Where Is God When Life Stinks?

Through His personal presence, God provides everything we need to face and overcome life’s difficult circumstances.

LIFE NEED

Standing up and announcing to your class, “This morning we are going to have an electrifying lesson about God’s presence,” may not produce the buzz of anticipation you’d like. Unfortunately, many teens don’t feel God’s presence.

Even your more sophisticated teenagers (and it might be added, many adults) rely on their emotions to indicate whether or not God is present. They might be very aware of God’s presence during an emotionally charged church service or retreat setting, but in the busy routines of their lives He might not seem very near or real.

In crisis situations, however, many teens cry out to God for help. When life is difficult, people often think about God and look to see if He’s there to help them. This, of course, can’t be the only basis for an awareness of God’s presence. But it is, in fact, one way He reveals to us that He is near and that we need Him.

There are many settings in which our culture exposes your students to the difficult side of life. So your teens shouldn’t have any trouble discussing the problems associated with painful experiences. Use this lesson to help your students recognize that God really is present in the midst of pain.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

James 1:1-4; Deuteronomy 31:7-8

In the opening section of his letter (or possibly more appropriately termed, essay) to Jewish Christians, James directly confronts one of the more perplexing human issues: how to understand and deal with difficult circumstances that occur in all our lives. At the time of his writing, James was responding to the poverty and oppression faced by Jewish Palestinian peasants.

This probably was not a new message for James’s readers. Jewish tradition repeatedly emphasized the value of enduring tough times and occasionally stressed that one could experience a deep-seated joy in the midst of troubled times because of the faith that we can have in God’s sovereignty. So James, in keeping with the tradition of his faith, encouraged his Christian brothers and sisters to be glad for these trials, because the perseverance required for getting through them would provide a breeding ground for maturity (James 1:1-4).

Neither James nor any prior biblical writer ever indicated that any human could overcome a hardship alone. As early as Deuteronomy, the biblical writers remind us that God always leads and is always present with His people. He will never leave us (Deuteronomy 31:7-8). There is no more absolute promise than that!

And what does having God present in our lives mean for us? It means we can face all of life, even the harshest and most challenging of circumstances, with strength and courage, encouraged by God’s promise to stay close. His personal presence means we can conquer our fears. We can live with hope in Him and in what He can do!

RESOURCES

- A listing of TV programs, newspaper articles, chalk/marker board
- Four copies of the How Does God Help? handout, Bibles
- Copies of the Understanding Pain handout, pens

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Take a moment to think about this question: How does someone find healing or become healthy in a sick, sick world? The answer: They don’t, not by themselves. Starting in Genesis 3, the Bible clearly portrays that humanity and all of creation is fallen and, as the old commercial says, we “can’t get up.” Trapped in sinful patterns, habits, and cycles, we’re all prone to unhealthiness. And sin is one disease no one escapes by their own efforts.

So where’s the healing in all this sickness? One of the best words in this discussion is “deliverance”—deliverance from the unhealthy effects of sin. That’s what this series of lessons is all about. This first lesson establishes an important point: There is no healing without a doctor. God is that Doctor. With His love at work in our lives, we can be fully healed and restored to spiritual health. Without Him we are helpless and hopeless under the power of our own sin nature. God alone can save us.

When we cry out to God, our Deliverer, there is no question that He draws near and stands beside us. He tells us over and over that He will and does. However, deliverance has many meanings; and deliverance from sin doesn’t mean that He will deliver us from all suffering, difficulties, and other effects of our own sinfulness and the sinfulness of others. That can be a tough (and possibly frustrating) concept to grasp at any age. But it’s the truth, nevertheless, and your teens need to be shown the full picture of how God’s deliverance can happen in people’s lives.

So then, even when God doesn’t fix everything the way we might like Him to, this remains true: He is still present and at work in our lives. As we face trials, we grow stronger only as we rely on God to face those trials with us. We can know and be assured of God’s presence in our lives no matter what adversity we must face!

A diamond cannot be perfected without friction, and people cannot be perfected without trials. —Confucius

When a man gets to despair he knows that all his thinking will never get him out. He will only get out by the sheer creative effort of God. Consequently he is in the right attitude to receive from God that which he cannot gain for himself. —Oswald Chambers

Think about your life before and right after you met Jesus Christ:

☞ What were the major consequences of sin in your life before meeting Christ? Were you a slave to any addictions (e.g., sex, alcohol, drugs, food, television, perfectionism) in an attempt to escape the painful effects of sin on your life?

☞ What helped you admit to God (and others) that you were a helpless sinner in need of deliverance?

Think of your life in Christ right now:

☞ What areas of your life have been ongoing problems, requiring day-to-day help from God and others? In what areas did you receive instant help and healing when you met Christ?

☞ During trials, what have your honest expectations of God as Deliverer been?

☞ Have you ever felt disappointed or angry with God for His response during a personal crisis?

☞ Has there been a time when you felt God should have rescued you in a certain way but didn’t?

☞ What does God’s presence mean to you right now?

As you pray for your students, think about the overall health—mental, physical, spiritual—of each member of your class:

☞ Who has suffered much because of the sins of others?

☞ Who has battled (or given in to) addictive behavior?

☞ Who would you most like to see impacted positively by this lesson?
Student Goals: Discuss the fascination of our culture with people’s pain; identify and categorize various painful situations; share feelings associated with painful circumstances.

Talk Show Trials

Talk shows. News programs. Supermarket tabloids. Made-for-TV movies. These sensational forms of media do their best to exploit what are, in reality, the most painful circumstances of life for real people whom God loves.

The week before class, watch (or tape) one or two of the popular talk shows or sensational news programs to get the headline or previews of the stories for the episode. Highlight for your class the stories that focused on people’s pain. Call a few students during the week and ask them to also listen for the commercials for the talk show/news program story lines. Ask them to be prepared to report to the class. (Some shows to consider keeping an ear or a recorder out for are Oprah, Maury Povich, American Journal, Inside Edition, DateLine, etc.)

Open the class session with a brief time of reporting; then ask these debriefing questions:

- Why do you think there is so much focus on people’s pain? How is the focus harmful? Is there any way that it is, or can be, helpful?
- If you had gone through a horrible experience, would you want to appear on a TV show to discuss it? Why or why not? Why do you think so many shows or forms of media are exploiting people’s tough times?
- What are the most painful experiences persons must face in this life? (List these on a chalk/markor board for the next activity.)

Life’s Not Easy

Next to the list of painful experiences your class has created, write the following three headings on the board: Individual Sins, Sins of Others, Sins of the Fall. Explain what each of these headings means, using the descriptions below.

Individual Sins—You made a sinful choice, and that sinful choice carries unpleasant consequences. Possibly you destroyed a relationship or ruined an opportunity for achievement.

Sins of Others—You suffer as a result of someone else’s sins. Your parents divorce. A drunk driver runs into your brother and kills him. Someone abuses you emotionally, physically, or sexually.
Sins of the Fall—We suffer in life as a result of the fall of human-kind into sin. Disease, death, famine, and darkened understanding come to us as a consequence.

Now categorize and build the list. Go over the items in your class list of painful experiences, and ask which of the three categories seems most appropriate for each. Allow for disagreement and take a vote if consensus can’t be reached. Then ask: After seeing these headings up front, what other experiences could be added under these headings? (Rewrite the original list under the headings, and add the other suggestions now.)

How Did You Feel? ☀5

Ask your students to think to themselves (not out loud) of a time when they have suffered for their own sin, the sins of others, or the sin of the Fall. Then, when they have the situation in mind, ask them to share how it made them feel. Divide into pairs for the sharing. Encourage them to be good listeners and to help build a safe environment for sharing in your class. Write the following questions on the board (or photocopy them from the book here) as a guideline for them to use:

1. What were your feelings about yourself during your hard times?
2. What were your feelings toward others during that period of time?
3. What were your feelings toward God during the trial?

Then say, We’ve already talked about how painful life can be. I think all of us would like to know what help is available as we face difficult circumstances. Let’s look to God’s Word for some answers.

TRUTH

Student Goal: Discover different ways God responds to hard times.

How Does God Help? ☀12

Before class, make four copies of the How Does God Help? handout. Divide your class into four groups, and distribute a copy of the handout to each group. (Keep in mind that a group can be one person.)

Assign each group to one of the groups of biblical characters listed on the handout. If you have a large class, consider assigning only one Scripture passage to each group. Be sure that each group has a Bible. Instruct them to read their listed passages and note how God responded to a difficult circumstance. Have them choose a

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT FACING TRIALS

1. Trials are a common experience of all of us. No one is immune. Trials are a part of living.

2. Trials are transitory. C. B. Williams translates 1 Peter 1:6 this way: “In such a hope keep on rejoicing, although for a little while you must be sorrow-stricken with various trials.” Trials, though difficult, are “for a little while.”

3. Trials are lessons that shouldn’t be wasted. Though not enjoyable or necessarily good in themselves, trials constitute a divine work for our ultimate good. Jesus never promised an easy journey, but He did promise a safe landing.

FOOTPRINTS

One night a man had a dream. In it he was walking along a beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the final scene of his life had flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints, and realized that they came at the hardest and saddest times of his life.

Bothered about this, he questioned the Lord, saying, “Lord, You said that once I decided to follow You, You’d walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most burdensome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why when I needed You the most, You would leave me.”

The Lord replied, “My child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that... I carried you.”

— Author Unknown

spokesperson to report their findings back to the rest of the class. Possible responses are listed below:

Kings
2 Samuel 12:1-18 (David prayed, but the child died.)
2 Kings 20:1-11 (Hezekiah prayed, and God gave him a new lease on life.)

Prophets
Nehemiah 6 (Nehemiah was given wisdom as a result of prayer.)
Daniel 3 (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were rescued.)

Jesus
Matthew 26:39-45 (Jesus did have to endure a painful death.)

Apostles and Believers
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (Paul had to live with his thorn.)
Acts 12:1-19 (Peter was rescued from prison.)
Acts 7:55-59 (Stephen was stoned.)

After your small groups have shared their research with the group at large, ask the following questions:

- Does God always deliver believers from painful circumstances?
- Is there anything that God will always do for us? (Be there!)

Read James 1:1-4 aloud, then say: Someone once said that God is more interested in our growth than our comfort. Does He just toss trials our way to see how we handle them?

Allow time for the students to respond. Then say: God doesn’t treat us like guinea pigs; He does provide help for us in times of trials. Ask a student to read Deuteronomy 31:7-8 aloud, then say: Yes, God allows us to go through certain trials. But we’re never alone. Life may be hard, but God is present. And God’s presence means guidance and strength and growth, whether or not we’re rescued from the difficulty.

VISION

Student Goal: Determine God’s role and our role in our particular situation.

Working Through Pain

Distribute copies of the Understanding Pain handout, and ask students to fill it out as an individual reflection activity.

Bring the group back together and read them the Footprints poem printed in the sidebar. Then close by inviting your students to join you in a prayer that God would help all of you be more aware of His presence in your lives, no matter what the situation. Ask Him to make himself known to you. Then together decide to look for signs of God’s presence in your lives.
Conduct personal videotaped interviews before this session by going to various people in your church and asking them, What has God done to help you get through a particularly painful time of adversity? Have them share their experiences for the camera. Use as a closing testimony to encourage your students.

Instead of reading Footprints to your class, consider having two students dramatize the poem for the class.

Pass around blank sheets of paper, and ask the student to write down a bad predicament in which they have found themselves. Be sure they know these predicaments will be shared with the whole class. Gather, shuffle, and redistribute the papers so that everyone has another person’s predicament. Ask students to write a clear account of how they would get out of the predicament handed them. Then have each student read the predicament and the solution. It might be fun to ask the person who wrote the predicament to volunteer how he or she solved it.

Talk about how we often turn to music during our difficult times. Ask students to share some of the songs they listen to and sing when they are faced with tough circumstances. Sing some of those songs together as a group, if everyone is familiar with them.

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