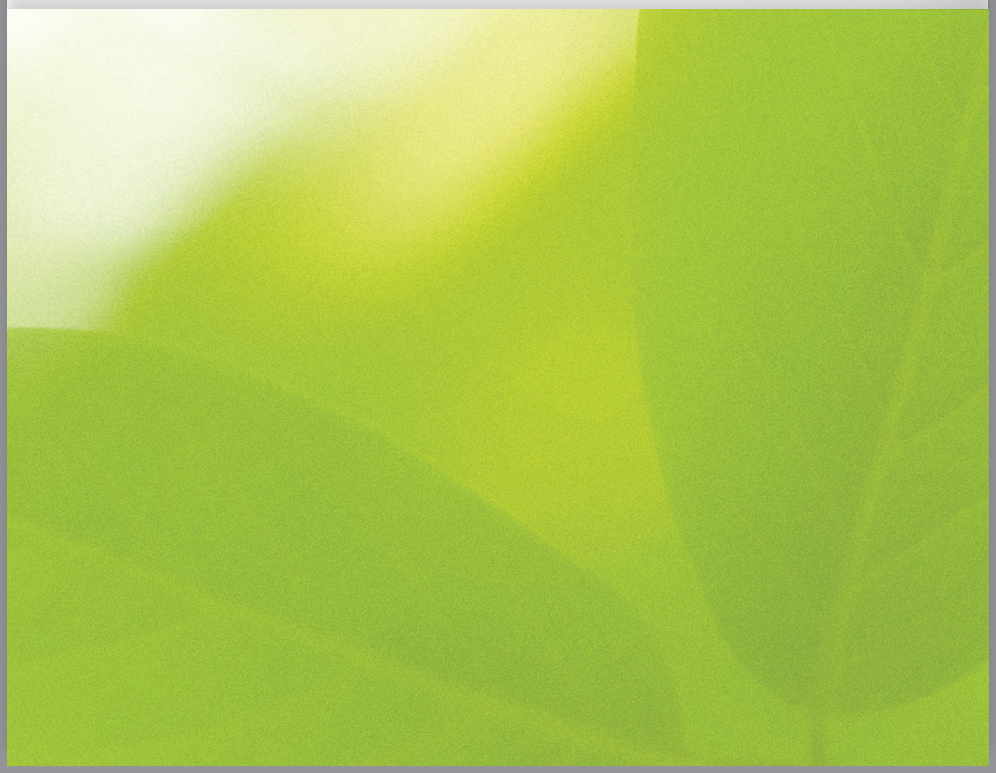
STUDY GUIDE

Suffering Is Not For Nothing

by Elisabeth Elliot



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The Terrible Truth

INTRODUCTION

Knowing that a sovereign and loving God intimately knows our suffering and pain is comforting and reassuring for Christians. In this lesson, Elisabeth Elliot reflects upon the terrible truth about suffering as a tremendous mystery for the Christian who knows that there is indeed a loving God but who also experiences tragedy that causes them to question "why?"

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. To show that through the deepest suffering, God teaches the deepest lessons
2. To recognize God's sovereignty and loving purpose in the midst of suffering
3. To consider how trust and assurance in God can transform terrible suffering into something wonderful

SCRIPTURE READING

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

—Isaiah 43:2

LECTURE OUTLINE

A. God often teaches us the deepest lessons through the deepest suffering.
   1. We must trust Him and have unshakable assurance through such times.
   2. He is in charge, He has a loving purpose, and He can transform something terrible into something wonderful. Suffering is therefore never for nothing.

B. Suffering is a mystery that none of us is really capable of plumbing.
   1. C.S. Lewis admitted that he personally knew little about pain and suffering.
   2. Many of us know relatively little about personal suffering in comparison to those who have suffered to greater degrees.
   3. The Christian idea of reconciling a loving God with the human experience of suffering is a mystery.
   4. One wonders if there is a perfectly loving purpose behind it all because it is not obvious.
   5. There are many good things in this life that we cannot do anything about, but that God wants us to do something with.

C. An all-encompassing definition of suffering is having what you don't want or wanting what you don't have.
   1. This definition covers the whole gamut from the small, trivial things to the big, important things.
   2. Malcolm Muggeridge said: "Supposing you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be because everything that corrects the tendency of man to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered."
   3. The deepest things learned in life come from the deepest suffering, and out of the deepest waters and the hottest fires have come the deepest things that one knows about God.
   4. God has seen to it that there is a certain measure of suffering, a certain measure of pain, and it is out of that very measure of pain that comes the unshakable conviction that God is love.

D. God is our refuge in suffering.
   1. There will be no intellectual satisfaction on this side of heaven to that age-old question, "Why?"
   2. Peace can be found in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and God.
   3. In loving us and giving Himself to us, God offers this unmistakable promise: "I will be with thee, for I am the Lord, thy God."

E. The terrible truth is that there is suffering.
   1. Questions such as "Is God paying attention?" and "Why doesn't He do something?" result from suffering.
   2. He will do something and He did do something via the cross, where harmony and suffering are brought together.
   3. It is only in the cross that we can begin to harmonize this seeming contradiction between suffering and love, and we will never understand suffering unless we understand the love of God.

F. There seems to be two different, paradoxical kingdoms.
   1. Jesus spoke of such things in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12), demonstrating the reality of the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of an invisible world.
   2. Paul similarly declared that it was his happiness to suffer for the sake of others (Col. 1:24).
   3. The psalmist in Psalm 23 was not naive enough to say, "I will fear no evil," because there isn't any; there is. We live in an evil, broken, twisted, fallen, distorted world.
   4. Suffering thrusts, forces, and hurries us to God as our hope and only refuge. Through it, we learn and experience who God is in a way that we could never have known otherwise.

G. Every question about suffering cannot humanly be answered at the present.
   1. The sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the splendor as yet unrevealed which is in store for us, until then we wait with eager expectation.
   2. The ultimate suffering was Christ's on the cross, which was endured for our sake.
   3. God has plans that we do not know or fully understand, but He has revealed enough about Himself to know that suffering is not for nothing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Elisabeth Elliot defines suffering as having what you don't want or wanting what you don't have.
   a. True
   b. False

2. According to Elisabeth Elliot, if all suffering was totally eliminated, why would a dreadful world exist?
   a. Because life would be boring and predictable
   b. Because the tendency of man to feel over-important would disappear
   c. Because true joy cannot exist without some sorrow
   d. Because faith would never be tested

3. How can questions about suffering best be answered?
   a. By continually asking, "Why?" in the midst of it all
   b. By accepting it as a mystery
   c. Through the power of the cross
   d. By expecting it as part of the human experience

4. Why is it not always obvious that there is an eternal and perfectly loving purpose behind suffering?
   a. Because people are deaf, dumb, and blind
   b. Because people are incapable of looking clearly at the data

c. Because not everything turns out fine, humanly speaking
d. Because not all trust that God is paying attention and will deliver them

5. Why is suffering referred to as "the terrible truth"?
   a. Because it causes us to wonder why God doesn't do something about it
   b. Because sometimes suffering seems like it is for nothing
   c. Because the very worst thing that ever happened in human history turns out to be the very best thing
   d. Because it causes people to lose hope

6. Pertaining to suffering, where does the idea of a loving God come from?
   a. Human deduction
   b. The revelation of God in the Scriptures
   c. Man manufactures Him in his mind
   d. Those who desperately want a God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

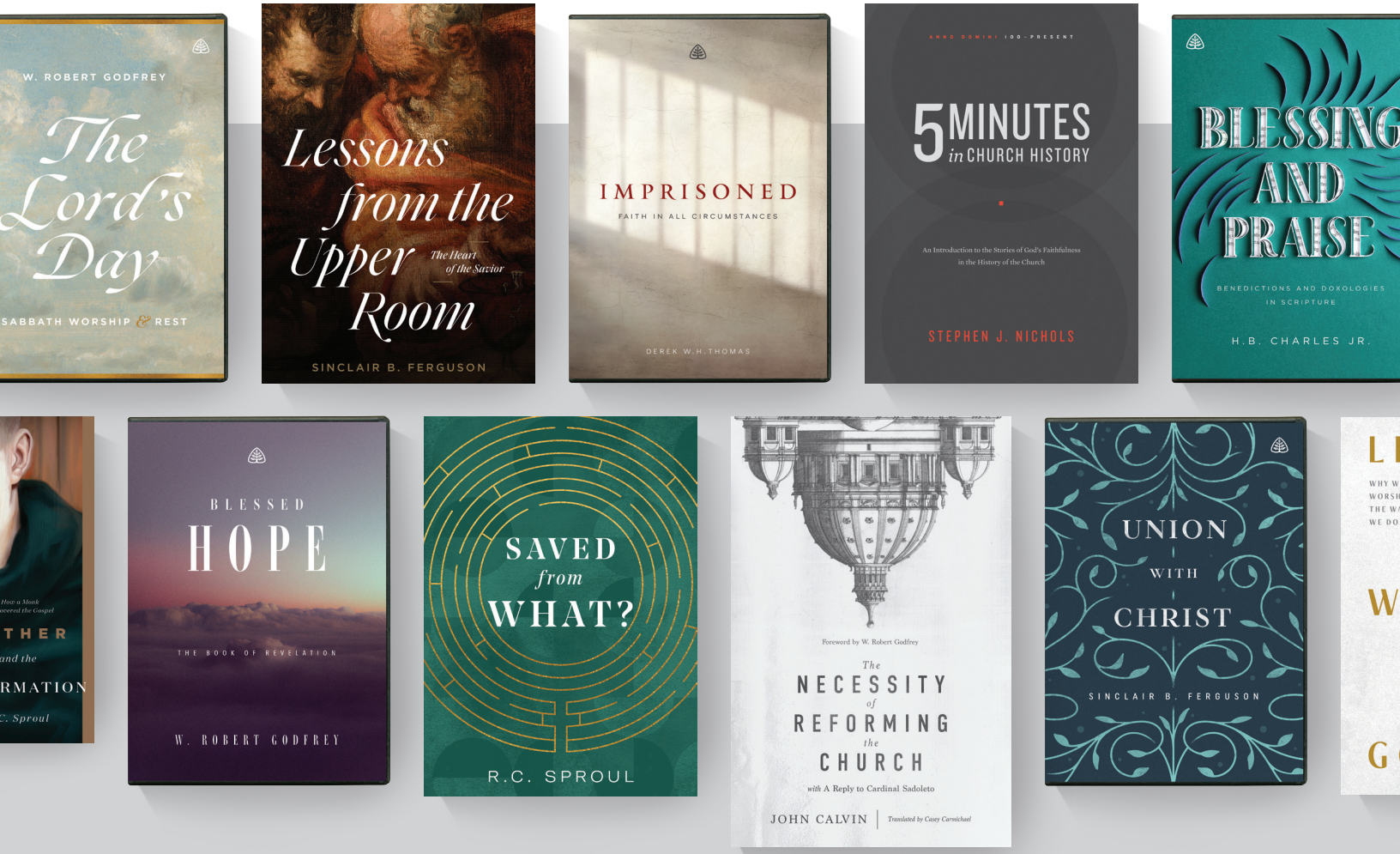
1. How would you explain to someone that a loving God permits human suffering? What are the ramifications of a world in which no one had anything they did not want or a world in which everyone had everything they wanted?

2. How does the cross harmonize the paradox between suffering and love?

3. How does suffering strengthen and encourage a Christian's faith? In what ways have you previously misunderstood the ramifications of suffering and the doctrine of God's sovereignty?

4. How can you respond to someone who asks why God does not do something to alleviate our suffering?

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