

Why would God
allow that?





HARD QUESTIONS

Why??

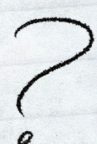

My plans ≠
GOD'S PLANS

Is it sinful to doubt
my faith?



Over the next four weeks, we will be wrestling with many different questions that are difficult and oftentimes feel complicated when it comes to God, the Bible, and our faith. The goal is to bring our questions and our doubts into the light of God's Word—seeking guidance in scriptural truth. As we do that, we will see how different characters in the Bible actually struggle with similar questions and doubts, and we will also see that God actually answers us throughout Scripture. We want to challenge you not to shy away from asking hard questions, but instead to explore God's Word with curiosity and expectation. We pray that this process will help you to grow in your understanding of the depths of God's love and his longing for a closer relationship with you.

Throughout the study, we want to encourage you to be honest when new questions arise or when you feel any doubt or tension around the conversations. There is a page in the back for you to write these things down as we go. We also would challenge you to talk to a small group leader, parent, or student staff about what you write down.



HARD QUESTIONS

Decision-Making

- How can I tell whether I'm following God's lead or I'm being led by my own desires?
- How do I make hard decisions when I don't feel like God is giving me clear direction?
- How do I handle it when my plans and dreams don't align with what God has for my future?

The Brokenness of the World

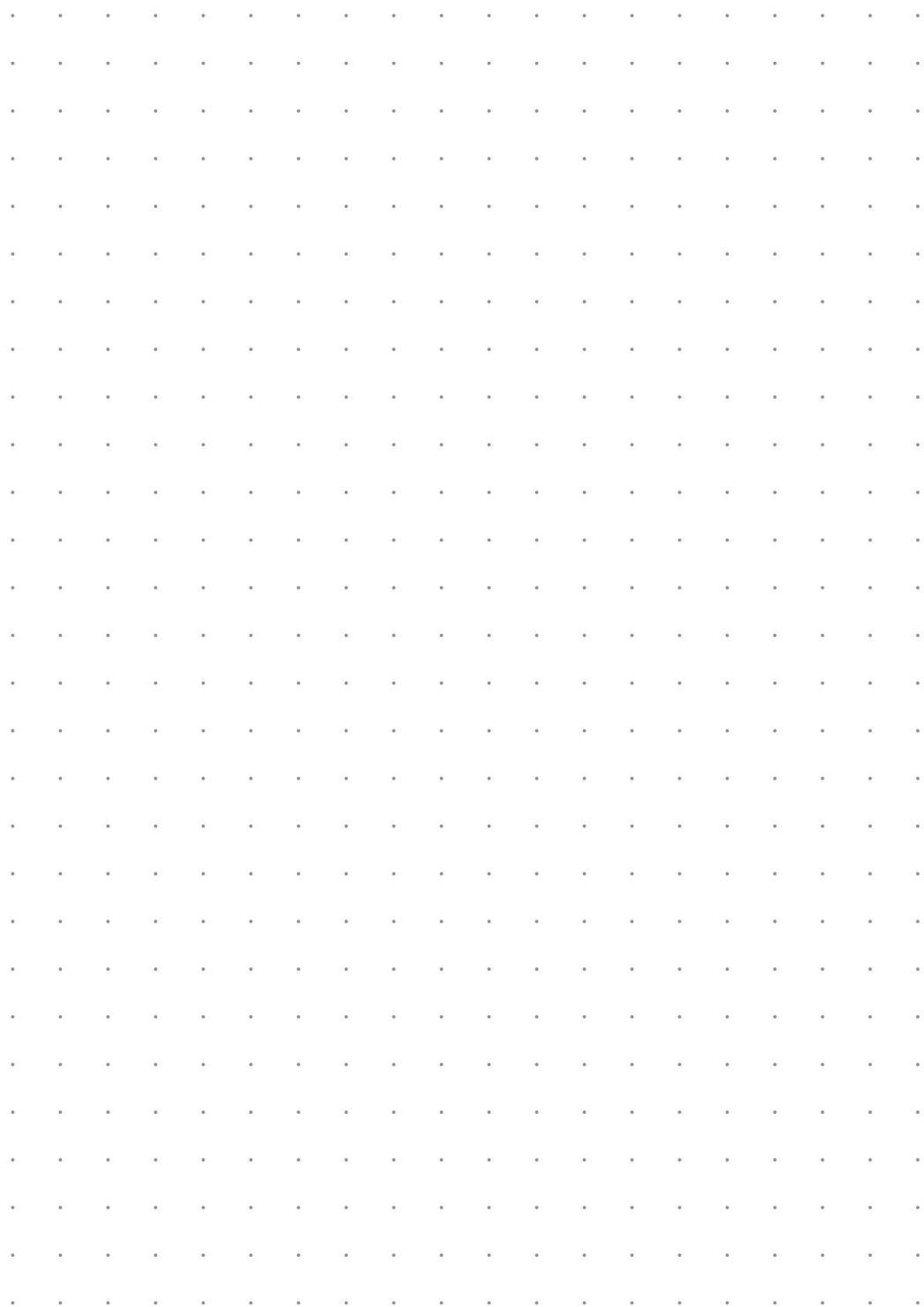
- Why does God allow suffering and evil if He's loving and powerful?
- Why does God sometimes say no to prayers for healing or relief—especially when the suffering doesn't seem to have any purpose?
- Why does God let people keep sinning—even when it clearly hurts them?

Doubt & Tension

- Is it sinful to doubt my faith?
- Can I be angry, bitter, or frustrated toward God and still have a genuine relationship with Him?
- How do I pray through my doubt and tension?

Salvation & Free Will

- What is Predestination?
- Do we have free will, or is our future already written by God?
- Can both of these things be true?



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DECISION
MAKING



How can I tell whether I'm following God's lead or I'm being led by my own desires?

2 TIMOTHY 3:14–17

But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

According to these verses, how should believers be guided?

PROVERBS 15:22

Plans go wrong for lack of advice;
many advisers bring success.

PROVERBS 11:14

Without wise leadership, a nation falls;
there is safety in having many advisers.

How do these passages instruct believers to go about making plans?

Who has God placed in your life that you can turn to for wise counsel and Scriptural advice before making decisions?

How do I make hard decisions when I don't feel like God is giving me clear direction?

DANIEL 3

King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then he sent messages to the high officers, officials, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up. So all these officials came and stood before the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Then a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

So at the sound of the musical instruments, all the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

But some of the astrologers went to the king and informed on the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Long live the king! You issued a decree requiring all the people to bow down and worship the gold statue when they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments. That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of Babylon. They pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They refuse to serve your gods and do not worship the gold statue you have set up."

Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to

serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?"

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."

Nebuchadnezzar was so furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face became distorted with rage. He commanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than usual. Then he ordered some of the strongest men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So they tied them up and threw them into the furnace, fully dressed in their pants, turbans, robes, and other garments. And because the king, in his anger, had demanded such a hot fire in the furnace, the flames killed the soldiers as they threw the three men in. So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, securely tied, fell into the roaring flames.

But suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisers, "Didn't we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, we certainly did," they replied.

"Look!" Nebuchadnezzar shouted. "I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire unharmed! And the fourth looks like a god!"

Then Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he could to the door of the flaming furnace and shouted: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire. Then the high officers, officials, governors, and advisers crowded around them and saw that the fire had not touched them. Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn't even smell of smoke!

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. They defied the king's command and were willing to die rather than serve or worship any god

except their own God. Therefore, I make this decree: If any people, whatever their race or nation or language, speak a word against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, they will be torn limb from limb, and their houses will be turned into heaps of rubble. There is no other god who can rescue like this!”

Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even higher positions in the province of Babylon.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego trusted in God’s strength and God’s plans, even when they were unsure of their own future and safety. Do you feel like you can trust God when the stakes are high?

Think back to a time when you were facing a hard decision. In what ways did you experience God’s protection or provision?

What hard decisions are you facing right now that you should go tell someone about (small group, leaders, parents)?

*How do I handle it when my plans and dreams
don't align with what God has for my future?*

ISAIAH 55:8–9

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord.

“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.

For just as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so my ways are higher than your ways

and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

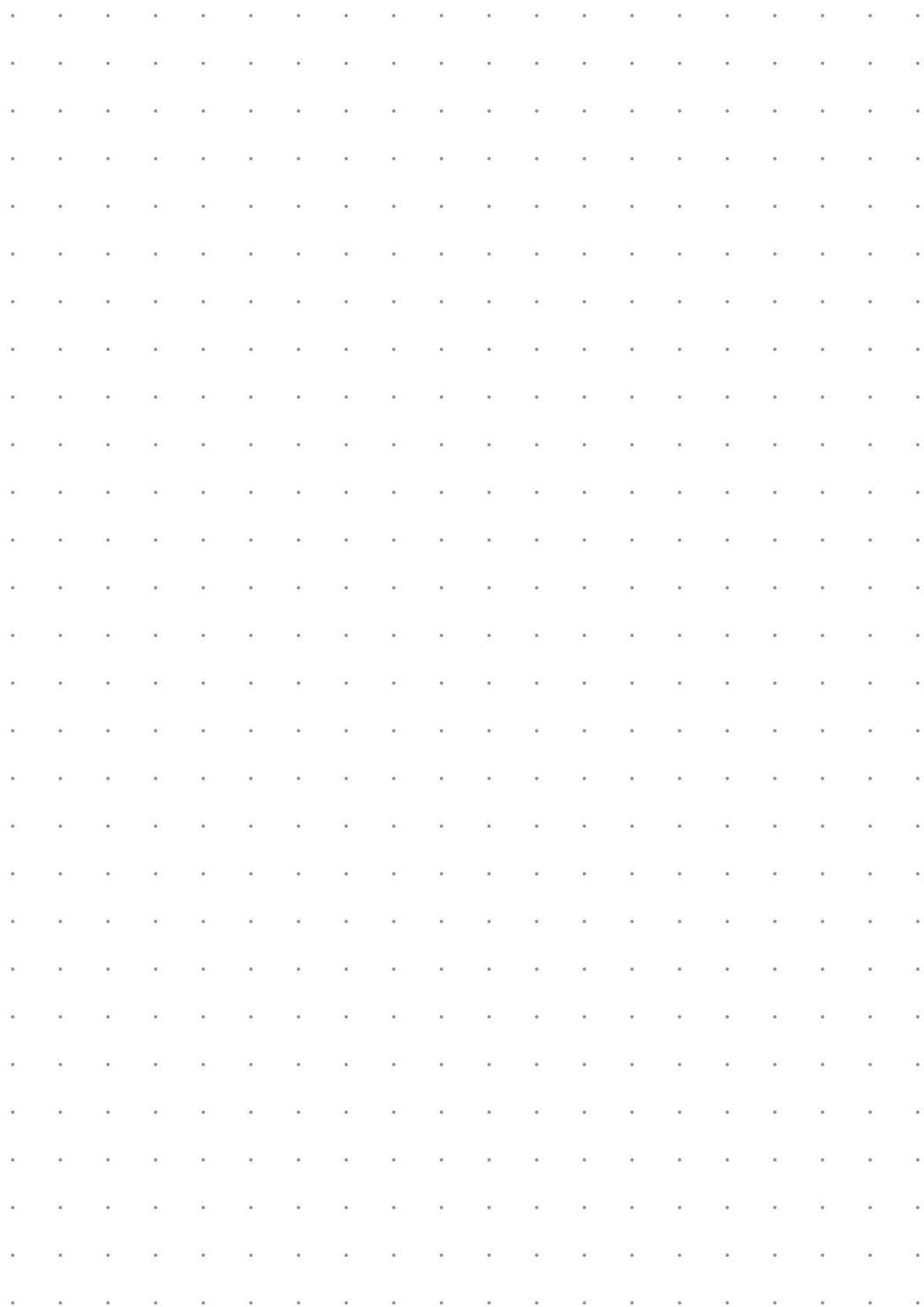
LUKE 22:41–44

He walked away, about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.

Are you holding onto a dream that you are worried God might not fulfill?

Scripture tells us that God's ways are much greater than ours. Why is that hard to believe sometimes?

Take some time to really reflect on this: even Jesus prayed that God's plan for his crucifixion would be different. How does that change your perspective?



THE
BROKENNESS
OF THE WORLD



Why does God allow suffering and evil if He's loving and powerful?

ROMANS 5:12–19

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.

Compare and contrast Adam’s sin to God’s good gift.

ADAM’S SIN	GOD’S GIFT

According to this passage, what hope is there for believers?

JAMES 1:2–4

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

The Bible says that because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross, there is joy and growth in suffering and evil. Think back to a time when you have encountered suffering. How have you felt joy or seen growth through that experience?

Why does God sometimes say no to prayers for healing or relief—especially when the suffering doesn't seem to have any purpose?

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7–10

... even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

MATTHEW 26:36–42

Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, “Sit here while I go over there to pray.” He took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, James and John, and he became anguished and distressed. He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour? Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!”

Then Jesus left them a second time and prayed, “My Father! If this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done.”

These passages show that even Paul and Jesus had moments where they wanted God to remove physical pain, but God chose not to. Describe a time when you prayed for God to heal you or a loved one and his answer was no.

How did God's answer affect your relationship with him?

Yesterday, we read James 1:2–4. It says that suffering produces endurance, which allows for our faith to grow and be strengthened.

- Have you ever seen someone you look up to walk through suffering? What was your perception of their experience?

Why does God let people keep sinning—even when it clearly hurts them?

ROMANS 1:18–32

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.

Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and

have no mercy. They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.

How does this passage answer today's main question?

PSALM 119:73–80

You made me; you created me.

Now give me the sense to follow your commands.

May all who fear you find in me a cause for joy,
for I have put my hope in your word.

I know, O Lord, that your regulations are fair;
you disciplined me because I needed it.

Now let your unfailing love comfort me,
just as you promised me, your servant.

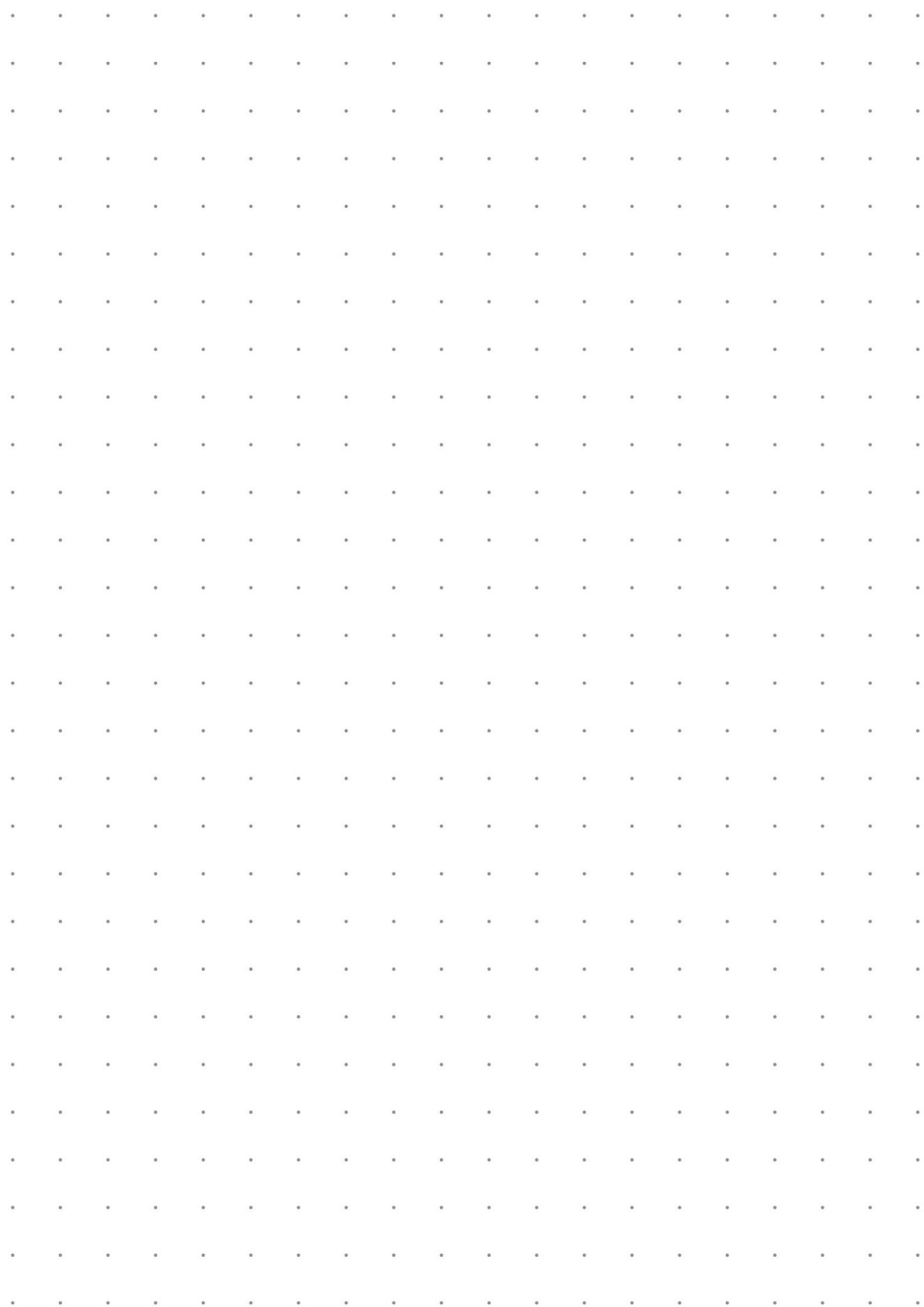
Surround me with your tender mercies so I may live,
for your instructions are my delight.

Bring disgrace upon the arrogant people who lied about me;
meanwhile, I will concentrate on your commandments.

Let me be united with all who fear you,
with those who know your laws.

May I be blameless in keeping your decrees;
then I will never be ashamed.

How can God use our sinfulness to draw us back to him?





DOUBT &
TENSION



Is it sinful to doubt my faith?

MATTHEW 14:22–33

Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

It is clear to see where Peter doubted Jesus. Where are some areas in your life that doubt tends to outweigh faith?

MARK 9:14–29

When they returned to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them, and some teachers of religious law were arguing with them. When the crowd saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with awe, and they ran to greet him.

“What is all this arguing about?” Jesus asked.

One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, “Teacher, I brought my son so you could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won’t let him talk. And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground. Then he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn’t do it.”

Jesus said to them, “You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

“How long has this been happening?” Jesus asked the boy’s father.

He replied, “Since he was a little boy. The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can.”

“What do you mean, ‘If I can’?” Jesus asked. “Anything is possible if a person believes.”

The father instantly cried out, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!”

When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. “Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak,” he said. “I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!”

Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up.

Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, "Why couldn't we cast out that evil spirit?"

Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer."

The father in this passage is aware of his faith struggle. On the one hand, he is gripped by unbelief; on the other, he desperately longs to have faith in Jesus' healing power. He cries out for help. In what areas of your life do you need to ask Jesus to help you overcome your unbelief?

In both of these stories, how did Jesus treat their unbelief?

After reading today's passages, do you think it is sinful to have doubts?

Can I be angry, bitter, or frustrated toward God and still have a genuine relationship with Him?

JONAH 4:1–11

This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”

The Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry about this?”

Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah’s head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. “Death is certainly better than living like this!” he exclaimed.

Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?”

“Yes,” Jonah retorted, “even angry enough to die!”

Then the Lord said, “You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”

How have you wrestled with God the way Jonah is wrestling in this passage?

Instead of being angry with Jonah, God meets him with patience, taking the time to explain himself and reveal more of himself to Jonah. How does that shape the way you think about sharing your own frustrations and anger with God?

How do I pray through my doubt and tension?

PSALM 44

O God, we have heard it with our own ears—
our ancestors have told us
of all you did in their day,
in days long ago:
You drove out the pagan nations by your power
and gave all the land to our ancestors.
You crushed their enemies
and set our ancestors free.
They did not conquer the land with their swords;
it was not their own strong arm that gave them victory.
It was your right hand and strong arm
and the blinding light from your face that helped them,
for you loved them.

You are my King and my God.
You command victories for Israel.
Only by your power can we push back our enemies;
only in your name can we trample our foes.
I do not trust in my bow;
I do not count on my sword to save me.
You are the one who gives us victory over our enemies;
you disgrace those who hate us.
O God, we give glory to you all day long
and constantly praise your name. Interlude

But now you have tossed us aside in dishonor.
You no longer lead our armies to battle.

You make us retreat from our enemies
and allow those who hate us to plunder our land.
You have butchered us like sheep
and scattered us among the nations.
You sold your precious people for a pittance,
making nothing on the sale.
You let our neighbors mock us.
We are an object of scorn and derision to those around us.
You have made us the butt of their jokes;
they shake their heads at us in scorn.
We can't escape the constant humiliation;
shame is written across our faces.
All we hear are the taunts of our mockers.
All we see are our vengeful enemies.

All this has happened though we have not forgotten you.
We have not violated your covenant.
Our hearts have not deserted you.
We have not strayed from your path.
Yet you have crushed us in the jackal's desert home.
You have covered us with darkness and death.
If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread our hands in prayer to foreign gods,
God would surely have known it,
for he knows the secrets of every heart.
But for your sake we are killed every day;
we are being slaughtered like sheep.

Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep?
Get up! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you look the other way?
Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?
We collapse in the dust,
lying face down in the dirt.

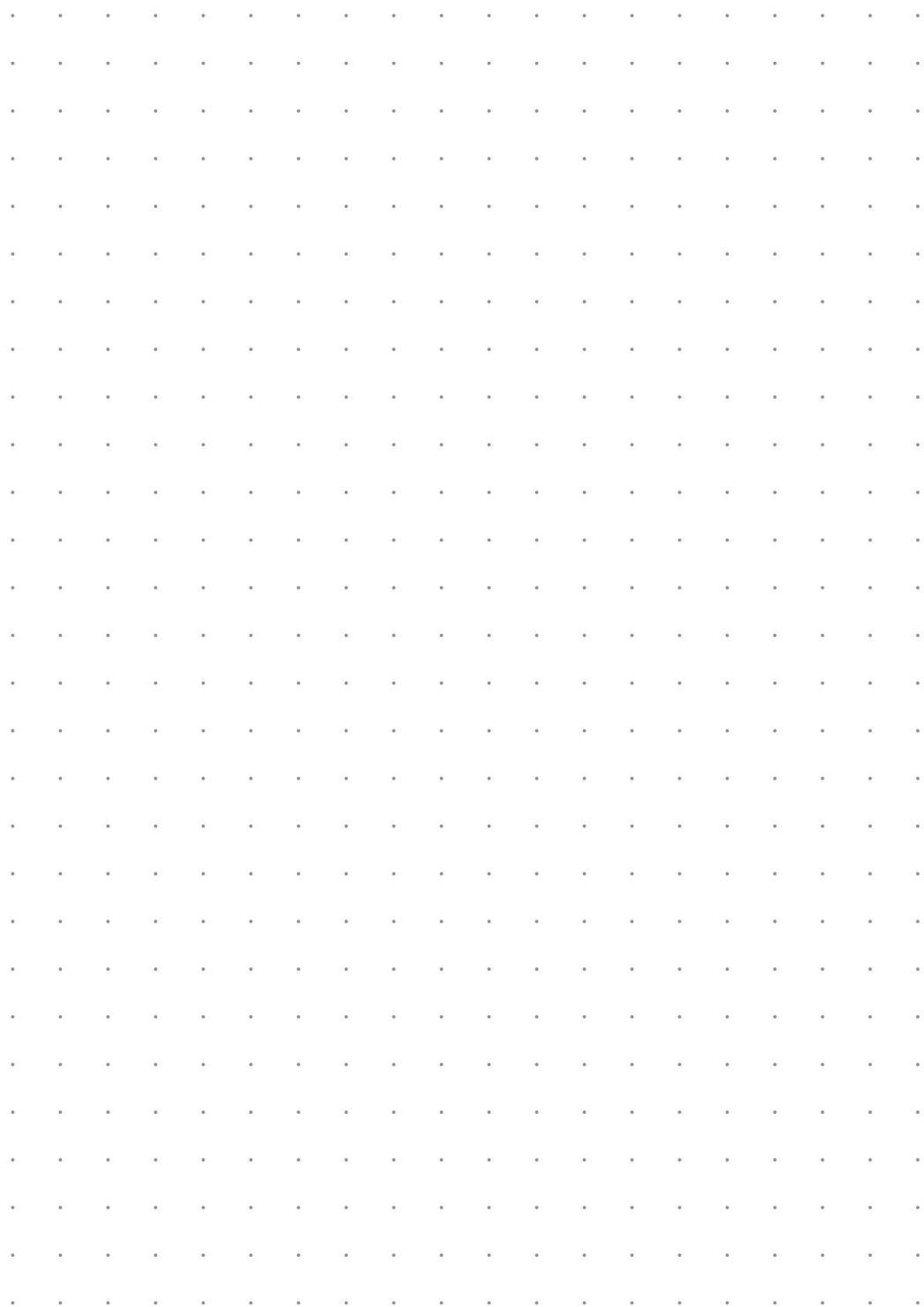
Rise up! Help us!

Ransom us because of your unfailing love.

How can God use our sinfulness to draw us back to him?

What does this psalm teach us about being honest with the Lord?

Take a minute to write out your own version of this psalm. Write down things that you want to praise God for right now. List out the things you are fearful of and worried about right now. Express ways that you might be angry or bitter or frustrated towards him.



SALVATION &
?? FREE WILL



What is Predestination?

EPHESIANS 1:3–14

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.

God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.

According to this passage, when did God choose you to be a part of his family?

Do we have free will, or is our future already written by God?

JOHN 1:1–18

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He existed in the beginning with God.

God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.

The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'"

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

What was given to all of those that believed?

This passage implies that there is still movement required from us. While God has made reconciliation possible for all (Colossians 1:21–22), we must choose to accept him and believe. How does this put responsibility in our court?

Can both of these things be true?

PSALM 44

This is a trustworthy saying:

If we die with him,
we will also live with him.

If we endure hardship,
we will reign with him.

If we deny him,
he will deny us.

If we are unfaithful,
he remains faithful,
for he cannot deny who he is.

These verses state that God cannot be unfaithful or deny who he is. That means God has both predestined us to be a part of his family, and we have the ability to choose him and believe in him. What tension does this bring up for you?

What kind of questions or doubts go through your mind when thinking about these topics?

Has this series brought up any other questions for you?

Whether you have new questions or you're looking for some clarity around something that wasn't covered, use this space to write it down. We would challenge you to take some time to talk with a small group leader, parent, or student staff about what you've written.



