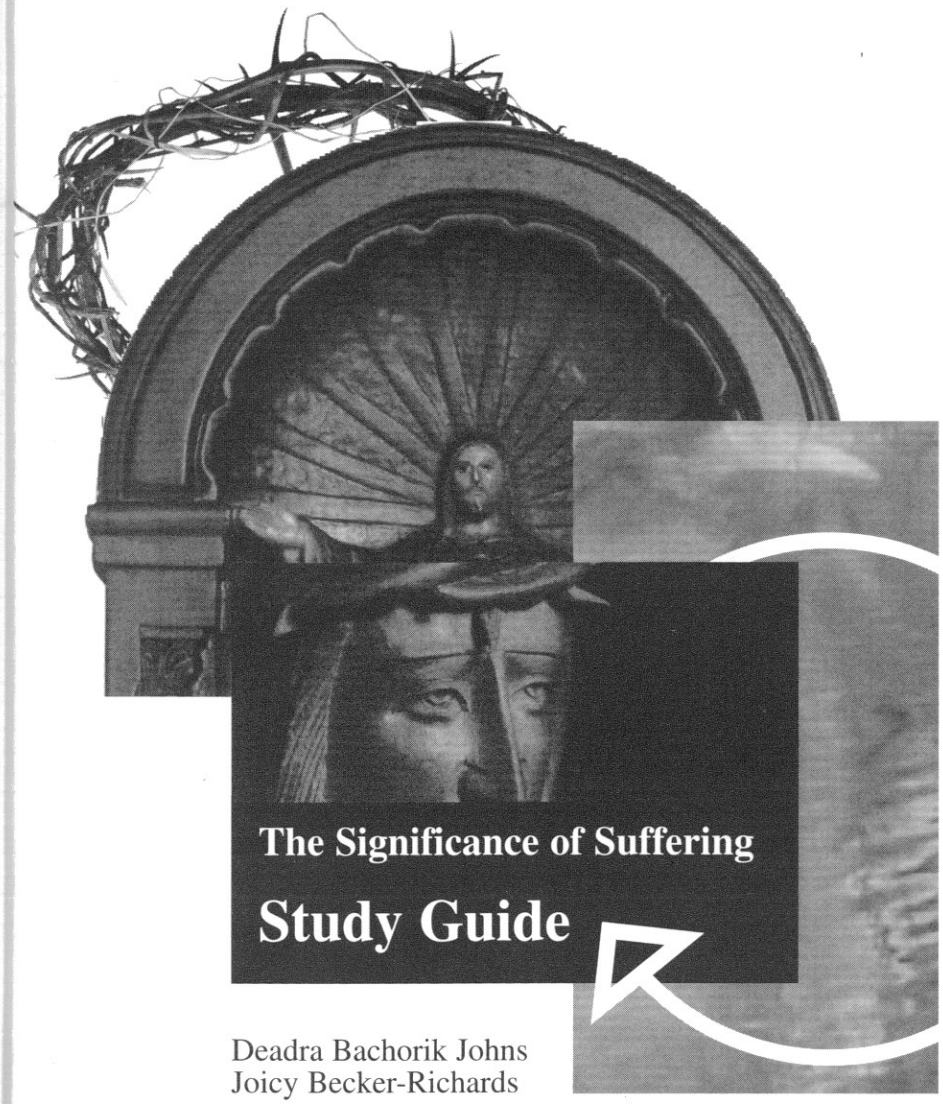

The Significance of Suffering

Study Guide

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUFFERING
STUDY GUIDE
by
Deadra Bachorik Johns and Joicy Becker-Richards
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How to Use This Video for Small Group Study

About This Video

This video is based on Diogenes Allen's book *The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World* and is most suitable for moderate to advanced study. While it is designed for use by small groups in ninety-minute sessions, it can be modified for other study situations and is particularly appropriate for use in a retreat setting. Video segments run from thirteen to twenty-three minutes, as follows:

Part 1—Breaking the Connection—16 minutes

Part 2—Hitting the Wall—13 minutes

Part 3—From Barrier to Passageway—13 minutes

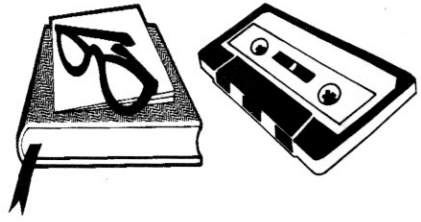
Part 4—Beyond Acceptance—19 minutes, and 4 minutes

Since the material may stir up deep issues, suggestions for daily reflection have been included at the end of each session and are strongly recommended. Due to the advanced nature of this study, we also recommend that copies of the book be made available to each participant.

Before the Sessions Meet

Leader preparation: As facilitator of the group, it's important to remember that you don't need to be the "expert," but you will want to be well prepared by doing the following:

- ❑ Before the first session, read through the entire Study Guide. This won't take long, and it will give you a sense of how the study sessions are put together. Then focus on the appropriate section prior to each session.
- ❑ If possible, read Dr. Allen's book *The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World,* focusing particularly on the introduction and chapters three and four.
- ❑ Before each session, view the video segment that you will be showing so that you know in advance what your group will be seeing. Jot down any impressions or questions that come to mind.
- ❑ Be aware that watching a video is a passive activity, and that it is through the discussion that the material will be absorbed and remembered. Be prepared to move quickly into the discussion once the video is over.
- ❑ Feel free to make copies of the study questions before each session for each member of the group, especially if participants will be journaling.



Equipment setup: Well before the meeting, check to make sure the television and VCR are set up and working.

- ❑ You will need a nineteen-inch screen for up to six people to view comfortably, and a twenty-five-inch screen for up to twelve people. A larger group will need a larger screen or more than one monitor hooked up to the VCR.

- ❑ Just before the group gathers, make sure the TV and VCR are turned on and the tape cued to the right spot so that the tape can be rolled with just a flick of a button. You may want to ask a group member to be responsible for playing the tape, so that you can concentrate on leading the discussion.

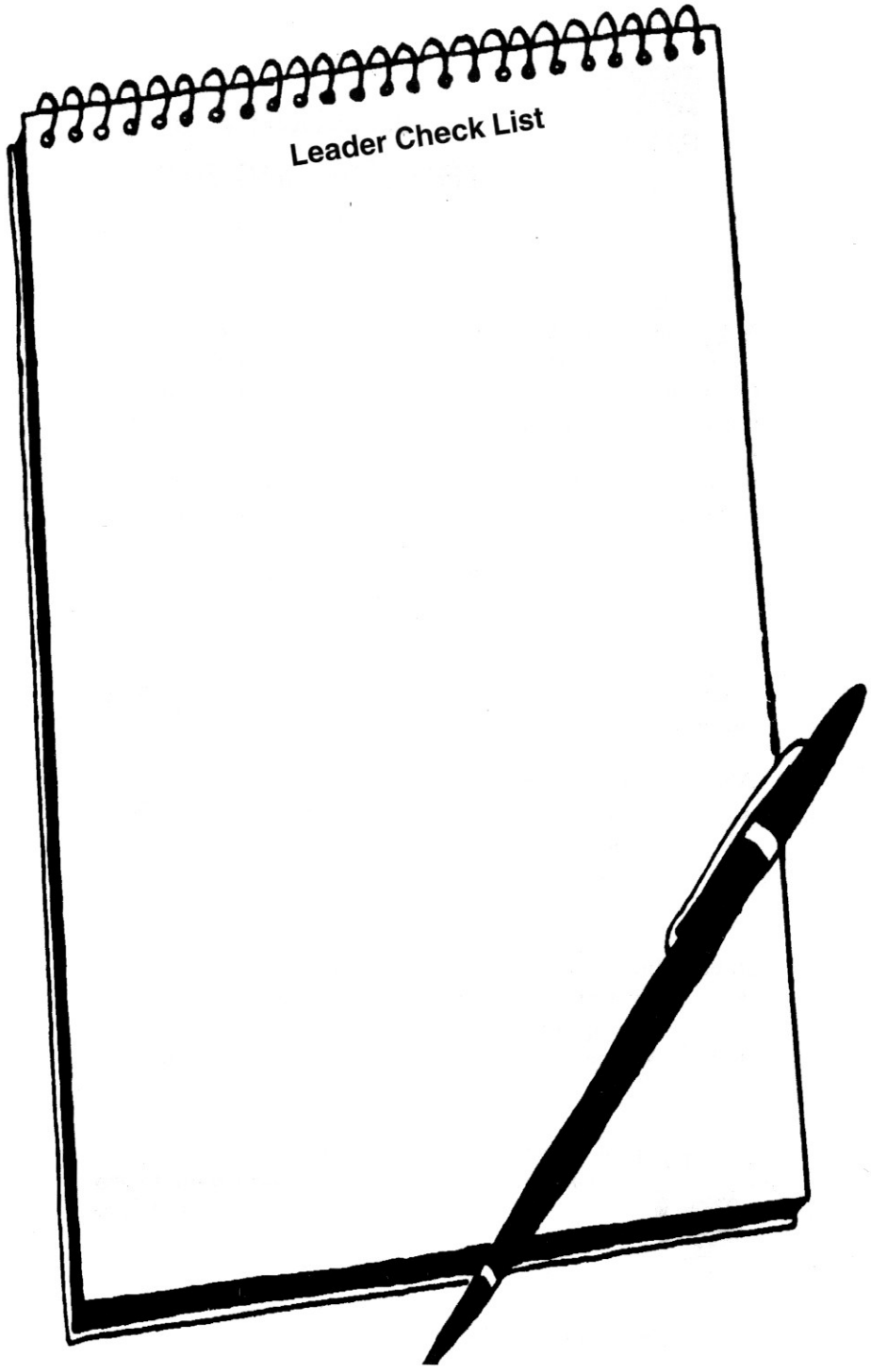
Room setup: While a circle is the best way to seat a group for discussion, it may not be best for viewing the video, depending upon the size of the group.

- ❑ Consider some kind of flexible seating for the group that will allow a good view of the video and circle seating for the discussion that follows.

- ❑ If the group is larger than twelve, consider breaking into smaller groups of four to eight members to allow everyone an opportunity to participate.

Teaching aids: If using this resource with a group, you will want to have newsprint or whiteboard available to write down key points as noted in the guide.

Remember—the questions in this guide are only suggestions. You may wish to skip, modify, or add questions based on the needs and interests of your group.



PART 1

Breaking the Connection

Scripture: Psalm 73

Wouldn't life make more sense if there was a direct connection between obedience to God and prosperity? Often, there is no discernible connection between obedience and reward, or disobedience and punishment. However, in the earliest biblical writings we find evidence that the ancient Jews believed that there was such a connection. Then, as time went on, they began to realize that this was not the case. To this day, we try to make sense of it: why do some people suffer while others do not? Can we find meaning in suffering, or do we suffer in vain?

Warm up

20–25 minutes

After introductions, respond to the following:

- Recall an early experience of unfairness or pain. This might be a childhood experience or an experience from a time later in life. What question would you have liked to ask God at that time?

Read Psalm 73:1–5, 9–14.

- What do you think most people expect from God in exchange for obedience?
- What is the reaction when expectations are not met?

Watch the video

16 minutes

Discuss

25–30 minutes

1. What did you find comforting in Dr. Allen's remarks? What was disturbing?

2. The story of Lazarus and the rich man makes the point that obedience to God does not guarantee prosperity, nor does disobedience guarantee suffering. What evidence of this truth do you find in your own experience?

3. How can prosperity create barriers between people? How can prosperity create barriers to God?

4. What would you say to someone who believes that things have gone badly in life because God is punishing him or her?

Close

15–20 minutes

Read Psalm 73: 21–26 and then respond to the following:

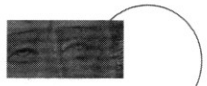
- What reward do you see in being faithful to God, even when life seems unfair?

Close with prayer.

Prepare

20–30 minutes daily

Read Psalm 90 every day this week. With each reading, record your questions, observations, insights in a journal. Also read pages 45–50 in *The Traces of God.*



PART 2

Hitting the Wall

Scripture: Psalm 90

When suffering occurs through no fault of our own, it is natural to ask, "Why did this happen to *me*?" Yet, we are material beings, subject to the laws of nature. Suffering forces us to confront our self-centeredness and to ask, "Why did I think I was immune to misfortune? Why *not* me?" As we are humbled, we recognize that we are much more than material beings. We are spiritual beings. As such, we now have the opportunity to experience God's gracious presence, even in the midst of our unavoidable suffering.

Warm up

20–25 minutes

Begin by sharing your journaling experience.

- What insights did you gain in this experience?
- What questions were raised? Answered?

Read Psalm 90:1–6.

- What is the psalmist's picture of life?
- What in this picture is comforting? Disturbing?

Watch the video

13 minutes

Discuss

25–30 minutes

1. What does Dr. Allen mean when he says that we are part of a natural order and therefore "material creatures"?

2. What is the price of being a material creature? What rewards can we find in accepting our limitations?

3. How can our suffering become an opportunity for contact with God?

4. Dr. Allen talks about the importance of preparing for suffering before it happens to us. What is your reaction to this? What are some ways we might prepare ourselves for future suffering?

Close

15–20 minutes

Read Psalm 90:14–16, and then respond to the following:

- How do we know God protects us even in adversity?

Close with prayer.

Prepare

20–30 minutes daily

Read Psalm 139 every day this week. With each reading, record your reactions (questions, observations, insights) in a journal. Also read pages 50–51 and page 86 in *The Traces of God.*

PART 3

From Barrier to Passageway

Scripture: Psalm 139

Acceptance of ourselves as material beings, vulnerable to adversity, can lead us closer to God. Unavoidable suffering can actually be the occasion by which we turn to God and experience God's grace. What begins as a barrier to God can ultimately become the passageway that leads to God. Through our suffering, God can surprise us with a gracious presence we might not find in any other way. It all begins with saying, "Yes, God," even when life seems unbearable.

Warm up

20–25 minutes

Begin by sharing your journaling experience.

- What insights did you gain in this experience?
- What questions were raised? Answered?

Read Psalm 139:7–12. The Psalmist describes "dark places" where one would not expect to find God. Yet God is there.

- What are "dark places" for you?
- Describe a time when you were surprised by the presence of God in one of those places.

Watch the video

13 minutes

Discuss

20–30 minutes

1. Dr. Allen says that when we accept our limitations in the material world, we are free to take another step. We can say "Yes" even to suffering. What is your reaction to this?

2. What is the result of saying "Yes, God" when we suffer?

3. Dr. Allen claims that experiencing God's gracious presence in adversity does not happen through our own will. Rather, it happens after a long period of preparation in which we open ourselves to the presence of God. Simone Weil prepared herself by repeating George Herbert's poem "Love" (page 86 in *The Traces of God)*. What are some of the things that can open us up to God's grace?

4. How can the barrier of nature become the passageway to God? What example from your own life comes to mind?

Close

20 minutes

Read Psalm 139:13–18 and then respond to the following:

- Can you give examples of when darkness might be good or even necessary?
- Have you ever grown closer to God when you were in a "dark place" in your life? Describe.

Close with prayer.

Prepare

15–20 minutes daily

Read Psalm 132 every day this week. With each reading, record your reactions (questions, observations, insights) in a journal. Also read pages 52–58 in *The Traces of God.*

PART 4

Beyond Acceptance

Scripture: Psalm 22

What if we say "Yes, God" to our suffering, but feel no gracious presence? Do we reject God's love and rule, or do we cling to God with faith that God has not abandoned us? Our response to suffering is critical. While we may have no control over our suffering, we do have control over what we do with it. We can either reject God or come to know and trust God more deeply.

Warm up

15–20 minutes

Begin by sharing your journaling experience.

- What insights did you gain in this experience?
- What questions were raised? Answered?

Read Psalm 22:1–5.

- The psalmist speaks from the depths of despair, convinced that God is absent. Describe a time when you felt God was absent from you. What was your reaction?

Watch the video

19 minutes

Discuss

20–25 minutes

1. According to Dr. Allen, the basis for our continued trust in the face of suffering, even when we feel God's absence, is the suffering that Christ endured on the cross. What is your reaction to worshipping a Christ who suffered?

2. How do we know that the love of God is active in our lives, even when we do not feel it? If you have experienced this, share an example of how this has been true for you.

3. Dr. Allen says that when we suffer, contact with God is not always direct. To illustrate, he describes how a stick can indirectly connect our hand to the ground. In what ways do we experience indirect contact with God?

4. How can suffering connect us with God?

Close

20–25 minutes

Read Psalm 22:22–25, 29–31 and then respond to the following:

- What do you think might have moved the psalmist from despair in the beginning of the psalm to hope and praise at the end? Share any similar experience you might have had in your own life.

View the final portion of the video (4 minutes).

- Has your understanding of suffering changed through the course of this study? If so, in what way?

Close with prayer.