

Introduction

'If there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?'
'How can God be so scary, yet loving?'
'How does the description of God in the Old Testament match with that in the New Testament?'
'How can Jesus be both man and God?'

If someone asked you one of those questions, I wonder how you'd answer? Maybe one of the following...

'Great! I've got a good answer to that!'
'I'll get back to you – I need to do a bit of reading.'
'I don't know... only God knows'
'Errr... can we talk about Brexit instead?'

Many people have devoted many years to analysing these questions – and you may enjoy doing the same. On the other hand, you may feel that they're too complicated and best left to others.

There are dangers of both. If we become overly focussed on the theory, we can get distracted from our calling to love God and love others. We can become more interested in knowing *about* God than knowing God. However, if we never spend time considering these difficult questions, we can miss out on the opportunity to get to know God better and become more confident in our faith. It can also help us to be more honest about what we *don't* know, as we explore faith with others.

Over the next few months, we're going to look into a few of these issues. As we do, it's important to remember that there are no easy answers. Instead, we will hopefully grow in our understanding throughout our lives as we pray, read the Bible and live life with God. We can also learn a lot from one another's thoughts, stories and experiences – which is where Growth Groups are such a help.

Many of these questions arise from paradoxes – two true statements that seem to be in conflict with one another. For example, *'God is loving'* and *'God allows suffering'*.

This idea is explored more in Krish Kandiah's book, **'Paradoxology'**, which we've used as a starting point for this series. It's not necessary to read the book, but if you want to spend some time looking into the issues in a bit more depth then it would be a good place to start. For an easier read on some of the questions, you could try reading 'Searching Issues' by Nicky Gumbel.

Over the next few weeks, we will explore some of the questions and paradoxes. It won't be easy, but I hope that by helping one another with our journeys, we will all grow closer to God.

Toby

1: No Easy Answers

This week is an introduction to the series and an opportunity to spend time in prayer at the start of the new year.

WELCOME & WORSHIP

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

1. Each share something that you are thankful for from the last month.
2. Spend some time saying short 1-line prayers of thanks.
3. Read out Psalm 100 together.
4. Now each share something that's been difficult or sad from the last month (only share if you want to).
5. Pray short prayers for one another.
6. Read out Psalm 100 again – although it may be more difficult this time..

WORD

Read Mark 12:28-34

Discuss your initial reactions to this passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- In verses 13-15, 18-23 and 28, people ask Jesus different questions. Each take a piece of paper and on it...
 1. Write down a question that you would have asked Jesus if you had been there.
 2. Write down a question about God, life or faith which you find difficult to answer.

- Share together what you've written down and why
- Share any times when you've been asked difficult questions like these?
 - Are there people or situations when you find it particularly difficult to respond to questions like this?
- In your experience, what do you find the most helpful or unhelpful ways to respond to these sorts of questions?
- Have there been particular times in your life when you've struggled to understand God? What has helped you?

WHAT NEXT?

- Share any concerns or worries that you have for the year ahead. Pray for one another.
- Pray for anyone you know who is particularly struggling during January.
- Pray for the Alpha Courses starting soon – where people will explore tough questions – and consider who you could invite.
- CHALLENGE: Ask God to send you people this week who want to know more about your faith.

2: Would God ask anyone to do that?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. Then try this...

Each share a time when you had to trust someone for something significant. How did it go?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Share good things that you want to give thanks to God for. Sing a song together about God's goodness or faithfulness. You could use a YouTube video or a CD/Download & printed words.

WORD

Here's the first tough passage to get your teeth into!

Read Genesis 21:1-7 and 22:1-18

Discuss your initial reactions to this passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- What questions does this passage raise for you?
- If you heard the sermon on this passage, share anything that you particularly remember.

- God condemns child sacrifice in the Bible – unlike other religions at that time. God also knew that he was going to save Isaac. How does this shape your view of God in the story?
- Abraham is confident that God will provide (v5: 'We will come back' v8: 'God himself will provide the lamb'). How does this shape your view of Abraham in the story?
- How do you think this episode affected Abraham and Isaac's relationships with God?
- God doesn't need anything from us – so why does he ask for things?
- Split into 2s or 3s. Each group take one of the following subjects: Family, Money, Time, Health, Safety
 - * For your subject, think of something big that God might ask someone to do today that meant giving up or risking that thing.
 - * Talk about why they would be hard & why God might ask someone to do them
 - * Share your thoughts with a whole group
 - * If God asked you to do them, what would you do?
- What areas of your life do you find it hardest to trust God with?

WHAT NEXT?

- Pray for one another in 2s-3s that God will help you trust him more at the times when you find it hardest.
- Pray for the youngest and the oldest in our church as they explore and grow in their faith.
- CHALLENGE: Spend time on your own this week asking God which areas of your life he wants you to trust him more with – and how.

3: How Can God be Scary & Loving?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Each share: Are there any Bible stories that you don't like? Why?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Go round the group. Go through the alphabet A to Z. For each letter, come up an attribute of God starting with that letter (be creative!). You could finish together with a prayer: 'Thank you God for who you are'

WORD

This week's big question is: How can God be scary and loving?

Once again, there are no simple answers!

Read Joshua 6:1-5, 15-27

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- Each take a piece of paper.
 - * Draw a horizontal line. At one end write 'Fair'. At the other write 'Unfair'. **Based on this story**, mark a cross on the line where you think God is on the scale between fair & unfair.
 - * Do the same on a second line with 'Compassionate' and 'Harsh'.

* Talk together what you've drawn and why

- For each of the following pieces of information, discuss: What difference does this make to your view of God in this story...?
 - a. In Genesis 15:13-16 and elsewhere, we learn that the inhabitants of Canaan (the Amorites etc) had opposed God's ways for centuries – including sacrificing children to their gods (Deut 12:29-31).
 - b. Years later, when Israel turned against God to other gods and engaged in their practices, God allowed the Babylonians and Assyrians to wipe out the Israelites.
 - c. God tells the Israelites to spare Rahab and her family, even though she was a prostitute
- In this story, do you think that God should have been more just – by wiping out evil quicker... or more compassionate by allowing people to sin for longer?
 - * What about in the world today?
 - * What about in the lives of you, your friends and your community?
- Do you think war is ever justified – and if so, in what circumstances?

WHAT NEXT?

- Find out about an area of the world where there is war. You could read out a newspaper/internet article as a starting point. Light a candle and use short prayers to pray for the people in that place.
- Pray for the current Alpha Course – as people explore questions of life and faith together.

4: Why did God let this happen?

The issue of suffering is huge & complex! It's also very important to a lot of people. Try to stay focussed on the topic, but give everyone a chance to share their thoughts & feelings – and **please be sensitive**.

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

When you see children suffering in a country such as Syria on the news, what feelings come to mind? Each share just a few words.

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Listen to the track 'Psalm 13 (How long O Lord)' by Brian Doerksen or read Psalm 13 slowly followed by a time of silence.

As you listen to the words and in the quiet, each think about a time in your life when some of these words seemed particularly relevant. It may help not to think of 'enemies' as people. In the quiet, talk to God about them. Finish by all reading verses 5-6 together.

WORD

Read Job 1:6-2:10 *You could read this by taking parts: Narrator, Job, Satan, God, Messengers (don't take personally which role you get!)*

Now write the following on separate slips of paper: God, Devil, Me, Others. Also, add a few blank slips. Put them in the middle so everyone can see them as you talk together.

- When bad things happen to you, who do you think is responsible?
 - * **God** – testing/teaching/punishing us
 - * **The devil** – an attack
 - * **Me** – our sin or lack of faith
 - * **Others** – now or in the past

- * **Something else** (add any other reasons to the blank slips)
- Explain your reasons
- How many of these do you think were reasons for Job's suffering?
 - * Which ones weren't? Why?
 - * Do you think the causes of Job's suffering are typical or unusual?

Divide into 2s/3s/4s. Each group discuss one scenario from...

- 1: A child starving in the 3rd world;
- 2: Someone injured in a car crash;
- 3: A cancer patient;
- 4: A person whose child has died

- * Give all the possible reasons you can think of for the suffering.
- * What factors make it easier/harder to explain? Why?
- * How do you think God feels about these situations?

Now, share briefly what you talked about with the whole group.

- *In 2s/3s/4s:* If possible, share one or two personal examples of suffering and your response to them. *Please be sensitive to others.*
- *All together:* How would you answer someone who asked you: 'How can a loving God allow people to suffer?'
- The suffering of Jesus and others isn't ignored by the Bible or the Christian faith - it is a central part. How might this fact help in facing suffering yourself – or offering a Christian response to others?

WHAT NEXT?

- In 2s/3s/4s: Share anything you're struggling with personally at the moment. Pray for one another. THEN mention anyone else you know who's suffering/struggling & pray for them.
- One role of Growth Groups is to care for one another. How could you support one another better as a group?

5: Can Jesus be both God and human?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Each bring/print/describe a picture that you like. Explain why you like it.

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Choose one of the authorised creeds on the CofE website at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/apostles-creed> In quiet, read through it and talk to God about it. You could then read it out together, but allow people to opt out if they're not comfortable.

WORD

WARNING! Again, there are no simple answers – experts have wrestled with this for centuries, so please be patient with everyone!

Read John 1:1-5, 14; Luke 1:26-35

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- Being honest, do you normally think of Jesus as more God or more human or neither? Do a show of hands in your group.
 - * Why do you think like this?

- The reading from John describes Jesus as 'The Word' who was God (v1) but also became human (v14).
 - * How do you feel about the idea of Jesus being both human and God?
 - * What do you think about the words that John uses?
- How does the virgin birth described in Luke make it easier or more difficult to understand Jesus as both God and human?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16 and Philippians 2:5-11

- In these passages, we are reminded that Jesus became human and we are encouraged to be like him.
 - * If Jesus hadn't become human, how might it change your understanding of God or your relationship with him?
 - * How do these passages encourage you in your faith?
- Because Jesus claimed to be God, CS Lewis said that we have to choose whether Jesus is mad (deluded), bad (a liar) or God (as he said he was).
 - * How helpful do you find this idea?
 - * How helpful might it be in sharing your faith with others?

WHAT NEXT?

- If you haven't done before, then choose one of the Mission Partner organisations that we support as a church (you can find them on our website). Pray for them now, but also work out how you could keep informed and pray for the work of that partner on a regular basis.
- Also, select a local organisation to pray for (if you haven't already)
- Spend time praying for one another to become more confident in sharing your faith with others.

6: Who's in control: God or us?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Talk about: In your life, do you like to be in control of things or would you prefer God was in control?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

All sit with your eyes closed and clench your fists. Imagine holding in your hands things that you are currently struggling with.

After a few moments, open your hands out upwards and imagine offering those things to God. Talk quietly to God about these things and imagine what he might be saying. He might or might not take them away from you, but ask for his help and guidance.

Finish by saying together Jesus' words to his Father before the cross: *'Father, if you are willing, take this cup (of suffering) from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'* (Luke 22:42)

WORD

Read Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50; 27:3-10

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in these passages jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- Who was responsible for Jesus's death? Come up with as many possible different answers as you can and explain why

- * You could find a copy of Caravaggio's 'The taking of Christ' and find out about the characters in it
- To what extent do you think the following were responsible for Judas's actions?
 - * 1: Judas himself; 2: The chief priests; 3: God (as part of his plan); 4: The Devil (see Luke 22:3)
 - * Do you think Judas had free will or was he out of control of his actions?
- Jesus's death was predicted hundreds of years before in several places in the Old Testament (eg Psalm 22). Even the buying of the potter's field (27:9-10) was predicted in Zechariah 11:12-13.
 - * Do you think that God made the events in today's readings happen to match the prophecy **or** did he already know that they would happen and revealed them in advance to his prophets?
- Do you feel pre-destined or programmed (by God or 'genetics' or 'fate') to do the things you do **or** do you feel like you decide yourself?
- What light does this story shed on the mystery of how God uses people in his plans, but also gives them free will?
- To what extent do you think people decide for themselves to follow Jesus or are they only chosen by God?

WHAT NEXT?

- Share examples of when you've wished that God would intervene but he hasn't. Also share times when he has intervened. Pray for one another for situations where you want him to intervene now.
- Pray for situations in the world where people are using their free will to cause harm to others (eg wars, climate change ec)

7: How can the cross be a victory?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Share: Who have you known who has been particularly humble?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Make a cross in the middle of the room creatively (for example, out of your shoes, stones or symbols)

Read Matthew 27:45-56. Reflect on your emotions as you hear the story. Each share a word that comes to mind.

WORD

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- What makes the crucifixion a unique event in history?
- Paul describes the message of the cross as 'powerful' (v18)
 - * What words would you use to describe the message of the cross?
 - * In what ways is the message of the cross powerful?
- What forms of power are there in the world today?

- * In what ways does the message of the cross seem foolish or sensible measured by the 'wisdom of the world'? (v18-25)
- * How can the weakness of God be stronger than human strength (v25)?
- God chose the crucifixion to be the central point in human history.
 - * Do you feel it was necessary – could God have found a different (less messy) way to achieve his purposes?
 - * Why didn't he? Think of as many reasons as possible.
 - * If people today could choose or create an event to be the centre of human history, what would it be like?
 - * What does this show about God and the Christian faith?
- Some have argued that the cross shows God the Father as cruel by sending his son to the cross.
 - * How does Jesus' free-will and nature as both human and God (see previous weeks) help to challenge this point of view?
- How is the cross good news for you and others today?
- How do you feel about sharing this good news with others?

WHAT NEXT?

- Review the Series. Discuss:
 - What has been most or least helpful about this series?
 - What has particularly challenged you?
 - What are you personally going to do in response?
 - Do let Toby know any feedback to help shape future notes. Thanks.
- If you want to look into these subjects more, then you might want to read one of the books mentioned in the Introduction.
- Pray for our local community and churches this Easter.