



*from the Market Harborough Methodist Circuit*

## **Session 1.3: SUFFERING**

### **INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT SUFFERING**

Suffering takes many forms: physical pain, illness, abuse, mental anguish, intense worry, bullying, terror or oppression, exhaustion, loneliness, humiliation. Suffering can result in mental illness, or mental illness itself can be a source of intense, unseen, suffering.

The question of suffering (or 'the problem of pain', as C.S. Lewis put it) is one of the great mysteries of our faith. *Why does God allow it, in a world that is meant to be 'good'?* In this session, we cannot fully answer that, but we can begin to explore it together, and we can find a safe space to be open and honest about it. To do this, we will look to the suffering of Jesus, and what is called his '**Passion**' (which in this context means 'suffering'). Each of the four Gospels tells a 'Passion Story' (essentially the story of Good Friday), all similar in form and structure and in the details that they give. This suggests that the early Christians found, in the telling of this story, not only a Saviour – whose death brings forgiveness and new life – but also a deep and real sense of *God being with us* in our suffering.

You may find this session difficult for many reasons, so please take care, only go as far as you are comfortable, treat one another with extra care, and know that God holds you, as we look at this together.

## PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

You might like to take along with you to the session **an object, a photo (representing a person, place or pet), a piece of writing or poetry, or something else** that has helped you through a time of suffering, pain, rejection, or mental illness.

*Group leaders* – you might like to **remind your group members** to bring something as outlined above, as it will be very helpful in starting the discussion. You will also need **a cross** of some description, and some way of attaching notes to it (see ‘Activity’ later).

### Praying before the session starts (at home or in the group):

**A breath prayer.** Try praying slowly, several times, breathing deeply, in and out, using again these words (based on Psalm 27, verse 1):

<i>(Breathe in)</i>	<b>Lord, you are my Light;</b>
<i>(Breathe out)</i>	<b>My Light and Salvation;</b>
<i>(Breathe in)</i>	<b>In you I trust;</b>
<i>(Breathe out)</i>	<b>In you I trust.</b>

## STARTING THE SESSION: OPENING PRAYER

Lord,

Thank you for this opportunity to gather together today and to support one another as we think about suffering – suffering that we have experienced in our lives and the suffering that Jesus experienced.

We ask that you quiet our minds and open our hearts so that we can receive your message.

Equip us, challenge us and comfort us;  
fill us with your grace in Jesus' name. Amen.

## FINDING OUR ROOTS

*Have you brought anything with you today?* If you feel able, share with others the object, photo, words, or whatever you have brought, and explain how this has helped you through a time of **suffering**.

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

In this session, we will continue the story of Jesus as he makes his way towards the cross by looking at the Passion story from Mark's Gospel. As you read this slowly and carefully, try to imagine what Jesus is going through. *What is he thinking, feeling, experiencing? What is he enduring?* (You might like to try breaking it up with more than one reader for the different paragraphs.)

### **Mark 15: verses 1-34 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' <sup>3</sup> Then the chief priests accused him of many things. <sup>4</sup> Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' <sup>5</sup> But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.*

*<sup>6</sup> Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. <sup>7</sup> Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. <sup>8</sup> So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. <sup>9</sup> Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' <sup>10</sup> For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup> Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' <sup>13</sup> They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' <sup>14</sup> Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' <sup>15</sup> So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.*

<sup>16</sup> Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. <sup>17</sup> And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' <sup>19</sup> They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

<sup>21</sup> They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. <sup>22</sup> Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). <sup>23</sup> And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. <sup>24</sup> And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

<sup>25</sup> It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup> The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' <sup>27</sup> And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>29</sup> Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, <sup>30</sup> save yourself, and come down from the cross!' <sup>31</sup> In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup> Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

<sup>33</sup> When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup> At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

## DIGGING DEEPER TOGETHER

*What do you make of this part of the story?*

As Christians read this story, we see a Saviour-Messiah going to his death believing that this is his calling from the Father-God and the climax of his ministry. We have come to believe that he went through all of this for our sake and for the salvation of the world.

*There are many ways of thinking about the ‘why’ of the cross. What is your understanding of it?*

Whatever religious understanding we put on what Jesus went through; it is clear that he suffered immensely. And this suffering matters to Christians. Christian faith is that God is ‘in Christ’, God-in-human-flesh, and that Jesus represents God to us. *So, why does it matter that God suffers in this way?*

As we read it, it may have been hard to contemplate the painful parts of this ‘Passion’ story. Sometimes we rush on to the joyful Easter-resurrection stories. *Going back over it, what **types** of suffering are experienced by Jesus here? Can you name them all?*

*In your own life, can you identify with Jesus at any point in the story? How do you think Jesus identifies with you?*

In the final words of Jesus on the cross (as told by Mark and Matthew), Jesus expresses a sense that even God has now abandoned him. This feeling would be very real, and is often experienced by people in times of mental illness or chronic depression. Depression is a common condition in everyday life – it can have many causes – but it can also be a clinical or chronic condition with long-lasting suffering. Sometimes it requires psychological help, cognitive therapy or medication. The sense of spiritual abandonment – that God is far away – is very common when people suffer from depression.

*What do you think of these words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”?*

*How can the church be considerate to those with mental ill-health, and how can we seek to help those with mental suffering in their relationship with God?*

**Psalm 22** (written many centuries before) starts with the exact same words Jesus used. Reading this psalm is perhaps key to understanding both the feelings of Jesus and ‘where God was’ in the situation. (See the notes in ‘More to Explore’ bit at the end.)

## **A SHORT TIME OF SILENCE OR GENTLE MUSIC**

*As we prepare to bring our prayers to God, you might like to keep silence or use some suitable gentle music that will be helpful in the next part...*

## **ACTIVITY: BRINGING OUR SUFFERING TO THE CROSS**

It is often said that Jesus takes our sins upon himself on the cross – that he dies with them, was buried with them, and enables our complete forgiveness and eternal life. This is true, and an important part of our faith.

It is also true that Jesus takes upon himself our *suffering* – not that we won’t suffer, but that *he shares in our pain*. He bears it with us. He weeps with us. He hurts with us. He knows even the feeling of being far away from God spiritually – feeling utterly abandoned.

You might like to write down something you are suffering, or regularly suffer from. One or more things that cause you pain – physical or mental. Or just a word that only God will know the meaning. Offer it to God as a prayer, by attaching it to the cross.

With suffering, we cannot simply ‘leave it with him’, but we can find through God the strength and the hope to live another day. And sharing with others can make it more bearable too.

## A SUMMING-UP PRAYER

God of suffering love,  
You have shown us in Christ that your love knows no bounds,  
and you would go through the utmost suffering for us.  
As we give these things to you now –  
the pains and suffering of our own lives –  
may we know you with us,  
bringing hope and healing,  
and leading us to resurrection life.  
Amen.

## LISTEN TO A SONG

*Lord, I need you* – song by Matt Maher

Available on YouTube using the link below:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuvfMDhTyMA>

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- Bring to God any prayers for the group, or for the church;
- especially pray for anything that has been difficult for anyone in this session;
- Pray for those who are suffering in our world or in our community;
- Pray for the week to come, and the challenges you face;
- You might like to **say the Lord's Prayer to finish.**

## MORE TO EXPLORE

You might like to read the Good Friday story in the other Gospels: **Matthew chapter 27, Luke chapter 23, John chapters 18-19**. See how they differ, and what words and events they emphasise.

Jesus knew the psalms very well, and it is no coincidence that the words he uttered on the cross (as recorded in Mark and Matthew) are the opening words of **Psalm 22**. **Try reading this psalm in full**. Jesus would know that although the psalm begins in depression and abandonment, it ends in hope and praise. His feelings were very real on the cross, and his suffering was enormous, but the reality of God's love was greater and deeper and would never turn away from him.

---

## WHAT IS GOOD SOIL?

When Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, he indicated that for the seeds of God's Kingdom to take root, grow strong and bear fruit, they needed to be planted in **good soil** (see *Matthew chapter 13, Mark chapter 4, and Luke chapter 8*). Christians have always realised that in order to grow in faith that is lasting and strong, we need to encourage and support one another, and find a place or a pattern that enables us to go deeper, ask questions and pray together, learning from each other and the traditions of the church.

We hope that these '**Good Soil**' resources will help and equip you to grow and be nurtured in faith, as part of the family of the church, in addition to weekly worship. They are meant to be flexible and optional, and to work in small groups, fellowship groups, families, with a friend, or can also be used as individual personal devotions. You do not need to use everything suggested. As you choose what is right for you, know that God is with you.

*These three sessions through **Lent** cover some difficult emotions that Jesus experienced as he approached his death. Make sure that you have someone you can talk to about any difficult feelings this may bring up for you. Please do ring your minister or lay worker if you want to talk or pray about anything, or speak to your pastoral visitor.*