

Session 3

Good Friday: “Why aren’t my prayers working?”



A note to leaders:

Today we wrestle with the biggest theological question of all time: “Why does a loving God allow terrible things to happen?” This may sound theoretical but, of course, it’s deeply personal. Every member of your group will have asked the “why?” question at some time.

This really could be a challenging session, so if you’re able, read chapters 7-10 of *God on Mute* in advance. Remember that you don’t have to answer every question, and you certainly won’t solve the problem of evil in 90 minutes! Your aim should be to facilitate the kind of honest conversation in which everyone feels heard.

Remember that it’s fine to say “I don’t know.” Try to lead your group into a place of deeper trust.

1. Introduce the session

5 minutes

Key verses

“And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” – Mark 15:34

Introduction

Welcome to session 3 of The Prayer Course II: Unanswered Prayer!

As usual we're going to do three things: First, we'll watch a video. Then we'll discuss the questions it provokes. Finally and most importantly, we'll pray together.

Last time we thought about Maundy Thursday and asked the heart question: "How am I going to get through this?" Today we're going to think about Good Friday and ask the more intellectual questions: "Why am I suffering?" "Why am I going through this?" "Why is God letting this happen to me?"

Begin the session by asking someone to open in prayer

2. Watch the video

35 minutes

Bible passages from the session

Mark 15:33-34, John 14:12, Genesis 17:17-22, Ephesians 6:10-17

Key points

(for your reference in case people need a little prompting!)

- Our unanswered prayers can be attributed to **God's world, God's will** or **God's war**
- Miracles have to be the exception rather than the rule because our world is infinitely complicated
- The will of God is often far darker and more painful than we imagine for reasons we can't immediately understand
- Spiritual warfare is real. Sometimes we need to stop fighting against God, and start fighting with him against the enemy of our souls

"There is hope, but that hope will not invalidate your pain..." - Alain Emerson

3. Discussion Questions

30 - 40 minutes

- Q.** What did you find most helpful, inspiring or challenging in what Pete Greig, Gemma Hunt and Alain Emerson shared?
- Q.** If you could ask God one "Why?" question, what would it be?
- Q.** On the cross Jesus asks God "Why have you forsaken me?" Would anyone be willing to describe a time that you felt abandoned or deserted by God when you needed him most?

Leader's note

Please note that this is a challenging question, especially for those who have experienced pain and loss, so do be aware of specific circumstances your group members might have faced as you ask this question.

God's will: In the book of Isaiah, God says: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." (Isaiah 55:8)

- Q. Looking back on past disappointments, does anyone have an example of a time when God knew best, even though you didn't think so at the time?
- Q. Why do we find it so hard to trust God?

God's world: Pete Greig quotes C.S. Lewis saying that, "the very conception of a common, and therefore stable, world demands that [miracles] should be extremely rare." ¹

- Q. Do you agree with this?
- Q. Should we pray less for miracles or simply trust more when our prayers aren't answered the way we want?

God's war:

- Q. Is it possible for a tragedy not to be God's 'fault'? Do you agree with Pete Greig's statement that we tend to blame God for things that are Satan's doing?
- Q. Does anyone have an experience of spiritual warfare that they can share?

Alain Emerson shares about the power of hope alongside the reality of pain.

- Q. Do we as a community lean too hard on one side of this equation, either focusing so much on hope that we aren't honest about pain, or focusing so much on pain that we fail to have hope? How can we hold both hope and pain together?

4. Small group prayer

15 minutes

Leader's note

If your group is more than 3 people, we would recommend splitting into smaller groups of 2 or 3 to give everyone an opportunity to share and pray for one another. Explain how much time you will have for prayer, and roughly how much time each person will have for sharing and praying.

Ask one another

- Q.** Earlier we shared the “why?” questions we’d like to ask God. Returning to this exercise, what would your most personal “why?” question be?

Pete Greig says that “it’s possible to trust even when we don’t understand”. Pray for one another. As you do so, you may find it helpful to remember God’s words to the apostle Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9)

5. Closing comments

5 minutes

Share with the group what you’ve really appreciated about the session.

Next week’s session will explore Holy Saturday and the mystery of God’s silence. We’ll be asking the question “Where?” - “Where on earth are you God, when heaven is silent and your son lies dead in the grave?”

To prepare for that, and to get the most out of the session, try to read chapters 11-12 of *God on Mute*. This is also available as an audiobook if you find that easier.

Closing prayer

Today we’ve tried to understand better the things we can, and to trust better when we can’t understand. Let’s finish now with a prayer of relinquishment written by George Macdonald. It’s not an easy prayer but you may like to open your hands as a sign of surrender.

*Afresh I seek thee, lead me—once more I pray— Even should it be against my will,
thy way.*

Let me not feel thee foreign any hour,

Or shrink from thee as an estranged power.

Through doubt, through faith, through bliss, through stark dismay,

*Through sunshine, wind, or snow, or fog, or shower, Draw me to thee who art my
only day.*

– by George Macdonald ². Taken from *God on Mute*, by Pete Greig, chapter 9

Further resources & reflection

Journaling question

“Where can I see God’s goodness at work in and through painful situations in my life? In what particular ways can I get better at trusting God when I don’t understand him?”

Daily devotions

At the back of the book that accompanies this course - God on Mute - you will find “God UnMute” – a forty day devotional journey. The daily content can help you process and pray at a much deeper level.

Reflect on...

- Take time to pause and reflect on Christ of Saint John of the Cross, by Salvador Dali (available online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross)
- Watch The Mission, directed by Roland Joffé (1986).

Books

- Luminous Dark, Alain Emerson
- The Problem of Pain, C. S. Lewis
- Night, Elie Wiesel
- The Crucified God, Jurgen Moltmann
- God on Mute, Pete Greig

1 C S Lewis, Problem of Pain p.25

2 George Macdonald, Diary of an Old Soul (London: SPCK, 2001) p46.