away from God during a time of suffering?
- ◻ What’s one question you wish you could ask God directly?
 - What are some of the hidden ways that people suffer? How can we support others, perhaps those we may not even realize are suffering?

- What are some things you have done to alleviate suffering or make a difference on a local, national, or worldwide level?
- How have you experienced hope in a time of suffering? Do any of these signs of hope seem to come from God?

What's my response?

This month, listen and watch for people you know who may be grieving or suffering physically or emotionally. Take time to pray for and comfort these people. Listen with an open heart and be aware of how God may be using you to bring comfort into this situation. Choose one or two of the following activities to try during the month.



- Make a special effort to lift up the prayer concerns from the group members this month. Keep the prayer concerns list in a private, but well-frequented place for you (a desk drawer that only you use, or possibly in your journal). Next month, be sure to check on those for whom you were praying.
- Read 2 Samuel 1:17-27 to learn about David's lament at the death of his friend Jonathan. Think about a time that you have cried out to God in grief. How has God comforted you in those times? Say a prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence during times of sorrow.
- Meditate on a portion of Psalm 23 each day. Memorize the Psalm so that it is always with you, especially during the tough times in your life.
- Visit or call someone who is grieving the loss of a spouse, child, or friend. Ask what you can do to help. Sometimes, grieving people don't know what they need or want. Offer to bring a dinner or to take them out to lunch. Listen if the person wants to talk, or just sit silently with the person.
- Call or write to someone who has helped you through a time of suffering. Tell them how important they were for you at that time and thank them for walking with you during a difficult time.
- Search the web to learn about suffering somewhere else in the world. Think about what you might be able to do to help alleviate that suffering. One person of faith and perseverance can make a difference in the world.
- Rent the movie *Hotel Rwanda* (R) and discuss the hopeful images that appear among the horror and anger of the Hutus and the incomprehensible suffering of the Tutsis. How does God work through people in terrifying situations?
- If you know someone who is caring for a sick friend or family member, look for opportunities to support this person. Ask the person what would help him or her in this task and offer to do it. If you are part of a group of several people who know this person, organize a group effort.
- Think about someone you know who is going through a difficult time and might especially need your encouragement, love, and prayer support. Think of as many specific ways as you can to reach out to this person in the next few weeks.

Closing

Closing Prayer:

God of life, when the days seem so dark and our sorrows seem to press heavily on our hearts, show us your light. Lord, when we are lonely and feel like no one cares about us, send us a friend who can remind us that you are our brother. Lord, when we are afraid of living even one more day, let your promise to always be with us fill us with courage. When we are full of our own pain, give us the wisdom and strength to comfort someone else. When we are tired, give us the gift of Sabbath to refresh and renew us. When we doubt your love, heal our hearts and fill us with trust in your faithfulness. Amen.

If you'd like to read more....

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