

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN'S GROUPS

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 women 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 feelings did you experience as a result?
3. How did you express and deal with those feelings? Talk about both constructive and destructive ways.
4. Read James 1:2-8. What good can trials do for us?
5. Why should we value perseverance (see verse 3)?
6. Which of James' instructions for handling tough situations are hard for you? What's hard about them?
7. 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

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

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

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

11. How can this group pray for you today?

On Your Own

Why not write a heartfelt prayer to God? Writing helps when our thoughts are jumbled. There will be time at the beginning of your next meeting to share these written prayers with the group if you wish.

SESSION 2—LAYING ISAAC DOWN: THE POWER OF RELINQUISHMENT

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. If any of you wrote a prayer in response to session 1, you may read those prayers for your partners if you want to. Otherwise, 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. When was the last time you felt desperate for divine direction? Did you receive it? If so, what surprised or comforted you? If not, what has your experience of hearing God's voice been like through the years?
8. 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 involved

If you're currently facing an Isaac experience, what part of this difficult process are you in?
9. What next step might you need to take in order to move closer to the altar where you can lay your Isaac down as an act of worship?

10. What would you like to say to God right now? Tell Him what's on your mind.

11. How can the group pray for you today?

On Your Own

Being completely honest, as Carol was when she prayed her first prayer of relinquishment in the jail parking lot, write out a prayer that expresses where you are right now.

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

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. If you wrote a prayer in response to session 2, you may read it for your partners. Otherwise, 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. What do you think about asking God questions such as "How long?" and "Why?"
6. How have you typically dealt with heartache in the past? For example, have you cried easily, or have you avoided crying? Do you find crying helpful, embarrassing, both?
7. Why do you react the way you do when you're sad?
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. What would you like to say to God right now about heartache or your current Isaac experience?

11. How can the group pray for you today?

On Your Own

If you have heartache over a current Isaac experience, consider praying out loud to God, pouring out your raw and uncensored thoughts, feelings, hopes, and fears. Allow God into the crushed places inside you and ask Him to embrace you with a comfort beyond anything you've experienced before. (If you're not practiced at this level of intimate communion with God, give it time and repeat your heartfelt prayers often!)

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.

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?

On Your Own

Go back to the story of the paralytic and ask God, "Right now, Lord, am I the one who needs to be carried or the one who should carry?" Then write a list of things you need from friends or things you can do to carry someone else.

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. Hope is wanting something you don't yet have. Does that conflict with contentment? Explain your view.
11. Is there an area or circumstance in your life for which you have lost hope? If so, why?

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

On Your Own

Write out Psalm 62:5-7 on an index card and place it where you can read it often. Memorize it and then intentionally meditate on it every day for at least one week. At the end of that week, notice if anything about your attitude or position has changed.

Or think back on your life and ask God to bring to mind times when He has brought some kind of victory out of calamity. Consider designating a small notebook or journal in which you will record past and future evidence of God's great salvage operation of redemption. How could such a record buoy your hope? What is one thing you could write in it?

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

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. If you meditated on Psalm 62, you might want to share something that came to your mind when you did that. Otherwise, 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?

On Your Own

Consider doing a faith-building project. Using a concordance or a Bible software program, look up every reference to faith and write down some of the passages that are most helpful to you. How could such a comprehensive list help you in the days ahead to see and walk by faith in unthinkable circumstances?

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

Check-In

1. Sit with one or two partners. If you searched for Scripture references on faith, consider sharing a passage you found helpful. Otherwise, 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 Matthew 27:27-46. Describe the opposition and shame Jesus endured. What specific things do you observe in the passage?
7. What specifically do you notice in this account of Jesus' personal anguish that has the potential to unleash the full power of joy in the midst of your current circumstances?
8. How helpful is it for you to reflect on Jesus' example? Why is that?
9. What do you think hinders us from being strengthened by the joy we know is in our future?
10. 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.

II. How can the group pray for you today?

On Your Own

Write out a gut-level-honest prayer to God telling Him exactly how you feel about the suffering He allows you and those you love to experience. Write until you have nothing more to say. Notice if you experience any shifts of energy or perspective as you pour your heart out to God on paper.

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 John 12:23-27. What is the connection between death (or loss) and fruitfulness? How have you experienced this connection?
4. What does it mean to say that anyone who loves his life will lose it?
5. How do you respond to the idea of following and serving Jesus even if He leads you into His path of suffering?
6. What victories and blessings — small and large — can you envision or are you already experiencing as you live through your Isaac experience?
7. In what specific ways can you act on the fact that in God’s grand story, we win?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

II. 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.)

On Your Own

Start a “blessings” list. For at least five minutes, refuse to think about your sorrow and frustration, and focus instead on the positive things you see in the midst of your Isaac experience. No matter how small the blessing — like the smile Carol received from someone in the prison visitation line — write it down and offer a prayer of gratitude to God.