



FACING THE HARD QUESTIONS

A Guided Manuscript Bible Study

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Facing the Hard Questions: A Guided Manuscript Study

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The Scripture Background notes are taken from the following resources.

The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®). Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003.

Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Background Commentary: New Testament.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Walton, John H. *The IVP Background Commentary: Old Testament.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

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Introduction to the Study

Life Happens

Life can be tough. It sometimes feels as if nothing is easy or goes our way. The tough situations may be related to a job, a family situation, a relationship, or health issues. There are periods of life when things are worse than other times.

In those bad times, we want answers. We ask ourselves: Why is it happening? Why is it happening to me? Who or what is causing the pain? What do I need to do to make the problem go away?

God is Big Enough

We may never know why things happen. Well, most of the time we will probably not know why things happen. When life gets out of control and painful, anger is often one of the initial responses.

Our anger may be a scatter shot to anyone around us, or targeted to someone involved in the situation. If we cannot identify a person at which to direct our anger, or even if we do, we get angry with God.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call! (Psalm 102:1-2, ESV)

Yelling out and screaming at Him in anger does not hurt Him. He wants us to turn to Him with all of our thoughts and needs, even when – especially when – they are messy and raw.

The Hard Questions Study

There are so many questions of life. A small sample of these questions have been selected for this study to be an example of how we can turn to God and His word with our tough questions to look for answers.

The questions we consider in this study focus our attention on hope, purpose, forgiveness, and peace.

Question 1: What does the Bible say about how God seems to “have it out for me”?

Does God have it out for someone? Anyone? Ever? It is against His nature for God to want to cause harm and heap evil upon someone. So why is this even a question to consider?

Well, when life gets to be so out of control and painful, we are looking for answers. Sometimes it feels like someone has it out for us. We want to make sure we have all of our bases covered in the area of placing blame for the cause of our problems. If there are persistent problems and no person is around to blame, we blame God.

And God is always there for us. He wants us to turn to Him at all times, especially in times of distress.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:1-5, ESV)

Too often we turn to things we can control to fix our lives... because we think God has it out for us. Whether it is throwing ourselves into work and pursuing material success, or turning to drugs to escape the pain we are experiencing.

Hope feels lost. Things are really bad when you blame God. It is a last resort effort. But it is in that state of hopelessness that we can find hope as we turn to God.

Scripture Background of Lamentations

Authorship: Not identified. Several opinions have been put forth. The theology agrees with Deuteronomy and Jeremiah; it is a literary masterpiece; it reflects eyewitness testimony, it was likely written by one author due to its unity of theme. The date of the writing probably falls between 587 and 516 B.C., with a time earlier in the era being more likely.

Audience: The people of Judah, to be prayed or sung as a reminder of the destruction of the temple.

Location: Jerusalem.

Situation: Lamentations describes the results of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The focus is on God and that hope can be found in his mercy. God is just and the people should turn to him and repent.

Question to Ponder: What does the Bible say about how God seems to “have it out for me”?

Scripture Reference: Lamentations 3:7-24 **Date:** _____

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1) Read the Passage Aloud (15 minutes)

- Pray for God to open hearts and minds to His Word.
- Read the scripture background.
- Read the passage aloud as a group.
- Underline points that stand out to you and make notes in the margin of the manuscript study format.

2) Highlight Key Words (15 minutes)

- Read the passage to yourself. Highlight key words using highlighters associated with the following questions.
- List **key words** related to the Question to Ponder while answering the two questions below. Consider repeated words, contrasts, cause and effect.

What words describe God’s character and actions? ■

What words describe our responses and attitudes? ■

3) Discuss Key Words, Questions, and Themes (20 minutes)

- What are questions related to the key words identified above?
- What is a theme (or themes) related to the Question to Ponder that is revealed through the key words?

4) Life Connection and Weekly Summary (10 minutes)

- How does the passage translate into today’s context (with particular thought to the Question to Ponder)?
- What is one take away to focus on during the week?

Lamentations 3:7-24 (ESV)

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones; he has made my paths crooked. He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding; he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate; he bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver; I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long. He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord." Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

Question 2: What does the Bible say about how it feels like “my life is wasting away” at work or at home?

We want to accomplish things. We want to achieve heights of success. We want to have an impact on the world around us. We want to be significant. We want to have purpose.

If we do not accomplish or achieve great things (great in our own minds), then the logical conclusion is that life is a waste.

We spend most of our “awake time” at work. So if we feel that our work is not meaningful, then we conclude life is wasting away. Likewise, we can feel the same way about our life at home.

Can there be a greater purpose to life beyond accomplishing goals at work or at home? Do we derive significance through a purpose that is greater than ourselves and greater than the life situation in which we find ourselves? Let’s hope so.

Scripture Background of The Psalms

Authorship: David wrote about half of the 150 psalms. Other authors include Asaph (12), the sons of Korah (10), Solomon (2), Moses (1), Heman (1), Ehtan (1), and about 48 psalms are anonymous. David wrote Psalm 139.

Audience: The book of Psalms, the Psalter, served as the songbook of the worshiping people of God.

Location: Israel.

Situation: It is basically a hymnbook of the people of God, the Israelites, at worship. There are five main themes found in the Psalms that are also represented throughout the Old Testament: monotheism, creation and fall, election and covenant, covenant membership, and eschatology. Different types or categories of psalms have been identified with much debate. It is stated that 150 different categories could be identified if the particular characteristics of each psalm were uniquely segregated. However, the basic categories include: laments, hymns of praise, hymns of thanksgiving, hymns celebrating God’s law, wisdom psalms, songs of confidence, royal psalms, historical psalms, and prophetic psalms. The key theme of Psalm 139 is God’s knowledge of his people.

Question to Ponder: *What does the Bible say about how it feels like “my life is wasting away” at work or at home?*

Scripture Reference: Psalm 139: 1-16 **Date:** _____

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Psalm 139:1-16 (ESV)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Question 3: What does the Bible say about the guilt I feel over my past?

“I have done the worst thing ever. It is unforgivable. I am the lowest of the low. I am worthless because I have done so much wrong in my life.”

Sound familiar? It feels like it is easier to forgive others. We couple the concepts of forgive and forget, thinking we must forget to truly forgive. And we cannot forget what we have done. It stays with us constantly. So logically, it seems like we cannot forgive since we cannot forget.

God has a different idea about forgiveness we should embrace.

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:4-7, ESV)

God cares about each person. He desires relationship with everyone, regardless of past experiences.

Scripture Background of John

Authorship: John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, the “beloved disciple.” Likely written between A.D. 70 – 100, while John was in Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Audience: Jewish believers who had been kicked out of synagogues, and the broader audience of Jews and Gentiles in the area

Location: the area Judea and adjacent areas. Jerusalem is located in Judea. Note that in Roman times, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee were the three main areas of Palestine.

Situation: A focus of John concerns the deity of Jesus. One area of emphasis in John is the Spirit. The Pharisees did not believe the Spirit was active in their day, and relied on their own interpretations and traditions to know the law. Christians believed the Spirit was with them and claimed to know God personally. In 1 John, three basics of Christian life are presented: true doctrine, obedient living, and fervent devotion.

Question to Ponder: *What does the Bible say about the guilt I feel over my past?*

Scripture Reference: 1 John 1 **Date:** _____

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1 John 1 (ESV)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Question 4: What does the Bible say about feeling overwhelmed and anxious with life?

We become anxious over uncertainty. We want to be in control of everything. Sometimes we think we know the outcome and we do not like it, so we worry. We are overwhelmed with the busy schedules, the pressures of meeting expectations. Being on edge about the things of life wears you out.

We think we need a break to relax or to escape. However, these things do not change the situation. Oftentimes, the situation may not be able to be changed.

What we desire, what we truly need in life is peace, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Scripture Background of Philippians

Authorship: Paul, around A.D. 60

Audience: Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi

Location: the Roman colony of Philippi

Situation: Philippi was the first church Paul founded in Europe. Paul wanted to encourage the Philippians in their faith. The city was afforded tax relief and additional land ownership privileges because it was an Augustan city (founded or re-founded in 42 B.C., rather by Antony and (later Augustus). The city was also on the Egnatian Way, a Roman commercial road, with good agricultural land around. It was an economically thriving city.

There was division in the church. Paul was encouraging them in their faith, to be unified, and to prepare for further persecution.

Question to Ponder: What does the Bible say about feeling overwhelmed and anxious about life?

Scripture Reference: Philippians 4:4-13 **Date:** _____

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Philippians 4:4-13 (ESV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.