



SESSION three



God And Suffering

According to a Barna Research survey, understanding God’s relationship to suffering is one of the biggest reasons non-believers gave for not accepting the Christian faith.

These results clearly show us the way we talk about our struggles matters – not just for our own faith, but also for the sake of skeptics and non-believers.

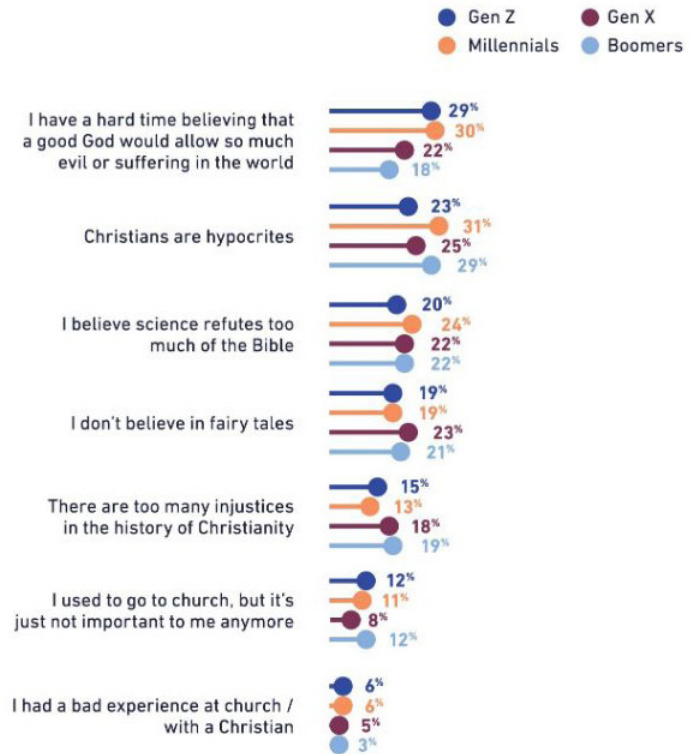
If we talk about our struggles as though God purposefully made them happen so He can teach us a lesson, we’ve created a warped relationship. In our efforts to find a reason why something bad would happen to us, we’ve made ourselves a victim of a malevolent god. We rationalize the trial will pass once we change our behavior or correct our pattern of thinking; and if the suffering doesn’t go away, we assume we have yet to learn our lesson.

This is not just bad theology; it’s an abusive relationship.

God is a compassionate God, full of love for all people. This isn’t to say God doesn’t sometimes use our suffering to draw us closer to Him. Trials can most certainly be a *means* by which we achieve spiritual maturity (James 1:2-5). Suffering may also be the consequences of our own sinful choices. We can have assurance, however, the Spirit will make God’s purposes for our spiritual maturity apparent when we face trials of our own making. He doesn’t leave it to guesswork; God doesn’t abandon us in our struggles until we “figure it out.”

The way we talk about our struggles matters...so let’s talk.

Non-Christians’ Barriers to Faith



U.S. teens ages 13–18, n=621, Nov. 4–16, 2016. U.S. adults 19 and older, n=486, Nov. 4–16, 2016.

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Watch Session Three Video

Dr. Hank Spaulding III is the associate campus pastor at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. He has a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics and teaches theology and Pauline classes. His book entitled *The Just and Loving Gaze of God with Us* was published this year and examines Paul’s political theology.

- Have you ever had a crisis that caused you to doubt God's goodness? What was that like for you? How did you work through this?
- The way that we talk about suffering matters. Unfortunately, we as Christians sometimes make this issue much simpler than it actually is. In what manner(s) do you think we do this?
- The Bible is filled with the cries of people who are upset and baffled by the injustice of suffering. Read Habakkuk 1:1-4. What strikes you about Habakkuk's complaint?
- When it comes to the sovereignty of God, we tend to err on two sides: either we attribute every event on earth to God and present God as an obsessive-compulsive micromanager, or we attribute nothing to God and present God as a withdrawn, impersonal being. How can we avoid falling into either of these camps?
- One of the biggest reasons non-believers give for rejecting Christianity is the amount of suffering in the world. Why do you think this is the make-or-break issue?
- What would you say to someone who attributes a hardship to the "will of God"?

Closing Prayer

Ask the group to quiet their hearts before reading the prophet's prayer in Habakkuk 3:17-19.

For Further Study:

Evil and the Justice of God by N.T. Wright // *Turn My Mourning Into Dancing* by Henri Nouwen
Is God to Blame? Moving Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering by Gregory Boyd
The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis

