EPISODE 1: THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

Purposes:
1. to briefly discuss reactions to the Acts of God feature film based on the responses in the Traveler’s Journal (if you viewed the film at your last gathering)
2. to view and discuss Episode 1 in the Acts of God teaching series

Preparation:
- Complete the Daily Strides in the Traveler’s Journal.
- Test the Episode 1 DVD.
- Arrange a comfortable viewing atmosphere.
- Have pens available.
- Set out tissue boxes.

LEADER’S NOTE: Some groups will utilize the Traveler’s Journal and some groups will not. Some groups will embrace wrestling together with the personal and emotional side of suffering while other groups will concentrate solely on the scriptural and intellectual facet of suffering. That being the case, it is important for you to read through the discussion questions in advance in order to choose those discussion questions that best match your group’s purposes. In any case, you will likely not be able to get through each question. Pray for wisdom and guidance in choosing the most helpful questions and be open to how the Holy Spirit might lead you.
OPTION A: If you watched the movie last session, start here.

Introduce the session: Before we discuss our reactions to the Acts of God film, remember what we discussed and agreed to in regard to emotions. (Review the agreement from the Preparatory Session.)

As the Introduction to the Traveler's Journal says, the three goals for this study are:
1. to wrestle together as a community with the meaning of suffering
2. to come to grips with our own suffering and how we cope with it
3. to share our experiences with each other so that together we “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2, New King James Version)

Let’s ask God to help us fulfill these purposes. (Lead in prayer.)

OPENING DISCUSSION
1. Let’s talk about some of your work from the Traveler’s Journal. Just as in the journal, let’s get the evaluative comments out of the way. What did you think of the film critically—it’s production quality, plot lines, acting skills, and so on? What did you like, not like, or would have done differently?

2. Did you find yourself identifying with a particular character in the movie? If so, in what way?

3. How accurately do you think the movie mirrors real life?
4. Let’s reflect on the emotions you experienced during the movie. On Day 2 of your Traveler’s Journal you were asked to consider what emotions you experienced during the movie and what you did with those emotions, whether you simply allowed the emotion, fully embraced the emotion, or resisted the emotion. What did you see in that exercise?

5. Did you try writing on your hand an emotion you had embraced one day, and writing an emotion you resisted on the other hand the next day, and noticing what you might learn about those emotions? If so, what was it like? What did you see?

6. If you listed family and friends, along with their past and present heartaches, on Day 6 of the Traveler’s Journal, what came out of doing so?

7. Anything else stand out to you from your reflections in the Traveler’s Journal this past week?

8. Did you find yourself drawn to pray for anyone in particular in our group this week?

**PLAY EPISODE 1.**

Follow-up questions can be found below in Option B.
OPTION B: If you did NOT watch the movie last session, start here.

Introduce Episode 1: First, remember what we discussed and agreed to in regard to emotions. (Review the agreement from the Preparatory Session.)

As the Introduction to the Traveler’s Journal says, the three goals for this study are:
1. to wrestle together as a community with the meaning of suffering
2. to come to grips with our own suffering and how we cope with it
3. to share our experiences with each other so that together we “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2, New King James Version)

Let’s ask God to help us fulfill these purposes.
(Lead in prayer.)

Before we start the video, do you have any insights from your work in the Traveler’s Journal you think would be helpful to share? To begin, I’ll share one of mine…

PLAY EPISODE 1.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION
1. As we face the question of suffering, what’s your biggest concern, if you have one? For example, you:
   - Might fear there will be no answer to the problem of suffering or maybe an answer you don’t like
   - Maybe you are concerned delving into this dilemma might lead to greater doubt in God’s goodness or even his existence
   - Maybe you’re afraid you will become overwhelmed with sadness, swallowed up by grief, and not be able to get out
Let’s see if we can share these without giving in to the impulse to immediately fix or answer these concerns.

2. The teaching portion of the video is based on the life of Joseph. Bob reviewed some of Joseph’s adversities: hated by his brothers, enslaved, imprisoned. Then he conveyed possible reactions to suffering. The reactions he named are listed in your Traveler’s Journal (become bitter, withdraw, feel defeated, turn to alcohol or drugs, become defiant, contemplate suicide, trust God.) Let’s brainstorm: What are some other possible reactions to suffering?

3. How would you say you have tended to react to your own suffering in the past?

4. Joseph is held up as a model of faithfulness. Some people think faithfulness is unquestioning obedience while others say that faithfulness can include questioning, wrestling, doubting, and struggling as exemplified in the lives of Moses, David, Job or Jeremiah. What is faithfulness? What does it involve and what does it look like?

5. Let’s discuss another aspect of the presentation. Listen as I read what Bob taught in the video.

The problem of suffering has always been a major challenge to belief in God. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why does he allow horrible things to happen to such good people? Cynics conclude either God doesn’t care or he is incapable of intervening.

Leslie Weatherhead once suggested that there are three areas to God’s will: God’s intended will, his permissive will, and his ultimate will. God intended this world to be perfect when he created it, but he permitted men to have freedom of choice, and as a result sin entered into the world. The sin virus knocked the world off-kilter. God has temporarily permitted pain and tragedy as a result.
We are not puppets on a string. We are free human beings created in the image of God and given the privilege of moving about in an exciting but fallen and sometimes dangerous world. Occasionally we’re going to crash and draw blood, but the heavenly Father promises, “I’ll be there. I’ll go through it with you, and if you let me, I’ll see to it that even the most painful experience will mature you, help you appreciate what Jesus went through, and make you hungry for heaven where I’m going to wipe away all tears, and there will be no more pain or sorrow and I will make all things right.”

6. Let’s discuss our reactions.

• What do you think of Weatherhead’s description of the three wills of God?

• What is your reaction to the idea of a “sin virus” that has infected and messed up the world?

• In the last paragraph, Bob listed five comforts for those who are suffering. What comfort do you find in each of the following passages?

1. Hebrews 13:5-6
2. James 1:2-4
3. Romans 8:17-18
4. Hebrews 12:1-3
5. Revelation 21:1-5

• Are those comforts enough to sustain you through any suffering?

PRAYER: I admire our group for taking on this difficult, emotionally challenging topic. Let’s end with an open time of prayer, saying to God whatever is on our hearts.