

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR COUPLES' GROUPS

This study assumes that you either are facing some trying circumstance yourself or have a friend who is. It also assumes that if you're not currently dealing with something difficult, you have in the past or will in the future. Life is just like that. So rather than being a dispassionate discussion of theory, this study concentrates on what you, personally, feel and think and do in such situations.

In addition to the eight sessions taught by Carol, this study includes a ninth session specifically for couples, in which Gene, Carol's husband, talks about how he has dealt with his family's tragedy. This additional session falls between sessions 2 and 3.

SESSION I—AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY: THE POWER OF UNTHINKABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

Check-In

1. Before you turn on the DVD, sit with one or two other people and answer this question: What is one thing on your mind that could distract you from hearing what God wants to say to you today? Respond using just a few sentences. There will be more time for sharing later.

After the DVD Teaching

The temptation in this first session will be to spend all your time talking about Carol's story. It's so shocking and heartbreaking! But the point of her story is to give you a springboard for talking about your own unthinkable circumstances, so limit conversation about Carol's story to no more than five minutes.

2. Unthinkable circumstances look different for each person. Think of some of the challenging circumstances you've encountered (you don't need to recount these in detail to the group). What have you done — both constructively and destructively — to try to cope with them?

3. Read James 1:2-8. What good can trials do for us?

4. How does James want us to handle tough situations?

5. Which of James' instructions are hard for you? What's hard about them?

6. James doesn't think much of prayers that are like wind-whipped waves when we face hard times, but those prayers are entirely normal. Carol's prayer life was like that when she first got the news about her son.

How would you describe your prayer life these days?

0	1	2	3	4	5
almost nonexistent	pretty windblown				clear, full of faith

7. To what extent do you, like Carol, tend to try to keep your world under your control?

8. If you love feeling in control, how do you typically try to achieve that feeling?

9. Why might it be good to accept that such control is an illusion?

10. Think about the idea of living in a chaotic, fallen world where bad things happen. Does that idea drive you toward God or away from Him? Why?

11. How can this group pray for you today?

SESSION 2—LAYING ISAAC DOWN: THE POWER OF RELINQUISHMENT

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him. Please limit your response to a sentence or two.

After the DVD Teaching

2. Read Genesis 22:1-18. What do you imagine was going through Abraham's mind as he headed toward the mountain of sacrifice?
3. What picture of God does this passage give you?
4. What has been your personal "Isaac" — the cherished person, thing, desire, habit, dream, or position you've needed to relinquish in order for God to release His power?
5. When you think about relinquishing an Isaac, what do you find yourself doing? (Examples: busying yourself so you don't have to think about it, bargaining with God, eating, succumbing to depression, getting mad)
6. What would relinquishing your Isaac for five minutes involve? What about relinquishing your Isaac for a week?
7. Read John 12:23-26. What does it mean in practice to lose your life?
8. How do you respond to the idea that your life will be fruitful in proportion to your willingness to lose it?
9. Why would God want us to relinquish what we love most?
10. True heart sacrifices involve:
 - Identifying something precious to you (your Isaac)
 - Letting go of your control over the situation, event, or person as an act of worship
 - Embracing God's love in the process of the release
 - Resting in the outcome, even if in this lifetime you are not allowed to understand the reason behind the need for the sacrifice and the pain involvedIf you're currently facing an Isaac experience, what part of this difficult process are you in?
11. How can the group pray for you today?

ADDITIONAL SESSION FOR COUPLES—GENE'S PERSPECTIVE

Carol's husband, Gene, offers a man's perspective in this additional segment, which you can find on the DVD under Bonus Features.

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

2. How would you describe Gene and Carol's relationship?
3. How does pain affect your relationship with your spouse?
4. Why do you think pain brings some couples together but pulls other couples apart? What makes the difference?
5. Gene talks about starting to write in a journal when he was in crisis. Discuss with the men in your group how they would respond to this idea.
6. How do you express sadness?
7. Read Psalm 77:1-12. What statements or questions in this passage can you identify with?
8. How easy is it for you to cry out to God for help (see verse 1)? Why do you think that is?
9. This psalmist is puzzled and troubled about God (see verses 3-4). What is it about God that he struggles to make sense of?
10. What past deeds of the Lord (see verses 11-12) can you remember when your soul is groaning?
11. How can the group pray for you today?

SESSION 3—WHY DIDN'T GOD DO SOMETHING?: THE POWER OF HEARTACHE

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

Because this is a particularly raw session, please remember your ground rule about not trying to fix people. Give people space to be angry or sad without having to make it all better.

2. Take another look at James 1:2-4. What difference does it make to know that trials are inevitable, whether you're Christian or not, faithful or not?
3. Trials don't produce perseverance automatically. What do you think determines whether a trial leads us to perseverance, bitterness, or collapse?
4. Read Psalm 13. What emotions does this poet express to God in the beginning? Middle? End?
5. Which of these emotions do you relate to? How do you express them?
6. What do you think about asking God questions such as "How long?" and "Why?"
7. How can this poet ask, "How long?" (verse 1) but still claim that he trusts God (see verse 5)?
8. When was the last time you wondered, *Why didn't God do something?* What thoughts and emotions did you experience (or are you now experiencing) while in the wilderness of *Why?*
9. When has God used the brokenness of your heart to enable you to minister to someone else in a meaningful way, big or small? How did that experience serve to give you a different perspective of your own heartache?
10. How can the group pray for you today?

SESSION 4—STRETCHER BEARERS AND YELLOW ROSES: THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

2. Read Luke 5:17-26. If you were the paralytic, what would you be feeling
 - in verses 18-19?
 - in verse 20?
 - in verses 21-23?
 - in verses 24-25?
3. What do you think this story says about Jesus — His identity, personality, and priorities?
4. What relevance, if any, does the story of the paralytic have for you?
5. Are you more comfortable being on the giving end or the receiving end of active caring? Why?
6. When was the last time you admitted you couldn't make it alone?
7. Carol first learned about the power of community in her family. In what contexts have you experienced the tangible support of others? Who has been Jesus for you, or who has carried you to Jesus?
8. If you need stretcher bearers in your life right now, say so.
9. Is there anything you can do as a group for someone in or outside your group who has a need?

10. Because this session is about community, it's a great chance to assess how effective your group is as a community. Save time to discuss these two questions:

- What's going well in our group?

- What could we do better to be a powerful community for one another?

11. How can the group pray for you today?

SESSION 5—EVEN IN THIS . . . : THE POWER OF HOPE

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

2. In what specific area or circumstance in your life today are you holding on to hope? What exactly have you been hoping for?
3. Did you hear anything in the DVD that encouraged you to hope? If so, what?
4. What makes hope hard?
5. Lamentations is a poem written in response to a tragedy — the poet's homeland was invaded, his city destroyed, his friends reduced to starvation and captivity. Read Lamentations 3:16-26. How does the poet describe what it's like to have hope crushed?
6. In what ways, if any, can you relate to the poet's grief?
7. What gives the poet hope?
8. How can we call God faithful if He allows such tragedy?
9. What evidence of God's faithfulness have you experienced?
10. Read Romans 5:1-5. Paul says we have "the hope of the glory of God" (verse 2). What does that mean?
11. Paul also says that hope doesn't disappoint us because God is pouring out His love to us through the Holy Spirit (see verse 5). In what ways, if any, are you experiencing that outpouring of love through the Spirit?

12. What would you say to a Christian who doesn't feel that outpouring of love?

13. Read aloud Psalm 62:5-7. Use this as a springboard to praise God and pray for each other.

SESSION 6—BUT WHERE IS THE LAMB?: THE POWER OF FAITH

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

2. Consider a time when God didn't answer your faith-filled prayers with the obvious "rescuing" intervention you asked for. How did you feel? What specific questions about God, faith, life, and yourself were you left with?
3. What, if anything, in the DVD has helped you process what you've considered to be an "unhappy ending" in some situation?
4. Read Genesis 22:6-8. In what circumstance do you currently find yourself asking God, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" What specific needs do you have that are not yet being met in ways known to you?
5. In your current unresolved circumstances, where do you see God in relation to you? Do you sense Him right beside you? Distant from you? Absent altogether?
6. Is faith more powerful when the lamb appears or when the desired outcome doesn't happen? What makes you say that?
7. Read Daniel 3:8-23. Describe the frightening situation in which the three Jews found themselves.
8. How did the three Jews express their faith in verses 16-17?
9. Why is verse 18 also an expression of faith?
10. If God doesn't remove your painful circumstance, how will you respond? Why?
11. In what specific ways would you like to see your faith change and grow?
12. How can the group pray for you today?

SESSION 7—EMBRACING THE UPSIDE-DOWN NATURE OF THE CROSS: THE POWER OF JOY

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. Tell your partners one thing you have been thinking about God this week or one thing that has been distracting you from Him.

After the DVD Teaching

2. Have each person in the group answer these three questions:
 - Is joy an emotion you tend to experience regularly? Often? Rarely? Never?
 - In the course of your life, have you experienced joy as a celebration or as an abiding sense of well-being? Or is the word *joy* tough for you to relate to?
 - On a scale of 0 to 10, where would you say you are right now in terms of experiencing joy?
3. What do you find yourself thinking about as you answer these questions about joy? Where do you put your focus?
4. Read Hebrews 12:2-3. Describe the joy that Jesus was looking forward to. Try to sketch as vivid a picture as possible.
5. Describe the joy that is ahead for you.
6. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Explain in your own words why Paul didn't lose heart.
7. What would it take for you to think of your troubles as "light and momentary" (verse 17)?
8. How can a person fix his eyes on what is unseen? What does that involve on a practical level?
9. Which, if any, of these thoughts give you joy? Talk about why they do or don't.
 - My suffering is making me a more loving and courageous person.
 - My suffering is drawing others to Christ.
 - Nothing can happen to me that can harm me in an ultimate way.
10. How can the group pray for you today?

SESSION 8—FINDING OUR PURPOSE IN GOD’S GRAND STORY: THE POWER OF SPEAKING UP

Check-In

1. Instead of your regular check-in, gather with your group of four and tell them what about this group you are grateful for. How have the others in this group blessed you? What will you take away from this group?

After the DVD Teaching

2. “Instead of running from God in the middle of our suffering, we are running to God.” On a scale of 0 to 10, how true is this for you right now?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Why did God give Paul a handicap?
4. Why do you suppose God likes to show His strength amid our weakness?
5. Think about God saying to you, “My grace is sufficient” (verse 9). What thoughts and feelings arise in you when you hear that?
6. What would you say to someone who feels that God’s grace hasn’t yet proven to be enough?
7. In what specific ways can you act on the fact that in God’s grand story, we win?
8. What victories and blessings — small and large — can you envision or are you already experiencing as you live through your Isaac experience?
9. What specific choices do you need to make today and in the week ahead that will enable you to go on living a productive and joyful life?
10. In what ways have you needed to adjust to “a new kind of normal” as a result of your heart sacrifice? How do you feel about that?
11. Carol found purpose in her suffering: to speak up for prisoners’ families who have no voice. What fruitful purpose might be in your suffering now or down the road?

12. How can the group pray for you today? (If at the end of the DVD segment you prayed to receive Christ, consider sharing this information with your group or with just one person afterward.)

LEADER'S NOTES

SESSION I—AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY: THE POWER OF UNTHINKABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

CHECK-IN. Before you turn on the DVD, give participants five minutes to connect with each other. Ask them to sit with one or two partners and briefly respond to this exercise. Have them share just one or two sentences, as there will be more time for sharing later. Watch the clock on this exercise and call participants back after five minutes.

AFTER THE DVD. If your group is larger than eight, ask participants to gather in circles of about four people for discussion and prayer. This will give everyone more airtime.

Some questions invite participants to tell painful personal stories. As the leader, you model the level of openness you hope to see in your group. Think ahead of time about what you can say that is brief, honest, and appropriately vulnerable. Talk about a challenging circumstance in which you didn't necessarily deal with everything with perfect faith. If you act perfect, everyone else will feel pressure to do so too, but if you admit weakness, others will appreciate that. If you've never suffered an unthinkable circumstance, that's okay — a normal challenge is fine.

You could easily spend your whole meeting on questions 2 and 3. Unless someone in the group really needs time to tell a current difficult situation, you might want to use a timer and give each participant up to two minutes for question 1. Or, if your group is large or talkative, dividing into circles of four is a great way to give everyone time to share.

Give participants your full attention while they're talking. Have a box of tissues handy. A few tears are okay.

Don't be afraid of silence while participants are thinking about how to answer a question. Wait them out as long as it takes rather than filling the silence with your voice. You can even joke, "I can wait longer than you can!"

It's not necessary for everyone to answer every question. In fact, it quickly becomes dull if you go around the circle for every question. Questions about what the Bible text says, such as questions 3 and 4, can easily be covered by one or two people.

Be sure to save time to pray for each other. Again, this is easier in circles of four. If the group feels strongly about hearing everyone's prayer requests, you can ask someone in each circle to write down the prayer requests and share them with the whole group at the end. As the leader, be willing to ask the group to pray about what is really going on in your life. Others will follow your example, and they don't need you to be perfect.

After the meeting, phone or e-mail participants who shared difficult stories. Thank them for what they have offered the group. Avoid giving advice or pat answers.

SESSION 2—LAYING ISAAC DOWN: THE POWER OF RELINQUISHMENT

QUESTION 2. You could have two or three people take turns reading this lengthy passage aloud.

QUESTION 3. This passage shows God telling a man to kill his son. That's scary. It's meant to be scary. We don't need to make apologies for that or wallpaper the story with rosy language to make it nice. God asked Abraham to do something that ordinarily God would forbid. Does that mean God might ask one of us to literally kill our children? No, this was a unique situation. But still, it's a strange story that shows how mysterious and bewildering God can be, even while it shows how wise and faithful He can be. That's true in many unthinkable circumstances.

QUESTION 4. Allow time for each person to think about and respond to this question. Don't be afraid of silence while people think. This is one of the few questions that everyone should answer. Most of the time it's fine if only one or two or three people answer a question. As the leader, you might go first on this question to set an example of openness.

ADDITIONAL SESSION FOR COUPLES—GENE'S PERSPECTIVE

The most important thing in this session will be letting the men talk. Let them compare their relationships with their spouses to Gene and Carol's relationship. Let them talk about what they admire in what Gene said or what they have trouble connecting to. Instead of analyzing Psalm 77 to pieces, let it spark their own responses to God. Aim for a session in which people are honest with God and with each other about what they really want to say—even if it comes across as somewhat raw and uncensored.

For many men, it's much easier to express anger than sadness or confusion. You can help by being open about your own sadness and confusion, as well as your trust in God.

If your group's prayer times tend not to go very deep, consider letting men pray with men and women with women.

SESSION 3—WHY DIDN'T GOD DO SOMETHING?: THE POWER OF HEARTACHE

QUESTION 3. One thing that makes a difference (and Psalm 13 echoes this) is when we keep struggling to trust God even when we're asking hard questions, such as "How long?" and "Why?" We can ask the questions as part of clinging to God, or we can ask them in rage and rejection of God. Periods of rage are part of the process, but when they settle into a cold, permanent rage, then we're setting ourselves up for bitterness. Here's another way to think about this: Do we remain convinced that God has the right to put us through whatever life throws at us, or do we reject His right to do that? Do we bail out on God when He does things we don't understand?

SESSION 4—STRETCHER BEARERS AND YELLOW ROSES: THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

This session gives participants a chance to make their current needs known to the group. That puts them in a scary position: Will others think less of them? Will others care enough to respond to their plea for help? When you get to question 8, you might want to say something about the fear of rejection that keeps us from letting others know our needs. Also, talk about the fact that because you're all busy and many of you are consumed with the needs of family members, a person might feel bad even mentioning a need in the group. Try to make people feel they can safely talk about their needs without worrying that others will feel pressure to respond beyond their capacity.

At the same time, especially when you get to question 9, try to make them feel they can be honest about what they can and can't do right now for others. None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something. Offer some options that are not too time-consuming:

- Send a card or e-mail to a group member who is struggling.
- Offer the person a ride to and from your meetings and take that time to listen and care for him or her.
- Meet one-on-one for coffee, even for half an hour.
- Chip in with other group members to buy a gift certificate to send a family out to dinner.

If the group identifies someone with a need, ask for a volunteer to organize the group's response. Leaders shouldn't do everything! Encourage someone else in his or her gifts by letting him or her take responsibility.

And if *you* need stretcher bearers in some large or small way, even though you're the leader, say so. Set an example of being willing to be open with your needs.

If you have been breaking into discussion circles of four, you might want to have someone in each discussion circle report to the larger group about responses to questions 9 through 11.

SESSION 5—EVEN IN THIS . . . : THE POWER OF HOPE

QUESTION 2. Normally it's good to avoid going around the circle and having everyone answer every question. That gets dull. But in this case it would be good to let all group members name one thing they hope for—something they really want but don't have. You can set an example by naming something nontrivial that you hope for, such as for your children to be healthy and devoted to Christ ten and twenty years from now. Or for your marriage to get past its current rough patch. Or for you to be significantly less anxious and more trusting in God a year from now than you are today.

Some people in our society have trouble admitting they want something badly. It seems so demanding, not humble. It also sets us up for disappointment.

QUESTION 4. Suffering makes hope hard. Suffering (getting what we don't want) disappoints our hopes. Because it hurts to hope and be disappointed, some of us decide it's less painful to stop hoping. But Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick."

QUESTION 12. One of the biggest barriers to hope is when we see suffering as evidence that God doesn't love us. In Romans 5, Paul says that suffering leads to hope as long as we know that the Holy Spirit continues to fill us with God's love. But suffering can lead to despair if we aren't confident in God's love. We think, *If God loved me, He wouldn't have let this happen to me. Therefore, God doesn't love me.* And the feeling of being unloved simply magnifies the suffering. But that "if . . . then . . ." reasoning is faulty. The Bible is full of cases in which God let bad things happen to people He loved. Jeremiah, Job, and Jesus are three examples.

There's no simple formula for changing that deep inner conviction that God doesn't love us. You can pray for group members who feel unloved. They might consider meditating daily on one of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion as evidence of God's love. You can tell one another with utmost seriousness, "God loves you, and I love you."

SESSION 6—BUT WHERE IS THE LAMB?: THE POWER OF FAITH

QUESTION 5. If members in your group feel that God is distant, ask them to say more about that. What words and images would they use to describe who God seems to be right now? A judge? An uncaring politician? A kind grandfather? A powerful warrior?

QUESTION 10. This is the critical question. As the leader, you might want to think ahead how you would answer it.

SESSION 7—EMBRACING THE UPSIDE-DOWN NATURE OF THE CROSS: THE POWER OF JOY

QUESTION 2. Think ahead how you will answer these. Be as honest as possible.

QUESTION 4. If additional Scriptures would help fill out the picture here, you could look at Revelation 5:6-14.

QUESTION 9. Paul was joyful because he was getting the things he most wanted: Others were coming to faith in Christ because of his influence, and he was coming to know Christ more and more intimately. He cared about those things more than he cared about a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed, the approval of his peers, or a well-stocked bank account. Many of us, though, care more about things such as health, financial security, and status among our peers than we care about fruitfulness and intimacy with Christ. Joy depends on what we care most about. Joy, or the lack of joy, exposes what we really care about.

SESSION 8—FINDING OUR PURPOSE IN GOD’S GRAND STORY: THE POWER OF SPEAKING UP

Your priority in this session is to bring the group to a satisfying close, even though some participants are still in pain and don’t have happy endings to their circumstances. Here are some ideas for doing that:

- Create a celebratory atmosphere with slightly more elaborate refreshments than usual.
- Tell the whole group some of the things you have gotten out of this study.
- Allow a few extra minutes for question 1.
- Allow time at the end to pray for fruitfulness in the lives of each group member. You might ask the people in each circle to place their hands on each member in turn and to pray a blessing over him or her.