

# Devotions for Times of **Trial and Challenge**



**Biblical** Reflections



# Devotions for Times of Trial and Challenge

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# WHERE IS GOD WHEN SUFFERING STRIKES?

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2010

## How do we answer the troubling question, “Where is God when suffering strikes?”

Personal suffering—whether illness, accident, assault, robbery, poverty or natural disaster—usually raises spiritual questions. A major catastrophe is for many people a spiritual catastrophe. A complex humanitarian emergency is a complex spiritual crisis. The questions that are raised by either personal suffering or complex humanitarian emergencies are the same: Where are you God? Why did you allow this to happen? Why us? Why are some spared while others aren't?

Anywhere, anytime catastrophic suffering is outrageous. Words are insufficient, yet nonetheless our hearts cry for answers. People want answers to these questions, and to fail to offer them is to fail to respond to people's deep needs. And so, a range of responses are commonly proposed:

1. This is God's will to which we must submit.
2. This is not only God's will, but God's judgment.
3. This proves that there is no good God in whom we can trust.
4. Even if there is a good God, Evil seems to be more sovereign.
5. Survivors thank and praise God for answering their prayers (which raises the painful question of why God didn't answer the prayers of others.)
6. Thus some conclude that silence is the only answer to these questions.

I am not satisfied with any of the six options we commonly hear. None of them do justice to the God whom we encounter in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There's no time when people are immersed in the darkness of pain, loss and grief for lengthy, complex answers to the age-old, universal human questions provoked by suffering. Usually the best responses are tangible expressions of love and compassion. But people also cry out for words of explanation. Why God? If we can't say something helpful in three minutes, we will never be heard. Therefore, daring to be over simplistic in the face of the profound mystery of human pain, I offer a three minute response.

First, the Gospel loudly proclaims that God's will for people is life, not death and suffering. God grieves over human sin and suffering. Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41). We respond to suffering with lament and tears. If we have lost our capacity to cry, we have lost our right to respond to others' pain. Suffering is contrary to the good will of the God of all goodness. Ezekiel proclaimed that God "takes no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18: 32). Therefore, in Jesus Christ, God does more than grieve. "I have come that you might have life in all its fullness," he says (John 10: 10). In the Messiah, Jesus, God entered into our broken lives and carried our pains, judged our sin and destroyed the power of the Devil (Isaiah 53: 4). He not only carried our pain, God triumphed over all that keeps us from experiencing fullness of life (Philippians 2: 5-11).

Second, though this triumph over suffering has been secured in Christ's life, death and resurrection, it won't be completely realised until the New Creation. We live in the meantime—stretched between the pains of the present and the promises of the future. We live between God's good original creation, its fallen brokenness, its redemption in Christ—and its fulfilment in the coming Kingdom. In this very mean time, no one, Christian or not, is exempt from

experiencing the brokenness of creation, the ravages of sin and the assaults of the demonic: disease, disasters and death. God usually doesn't overturn natural law, or the consequences of creation's fall. "All of creation is groaning in labour," awaiting the fulfilment of our corporate redemption—then creation too will be set free (Romans 8: 18-25).

Third, we confidently proclaim that suffering doesn't have the last word! One day, God "will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more... See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21: 3-5). When Israel was captive in Babylon, God gave them profound words of guidance: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29: 11). Hope in the Hebrew language is a wonderful picture word, describing the tension placed on a spider's web. When disconnected from one end or the other, it can bear no weight. When firmly anchored between two points and stretched tight, the web can bear great weight. Hope is to be stretched between two places—firmly anchored in both the present and the future. The strands in a web become the pathway for hope. As followers of Christ, we choose to be firmly anchored in the pains of the present while holding on tightly to the promises of the future. As Hebrews 6: 18-20 says, "The hope that we have in Jesus Christ is an utterly reliable anchor for our souls, fixed in the innermost shrine of heaven, where Jesus has already entered on our behalf".

Fourth, because of this hope we don't merely give in to suffering, resigning ourselves to it as our lot in life. Nor do we seek to escape the woes of the world. Israel was called to seek the welfare of Babylon and plant gardens in the city of its captivity. Hope frees us to live in joyous rebellion against all that keeps life from becoming what God intends it to be. "The Father of mercies and the God of all comfort comforts us in our affliction that we might be able to bring comfort to those who suffer with the comfort we have received" (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4). We have the privilege of allowing the Spirit of God to pour out the love of Christ through our hearts and hands. As God's people, we are an army of caregivers, bringing tangible hope to people weighed down in suffering next door, and around the world. In addition to bringing comfort to the pains of suffering, we seek to remove its causes. In both kinds of intervention, we manifest in the brokenness of the present signs of the splendor of God's coming future.

World Vision was borne in pain and exists because of hope. We don't know why some are spared and richly blessed, while others experience unimaginable sorrow and suffering. All we know is that no pain is unimaginable to God, for God has borne it all in Jesus Christ. Our calling is to steward the life and resources with which we've been entrusted so as to enter into the depth of human suffering and allow the Spirit of God to pour out through us tangible expressions of God's trustworthy love—in food, shelter, health care, advocacy, economic development and structural changes that address many of the causes of suffering. In our tears of empathy and lament, our actions of service and justice, and our prayers of intercession and testimony, we point people to the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort found in Jesus Christ. We encourage people—give people courage in the midst of pain—to hope in the God through whom one day, all sorrow will cease and all suffering will end. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, grant us your peace.

# A COURAGE FUELED **BY FAITH**

*From the 2020 World Vision Annual Partnership Bible Study*

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**Publication Date:**

2020



## **Daniel 1:8,19 (NIV)**

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine...  
..And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah;  
therefore they were stationed in the king's court.

Our Promise, World Vision's global strategy, strengthens our resolve to live and love as Jesus did which meant following Him into fragile contexts to reach the most vulnerable children and families. Moving towards the unknown often exposes new layers of fear. In response to this, we usually seek to protect ourselves and our work by making sure we do not violate the norms, by pleasing the majority and gaining favor from those in power. Living and serving in unfamiliar contexts may lead us into situations that will challenge our convictions and make us think that our faith is a disadvantage.

We learn from Daniel however that it is possible to navigate unfavorable contexts and gain positive results without shying away from our faith.

Daniel and his young friends were taken as war prisoners in a foreign land with foreign set of values and foreign gods. Their captors gave them an opportunity to start their lives anew with the condition of embracing newly given identities and lifestyles (Daniel 1:3-7). Daniel resolved however that he would remain faithful to God - even if it meant danger for his life.

With humility, he continued to live in ways that please God and respectfully refused to compromise his faith. God honored Daniel's faithfulness and granted him favor from the king of the land and a prestigious position of leadership in his empire.

The story of Daniel and his friends demonstrates courage fueled by faith and shows that God greatly honors those who stand up for Him especially when it is hard to do so.

There are a number of principles we can learn from Daniel's life.

- 1. Living out our Christian faith with boldness and humility means fully trusting God to be in control.** Daniel has every reason to doubt God's sovereignty having recently seen his nation go down in defeat, his home devastated, his friends and family put to death and becoming war captives. But he still chose to submit to God's will even if his situation meant an uncertain future. God was pleased with Daniel's conviction and did more than he could ever ask or imagine.
- 2. Living out our Christian faith with boldness and humility means continuously living out what we profess.** Integrity equates to credibility. Daniel's faith in God propelled him to live a life of excellence – it is an active faith. Our faith should manifest in the quality of our work and our lives. He honored God by living a life that was a cut above the rest. It was good that people with a different set of values and faith noticed him and promoted him.

**3. Living out our Christian faith with boldness and humility necessitates total obedience and surrender to God.**

One's willingness and readiness to jump at God's command reveals the degree of one's familiarity with God's character. When we truly know that we serve an all-powerful and loving God, we can confidently trust Him regardless of our circumstances. We can bravely endure the difficulties, and resist the "easy way" out of our discomforts. We can say no to ways that go against His ways, and trust God's provision for an alternative course of action that brings honour to His name.

**4. Living out our Christian faith with boldness and humility also means acknowledging that the God who breaks new grounds and opens doors of opportunities for us is also the One who will provide for the journey ahead.**

He is the same God who brings out the 13 fruit of our labour as we remain faithful to Him. He does all the work and completes what He starts. We merely contribute as we follow His lead.

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. How do we ensure that the decisions and choices we make in our work are primarily influenced and motivated by our Christian faith convictions?
2. What practical steps can we take in our work to have the same resolve that Daniel displayed?



**Prayer:**

Our powerful and sovereign God,

You are a God who is able to do beyond what we can ask or imagine. You are the one who initiates everything. We are grateful that we can join You in Your work. We are nothing without You, and we will accomplish nothing without You. Forgive us for our hesitation to obey You.

Forgive us for proudly thinking that we know better and for our lack of faith. We realise that we can only trust You in as much as we have experienced You firsthand. We want a faith that is truly ours and not borrowed from others. Enable us to say yes to Your invitation for us to take a leap of faith – to run when You say run; to jump when You say jump; and to be still when You say be still – to fully surrender our will to You.

We ask of You Lord to make us faithful and courageous like Daniel and to not ever depend on ourselves, our wisdom, abilities, nor our connections. Allow us to live by Your strength and power alone.

Amen.

# FINDING GOD WHEN LIFE IS OVERWHELMING

*From the 2012 World Vision Annual Partnership Bible Study*

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**Publication Date:**

2011

The story of Elijah, the prophet, is the story of a man who faithfully follows God's command and sees God work in miraculous ways. Elijah is an inspiring character, and it would be easy to view him as a hero. To only look at this aspect, however, would be to miss the message in this story that addresses the very real question with which many of us wrestle on our faith journey. Elijah's faith crisis takes him to the brink of despair. Thankfully, this is not the end for Elijah. In this study we explore how Elijah makes it through a challenging time and goes on to play his part in God's plans for Israel.



## 1 Kings 19:1–15

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' 3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' 6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 10 He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

11 He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was

not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 14 He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' 15 Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.'

### Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about Elijah's responses to God in verses 10 and 14? Is anything surprising to you?
2. Why do you think Elijah journeyed to Horeb when he was at his lowest point?
3. Imagine you are Elijah in the cave. How would it feel when you hear the wind, the earthquake and then the fire? How would you feel in the silence that follows?
4. Have you ever felt like giving up your work or your faith?
5. What does the passage tell us about the way in which God chooses to work with people?

### Reflection:

Elijah's response to Jezebel's threat is surprising. Whereas previously Elijah did not hesitate to face adversity, here his confidence is rocked. He travels into the desert and lies down to sleep – an action tantamount to ending his life. The Bible provides little insight into the trigger for action, other than that Elijah appears tired and discouraged. God sends an angel to give him food and drink. This messenger encourages Elijah to return to Horeb, the home of Mount Sinai and God's earthly dwelling place, and it is here that Elijah meets with God.

Perhaps you, like me, wonder why God doesn't step in sooner in this story. After all, Elijah had previously been faithful and effective in his ministry. More than once he had risked his life to serve God, so why does God wait for Elijah to reach his lowest point? Elijah's response to the Lord's reproach (vv. 9 and 13), full of frustration and disillusionment, is easy to comprehend: Elijah has worked hard to make a difference and there seems little to show for it.

Elijah seems burned out, and it would seem that it has hurt his judgement. His pessimism causes him to overlook his previous experience and forget that he isn't in fact alone (one hundred other prophets were saved from persecution). Twice he vents his frustration and twice God chooses to respond indirectly. At first God merely instructs Elijah to stand before God. The way God speaks is barely audible, in stark contrast to the preceding wind, earthquake and fire. It suggests that Elijah must listen very carefully and be open to God's working through simple and unexpected means. The second time God gives Elijah a new mission and gently reminds Elijah that he is far from the only one committed to the cause.

God graciously and gently provides a way forward when Elijah is overwhelmed – food, drink and a return to the foundation of faith. The Lord renews Elijah's vision yet assures him that Israel's future does not stand or fall by his effort alone. The Bible does not tell whether Elijah becomes discouraged ever again. I suspect he did. After all, he returns to the challenge of service, and it is there that it can be hardest to make sense of God's call. I trust that at those times God's messengers turned up once more.

The Lord will meet us in all of our challenges. God has a way forward for us, if we will seek his guidance. God calls us to listen very carefully for his voice, and God will be faithful to speak to us.

### Key Thought:

God graciously and gently provides a way forward when we are overwhelmed.

### Idea for Application:

Consider how best you can ensure that you stay physically and spiritually refreshed in your work at WorldVision, so that you can withstand challenges when they come. Second, how best can you support others who are struggling to make sense of their faith?

### **Idea for Worship:**

Today in your intercessions, pray for each other that your faith might withstand the stresses and strains that you encounter at work. You might also like to serve each other with some simple food and drink as a symbol of God's renewal. Together you may also read aloud the following prayer, based on a version of 'St Patrick's Breastplate'.

Christ be with you, Christ within you,  
Christ behind you, Christ before you,  
Christ beside you, Christ to win you,  
Christ to comfort and restore you.  
Christ beneath you, Christ above you,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love you,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger:

Amen.

**God graciously and gently provides a way forward when we are overwhelmed.**



# BUILDING INTO EVERY WEEK

## EVERYTHING NECESSARY FOR WHOLENESS

*From 2012 World Vision Annual Partnership Bible Study*

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The purpose of humanitarian work is to serve others. We are expected to care for the well-being of the people we are called to serve. And the needs are so great that we constantly feel pressure to do more. More often than not, we find our own resilience to stress weakened by work overload, a sense of being overwhelmed, increasing frustration, fatigue, physical illness and a loss of satisfaction and joy. These prolonged times of stress often lead to burnout.<sup>3</sup>

As part of God's creation, people function best when we are intentional in taking care of our whole being. Conserving our physical, mental and spiritual health is part of essential stress management, which includes physical exercise, diet, medical care, adequate sleep and rest, setting priorities, developing times of quiet reflection and requesting the support of others.

### **Physical Health:**

Exercise helps the body grow stronger. In our rather sedentary modern lives, most of us are aware of the need to exercise regularly, cut unhealthy foods from our diets and replace them with more nutritious foods. Research shows we need 30 minutes of exercise daily. Caring for our health also includes receiving adequate medical care for ourselves and our families. It is critical for humanitarian workers to stay healthy, prevent accidents and have regular health check-ups.

Adequate sleep and rest are essential to restore our bodies to optimal function. Most people require seven to nine hours of sleep to function effectively. Rest is

so critical that even God rested on the seventh day of creation, and God blessed the day of rest and made it holy (Gen. 1:31–2:3). Many of us are not disciplined enough to ensure that we give ourselves one day off a week without feeling guilty.

### **Spiritual Practices:**

God frequently reminds us that the care of our emotions and our spirit is as important for our well-being as physical strength. We have an inherent need to take time to be still and to pray, focus on God, listen to God's voice, contemplate God's acts throughout creation and reflect on the meaning of scripture. This is the way to feed our spirits and anchor our souls to that which is beyond ourselves. Spirituality provides direction and meaning to our lives.

However, in the frenzy of our busy lives, our excuse is often that we don't have time for quiet contemplation. Or if we do practise disciplines to build our spirits, it may only be through some form of religious worship for an hour or two on a set day of the week. More than 450 years ago, Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Catholic Jesuit order, taught religious practice and disciplined ongoing self-assessment to his followers. The Jesuits stopped three times a day to practise self-reflection and prayer. Loyola's desire was for his priests to measure how effectively they were putting their beliefs into practice. This was essential as they carried out their work living their daily lives in the world. Through imposing regular reflection and spiritual focus throughout the day, there was no

artificial separation between feeding the body, mind and spirit in daily practice. These techniques were designed to allow busy people to 'reflect on the run', and they remain a relevant practice today.<sup>4</sup>

Practising prayer and reflection enables us to continually reassess our actions, learn from our mistakes and adjust our course. This realignment provides meaning and strengthens our faith and values. Setting aside time for stillness and focus is essential for this to happen. Equally, being honest with ourselves in measuring our personal deeds and attitudes is a key aspect of the discipline of integrity – there is no point in trying to fool ourselves!

### **Community:**

Finally, practising our faith in regular rituals together with like-minded people enables us to worship God in community and grow alongside others. Social support provided by the church and other religious institutions is an important way of collective expression of faith which bonds us together in unity with God.

In times of adversity and high stress, the combination of a strong belief system, the discipline of prayer and contemplation, rest, and a sound and healthy body will provide the necessary armour to protect us and provide the resilience we need to grow and thrive.

### **For Discussion:**

1. Do you feel that you have a healthy rhythm in your life right now?
2. Are there specific spiritual and physical disciplines that you would like to grow in?

# BEING WITH OTHERS **WHEN** **THEY ARE HURTING**

*From the 2012 World Vision Annual Partnership Bible Study*

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**Publication Date:**

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When others are struggling with pain in their lives, sometimes we don't have any solutions to give them. It is in these times that God calls us to simply be with them. Our presence alone can be healing. Mark 5 shows Jesus being pulled in many different directions by people who place great demands on him. Before encountering Jairus, Jesus has just calmed a storm and healed a demon-possessed man. He has many urgent ministry duties. In this study, we will look at the ministry choices that Jesus makes. Jesus gives us an example of choosing to slow down and spend time with people. We too are called to exercise our faith in God by being with people, listening to them and loving them.



## **Mark 5:21–36 21**

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. 22Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' 24So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better; but rather grew worse. 27She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' 29Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' 31And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' 32He looked all round to see who had done it. 33But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

35While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' 36But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.'

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Ask each person in your group to represent one of the characters in this passage: Jesus, the crowd, Jairus, the bleeding woman, and the disciples. If there are more than five people in your group, two or more people may represent each party. Have the representatives show what the character would have been thinking and feeling during the events in the passage.
2. Discuss how Jesus related with the bleeding woman. What specific actions did Jesus take?
3. Jesus was urgently called to save the life of a little girl. However, along the way Jesus changes his plan and stops to talk to a chronically ill woman. Why do you think Jesus might have made this decision? What decision would you have made in this situation?
4. What chronic (persistent) situations (such as trauma, poverty, injustice, epidemics) do you face in your work with World Vision?
5. How do you think Jesus is present in the chronic challenges around you? How can you join Jesus as he is present in the lives of hurting people?
6. What lessons from Jesus' interaction with the bleeding woman could you apply when you relate with friends, colleagues and community members who are hurting?

**Reflection:**

Jairus was a rich and powerful man. His daughter was an innocent girl on the verge of death. Jairus knew that his daughter could have a bright future ahead of her, if Jesus would save her right away. On his way to heal Jairus' daughter, Jesus was stopped by a poor, oppressed and hurting woman. This woman was different in many ways from Jairus' daughter. She did not have a bright future ahead of her. Her situation was not urgent – she had already been bleeding for 12 years. She was thought to be incurable. Yet in the middle of his urgent mission to save Jairus' daughter, Jesus chose to stop and listen to the woman's story. In the eyes of everyone around him, Jesus' foolish choice caused the young girl to die. Yet Jesus knew that there was hope for both cases. He was filled with hope for the bleeding woman, even when everyone else had lost hope. He knew that God could do anything, for anyone. Jesus interacted with both the bleeding woman and Jairus' daughter equally. He spent time with the woman, listened to her story, and called her

'daughter'. Because of the time he spent with her, not only was the woman healed physically, but she also experienced emotional and spiritual healing and freedom.

In our work, we are often called to focus on urgent situations and quick wins, and this is very important. Yet sometimes we struggle to have hope for the situations that have continued on and on for years. Just like the physicians in the case of the bleeding woman, we may have already tried to bring change to these difficult situations, but nothing worked. We may feel there is nothing that we can do. It is in these times of doubt that God calls us to simply be with those who are hurting. We do not know what the solution is, but we must believe that God wants to love and heal others simply through our presence. God may call us to be present with community members or with our colleagues as they face great hardship and sorrow in their lives. In these times, let us remember that God is the healer; we are not. We can simply love people as they walk along their healing journey with God.

It can be difficult to maintain deep relationships with hurting people for long periods of time when we don't see change in their lives or circumstances. We need the power of God to help us stay on this journey. In these times it is helpful to meditate on the incarnation of Christ in our lives. God became human and chose to live with us, to walk with us and to bear our pain, so that we could receive full healing. We are like the bleeding woman, and we can also be like Jesus to others. Transformational development can occur only when we become incarnate with others. Rather than implementing programme after programme, we are called to spend time with and listen to people, sharing the power that we've received from God so that others are empowered to believe in themselves, identify solutions, value their own opinions and find hope in God. The Lord created us to live in community – both community with one another and with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need others, and they need us. May we deeply love our colleagues and communities through long-term relationships, just as Christ has loved us.

**Key Thought:**

God wants to love and heal others simply through our presence with them.

### **Idea for Application:**

We can be present with others by actively listening to them. This may include looking other people in the eye while they are speaking, asking them specific questions, repeating back to them what they have shared, and expressing sympathy for them. Active listening does not need to offer judgments or solutions to the person's challenge. Consider applying this Bible study by asking one or more of your co-workers how they are doing emotionally and spiritually, and actively listen to their response. This type of lay ministry is best done with people of the same gender as you.

### **Idea for Worship:**

Read these words out loud together as a closing prayer:

Let us treat everyone with equal kindness  
Let us treat others as we like to be treated  
Let us comfort one another  
Let us strengthen one another  
Let us give courage to those who are fearful  
Let us care for the weak  
Let us be patient with everyone  
Let us think of what is best for each other and the community  
Let us be gentle in carrying out our business  
Let us act with compassion, in kindness and humility  
Let us do all that we can to live at peace with everyone  
Love trusts, hopes, endures  
A kindly word multiplies friends  
Kindly words also heal  
Let us help each other



**God wants to love and  
heal others simply  
through our presence  
with them.**

# ENCOUNTERING THE SUFFERING CHRIST

*From the 2012 Annual Partnership Bible Study*

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When we are suffering, we can feel angry, depressed, hopeless and out of control. We may begin to feel that we have nowhere to turn. In these times, we can find strength in the passages in the Bible that describe Jesus' suffering. It can be comforting to know that we are not alone, but that others have endured the same things as have we. Isaiah 53 is one such passage that describes a 'suffering servant'.



## Isaiah 53

1 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. 4 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.  
8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. 9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. 11 Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. In your group, list the words in this passage that describe the suffering man and the things that happen to him.
2. This passage states several times that this man is suffering for us and our sins. What does this mean to you?
3. From verses 10–12, what is the positive aftermath of the man's time of suffering?
4. Does anything in this passage encourage and strengthen you?

**Reflection:**

Isaiah 53, Isaiah prophesies about the suffering of the coming messiah, a prophecy which Jesus Christ fulfilled around 700 years later. The description in this passage provides a horrific picture of the torture that Christ endured: he was despised, rejected, crushed, oppressed, filled with pain and led to slaughter. Many of us and the people with whom we work have experienced times of suffering. In these moments, we can take great comfort from this passage and others that describe Jesus' crucifixion, because we know that Jesus understands perfectly what we are enduring and that he is crying with us. We are not alone.

When I have faced great suffering or mistreatment, sometimes the only place for me to look to is Christ on the cross. I have experienced such great pain and anger that I could not let go of. When I remember Christ's suffering for me and with me, the Holy Spirit begins to slowly dissolve my anger and give me a feeling of hope. I realise that if my Lord could endure such suffering, it is not impossible for me.

In this passage we also see that Jesus did not suffer needlessly. Rather, Isaiah writes that the suffering servant (Jesus) was crushed for our sins and bruised so that we could be healed. Jesus allowed himself to endure this pain out of love for you and me. Jesus had you in his mind as he suffered. This can also bring comfort during our most difficult times.

Often we feel as if there is no reason for our suffering, or no hope that things will get better. Isaiah 53 promises that this is not true. Because Christ lives in us, our suffering can produce good, even if we don't see the fruit for a long time. Sometimes this means that we choose to suffer with others, particularly

the communities that we serve. Our choice not to escape the suffering that the community endures can produce beautiful fruit in ministry. There is always hope in the midst of suffering. The communities that we serve with need to hear this hope from us. Jesus was not tortured, mocked and killed only for your sins and my sins.

Jesus endured suffering for the sake of every person, including our enemies and the people who cause us to suffer today. Remembering the suffering of Christ helps us to respond with love to others, and to forgive and respect others who treat us badly. Christ is alive in us, reaching out from within us to bless others. As we kneel at the foot of his cross, we are empowered to reach out in love to love and serve others as Christ does.

**Key Thought:**

Jesus is present with us and comforts us in our suffering.

**Idea for Application:**

Later today or this week, take some time to read and reflect on the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus in Mark 14–15. Consider what God is personally speaking to you and your life through this passage.

**Idea for Worship:**

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for humanity you sent your Son Jesus Christ our Saviour to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility. Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

-The Book of Common Prayer, 'Collect for Palm Sunday'.

# ESTABLISHED IN CHRIST'S LOVE

From the 2019 World Vision Annual Partnership Bible Study

**Authors:**  
Charles Rwomushana

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## Introduction:

Invitation to worship:

'Jesus, Thine All-victorious Love'  
Jesus thine all-victorious love  
Shed in my heart abroad;  
Then shall my feet no longer rove  
Rooted and fixed in God.  
O that in me the sacred fire  
Might now begin to glow;  
Burn up the dross of base desire  
And make the mountains flow!  
O that it now from heav'n might fall  
And all my sins consume!  
Come, Holy Ghost, for thee I call,  
Spirit of burning, come!  
Refining fire, go through my heart,  
Illuminate my soul;  
Scatter thy life through every part  
And sanctify the whole.



## Ephesians 3:17-19

17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

## Scripture Reflection:

In this passage, the apostle Paul prays first that the Ephesians would have constant communion with Christ, always feeling his presence in their hearts. He then prays that they would be rooted and grounded in love – love for Christ and for one another – to better understand Christ's limitless love. Paul's choice of the word 'rooted' brings to mind the important function that roots play in a plant's survival and growth. Believers must remain rooted in God's Word in the same way, if we desire to grow and thrive spiritually. Consider the following insights:

- 1. Our spiritual food:** As plants receive nourishment through their roots, believers receive spiritual nourishment through God's Word (Deut. 8:3). When we feed our soul with God's teachings, we are taking in food that ultimately helps us to align our actions, lives and words with God's Word and will.
- 2. Prayer:** As the plant reaches towards sunlight, so should we reach out to Christ through prayer daily. Our spirit is completely absorbed in God during prayer; becoming sensitive to and aware of his presence. Jesus affirms that prayer is our

biggest weapon against evil when he said, 'Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial' (Matt. 26:41). Most importantly, prayer keeps us connected to and rooted in Christ.

3. **Discernment:** Roots absorb water and nutrients from minerals that are essential and appropriate for the plant. This selective absorption is similar to discernment, which we must exercise at all levels at all times. We must fervently seek the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), praying for the Spirit of God to give us wisdom to apply to our lives and work.
4. **Firmly built:** The apostle Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be 'grounded' in Christ's love. To be grounded is to be established firmly, anchored and unable to be tossed about by every passing wind. We often encounter various 'winds' in our work as we strive to work in many countries and contexts (Matt. 7:24–27). Maintaining World Vision's rich Christian identity in the midst of constant pressures can be challenging, but, as a ministry grounded in God's Word, we must regularly depend upon scripture, both as individuals and corporately.
5. **Living in unity:** Plants need water, air, nutrients and sunlight to grow. They rely on all of these elements— not just one or two — to thrive. In the same way, Paul encourages the Ephesians to be united as a body of saints. In doing so, we can benefit from the elements of fellowship — corporate worship, prayer, accountability and encouragement — that are vital for believers to thrive and fully understand Christ's love.

### Discussion Questions:

1. How deeply rooted are you in God's Word as your source for spiritual food? Has something else become your main source of nourishment?
2. How has prayer been part of your daily relationship with God?
3. Looking back on your life, what are some examples of how being firmly grounded in Christ's love helped you through challenging times in your work and ministry?



### Prayer:

I kneel in your presence, Lord, praying that you would give me strength and power through your Spirit and Christ will live in me through faith. I also pray that your love be the ground into which I sink my roots and establish my foundation, that I may understand and experience the depth of your love and be completely filled by you.

# LAMENTATION

## From the 2019 “We Are World Vision” Month Resource Guide

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### Publication Date:

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### Invitation to worship:

Reflect on the following story and experience shared by Silvia Correa:

I remember the story of two teenagers, a Salvadoran brother and a sister, staying at a shelter house assisted by World Vision in Mexico City. Mexican immigration officers detained them. They were waiting to be deported back to El Salvador where their grandmother was located. They had hoped to enter the United States to flee from the violence and dangers of gangs in their area and reunite with their mother.

While at the shelter, the 13-year-old sister shared: “I am sad because I miss my grandmother and we are in danger in El Salvador, but when I’m sad I pray to God and hope comes back. I know God is with me in my sadness; when I feel alone, I know he is there”.

Why does God allow children to be born in these conditions? Poverty, abuse and exploitation put them at risk. Despite these heart breaking circumstances, children like these continue to hope in God, knowing that God is there with them in their suffering and peril.



### Psalm 10:1-2

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.”

### Reflection: (Matthew Scott)

Lament is an old-fashioned word. Lament is something we would rarely sing about or a topic we would seldomly hear preached on a Sunday with our church families. Still, a good part of our bibles are filled with lament. Dozens of Psalms and much of the Prophetic writings are filled with lament. There is a whole book in our Bible called “Lamentations”.

Lament is commonly defined as a passionate expression of grief or sorrow, or a complaint.

Psalm 10 paints for us a picture of lament in the bible. The Psalmist is crying out to God from within a fragile context about the awful way that the wicked are treating the most vulnerable, and complaining that God seems to be doing nothing.

Lament does not sit well with many cultures, especially those in the West. People in the West prefer to focus on abundant life, the victory in Jesus, and the comfort of healing. These things are all good and worthy things to sing and dance about. While the Bible encourages us to give thanks, to praise, to worship, to present our requests to God, we are also called to lament.

In July 1997, this lesson of lament became quite personal for me. One of my first field visits with World Vision took me to Cambodia to visit projects protecting children from the dangers of land- mines and unexploded bombs after decades of violent conflict. On my second morning in Phnom Penh, I visited the Tuol Sleng genocide museum where the horrors of the nation’s past were commemorated. Another visitor and I walked and stared silently

at images of the killing fields and the bureaucratic efficiency of death perpetrated by Pol Pot's horrific regime.

Later that afternoon, Phnom Penh was suddenly fully engulfed in armed conflict. I sheltered in a colleague's home as mortar shells rained down on the city for days and gunfire rang out in the streets. A brief visit to the Cambodian children's hospital presented a haunting sight of abandoned wards filled with intravenous drips dangling loosely, bandages strewn on the floor where terrified parents had grabbed their children and fled as shelling and gunfire grew close.

Even as grief and terror gripped the city, some of us expatriates risked a dangerous drive to the airport so that we could board waiting aircraft sent to retrieve us. As we boarded there were tearful goodbyes with our Cambodian colleagues, whom we were leaving to an uncertain fate.

Together, those of us who stayed and those who left were united in our grief at the tremendous loss of life. We felt deep and passionate sorrow for those maimed and injured, and at the advent of fear. In addition to the death and injuries, families had become separated in the chaos. Law and order crumbled. Decades worth of economic and infrastructure development were reduced to rubble in the first few days of fighting.

Today, we can lament the same in Bamako or Bangui, Goma or Gaza, Mitrovica or Mogadishu, San Pedro Sula or Sana'a.

Confronted with the suffering and injustice that we see there, we must cry out to God, as the Psalmist does: "Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed." (Psalm 10:12)

This is the kind of prayer prayed by people who live in war zones. Father Emmanuel Katongole, a Ugandan Catholic priest, and Chris Rice, a Mennonite civil rights activist, wrote together:

"Lament is not despair. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. We are enjoined to learn to see and feel what the Psalmists see and feel and to join our prayers with theirs. The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament."

Rice and Katongole know this well. As the founding members of the Great Lakes Initiative (GLI), they have mobilised prayer, teaching, reconciliation, and peace across the troubled Great Lakes region in Africa. Their experience is grounded in centuries of Christian teaching on the way to healing in fragile and broken places. They bring leaders from around the world on pilgrimages of pain and hope.

Jesus Christ practiced lament frequently in complaining to the Pharisees about their exploitation of the poor. Our Lord grieved and wept openly at his friend Lazarus' death. Jesus cried in desolation from the cross: "My God why have you forsaken me?" Soon after, the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and celebrated victory over death and all that hinder the world from experiencing fullness of life. In the same way, the path of transformation for the most vulnerable children and their families winds through the valley of the shadow of death. The hope of reconciliation begins with encountering pain and crying out in deep lament. But the path does not end there. Lament is a Biblical beginning, but it is not the final word.

As with so many Psalms like it, Psalm 10 begins in the minor key of lament but resolves to the major chord of praise in verses 17 and 18:

"O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more."

The whole Psalm shows us an extended divine rhythm beginning with lament of evil and suffering, and ending with a declaration of God's attentiveness to suffering. God's goodness and justice endures, even as human beings slaughter one another, sometimes invoking God's name.

As Christians, we worship and obey a God who is well-acquainted with the suffering and evil that humans inflict on each other. We worship a God who laments with a broken heart that this is not the way things are supposed to be. In Jesus we believe in the hope of redemption, and the power of resurrection.

As we seek to follow Jesus into fragile contexts, we are called to lament and to identify with suffering. We are called to the truth of transformation that means destruction does not have the final say. We are called to a life of lament and praise, of mourning and dancing.

### Reflection Questions:

1. How have you or can you practice lament in your own personal spiritual journey?
2. Have you ever taken a pilgrimage of pain and lament? If so, what was your experience? What were the outcomes?
3. What local places could you visit where you live or work, to practice the Biblical discipline of lament?



### Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

As Bob Pierce prayed that his “heart would be broken by the things that break Your heart,” so too we ask You to guide us in the way of Your Son. Through lament with those who suffer greatly in fragile places today, disturb us with what is lacking. Inspire us to be faithful witnesses to your resurrection hope. As we seek to follow You into fragile contexts, teach us, Lord Jesus, to grieve what is lost and to cry to You for justice and peace.

Amen

**Jesus is present with  
us and comforts us  
in our suffering.**



# HOPE IN OUR ‘WONDERFUL COUNSELLOR’

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## Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

‘For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’

### Call to Worship:

Begin your time of reflection with the following prayer: Of our future, present, past – You are Lord. Of our plans, however vast – You are Lord. Of our families, friends, and foes – You are Lord. Of our sorrows, joys and woes – You are Lord.

(Adapted from the book: “Praying the Names of God” by Leanne Blackmore, Barbour Publishing 2016)

### Reflection:

Life is hard. In our work with World Vision, and in all of life, we go through difficult experiences. Sometimes we are not OK. We seek counsel or advice from family members, friends, co-workers, professional advisors, and church leaders. Often times, Jesus Christ can work through them to provide words of comfort and understanding. Isaiah, when prophesying about the Child to be born—the Son to be given—writes ‘He will be called “Wonderful Counsellor.”’

Some translations of this verse place a comma between ‘Wonderful’ and ‘Counsellor’ suggesting that Jesus would be both ‘Wonderful’ and ‘Counsellor.’

- Consider for a moment how Jesus is simply ‘Wonderful’: God incarnate. The God of creation coming to this earth as a baby, to grow into a man, displaying the nature and identity of God to humanity.

- Consider how the coming Messiah would be a ‘Counsellor.’ Jesus, with His wisdom and insight, drew people by the thousands. They listened to His every word. Jesus also said that He would send the Holy Spirit as the Helper, or Counsellor, to teach us all things (John 14:26).

When I think about counsel that I have received that might be considered ‘wonderful’, more often than not, the counsel has been challenging, exhorting, and difficult. Counselling that is ‘wonderful’ stirs us away from complacency. Receiving counsel and allowing it to change our lives is transformative.

The counselling that we receive from the triune God is ‘wonderful’: ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts’ (Isaiah 55:9). We need the wisdom of God, the words of Jesus, and the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit as we make our way through the challenges of this life. Jesus, Emmanuel, ‘God with us’, is our ‘Wonderful Counsellor’. He gives us hope when life is hard.

### Questions for Reflection:

1. When life is difficult, where do you most often seek help or advice?
2. Have you ever received ‘wonderful’ counselling? What made it ‘wonderful’?
3. How can you be more open to Jesus as ‘wonderful counsellor’ today?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, In You are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. You are indeed 'Wonderful.' You provide the very best counsel. We praise You for being our 'Wonderful Counsellor'. Remind us of these aspects of Your character during this Advent season. Help us to come to You and experience Your wonderful counsel in the days and weeks ahead.

Amen.

