



# SPIRITUAL CRISES

*No one wants one. Everyone needs one.*

## Small Group Guide



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Authors: David Emery, Matthew Kelley, and Corey Miller  
Edited & Designed by Rachel Freeny

# INTRODUCTION

## **WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL CRISIS?**

No one wants a spiritual crisis, but everyone needs one. Spiritual crises occur throughout our lives when we experience an event or circumstances that shift the ground our faith is built on. Spiritual crises are an opportunity for spiritual progress—a widening of the soul and opening of the heart. Spiritual crises help us cultivate humility and compassion.

## **ABOUT THIS STUDY**

This five session small group study explores five common questions that people have about God, the Bible, and the life of faith. This study is best experienced with other people, so consider inviting a few friends to go through it with you.

## **HOW TO USE THIS STUDY**

Over the course of five sessions, we will look at suffering, doubt, the Bible, forgiveness, and anxiety and depression. Each of these questions shape our faith and our understanding of God.

Here are some things to keep in mind throughout this study:

God shows up when people have real conversations about real life. Don't be afraid to lean into the discussions this study will spark in your group.

The freedom to be real about our questions, doubts, and fears is an expression of faith, not weakness. As such, you're encouraged to create a safe, respectful space in your group for people to share honestly.

Because this study addresses some difficult topics, consider beginning and ending your group's time together with prayer.

Sermons complementing this study will be available at [MiddletownChristian.org/sermons](http://MiddletownChristian.org/sermons).

# Session 1 -- SUFFERING & EVIL

## THE CRISIS

Each of us has watched a loved one die, been the victim of a crime, encountered poverty, witnessed injustice, or in some way been confronted with the reality of suffering. Human history and our personal lives sometimes seem like one long chronicle of suffering and despair. If God is all powerful and loving, why is there suffering in the world? Why doesn't God do something? All world religions deal with this question differently. Suffering is a major theme in the Bible as well. There are no simple answers.

## KEY SCRIPTURE -- JOB 1:1, 2:1-10

Additional Scriptures: Psalm 22:1-11, Mark 15:22-39, Romans 8:28, 33-39

## KEY IDEAS

1. The Bible answers the questions we have about suffering a hundred different ways.
2. God allows people to make their own choices and this allows for some great things to happen and for some terrible things, too.
3. God isn't some distant, detached, and disinterested deity. God entered into our world and personally experienced our pain through Jesus Christ.
4. The best answer to the problem of suffering is learning to be OK with having no answer that will ever satisfy us and doing something ourselves to relieve it. The Jesus stuff like feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and clothing the naked.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What easy explanations have you heard for why people suffer? What are some of the least satisfying?

What are the pitfalls of the statement, “everything happens for a reason?”

How has the problem of suffering impacted your life and the lives of the people you love?

When have you grown the most? When life has been easy or when there has been suffering?

What are some of the ways that you can work with God to offer help to people who are suffering?

## QUOTES

“No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career — something will inevitably ruin it.” - Tim Keller, *Walking with God in Pain and Suffering*

“Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people?...The response would be...to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us, and to go on living despite it all...no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened.”- Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

“Suffering is not God’s desire for us, but it occurs in the process of life. Suffering is not given to teach us something, but through it we may learn. Suffering is not given to teach others something, but through it they may learn. Suffering is not given to punish us, but sometimes it is the consequence of our sin or poor judgment. Suffering does not occur because our faith is weak, but through it our faith may be strengthened. God does not depend on human suffering to achieve his purposes, but sometimes through suffering his purposes are achieved. Suffering can either destroy us, or it can add meaning to our life. - Adam Hamilton

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

Adam Hamilton, *Why?*

# Session 2 -- DOUBT

## THE CRISIS

For many Christians, doubt is seen as the opposite of faith. We are taught what to believe about God and the Bible and encouraged to accept it without question. As we grow older, we encounter new ideas from science, other religions, and other Christian traditions. Those new ideas spark questions and doubts about what we've always believed, and we may worry that our doubts make us bad Christians. What do we do when the things we once believed (or thought we believed) seem to fall apart? Are faith and doubt fundamentally incompatible, or can we grow by hold them in tension with one another?

## KEY SCRIPTURE -- JOHN 20:24-29

Additional Scriptures: Matthew 28:16-19, Hebrews 11:1, Genesis 18:9-15

## KEY IDEAS

1. Faith and doubt aren't enemies.
2. There are no doubts that you have that have not already been explored by others. You are not alone.
3. Jesus can hold all of humanity, with our faith and our doubt, together.
4. God calls us to keep moving forward in faith even when things don't make perfect sense.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are some of the doubts you have?

When has a time of doubt felt like too much to overcome?

When has your doubt helped you grow in faith?

How can we keep moving forward even in a moment of doubt?

## QUOTES

“We long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it’s uncomfortable.” -Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*

“Faith and doubt aren’t opposites. Doubt is often a sign that your faith has a pulse, that it’s alive and well and exploring and searching. Faith and doubt aren’t opposites, they are, it turns out, excellent dance partners.” -Rob Bell

“If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” -Rene Descartes

“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” -Frederick Buechner

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*  
Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*  
David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters*  
Victor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

# Session 3 -- THE BIBLE

## THE CRISIS

The Bible is an inspiring book that shares God's love and guidance for our lives. It offers us a pathway for living a meaningful life and experiencing God. But there are also parts of the Bible that are troubling and don't make sense to us. What do we do with those parts of the Bible that appear inconsistent with the character of God? For example, in Joshua chapter 6, God orders the Israelites to destroy the city of Jericho and leave no survivors. Why would a loving God order the death of innocent women and children? Mark Twain said "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."

## KEY SCRIPTURE -- JOSHUA 6:1-20

Additional Scriptures: Psalm 119:105-112, Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 23:32-47

## KEY IDEAS

1. When reading the Bible, discerning what the biblical writer was attempting to communicate to the original audience is important.
2. The Bible presents a variety of points of view about God and what it means to live faithfully.
3. Every person reads the Bible through the lens of their personal beliefs and world view.
4. The Bible has both a human book and a divine book. It was inspired by God but written by human hands.
5. You are not being disloyal to God if you cannot accept the idea that God would command God's people to commit genocide, as found in Joshua 6.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How has your reading and study of the Bible changed over the years?

What kind of struggles or barriers have you experienced in reading and trying to understand the Bible?

What is the one thing about the Bible that has troubled, perplexed, or confused you? Why?

How does knowing that the Bible is both human and divine impact the way you interpret it?

## QUOTES

“I have come to regard with some suspicion those who claim that the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means they haven’t actually read it.”

-Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*

“Shifting my thinking on the Bible did not mean I was losing my faith in God. In fact, I had the growing sense that God was inviting me down this path, encouraging it even.” - Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*

“What’s the Best Question to Ask When You’re Reading the Bible? Why did people find this important to write down?...Why did people write this down? What was going on in their world that this was important to them? Why did they feel the need to put words to this? Start with that question. Start with those questions. And see what happens.” - Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible?*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rob Bell, *What is the Bible?*

Pete Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*

Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*

# Session 4 -- FORGIVENESS

## THE CRISIS

The power of forgiveness is an awesome thing. No relationship can survive without it, much less thrive. Whatever the issue, forgiveness sets both sides free and makes healing possible. But the truth is, it's easier to forgive an enemy you seldom see than a loved one who hurt you. As C.S. Lewis once said "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive." Bitterness is easy. Hatred is easy. But forgiveness? That's a tough one.

## KEY SCRIPTURE -- 2 SAMUEL 16:5-14

Additional Scriptures: 1 Kings 2:1-10, Matthew 18:21-35, Luke 23:32-47

## KEY IDEAS

1. Forgiveness is not an event. Forgiveness is a journey.
2. You cannot simply decide to forgive someone and expect it to be done. It takes time, compassion for yourself, and the support of others to work through the pain that you endured.
3. True forgiveness brings about an inner peace in your heart and in your mind. You no longer define yourself by your injuries.
4. Knowing God's love and forgiveness in a deep personal place makes possible what would not be possible otherwise.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do you think it is difficult to forgive those who hurt you?

What barriers have hindered you from forgiving others?

Have you experienced the freedom that forgiveness brings? If so, how?

What are you gaining by choosing to not to forgive? What are you losing?

Talk radio host Bernard Meltzer once said, “When you forgive, you in no way change the past, but you sure do change the future.” What does that quote mean to you?

## QUOTES

“Forgiveness is a favor we do for ourselves, not a favor we do to the other party.”  
-Harold S. Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters*

“Forgiving does not usually happen at once. It is a process, sometimes a long one, especially when it comes to wounds gouged deep. And we must expect some lapses...some people seem to manage to finish off forgiving in one swoop of the heart. But when they do, you can bet they are forgiving flesh wounds. Deeper cuts take more time and can use a second coat.” - Lewis B. Smedes

“Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”  
-Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*

“My trust in God flows out of the experience of his loving me, day in and day out, whether the day is stormy or fair, whether I’m sick or in good health, whether I’m in a state of grace or disgrace. He comes to me where I live and loves me as I am.” - Brennan Manning, *Ragamuffin Gospel*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Adam Hamilton, *Forgiveness*  
Barbara J. Hunt, *Forgiveness Made Easy*  
Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*

# Session 5 -- ANXIETY & DEPRESSION

## THE CRISIS

We all experience times of feeling sad or anxious. Sometimes these are chronic conditions diagnosed by a physician. Other times these feelings are triggered by the ups and downs of life. Many people will tell us that feeling sad or anxious is a sign of not trusting in God. The gospels clearly tell us that Jesus and his followers all experienced these emotions. How do we keep going when these feelings overwhelm us? How can feeling depressed or anxious actually bring us closer to God?

## KEY SCRIPTURE -- MATTHEW 26:36-46

Additional Scriptures: Psalm 22:1-11; Ecclesiastes 2:1-3, 10-11; Jonah 4:4-9

## KEY IDEAS

1. Many characters in the Bible experience anxiety and depression. Trusting that God will walk with them through these times is what makes them heroes of faith.
2. There are many responses to feeling sad, anxious, and even hopeless. We can live in denial; we can believe the voices that tell us we are failures and unlovable; we can even give up on life. Or we can keep moving forward even if we don't know how it will all work out.
3. Jesus felt abandoned by God on the cross, but God was most present with him and all of us in those moments of suffering and hopelessness.
4. God walks with us through depression and anxiety, even if we are unable to sense God's presence.
5. Admitting our need for help is the first step toward healing. There is no shame in seeking professional help from a counselor.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you feel comfortable sharing, when have you felt depressed or anxious? What triggers these feelings in you?

What has been helpful to you during these times? Have people said or done things they meant to be helpful but just made things worse?

What stigmas around mental health prevent people, especially Christians, from asking for help? How can we eliminate the stigma around mental health in the church?

How does knowing that God joins us in these struggles affect how you understand your relationship with God?

## QUOTES

“Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind? In short: “Who can take away suffering without entering it?”

-Henri Nouwen

“When depression and anxiety tell us the lie that we are not God’s beloved, we can look to the crucified Jesus and remember that God is with us in our moments of suffering. You are God’s beloved child, and nothing— not even how abandoned you may feel at certain moments— can ever change that.”

-Matthew L. Kelley

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you or someone you love is experiencing depression and anxiety, please ask for help. Contact Melvin LeCompte, Congregational Care Minister, for local counseling resources (mlecompte@middletownchristian.org).

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24-hour crisis hotline that provides free and confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress: 1-800-273-8255.

Books:

Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

James Hightower and Matthew L. Kelley, *Out of the Depths: Your Companion Through Depression and Anxiety*

# LENT & EASTER AT MCC

## SUNDAY NIGHT DEEP DIVES

March 10th-April 7th, 2019

5:30 PM in the Sanctuary

Each week, David Emery answers your questions, talks with special guests, and dives deeper into the week's topic. Childcare available.

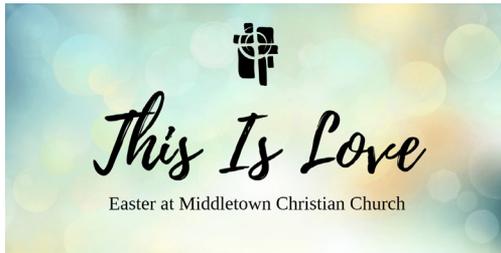
## MAUNDY THURSDAY WORSHIP

April 18th, 2019

7:00 PM in the Sanctuary

Join us for a special commemorative service during Holy Week.

## EASTER AT MIDDLETOWN



Saturday, April 20th

5:30 PM in the Sanctuary

Sunday, April 21st

8:30, 9:50, & 11:10 AM in the Sanctuary

*All Easter Sunday services will be identical.*





500 N. Watterson Trail, Louisville, KY 40243  
[MiddletownChristian.org](http://MiddletownChristian.org)

Sunday Worship: 8:30a, 9:50a, & 11:10a