



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo
(*Suffering*, pp. 56-60)

Suggested Article:

📖 How the Soul Grows Through Loss
(*Suffering*, pp. 84-89)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

In a little Salvadoran hamlet, the memory of villagers' suffering during a long and terrible war becomes a celebration of the Christ who suffers with them at each Station of the Cross. They remind us there are many "crucified peoples," and we need to ask "Who put them on the cross?"

Prayer†

For the poor, the persecuted, the sick, and all who suffer; for refugees, prisoners, and all who are in danger; that they may be relieved and protected, we pray to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 57

Responsive Reading (from Lamentations 5)

Remember, Great God, what has happened to us.

See our disgrace.

Our inheritance is given to strangers,

Our homes given to aliens.

We have become orphans with no father,

Our mothers are like widows.

We must pay for water to drink,

We must buy our firewood.

We are driven hard with a yoke on our neck,

We are weary but are given no rest.

We get our bread at the peril of our lives,

Our skin is scorched from the heat of famine.

The joy of our heart has ceased,

Our dancing has turned to mourning.

Because of these things our hearts are sick,

Our eyes have grown dim because Mt. Zion lies desolate.

All: Restore to us yourself, Great God, that we may be restored.

Reflection

"I encourage first-time visitors to El Salvador to go to the rural village of Santa Marta where folks are willing to talk about their past," says Yvonne Dilling. "In this village where mother and grandmother still cook delicious thick white corn tortillas from scratch on a clay griddle over a wood fire, all you need to do is give people a leading sentence—such as 'They say the people suffered a lot before they fled through the hills to Honduras'—and some personal or family experience rolls right out, as though the mother awoke that morning thinking about it. And maybe she did."

In a nearby hamlet of Valle Nuevo, Dilling joins villagers each year to commemorate the Lempa River crossing in 1981. She calls "it a 'crossing' [not a 'massacre'] because, even though fifty people were slaughtered by the army, five thousand others survived." How do they cope with terrible memories of suffering?

▶ *They reclaim the "river that produced death[,]...pronouncing it a river of life."* For years villagers walked to the river to observe a Mass in honor of those who died there, enjoy a picnic with the survivors and their descendants, and swim in the river.



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► *They re-enact the Stations of the Cross.* When older members could no longer trek to the river, the community chose to commemorate in the village. “Women and men who had *never* gone to the river because their memories were too painful began to participate,” Dilling says. “At each station, they reflected on how Christ suffered there again with the Salvadoran people during the war. These villagers...were blessed with some mental healing as they recalled that God was with them in Christ through those long and terrible years.”

Phyllis Kersten notes that encountering the triune God in the midst of our suffering is also a theme in the lives of Gerald Sittser and Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost family members in tragic accidents. “No matter how deep the pit into which I descend,” Sittser reports, “I keep finding God there. He is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. He is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world.”

“It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live,” writes Wolterstorff. “I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see [God’s] sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor.”

Study Questions

1. “Some grief is too deep to bear,” Stephen Schmidt observes. Rather, “it is endured, it is challenged, it becomes the stuff of reconciliation or transformation.” How are the villagers of Valle Nuevo dealing with their grief? Is it significant that they are dealing with it *together* as a community?
2. According to Dilling, what is the difference between a victim and a martyr? Both may endure terrible and undeserved suffering. Which are the people in Valle Nuevo?
3. “Our biblical mandate is two-fold: to respond immediately to alleviate the suffering of others, and to work to change policies that cause suffering,” Dilling suggests. “Our works of mercy are important, but so is political advocacy. To *not* take action to transform political structures that cause suffering is to side with the oppressor.” Do you agree?
4. Discuss Gerald Sittser’s insight: “I was empty of energy and desire. All I could do was *let God love me*, even though I hardly believed that he loved anyone, least of all me.... I learned through that experience that nothing can separate us from his love – not even our inability to love him in return!”
5. Wolterstorff finds that looking “at the world through tears” enables him to “see things that dry-eyed [he] could not see.” How can our suffering reshape the way we see and respond to the world’s agony?
6. Do members of your congregation share their grief and suffering with one another, or do they deal with them alone? How does your congregation respond to suffering in the wider community?

Departing Hymn: “Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

[†]*The Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

Suffering Together at Valle Nuevo

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 6	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how God can be experienced in the context of our suffering.
2. To explore how we can deal with grief and suffering *together* within a faithful community.
3. To examine how we respond to the agony of victims and martyrs in the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Yvonne Dilling recounts this conversation with a Salvadoran woman who survived the Lempa River massacre in 1981: "Rosario looked out over the hills, but I knew she was not seeing the cultivated corn as she said, 'They shot my baby in my arms and wanted me to fall into the river and be swept away in the current just like those five-hundred who were swept away at the Sumpul River massacre. I carried my baby all the long hike to Los Hernandez. All the while I was thinking, "I can't bear this." The women there had to forcibly take her out of my arms that night and I watched them bury her just as she was, wrapped in a cloth.' Other details emerged as she recalled how that night changed her life. A few months later soldiers killed her husband. After several more months, Rosario gave her remaining child to her mother and joined the emerging guerilla group. They fought for seven years until the armed forces, unable to defeat the rebels, finally accepted a U.N.-sponsored opportunity to negotiate peace.

"When Rosario finished her remembering, I cautiously ventured: 'Visitors from other countries often wonder how you could still believe in God after all the unjust suffering you have endured. Why aren't there more atheists here?'

"The suffering did not produce atheists; what did was the church's failure to defend the people in the face of the injustice, and the outright collusion of the bishops when they blessed the army,' she responded. 'Not even that, really,' she continued on a new train of thought, 'it produced folks who will not participate in that church but who still believe in God.'"

"I felt that God was always with me,' Rosario said,... 'If I hadn't felt that, I could not have borne the suffering'" (*Suffering*, pp. 57-58).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading aloud the responsive prayer in the study guide (the leader begins and the group responds with the line in bold print).

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 57 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

"Though the loss of a loved one is always deeply personal," Phyllis Kersten reminds us, "the spiritual insight that can emerge from reflection upon it can be of great benefit to the wide community of faith." This study highlights some similarities among the responses to grief and suffering by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Gerald Sittser, and the people of Valle Nuevo, El Salvador.

For background information about the Lempa River crossing, see the colorful banner commemorating the event at www.plowcreek.org/esbanner.htm. A timeline and brief history of the Salvadoran civil war is available online at www.pbs.org/itvs/enemiesofwar, the website for the PBS documentary *Enemies of War*.

Study Questions

1. The villagers symbolically challenge their grief by commemorating the river crossing each year. They are transformed and reconciled to their enemies in the Mass and by walking the Stations of the Cross. Encourage members to discuss the value of facing grief with the support of others, especially with people who share the same (or similar) suffering.
2. "Victims are people who are caught in the world's cross fire, who are unfortunate to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, like the pedestrian who crosses the road in front of a drunken driver," says Dilling. "Martyrs are those who act out of faithfulness, even though they know their actions could bring them suffering and death." She sees the people at Valle Nuevo as martyrs for resisting a politically and economically oppressive government. It is important to recognize that victims (like Wolterstorff's son or Sittser's wife and children) as well as martyrs endure *undeserved* suffering. The difference is that martyrs, when they are faithful to God in a just cause, call us to "choose sides" morally. "We need to ask 'Who put them on the cross?' That is, we have to do political analysis. This will lead us to the question, 'As a follower of Jesus, what am I going to do to help get them down from the cross?'"
3. Dilling notes that "many laws in the Old Testament are based on sensitivity to the poor." Amos delivers God's judgment on the policies of Israel's neighboring countries (Amos 1:2-2:3). Brainstorm a list of specific political and economic policies in your city, state, and the United States that cause suffering among the poor or diseased today. Discuss how members could work through the government and with other agencies to change these policies.
4. We may struggle against others loving us because we want to be self-sufficient, or do not want the responsibility that comes through personal relationship. Only when we are "empty of energy and desire" do we let them love us. Sittser says he had stopped loving and trusting God, which threw up another barrier.
5. Wolterstorff speaks of his sympathy for the world's wounds being enlarged. Sittser says "sorrow enlarges the soul," until it "is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world's pain and hoping for the world's healing at the same time." He has reevaluated his priorities as an individual before God and as a parent. He's grown more dependent on God, having given up the effort "to be a perfect parent," but inviting "God to be their parent through me." Does sorrow always enlarge the soul, or do some people become self-focused in sorrow and reduced in self-pity? What makes the difference, do you think?
6. Encourage members to discuss how they become aware of grief and suffering in the congregation and in the wider community. Are announcements made in worship? Are concerns discussed in small groups? Then evaluate how the congregation responds. Are the responses episodic (with visits, counseling, service) or ongoing (with support groups, recurring ministries). Are long-term as well as immediate needs being met? Do members respond on an individual basis, or are their efforts coordinated by a minister, leader, or group? Does the congregation partner with other congregations or agencies?

Departing Hymn

"Why Have You Forsaken Me?" is on pp. 42-43 of *Suffering*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.