

S T U D Y G U I D E



Surprised by Suffering

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Renew your Mind.

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Study Schedules</i>	5
1 <i>Suffering: A Case Study</i>	6
2 <i>Suffering: A Divine Vocation</i>	13
3 <i>Dying in Faith</i>	21
4 <i>Life after Death?</i>	29
5 <i>The Resurrection of Christ</i>	36
6 <i>What Is Heaven Like?</i>	44

Introduction

In times of suffering, questions about God's goodness press in on our minds. Faith engages us in a wrestling match with our emotions and our trust in God. Should we be surprised by suffering? Could it be that suffering is part of the human condition? A calling ordained by God? In this series, Dr. R.C. Sproul addresses the most difficult struggle of our experience: the problem of pain. He shows us that God is involved in our suffering and reminds us that a time is coming when there will be no more pain, death, sorrow, or sadness.

This study guide is a companion to the video teaching series. Whether you are using the DVDs, streaming the videos on Ligonier.org, or going through the course in Ligonier Connect, this resource is designed to help you make the most of the learning experience. For each message in the series, there is a corresponding lesson in this guide. Here is what you will find in each lesson:

INTRODUCTION	<p>The introduction is a brief paragraph that summarizes the content covered in the lecture and considered in the study guide lesson.</p> <p>How to use: Use the introduction to each lesson to get a sense of the big picture before watching the video. Refer to these statements as you work through the study guide to remind yourself of what you have already covered and where you are headed.</p>
LEARNING GOALS	<p>The learning goals are the knowledge and skills that the study guide lesson will endeavor to equip you with as you work through the lecture content.</p> <p>How to use: Familiarize yourself with the goals of each lesson before engaging its contents. Keeping the overall purpose in mind as you watch each video and reflect on or discuss the questions will help you get the most out of each lesson.</p>
KEY IDEAS	<p>The key ideas are the major points or takeaways from the lecture.</p> <p>How to use: Use these ideas to prepare yourself for each lesson and to review previous lessons. They describe specifically the knowledge that each lecture is communicating.</p>

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	<p>The questions are the guided reflection and/or discussion component of the lesson that is intended to help you prepare for, process, and organize what you are learning.</p> <p>How to use: Reflect on individually or discuss in a group the questions in the order in which they appear in the lesson. The time stamps in the right margin indicate where the answers to questions during the video can be found.</p>
PRAYER	<p>The prayer section offers suggestions for how to close the lesson in prayer with respect to what was taught in the lecture.</p> <p>How to use: Consider using each lesson's prayer section as a guide to personal or group prayer. These sections follow the ACTS prayer model, which you can learn more about in R.C. Sproul's Crucial Questions booklet <i>Does Prayer Change Things?</i> This helpful guide is available as a free e-book at Ligonier.org.</p>
REVIEW QUIZ	<p>The review quiz is a set of six multiple-choice questions that appears at the end of each lesson.</p> <p>How to use: Use each quiz to check your comprehension and memory of the major points covered in each lecture. It will be most beneficial to your learning if you take a lesson's quiz either sometime between lessons or just before you begin the next lesson in the study guide.</p>
ANSWER KEY	<p>The answer key provides explanations for the reflection and discussion questions and answers to the multiple-choice questions in the review quiz.</p> <p>How to use: Use the answer key to check your own answers or when you do not know the answer. Note: Do not give in too quickly; struggling for a few moments to recall an answer reinforces it in your mind.</p>

Study Schedules

The following table suggests four plans for working through the *Surprised by Suffering* video teaching series and this companion study guide. Whether you are going through this series on your own or with a group, these schedules should help you plan your study path.

	Extended 8-Week Plan	Standard 6-Week Plan	Abbreviated 4-Week Plan	Intensive 3-Week Plan
Week	Lesson			
1	*	1	1	1 & 2
2	1	2	2 & 3	3 & 4
3	2	3	4 & 5	5 & 6
4	3	4	6	
5	4	5		
6	5	6		
7	6			
8	*			

* For these weeks, rather than completing lessons, spend your time discussing and praying about your learning goals for the study (the first week) and the most valuable takeaways from the study (the last week).

Suffering: A Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Often, the first question that comes to our minds when suffering is “Why?” Worse than the pain of suffering is the hopelessness that comes with a sense that there is no purpose to or value in the pain. We also face uncertainty about the future, and when we attempt to comfort a suffering friend, we can feel inadequate to help. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul explores the purpose of pain and suffering in order that we might gain an understanding of God’s relationship to the tragedies that intrude in human life.

LEARNING GOALS

When you have finished this lesson, you should be able to:

- Define God’s relationship with pain and suffering
- Identify common emotions that accompany pain and suffering
- Reflect on Christ as an encouragement for those who suffer

KEY IDEAS

- We ask questions about the purpose of our pain and suffering because we do not want our pain and suffering to be meaningless.
- Christians have a duty to represent Jesus Christ to those who are suffering and bring His comfort, peace, and understanding to them.
- God is sovereign, so it is impossible for pain and suffering to be without purpose, and He can use us in His sovereign providence to comfort others.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before the Video

What Do You Think?

Take a moment to answer the following questions. They will prepare you for the lecture.

- What has been a particularly painful event in your life?
- What is your usual response to pain and suffering?

Scripture Reading

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

—1 Peter 4:12–16

- What does this passage reveal about a common response to suffering? How is this even more the case when someone suffers as a Christian?

During the Video

Answer the following questions while you watch the video. They will guide you through the lecture.

Suffering with Others

0:00–16:36

- When we suffer, why are we prone to ask, “Why?”
- What can we do when we do not know what to say to someone who is suffering?

God's Sovereignty

16:36–29:35

- What is an erroneous view of the relationship between God and suffering? What problem does it try to solve?

- What are ways that the story of the Bible expresses God's involvement with suffering?

Application

29:35–35:20

- Why can we be confident even if we don't have a quick and simple answer for someone who is suffering?

After the Video

Answer the following questions after you have finished the lecture. They will help you identify and summarize the major points.

- How is it good news that God is involved in our suffering? What, then, becomes our struggle when we suffer?

If you are in a group, have the members look up and read a number of the following passages and share insights about God's perspective on suffering and its purposes: Gen. 50:20; Deut. 29:29; 1 Sam. 2:6–8; Eccl. 3:1–8; John 9:1–3; Rom. 8:18–21, 26–28; 1 Peter 2:19–24.

- Respond to Dr. Sproul's first application prompt: Imagine that you were asked to comfort a family after a tragic loss. How would you feel about speaking to the family? What would you say or do?

If you are in a group, have the members discuss their answers and different ways that people can respond to such a situation.

- Respond to Dr. Sproul's second application prompt: Imagine yourself in a situation of serious pain. What would you want a friend or pastor to say or do for you?

If you are in a group, have the members discuss their answers and consider the question: How might a quick and easy answer for suffering be unhelpful or even harmful?

PRAYER

Commit what you have learned from God's Word in this lesson to prayer.

- Praise God that our suffering is not meaningless in His sovereignty.
- Confess times of distrust toward God in your past or present suffering.

- Thank God for His presence and peace that you know in Jesus Christ.
- Ask God to comfort someone close to you who is currently suffering.

REVIEW QUIZ

Use these multiple-choice questions to measure what you learned from this lesson.

1. It is dangerous to take God out of the equation of someone's suffering.
 - a. True
 - b. False
2. What principle was communicated by the illustration about childbirth?
 - a. The importance of patience through pain and suffering
 - b. The importance of acknowledging the consequences of sin
 - c. The importance of knowing the purpose behind our suffering
 - d. The importance of turning to Christ in our times of need
3. Who said, "It is the duty of every Christian to be Christ to his neighbor"?
 - a. Martin Bucer
 - b. Martin Luther
 - c. Theodore Beza
 - d. Huldrych Zwingli
4. What is *not* a way to bring Christ to our neighbors in pain and suffering?
 - a. By bringing His peace
 - b. By bringing His comfort
 - c. By bringing His judgment
 - d. By bringing His understanding
5. Before we attempt to comfort people who are suffering, we must come up with an easy way to explain their suffering.
 - a. True
 - b. False
6. Which attribute of God guarantees that suffering has meaning?
 - a. Aseity
 - b. Eternality
 - c. Sovereignty
 - d. Omniscience

Answer Key—Suffering: A Case Study

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before the Video

What Do You Think?

These are personal questions. The answers should be based on your own knowledge and experience.

Scripture Reading

- What does this passage reveal about a common response to suffering? How is this even more the case when someone suffers as a Christian?

When the Apostle Peter says, “Do not be surprised,” it reveals a common response to suffering. One of the emotions we encounter when suffering is surprise. This is even more the case when Christians suffer for being Christians. This passage deals with Christian persecution, which is suffering because of righteousness. Even though this type of suffering is not justified, it should not be surprising. This is why Peter reminds us of the suffering of Christ, whom we follow.

During the Video

Suffering with Others

- When we suffer, why are we prone to ask, “Why?”

When we suffer, we ask the question “Why?” because knowing that our suffering has a purpose helps us endure. Worse than the pain of suffering is the feeling that our suffering is meaningless or worthless.

- What can we do when we do not know what to say to someone who is suffering?

Often, we feel that our words are inadequate to comfort someone who is suffering. In Dr. Sproul’s experience, sometimes there is nothing left to do but to be present with someone, listen, and hold hands. This can have a profound effect because Christians are representatives of Christ and can bring His peace, comfort, and understanding to those who suffer.

God’s Sovereignty

- What is an erroneous view of the relationship between God and suffering? What problem does it try to solve?

It is erroneous to think that God is not involved in our suffering and that only the devil is behind it. Such an idea attempts to soothe the anger that people feel toward God when they suffer, but it adopts an unbiblical view of God.

- What are ways that the story of the Bible expresses God's involvement with suffering?

The Bible expresses God's involvement in suffering in many ways explicitly, but we can also see God's involvement with suffering implicitly in His relationship with His people Israel. God was intimately involved in forming the nation of Israel out of the suffering of slavery in Egypt. In the New Testament, Jesus is a man of sorrows who fulfills Isaiah's prophecies of the Suffering Servant.

Application

- Why can we be confident even if we don't have a quick and simple answer for someone who is suffering?

Even if we do not know what to say to someone who is suffering, we can have confidence in the promises of God to bring comfort to His people and that God can even use us as conduits of the comfort we have in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

After the Video

- How is it good news that God is involved in our suffering? What, then, becomes our struggle when we suffer?

The fact that our sovereign God is involved in our suffering means that it is impossible for our pain and suffering to be without purpose. God's sovereignty means that there is no such thing as meaningless sorrow. The challenge, then, becomes our struggle over whether we can trust God through our suffering. We do not always know the meaning of our suffering, but we can trust that just as God is sovereign, He is also good.

- Respond to Dr. Sproul's first application prompt: Imagine that you were asked to comfort a family after a tragic loss. How would you feel about speaking to the family? What would you say or do?

The answers to these questions are subjective, though the subject of this lesson deals with the types of questions people ask and the emotions they feel when suffering. It also deals with the types of emotions that those who are called to comfort others can feel. Sufficient answers should take these experiences into consideration.

- Respond to Dr. Sproul's second application prompt: Imagine yourself in a situation of serious pain. What would you want a friend or pastor to say or do for you?

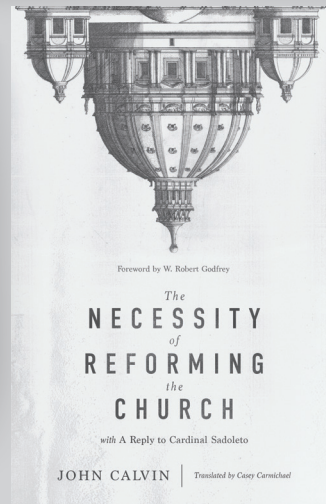
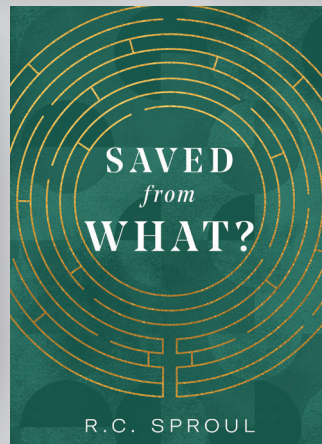
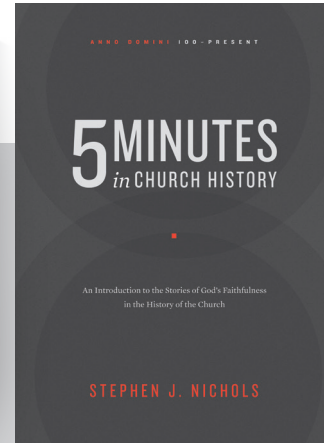
The answer to this question is subjective, and its purpose is to teach us how to identify with the weightiness of comforting others. Considering how someone could be present with you in a Christlike way would be a good way to approach the question.

REVIEW QUIZ

Lesson 1

1. **A.**
If we attempt to take God out of the equation of someone's suffering, we risk emptying suffering of its meaning, and we also call God's power into question. If God is not involved in suffering, then people might begin to doubt His power to do anything about it.
2. **C.**
Dr. Sproul used childbirth as an illustration of how knowing the purpose behind our suffering helps us endure it. A mother can endure the travail of labor pains because she knows that through them she is bringing life into this world. Dr. Sproul even used a tragic story in which this wasn't the case to underscore our need to know the meaning behind our suffering.
3. **B.**
The Reformer Martin Luther said, "It is the duty of every Christian to be Christ to his neighbor." When people we know are suffering, it is important to remember that we as Christians have an opportunity to represent all the graces of Jesus Christ to them.
4. **C.**
Though Jesus Christ will judge the world on the last day, we do not comfort others who are in pain and suffering by bringing His judgment. Rather, we ought to bring His comfort, peace, and understanding. This is one way that we can avoid being like Job's friends, who tried to explain his suffering as a result of some sin.
5. **B.**
Even though suffering does have a purpose, we do not have the mind of God. Yet even without an answer for someone's pain, we can be confident that God is able to use us to bring comfort to the situation.
6. **C.**
Of these four divine attributes, God's sovereignty guarantees that suffering has meaning. God is in control and has foreordained everything that happens for His glory. Though we might not understand the reason behind our suffering, we can trust God that there is a purpose behind it.

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