

CHURCH.

LESSON 47

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray and commit your group and this course on building Christ's Church to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) [QUIET TIMES] REVELATION 15 - 18
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Take turns and *share* (or *read* from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Revelation 15 - 18).

Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) [KEY VERSE IN JOHN] (20) JOHN 18:36
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Review two by two.

(20) John 18:36. Jesus said: My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) [CHURCH RESTORING MINISTRY] SUFFERING AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
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This is a teaching about suffering. Suffering comes to both Christians and non-Christians alike. People suffer in many different ways and also react in different ways to suffering. But everyone wrestles with the question why there is suffering and what is the significance of suffering. This study deals with these questions.

A. SUFFERING NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED

1. Suffering has many different forms.

Introduce. People suffer in many different ways.

(1) Different forms of suffering.

Some people suffer, because they are sick or have a physical, mental or emotional disability. Maybe they face a risky operation or suffer a permanent handicap.

Some people suffer, because their plans, dreams and hopes have been shattered, or they feel that their craving for love and meaningful relationships has never been fulfilled. Other people suffer, because they see no purpose in life. Some people suffer, because they have marriage problems or have a disappointing job. And other people suffer, because they feel guilty or ashamed. Some people suffer, because others treat them unfairly. Other people suffer, because they feel restricted by rules and their circumstances.

(2) Questions with regard to suffering.

Many people suffer, because they cannot find an adequate answer to their burning questions. Their questions constantly taunt and torment them. For example they ask,

- "How can I reconcile suffering with a loving and almighty God?"
- "Why must I suffer? Why me, God?" "What have I done to deserve this suffering?"
- "How can anyone rescue me from this suffering?" "When will I be set free from all this suffering?"

People are tormented by their unanswered questions.

(3) The torment of suffering.

Other people suffer, because they constantly see people who suffer in this world. They are tormented by seeing patients suffering pain and by feeling helpless to do anything about it. They are agitated by their own feelings of anger and indignation at the supposed injustice. They agonise when they have to say farewell to a beloved person that is dying. People are tormented by their own fear of suffering and death. They are tormented with the anxiety of whether they are able to cope with their suffering or whether they should give up. No matter in which form suffering comes, it always hurts and it is always difficult!

2. Suffering needs room to express itself.

Introduce. People who suffer are looking for answers. But before that, they must first have an opportunity to express their sorrow and receive time to digest their suffering inwardly. Many people in the Bible experienced pain and had emotions of sorrow or anxiety.

Discover and discuss. How did people in the Bible express their suffering?

(1) Job.

Read Job 3:1-26.

Notes. When Job lost his possessions as well as his sons and daughters, he *cursed* the day of his birth, because he felt hurt and was angry. He desperately sought an answer for his suffering. He said, “Why did I not perish at birth” (Job 3:11)? “I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil” (Job 3:26).

(2) David.

Read Psalm 6:1-10. Psalm 6 is David’s prayer of tears. Although he was a strong warrior and a famous king, he did not regard *crying* as shameful. He prayed, “I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes” (Psalm 6:6-7).

Read Psalm 30:1-12.

Notes. When David was very sick and in danger of dying, he *pleaded for God’s mercy* so that he might live and proclaim God’s faithfulness. He prayed, “To you, O Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy: What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?” (Psalm 30:8-9).

Read Psalm 69:1-21. When people persecuted David and circumstances turned against him, he experienced great emotional *anxiety* and expressed his *despair* in his prayer to God. He prayed, “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God” (Psalm 69:1-3). He wept and fasted, because he was scorned, disgraced and shamed (Psalm 69:10,19). He said, “Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but there was none” (Psalm 69:20).

Read Psalm 142:1-7. David is not *afraid to pour out his complaint before God and tell him his trouble*. He said, “No one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life. ... I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me” (Psalm 142:4,6).

(3) Jesus.

Read Matthew 27:46.

Notes. Even Jesus expressed his suffering on the cross in loud cries, “My God! My God! Why have you *forsaken* me?”

Summarise. Just like Job, David and Jesus, you may *express* your suffering. Take enough time to mourn. You may pray your own prayers or the prayers of the suffering people in the book of Psalms as a means to express your pain and anguish to God. God is interested in how you feel and he is concerned with your suffering. He sees your tears and remembers your cries for help!

3. Suffering evokes reactions from other people.

Introduce. People not only react to their own suffering, but also to the suffering of other people. Some religions¹ regard all suffering as a punishment for some personal sin, committed in his present life or even in a previous life (incarnation). They *judge* people who are suffering by saying that it is “their own fault and their deserved punishment”. Or they regard suffering as “a shame for the family” and then hide the handicapped or retarded person from society. That is why they *can feel no pity for the suffering of others and cannot show compassion*.

However, Hebrews 4:15-16 teaches that Jesus *sympathises* with our weaknesses and gives us mercy and grace to help us just when we need it. And 2 Corinthians 1:4 teaches, “God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we *can comfort* those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

Discover and discuss. How should Christians react to the suffering of other people?

(1) Mourn.

Read Romans 12:15. Christians should *mourn* with people who mourn.

(2) Sympathise.

Read Matthew 27:46; Hebrews 10:34. Christians should *sympathise* with Christians who are imprisoned for their faith in Jesus Christ.

¹ Karma samsara of Hinduism and Buddhism

(3) Visit, pray and help.

Read Matthew 25:39; 27:46; 2 Corinthians 1:4. Christians need to *visit* the suffering people in the world and learn how to suffer together with them or how to comfort them. Christians need to learn when to *pray* for suffering people and when to *help* them practically in their suffering.

B. PEOPLE SUFFER FOR DOING WRONG

Introduce. All people suffer at some point in their life. They sometimes suffer for doing what is wrong in God's eyes and sometimes for doing what is right in God's eyes. There are five reasons why all people in the world suffer.

1. People suffer because of their godlessness.

(1) The original cause of all suffering is the fall of the human race into sin.

Read Genesis 3:1-19; Romans 8:18-21.

Discover and discuss. What was the original cause of all suffering of the human race?

Notes. The Bible clearly teaches that all suffering is due to the fall of man in sin. In Genesis 3 we read how the first people (perfectly created in the image of God nevertheless) fell into sin. Adam and Eve had turned their backs on God, had disobeyed God's command and then had hidden themselves from God. God punished their sin with suffering, trouble and physical death.

Romans 5:12 says, "Sin and death entered the world through one man (Adam), *because of this or in connection with this* (Greek: *ef hó*) all (people) *once for all* sinned (Greek: *pantes hémarton*) (aorist tense)." God does not only think in terms of *individuals*, but also in terms of *communities*. All natural people fell into sin *in solidarity with* their representative, Adam. And all believers in Jesus Christ are justified *in solidarity with* their Representative, Jesus Christ! Just as Adam is the representative of all natural people who have fallen into sin and are doomed, so Jesus Christ is the Representative of all Christians who have been justified and saved (by faith in what Christ did) (Romans 5:12,17-19). The whole human race shares in the punishment of Adam and the whole Church of Christ shares in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:17,21). "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness (of Christ) reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

Natural man lost his perfect relationship with God, his innocence before God and his immortality. Man felt *guilt, shame* in the presence of God and in the presence of other people and *fear* in the presence of God. Satan became man's greatest enemy. Women suffered, because the pain in childbearing increased and women came to be ruled by men. And man suffered, because he became worn out by toil. Finally the bodies of man breaks down and they die (Genesis chapter 3).

Also the whole creation was subjected to frustration and bondage to decay (Romans 8:19-20). The earth and nature were no longer perfect, but produced thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18) and were subjected to disasters as earthquakes, floods, draughts and famine (Ezekiel 14:21).

Man and creation would suffer from the fall into sin until the second coming of Christ, because only then the earth will be renewed and the creation will be restored to perfection (Acts 3:21).

(2) The continued cause of all suffering of the human race is godlessness.

Read Psalm 14:1-3; Romans 1:18-23.

Discover and discuss. Why does the human race continue to suffer?

Notes. The human race continues to suffer, because all human beings continued to follow in the footsteps of Adam. They continued to be godless.

People who are godless, have no relationship with or the wrong relationship to the God of the Bible! A godless person believes that God does not exist or he believes in "another god than the God" who has revealed himself in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. The life-style of an atheist is characterised by the fact that he regards himself as his own "god" and does whatever he pleases. The life-style of a religious person, who is not a Christian, is characterised by the fact that he makes idols or devises his own concept of god that justifies his values and way of living². Such religious people usually try to be justified or saved in their own devised way, by their own religion, by keeping their own man-made religious laws³ or by doing works which they regard as "good". In short, godlessness is either living without the God of the Bible or living in the wrong relationship to the God of the Bible!

The result of godlessness is that the thinking of people becomes futile, worthless, useless and fruitless and their hearts become darkened. Consequently they live in a world of lies and deceit. They lack the necessary light to live a moral and spiritual life. They live in a world where people do not know the true God and cannot find the power to do what is good in his eyes. In such a world people suffer and cause other people to suffer!

² For example, justifies holy wars, terrorism, revenge killing and the abuse of women.

³ For example, praying a number of times a day, fasting at certain times, giving a prescribed amount of money, making prescribed pilgrim's journeys, dressing in prescribed religious way, etc.

2. People suffer because of their wickedness.

Read Romans 1:24-32 James 4:1-2.

Discover and discuss. Why do people continue to suffer in this present world?

Notes. People continue to suffer, because they continue to be wicked. People who are wicked (unrighteous), have the wrong relationship to their neighbours! People do many wrong things to one another. They drag one another into indecent and depraved life-styles. They invent ways to do evil and do every kind of conceivable wickedness to one another. Consider the things listed in Romans 1:28-32, like spiritual arrogance and hatred towards God, sexual immorality and perversion, commercial greed and deceit, social gossiping and boasting and political senselessness and faithlessness. People are filled with evil and do evil; they invent evil and approve of evil. No wonder, when people do these things to one another, they all suffer!

3. People suffer because they suppress or exchange God's truths.

Read Luke 5:31-32; John 9:39-41; Romans 1:18,23,25; 1 John 1:8 – 2:2.

Discover and discuss. Which things do people frequently do that cause them to suffer?

Notes.

(1) People frequently suppress the truth or they exchange the truth for a lie.

This causes very much suffering. Only when a person faces the truth about his physical sickness, can a doctor help him. A person who denies that he has a problem, cannot be helped to solve his problem (Luke 5:31-32). And only when a person faces the truth about his sin, can Jesus Christ save him. A person, who denies that he has sin, only deceives himself (1 John 1:8 – 2:2). Only when a person believes the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and to salvation, he will be set free from slavery to sin (John 8:31-36) and he will be completely saved, that is, he will never again thirst and will never be rejected (John 6:35-37).

(2) What is the truth?

“The truth” is knowledge about who the God of the Bible is and what he says and does (John 14:6; 17:17).

The truth is what the Bible says about natural man (the person living without God). Without the God of the Bible you cannot know the truth about yourself or the significance of life. Without God, man tries to give logical and reasonable answers to the fundamental questions of life. “Where do I come from?” “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “How should I live?” And “Where am I going?” Without God, man is completely lost!

The truth is what the Bible says about Jesus Christ. He who receives Christ, receives God (Matthew 10:40). He who *rejects* Christ, rejects God (Luke 10:16). He, who *honours* Christ, honours God (John 5:23a). He who *does not honour* Christ⁴, does not honour God (John 5:23b). Only he *whom God gives to Christ*, comes to Christ and will never be driven away (John 6:37,44). He who *knows* Christ, knows God (John 8:19). He who *loves* Christ, loves God (John 8:42). He who *believes* Christ, believes God (John 12:44). He who *listens to Christ's words*, listens to God's words (John 12:47-50). He who *accepts* Christ, accepts God (John 13:20). He, who *sees* Christ, has seen God (John 14:9-10). He who *obeys* Christ's commands and teaching, will be loved by God and God will come and make his home with him (John 14:21,23). Christ gives eternal life, reveals God and prays for the person *that God gives to Christ* (John 17:2,6,9). He who *acknowledges* Christ, acknowledges God (1 John 2:23a). He who *denies* Christ, denies God (1 John 2:23b). He who *acknowledges* Christ, God lives in him and he in God (1 John 4:15). He, who *loves* Christ, loves God (1 John 5:1). He, who does not continue in the teaching of Christ, does not have God (2 John 9). These truths in the Bible dooms all other gods, prophets and religions in the world!

The truth is what the Bible says about a Christian.

- The believer in Jesus Christ has true security: he knows that he is unconditionally loved and permanently accepted (Isaiah 43:1-4)!
- The believer in Jesus Christ also has a significant life: he knows that his life is important, meaningful and fruitful (Jeremiah 29:11; John 15:5)!

Without God, people cannot know these two important truths and so they will continue to suffer in their ignorance and despair.

(3) The truth is inseparably bound to God and to his words and his deeds in the Bible.

People who suppress or exchange the truth for a lie, sin against their own conscience, believe in false teachings (beliefs, convictions, truths) and have a wrong relationship to themselves. The truth about the God of the Bible, about what he says and does, about the condition of man and about the destiny of this world is often ignored, deliberately suppressed or deliberately changed. Governments do not like to submit themselves to a spiritual and moral power higher than themselves. Rich or powerful or intellectual people often suppress and exchange the truth, because accepting the truth would mean that they would have to change their life-styles. As long as governments and people refuse to change, and are unjust and selfish, they will continue to suppress and exchange the truth for their own ends. The result is that people suffer.

⁴ Other religions even deliberately dishonour Jesus Christ.

By nature, man has:

- a wrong relationship to the God of the Bible – he is godless
- a wrong relationship to his fellowmen – he is unrighteous (wicked)
- a wrong relationship to himself – he believes in lies

The Bible calls these three wrong relationships with the one word: sin. The real reason for so much suffering in the world is “sin”: the fact that people miss God’s goal for their lives!

4. People suffer because of the real existence of death.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:2-12; Romans 6:23.

Discover and discuss. All people suffer, because they fear death. Why do most people fear death?

Notes. All people suffer, because they will die. Because all people have sinned, all people will die.

Death is so terrible, that many people do not want to talk about it. Death becomes the climax of all suffering for most people. Most people fear death, because death means *separation*:

- *of your spirit (soul)* from your body: your body returns to the dust of the earth and your spirit or soul goes to heaven or to hell.
- *from your loved ones*: you have to leave them behind!
- *from your possessions*, loss of all your education, loss of your job, leaving behind all your accomplishments and position. Nothing of all you have worked for so hard during your lifetime, can you take along with you in death.

“For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Timothy 6:7).

Death is also terrible for those who are left behind. They are separated from their loved one and continually miss him. Sometimes they suffer, because they do not know whether their departed loved one has gone to heaven or to hell after death. Moreover, they fear death themselves, because they don’t know when it is their turn to die or what to expect after death. The reality of death causes all people to suffer.

5. People suffer because of the real existence of God’s judgements.

(1) The present judgements of God cause people to suffer.

Read Galatians 6:7-8; Amos 4:6-12; Haggai 1:6-10; Ezekiel 14:21.

Discover and discuss. How do the judgements of God cause people to suffer?

Notes.

People suffer because God allows judgements to strike people who transgress his laws. God has built laws into his creation. If these laws are transgressed, they bring punishment with them. “A man reaps what he has sown” (Galatians 6:7-8). For example, if a person ignores the law in physics, called gravity, and jumps from a high building, he would probably die. Likewise, God has also built spiritual and moral laws into his creation. A lazy person reaps poverty. A peddler of drugs reaps drug addictions. A sexual immoral person reaps venereal diseases. A man who takes up weapons, will be destroyed by weapons.

People suffer because God brings judgements against people who ignore, reject or disobey him. God controls the universe, including the events of history and the forces of nature. In times when people disobey God or when the relationship between people and God is broken, then God withdraws his care of the world or he punishes the people. Then God brings judgement on the world and its people and they suffer. For example, God can withdraw the fruits of nature as well as people’s basic needs for food and clothing. He can cause people’s purses to get holes and blow their high expectations of life away (Haggai 1:6-10). In this way, God uses all kinds of disasters like earthquakes, floods, and especially draughts and famines throughout history to show his displeasure with sin and to warn people to repent and turn back to him (Ezekiel 14:21; cf. Revelation 8:6 – 9:21). God says, “You have not returned to me. Prepare to meet your God” (Amos 4:6-12)!

(2) Godless and unrighteous people will suffer worse at the Last Judgement.

Read Hebrews 9:27; Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.

Discover and discuss. What will be the worst suffering?

Notes. The worst suffering will be God’s eternal punishment in hell. God’s final judgement will come after death. Then God will judge all people for their godlessness, wickedness, lies and rejection of Jesus Christ. The wicked will be punished with everlasting separation from God and will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. The suffering after the final judgement of God is far worse than death! All unbelievers and wicked people will suffer in the future age. This is very serious! Suffering after God’s future final judgement will be far worse than all the present suffering on earth!

C. CHRISTIANS SUFFER FOR DOING GOOD

Introduce. Christians must distinguish between suffering for doing what is wrong and suffering for doing what is right. Christians are called not to seek suffering for doing what is wrong, but to endure suffering for doing what is right. The prophets in the Old Testament often suffered for doing what is right. Jesus Christ suffered for doing what is right. The

apostles in the New Testament suffered for doing what is right. And Christians are called to endure suffering for doing what is right.

1. Christians often suffer because they cannot change their circumstances.

Discover and discuss. How should a Christian behave in difficult circumstances?

(1) Sometimes Christians live in a difficult country.

Read Acts 17:25-76.

Notes. Christians often suffer because they cannot change their outward circumstances or conditions. God has determined each person's place and their outward circumstances on earth. It is his will that each person seeks him within those circumstances! This does not mean that a person should not strive to change those circumstances, if he is able to do so. God has given people certain abilities and opportunities to make the most of their circumstances!

(2) Sometimes Christians are slaves of earthly masters.

Read 1 Peter 2:18-20; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22 - 4:1; Matthew 5:6; Acts 5:29.

Notes. Being a slave is difficult. Many women on earth are slaves in their own homes due to religious or cultural reasons. Many children in poor countries are forced to work as slaves for greedy parents or employers. Many foreign workers are exploited and receive extremely unfair wages.

How should Christians regard slavery? During the New Testament times, slavery was still common and people often suffered under their harsh masters. 1 Peter 2:18 says, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect." These slaves were house servants who were in daily contact with their masters and owners in the house (Luke 12:35-48) rather than slaves working under supervisors outside (Exodus 5:6). The apostle Peter teaches that these slaves should subordinate themselves and obey their masters. They should submit themselves to their masters in fear, *because resistance was useless and would only increase their maltreatment*. And they should also submit themselves to them with all inward and outward respect, because God demands this. They should submit themselves not only to masters who are good and considerate, but also to masters who are harsh. The word harsh means grumpy, pig-headed, unreasonable, capricious, unpredictable, and even unjust. The apostle Peter demands that Christian house servants subject themselves to their masters even when they are hard to serve due to their unreasonable demands and injustice.

How should Christians regard modern "employer-employee" relationships? The "slave-master" relationship in the early times may be applied to modern "employer-employee" relationships. The Bible demands that Christian employees submit themselves to their employers with respect. Christian employees often suffer under the unjust rules and actions of their employers. Whenever their employers make unreasonable demands and act with injustice towards them, they suffer. Sometimes employers act as if they own their employees and can make any kind of demand on them. Some employers demand very much overtime work without pay. Other employers make their employees work in unhealthy or dangerous conditions. Again other employers make people, who are desperate for employment, work very hard, but grossly underpay them or even withhold paying their wages (James 5:1-6). In some countries, employers use children in their labour force without giving them an education or fair wages. In an increasing number very young girls, especially from very poor families, are forced into cyber-sex (internet and mobile phone prostitution). Many such harsh and unjust conditions cause Christians as well as non-Christians to suffer.

Christians should submit to such harsh circumstances with respect, work hard, deliver quality work, be faithful and honest, probably because they may be able to witness about Jesus Christ to their employers (cf. Matthew 10:16-20)! In the mean time, Christians may and should do everything (that is biblically) possible to change their unjust circumstances, but they should always talk to their employers and about their employers with respect.

However, when employers demand that their employees *do things which are forbidden in the Bible*, then the employees may gently resist their employers. For example, under no circumstances may Christian employees give or accept bribes, cheat, lie, steal or be involved in sex related activities, etc. Whenever their employers threaten them, they should point out to their employers that they should obey God more than any other person on earth (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29). Whenever their employers punish or dismiss them, they should endure this suffering with respect.

2. Christians often suffer because they live a righteous life.

Discover and discuss. How should Christians act in situations where they suffer for doing what is right in God's eyes?

(1) The prophets in the Old Testament were persecuted.

Read Hebrews 11:36-37.

Notes. It says, "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and maltreated."

(2) Christians will also be persecuted.

Read Matthew 5:10-12; Hebrews 10:33-34; 2 Timothy 3:12.

Notes. In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of *righteousness*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the

prophets who were before you.” Christians are often persecuted, because they are righteous. To be righteous means that they are living a life in harmony with God’s holy will (something non-Christians resent).

Other people are struck in their consciences when Christians live in accordance to the Bible, do what is right in the eyes of God and hate what is evil in the eyes of God. That is why they persecute Christians! The wicked people want such righteous people to join them in doing evil (John 3:19-21).

Throughout the centuries, Christians have been persecuted for the sake of Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

- Christians have been called “atheists”, because they did not participate in the worship of visible man-made gods.
- Christians have been called “spies” and “traitors”, because they often had to meet in secret places to escape the persecution of religious and political leaders.
- Christians have been called “unpatriotic”, “no nationalists”, because they confessed loyalty to Jesus Christ as their King and refused to worship the Roman emperor (Philippians 3:20).

Hebrews 10:33-34 describes the sufferings of Christians: “Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you had better and lasting possessions.”

Suffering as a Christian takes many forms. For example, some Christians:

- die as martyrs
- suffer because they make up their mind not to marry a non-Christian
- lose their jobs, because they refuse to be involved in a crooked business deal, bribery or lies
- suffer because they are excluded from schools, universities and government posts or are expelled as a teacher in school because he acknowledged to be a follower of Christ and remained walking in the light

Christians cannot avoid oppression or persecution. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

3. Christians often suffer because they are faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

(1) Christians often suffer because they are faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 10:16-20; Acts 20:29-31; 1 Peter 4:15-16.

Discover and discuss. How should Christians act when they are sent out to witness?

Notes. Christians often suffer because they are faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ. Christians are sent out to face suffering. The disciples of Jesus, as all servants of Jesus today, did not go out to invite persecution. No, Jesus Christ himself actually *sent* them out to preach the gospel, to teach the Bible and to help people. He *sent* them out among “wolves”, that is, among people in the world who would treat them viciously and destructively. The “apostles” (the word means “sent ones”) actually represented Jesus Christ among the people. This meant that Jesus Christ was working through them, that he would be with them when they suffered and that he would protect them whenever necessary.

Christians should face suffering with wisdom and innocence. The disciples must be “shrewd as snakes”. The *cautiousness and wariness* of snakes had become proverbial in Israel. Christians should be cautious in everything they do. They should try to gain *insight* into the people to whom they witness and try to discover what the best way to witness to them is. The disciples must also be “innocent as doves”. Doves symbolised *purity* in Israel (Song 5:2). This means that Christians should never compromise with evil.

Christians should never suffer for doing what is wrong. “To be on their guard against people” (Matthew 10:17) includes the following: Christians should not naively entrust themselves to people, because some people will betray them. In Jesus’ own community, the religious leaders were constantly setting traps to catch him so that they might have a reason to bring him to court (Matthew 12:10; John 8:6). And even one of his own disciples, Judas, betrayed him. After Jesus had ascended to heaven, people continued their hatred and opposition against the followers of Jesus. Christians should not fall into the traps of people’s catch-questions, but pray for grace to give them an appropriate answer. They should not make people angry without good cause. They should also not do anything that might enable the people to bring a valid charge against them. 1 Peter 4:15-16 describes this as follows: “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you *suffer as a Christian*, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name”, that is, that *you bear the name of Christ*.

Christians should use opportunities of persecution to witness to government officials. Jesus said to his disciples, “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles” (Matthew 10:18). Jesus said that his disciples would be handed over to the local Jewish courts, which were held in the synagogues. The punishment for certain crimes in that time was flogging with a whip. The maximum was thirty-nine lashes (2 Corinthians 11:24). The disciples would be dragged before high officials, like governors and kings, who would judge them. This happened to both Jesus and Paul. It is important to notice that Jesus said that the purpose of this persecution is that the disciples witness to their judges! *Sometimes persecution is the only way in which the police, the judges and other government officials hear the message of God’s love and forgiveness.* Christians should not worry about what they should say at that time, because the Holy Spirit will remind them of the words of Jesus and inspire them with courage.

(2) Christians should regard this kind of suffering as a participation in the sufferings of Christ.

Read Acts 26:14; Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:12-14.

Discover and discuss. How should Christians regard their sufferings?

Notes.

The sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was called “the devil” (Matthew 10:25), “a despised foreigner” (John 8:48), “demon-possessed” and “raving mad” (John 10:20). He was hated by the evil people of this world (John 15:18-21). The authorities plotted to kill him (Matthew 26:3-4). The officials spit in his face, struck him with fists (Matthew 26:67), arranged a mock trial with false witnesses (Matthew 26:59-60), bound and led him away as a criminal (Matthew 27:1-2), stripped him of his dignity, put a crown of thorns on his head, mocked him, spit on him, struck him on the head again and again with a staff (Matthew 27:27-31) and finally crucified him by hammering long iron nails through his hands and feet onto a cross (Matthew 27:35). And yet he was completely innocent!

The sufferings of the apostle Paul. Before his conversion, Paul also did everything that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus Christ, put Christians in prison, voted in favour of their death, had them flogged in Jewish religious buildings and tried to force them to blaspheme against Jesus Christ (Acts 26:9-11). Later Paul himself faced very much persecution. He was frequently imprisoned, severely flogged, five times he received from the Jews 39 lashes with a whip, three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, he was constantly in danger from his own countrymen and in danger from false brothers (2 Corinthians 11:23-26). Paul bore on his body the marks of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 6:17).

Participating in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Christians should regard this kind of suffering as “a sharing or participation in the sufferings of Christ” (Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 4:13). The Bible says that when Christians suffer for their faith in Jesus Christ or for their faithfulness towards him and his Word, then “Christ’s afflictions overflow to them” (2 Corinthians 1:5). When anyone persecutes the disciples of Jesus Christ, he is persecuting Jesus Christ himself! Before his conversion Paul persecuted Christians. Then Jesus Christ said to him, “Saul, why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 26:14). The persecution against Christians is in reality a persecution against Jesus Christ! This means, that when you are persecuted as a Christian, you are never far away from the presence and love of Jesus Christ and from his strength and comfort.

Filling up the quota of sufferings necessary. In the Bible the sufferings of Christians is regarded as the sufferings of Jesus Christ. But nowhere are the sufferings of Christians represented as contributing to the accomplishment of redemption. They are only regarded as “filling up the total quota of sufferings necessary” for the completion of redemption and the glorification of the whole Body of Christ (Colossians 1:24). Christ’s suffering on the cross on earth as an atonement sacrifice was unique and no one contributed to that suffering! But Christ in heaven continues to suffer with his Body (the Church) on earth as they are oppressed and persecuted.

Participating in the glory of Jesus Christ. Romans 8:17 says that Christians share in the sufferings of Christ in order that they may also share in his glory! Just as Christ in his sufferings, death, and resurrection cannot be contemplated apart from those on whose behalf he suffered, died, and rose again, so in the glory bestowed upon him as the reward of his finished work, he cannot be contemplated apart from them. And they in the state of glory cannot be contemplated apart from him. Therefore the glory of the inheritance of Christians can be none other than the glory that is Christ’s in the reward of his exaltation (John 17:24). Suffering with Jesus Christ is the condition upon which the attainment of the inheritance is contingent. There is no sharing in God’s glory unless there is sharing in his sufferings. Sufferings and then glory was the order appointed for Jesus Christ himself (Philippians 2:6-11). The same order applies to those who are heirs with him.

D. THE REACTIONS TO SUFFERINGS

1. Different reactions to suffering within history.

Discover and discuss. How did the following people react to suffering?

Notes. These examples are not teaching us how we should react to suffering. They are also not exhaustive.

(1) Call down God’s curse or judgement.

Read Psalm 10:15; 58:6.

David prayed and called for the curse or judgement of God to fall upon his enemies.

However, Jesus Christ teaches how we Christians should react to suffering, “Bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:27-28). And Paul teaches, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14).

(2) Threaten and retaliate (revenge).

Read Matthew 5:38-42.

Some individuals are evil and retaliate. They demand “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. They do to others the same evil those people have done to them. Some cultures are evil and teach so-called “honour-killing”. They teach that the honour of a person or a family or a nation or even a religion should be kept high by murdering innocent members of the family or society to which an offender belongs! In this way some families have been murdering one another for

centuries, some nations have never stopped to make war against one another and some religions have turned into terrorism or religious wars.

However, Jesus Christ teaches how we Christians should react to suffering caused by an evil person, family, nation or religion. He says, “Do not resist an evil person”. And when one of his disciples retaliated and cut off the ear of an enemy, Jesus immediately healed the wound (Luke 22:50-51) and said, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:51-52). When people hurled their insults at Jesus Christ, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

(3) Deny Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 10:17-20,32-39.

Some people react out of fear for persecution and disown Jesus Christ before their own family, society and government. They are afraid of suffering and so deny that they are Christians.

However, Jesus Christ warns Christians not to deny him. He says, “Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”. The cross symbolises that a genuine Christian is willing to suffer rejection, false accusations, shame, beatings and even death for the sake of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ also teaches how we Christians should react to persecution. When your persecutors flog you and bring you before their religious leaders, police or even political leaders, then “do not worry what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Persecution is sometimes the only way in which these religious leaders, police, judges or government leaders will hear the gospel! Throughout the centuries, history has proven that “the blood of the Christian martyrs have become the seed of the gospel”.

(4) Keep silent.

Read Matthew 10:33; 2 Timothy 2:11-13.

Some people that are put under pressure are afraid to acknowledge that they are Christians (believers in Jesus Christ). So they disown Jesus Christ before people. “If we disown him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:12b-13). This cannot mean that Christ will give us eternal life in spite of the fact that we are unfaithful! It can only mean that Christ will not only be faithful in carrying out his promises (Matthew 10:32; 2 Timothy 2:11-12a), but *also remain faithful in carrying out his threats* (Matthew 10:33; 2 Timothy 2:12b).

Most of the time, Jesus Christ wants Christians to open their mouths and witness to their persecutors. In most circumstances Jesus Christ spoke out for what is right. When he was unjustly beaten, he said, “If I said something wrong testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why do you strike me?” (John 18:23) At other times when speaking would not help he prayed for his enemies. He said, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

But in some circumstances we Christians may follow Christ’s example and remain silent. For example, Christ remained silent when he was falsely accused or when his enemies mocked him (Matthew 26:59-64; 1 Peter 2:21-23).

(5) Continue to live righteously.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 11:23-29; 2 Timothy 3:10-12.

The apostle Paul had a variety of responses to suffering. He would work hard with his hands in situations of poverty, answer kindly those who slandered him, bless those who cursed him, and endure all kinds of persecutions. Throughout his sufferings, he continued to care for the churches under his care. Paul was very much aware that he was setting an example for other Christians. They learned much from his way of life, purpose in life, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions and sufferings.

2. Different possible reactions to suffering.

(1) Avoid suffering.

Read Deuteronomy 10:17-18; 16:17-18; Exodus 23:8. A Christian may be tempted to avoid suffering at all costs and may want to bribe his persecutor. But the God of the Bible never bribes (Deuteronomy 10:17-18)! God’s righteous judges never receive bribes (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)! And Christians may never be involved in bribery (Exodus 23:8)!

A Christian may be tempted to avoid suffering at all costs by simply going along with his persecutor’s unjust demand and do whatever is demanded. However, in this way the Christian would become as crooked and evil as his persecutor. A Christian should tell his employer or government that he cannot and will not do anything that is unjust or forbidden in the Bible!

(2) Flee from suffering.

Read Matthew 10:11-14,23. The Christian should first try and proclaim the message of God’s kingdom to a town and do good in that town. However, if the town resists them, they should leave that town and go to another town. And when that town persecutes them, they should flee to another place.

(3) Oppose suffering.

Read Romans 12:17-19; 1 Timothy 2:1-6. Many people oppose suffering. They draw up petitions, organise strikes, passively resist the authorities or even actively oppose the authorities by active violence, roadblocks, throwing stones, breaking windows, plundering shops, burning cars, attacking the police, etc.

While Christians should draw the attention of the proper authorities to injustice, they should never resort to verbal abuse or violent opposition against the authorities. Christians should never threaten people, never resort to violence and never retaliate. If they do, they become as evil as their opponents and God will judge them. Christians should never resort to the evil methods of their opponents. A Christian can never be a terrorist and a terrorist can never be a Christian.

However, when Christians see injustice, they should tell the proper authorities. If the authorities are very evil, it may be wise not to talk to the authorities about the evil they do. Instead, Christians should pray for the conversion of people in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-6). And Christians should be involved in bringing relief to people who suffer under the injustice of authorities or the injustice of society (Matthew 5:10; 25:37-40; Hebrews 10:33-34; Proverbs 9:8-9).

(4) Bear suffering

Read 1 Peter 2:21,23. Some Christians are tempted not to bear suffering. However, also in the area of suffering Christians are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. When people hurled their insults at Jesus Christ, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to God who judges justly. Christians should not react against their persecutors, but instead *react towards God*, pray for grace to bear the suffering and entrust their situation and life into the hands of the Living God. In the final judgement day, God will judge every person according to his attitudes, words and behaviour.

(5) Use suffering as a way to spread righteousness.

Read Matthew 5:6,10,20,38-42; Hebrews 10:32-34; 13:3; Matthew 25:37-40. The Christian should never resist an evil person (Matthew 5:39). When an evil person strikes them, they should allow him to strike again until his anger is cooled. When an evil person takes some of their possessions, they should give them some more of their possessions. When an evil person forces them to carry their load for one mile, they should carry it for two miles (Matthew 5:39-42). The righteousness of Christians should surpass everything their enemies expect (Matthew 5:20). They should love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them and pray for those who mistreat them (Luke 6:27-28). They should hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6). Jesus Christ will bless Christians that are persecuted because they do what is right in Christ's eyes (Matthew 5:10). Christians should sympathise with those in prison (Hebrews 10:34) and remember those who are mistreated or martyred in prison (Hebrews 13:3). Christians should feed the hungry and thirsty, invite strangers into their house, cloth people who need clothing and visit the sick (Matthew 25:37-40). Christians should do things that decrease the suffering of people on the one hand and that change the wrong structures in their society to good structures on the other hand.

3. Different important issues that involve suffering.

Discover and discuss. Where, do you think, should Christians stand with respect to issues that involve suffering like the punishment of children, abortion, euthanasia, life-long imprisonment and the death penalty?

(1) The punishment of children.

Read Proverbs 13:24. The Bible advises parents to punish their children when children deserve punishment. However, parents and teachers may never beat children at random, with fists or cause injuries and damage. They should punish children appropriately, with a rod at the seat of his pants, because a rod is an instrument of punishment that causes pain but no injury.

(2) Abortion.

Read Exodus 20:13; Psalm 139:13-18. Abortion is the killing of unborn-babies that are not wanted by their parents. However, it is God himself who creates people in a wonderful and mysterious way. Because people cannot create people, they are forbidden to kill them.

(3) Euthanasia.

Read Mark 10:19. Euthanasia is the so-called "mercy killing" of people who suffer some disease, depression or old age. However, God clearly prohibits every form of murder.

(4) Death penalty.

Read Genesis 9:5-6; Exodus 21:12-14; Deuteronomy 22:25-27; Romans 13:4. The Old Testament judicial law ordered the death penalty for rapists. What do you think should modern society do with rapists, kidnappers, murderers, etc. What do you think should modern society do with rapists, kidnappers, murderers, producers of drugs, people who commit honour killing, terrorists and people engaged in so-called holy wars against Christians? Should modern society maintain the death penalty? Or should these criminals only get life-long sentences? Or should they be released as soon as possible so that they can again commit these crimes?

E. THE SIGNIFICANCE OR VALUE OF SUFFERING

Introduce. The Bible teaches that the suffering of Christians is very meaningful. Christians know that sufferings are God's means to build character, to make them useful in this world and to prepare them to enter heaven later.

Discover and discuss. What are the great benefits of suffering according to the following passages?

1. Suffering produces obedience to God's Word.

Read Psalm 119:67,71.

Suffering produces obedience to God's word. Difficulties, persecutions and sufferings drive Christians to find answers, comfort and strength in the Bible.

2. Suffering produces character.

Read James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5.

Suffering produces Christian character. A person's relationship to God changes completely when he believes in Jesus Christ. But because his relationship to God has been changed, every event in the life of a Christian also changes! Before a person becomes a Christian, suffering seems absolutely meaningless. But after a person becomes a Christian, suffering is no longer meaningless, but produces different kinds of good characteristics in the Christian. For example:

(1) Suffering produces joy.

A Christian can rejoice in his sufferings, because suffering has significance. He regards suffering as a beneficial manifestation of God's love for him.

A believer rejoices on account of suffering (Acts 5:41). He considers it an honour to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ considers the suffering of the Christian as a suffering inflicted on himself (Matthew 25:40,45; Galatians 6:17; Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:13-14).

A Christian also rejoices amidst his suffering, because he experiences God's reality and powerful help (Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 1:4-10; 11:23-30; 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 3:11-12). He rejoices in the fact that suffering is an occasion for God to manifest his power to support him amidst the suffering or even deliver him from the suffering. A Christian rejoices in his suffering, because his problem has now become God's possibility!

(2) Suffering produces perseverance.

When a Christian suffers, he develops patience and persistence. On the one hand, he learns to endure suffering patiently. On the other hand, he learns to faithfully persist in his duty. A Christian's weakness only serves to magnify God's power (2 Corinthians 12:9)! When the suffering Christian acknowledges that he himself is weak, but that God is strong and ready to help, he will seek help from God. Because God's help is completely sufficient, the faith of the Christian is strengthened and leads him to persevere in his relationship to Jesus Christ and to persevere in his Christian calling.

(3) Perseverance produces character or approved integrity.

The Greek uses the word: "dokimos" and it means tested (tried) and approved. God uses difficulties, persecutions and sufferings to test Christians. When a Christian perseveres in his suffering, he *proves* that God is faithful to him and also that he is faithful to God. When a Christian perseveres in his relationship to Jesus Christ and in his Christian task, God puts his stamp of *approval* on the Christian! It is as if God says, "I tested you and you proved to be genuine! I regard you as a tried and approved Christian". Thus, God tests the integrity of the Christian when he allows him to undergo different kinds of difficulties, persecutions and sufferings.

(4) Approved character produces hope.

When a person gives up during a trial or test, his hope (or expectation) is weakened. But when he endures suffering and perseveres in the test, his hope or expectation that he will conquer only becomes stronger.

3. Suffering produces maturity.

Read James 1:2-4; Hebrews 12:1-13. Suffering produces Christian maturity. According to James, trials and temptations in life continually produce Christian maturity or better: completeness or perfection in Christian character. According to Hebrews, the practical training and correction (discipline) of God makes the Christian participate in God's holiness, righteousness and peace.

4. Suffering produces courage, boldness and fearless action.

Read Philippians 1:12-14. Persecution produces boldness. Philippians 1:12-14 says, "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ... Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." Paul was chained inside a dungeon in the Roman city of Philippi. His example of suffering stimulated other Christians to become courageous and bold in their witnessing for Jesus Christ. In Philippi many Roman soldiers of the palace guard and even members of the household of the Roman emperor (Philippians 4:22) became believers in Jesus Christ.

5. Suffering spreads the gospel message.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8. Persecution spreads the gospel message. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8, Paul says that the severe suffering of the Thessalonians caused their faith in God to become known everywhere. When a Christian suffers for Christ's sake in a way that honours Jesus Christ, his suffering is noticed by very many people. Other Christians will

become courageous and bold to suffer as well. The death of Christian martyrs becomes the seed of the gospel. C. S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but in our pains. Christian suffering is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world”.

6. Suffering manifests the glory of Jesus Christ.

Read 1 Peter 4:14. Persecution manifests the glory of Jesus Christ in a Christian. When a Christian suffers because of the name of Jesus Christ, he is blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on him. When he suffers for the sake of Jesus Christ, God’s Spirit will shine divine glory through him. He will have a joy, peace and quiet trust in God that surpasses all human ability to do these things! The suffering Christian will be able to forgive and to love his enemies, just as Jesus Christ did. He will persevere even unto death, just as Jesus Christ did. However, the perseverance of a believer is to be attributed, not to the strength of the Christian’s love for God, nor to anything else in himself, but only to the free and great love of God for the Christian (Romans 8:28-39).

7. Suffering prepares a Christian for heaven.

Read Matthew 5:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5.

Persecution prepares a Christian for heaven. All the persecutions and trials, which the Thessalonians faced, were evidence that God’s judgement was right. And as a result these Christians would be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which they had suffered. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	[REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD
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Take turns in the group to pray short to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	[ASSIGNMENT] FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. **Commitment.** Be committed to make disciples and build Christ’s Church.
2. **Preach, teach or study the teaching** of “Suffering and the sovereignty of God” together with another person or group of people.
3. **Personal time with God.** Have a quiet time with God from half a chapter of **Revelation 19 - 22** each day. Make use of the favourite truth method or question method. Make notes.
4. **Memorisation.** Daily review the last 5 memorised verses from John. (16) John 16:8, (17) John 16:13, (18) John 16:14, (19) John 17:15, (20) John 18:36.
5. **Bible study.** Prepare the next Bible study at home. Make **a summary of the Gospel of John.**
Read through the Gospel of John once more and make your own summary of the Gospel of John with the help of the following questions:
 - Give a title to the Gospel of John.
 - Give titles and sub-titles to each chapter of the Gospel of John.
 - What are the most important doctrinal conclusions in the Gospel of John?
 - What are the most important practical lessons in the Gospel of John?
 - What do you think is the relevancy of the Gospel of John for our time and our community?
 - Give a presentation of one aspect of the Gospel of John to the group. How would you pass this truth on to others?

The following are possible presentations:

- Explain a truth by means of *a drawing or illustration.*
 - Give *a short sermon* on some truth to the group.
 - Write *a poem* or compose *a song* and present it to the group.
 - Write *a short play or mime* and show it to the group.
 - Devise *a quiz* and carry it out within the group.
 - Tell a short story or testimony that illustrates a truth in the Gospel of John.
6. **Prayer.** Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
 7. **Update your notebook** on building Christ’s Church. Include your notes on personal time with God, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.