

Transformed by Tough Times

Small Group Study Guide

A free companion guide for group study prepared by author Steve Reed

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How to get the most out of this material...

1. Get a partner. This study is designed for you to go through it with at least one or two other people. If you work through this material with someone else, it will help you see things you wouldn't otherwise have noticed, and undoubtedly you will also have an opportunity to be there for someone else. The material is designed to allow multiple leaders to facilitate the group. Feel free to trade off responsibilities with one another, and encourage one another to take turns leading.

On the following page is a pact that you can sign with a partner. This will solidify the decision you are making to take this journey together.

2. Do the work, but enjoy the process. At the beginning of each session are ice breaker questions to help the group get rolling. Choose one that you think your group would do well with, and then have fun getting better acquainted.

To answer the questions in the Book Observations and Highlights sections, the chapter readings in the book are essential. If folks haven't read the material beforehand, you might consider reading it out loud on the spot during your group time. Most chapters are fairly short and can be read in less than five to ten minutes.

Because there are 24 total sessions, we recommend that you break them up into three 8-session blocks so that there can be breathers in between. The last session, #24, has a graduation ceremony of sorts. It's called the "Ceremony of the Cross." If you plan to pick and choose sessions, consider ending with this meaningful caper to the learning experience.

3. "Story" the Bible Passages. One suggestion that can make a huge impact on a group is to assign a group member each session to look ahead to the next session's Bible story and prepare to tell the story in their own words. There's no need to tell the story perfectly, because the group can then follow up with questions that clarify what they heard. Often it is fun to ask, "What did they leave out of the story that we can read in the text?" Or, "What did they add to the story that isn't necessarily in the text?" The feel of this might be like someone telling about a scene in one of their favorite movies. This simple habit will embed the Bible into the participants like nothing else can and is guaranteed to improve the group's mastery of the Bible as you go along. Try it!

4. Experiment. This material is designed for you to adapt to your group. If you want to hit the high points but not wade through the whole 24 sessions, that's fine. It's legal to be selective about the material and choose what gets you where you think the group needs to go. Note that for most sessions, there is more content than can realistically be done in a normal hour and a half Bible study. If you want to take it slower and cover almost everything, you'll need to relax about covering all the questions in one setting. Since there are multiple ice breakers, some groups might choose to use two different ones in dealing with the same material over two weeks. The main thing is that each week people need to boil things down to "One Thing." And that leads us to #5.

5. Each session, get it down to "One Thing." As the study goes from Bible passage reflection to partner-to-partner questions, the goal is for you to listen to God and determine the "one thing" you believe you need to do about what you learned from that study. Each session, take a few

minutes to ask how everyone is doing on their “one things.” This is the section that will help you see progress and help you stay focused on truly being transformed by your tough times.

6. Pray like crazy. So much of what you gain through this study will come through times of personal and group prayer. Listen to God and to each other during these days, and see what happens.

Feel free to download more copies of this guide as needed.

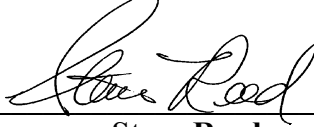
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My Pact

I commit to the process of discovering how I can be transformed not just *in spite of* my tough times but *because of* my tough times. As I seek help and support for myself, I also commit to being supportive and helpful to others who are challenged with difficult circumstances as well.

Your name

Partner's name



Steve Reed



*"It's better to have a partner than go it alone.
Share the work, share the wealth.
And if one falls down, the other helps,
But if there's no one to help, tough!*

*By yourself you're unprotected.
With a friend you can face the worst.
Can you round up a third?
A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped."*

King Solomon
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (The Message)

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #1 - “Nail It” Thinking in the Middle of Tough Times
Reflecting on Chapters 1 and 2

Icebreakers: *(Icebreakers are initial questions that can get a group warmed up and talking freely. No need to use all the questions in this section. Pick one you like from the suggestions, or come up with your own. It can be fun!)*

1. With all that has happened in recent days in the news, what seems to have impacted you the most?
2. What kinds of tough times affect you more: personal relationship problems, loss of loved ones, something like 9/11, disasters like Hurricane Katrina, or downturns in your economy?
3. What has been your toughest challenge to date?

Book Observations and Highlights:

1. When Steve talked about “nail it” thinkers versus “don’t miss” thinkers, he talked about how “nail it” thinkers focus on what they *want* to do—not on what they *don’t* want to do. Then he made the claim that the way you think can make you or break you.

What do you think about a statement like that?

Can you cite someone like Steve’s coach who set you up to succeed in the way you approach life?

2. Steve told a story about how well-meaning friends tried to cheer him up. What’s one of the worst “cheer up” talks you’ve ever received from someone?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Philippians 4:4-9 (NIV), written by Paul

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

According to Steve’s observation in the book, where was Paul when he penned these words? How does that affect your view of Paul and what he says here?

When Steve quoted this passage in the book, he used the Message version. Comparing that version with the New International Version cited here, what ideas stand out to you with each version?

Instead of worrying, what does Paul encourage us to do? If we do what Paul advocates, what is the promised result?

When Paul points us to thinking great thoughts, Steve believes he’s coaching us to have a “nail it” mentality at all times—especially during our tough times. How easy is this for you to do?

Steve mentioned that Paul’s focus on the positive was a lot bigger and more profound than a speech about the power of positive thinking. Why do you think he might say that?

Partner to Partner: *(This section is designed to give everyone in the group a chance to be as transparent as possible for growth to take place. In larger groups, it is best done by breaking into smaller units of two or three people who stay in touch with one another beyond the group study. Perhaps it would be good to see if everyone has a partner to commit with them on the “My Pact” page at the front of the book.)*

How much of a “nail-it” thinker am I really? Do I focus more on what I want to do or on what I *don’t* want to do? Perhaps you can answer this with a percentage. What percentage of the time am I a “nail it” thinker? 10% of the time? 50%? 75%?

What area of my life do I tend to think positively about?

What area of my life do I tend to be negative about?

What one thing can I do this week to do something positive about a bad situation?

My “One Thing” I want to do: *(This section allows you to select the most strategic thing you want to do as a result of this study and write it down to keep track of your progress. Be great partners for one another and be diligent to follow up with one another and encourage one another in this section.)*

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: If you haven’t already done so, read up to and including chapter 5 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #2 - Singing in Jail
Reflecting on Chapters 3 through 5

Icebreakers: *(As a part of the icebreaker process, if your group is primed and ready to jump into sharing what they are learning, you might want to go straight to a review of the “One Thing” section from the week before. After the first session, each time you gather, you want to reinforce the positive steps that each person takes. Each group has a different feel to it, so feel free to experiment with what works best for your group.)*

1. Do you have any stories to share related to how you did with your “One Thing” you wanted to change from last week?
2. When you have had a rough day, which are you more likely to do:
 - a. Go home and watch TV
 - b. Go online and surf the net or FaceBook with friends
 - c. Turn on some music for the occasion
 - d. Work on the yard or a hobby
 - e. Read a book
 - f. Other _____
3. When you turn on music to pick you up, what kind of music do you like to listen to?
4. Name a song that is “your” song for inspiration.

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter three, Steve told the biblical story of Paul and Silas singing in jail. If you need to, take some time to review that story in Acts 16:16-34.

Steve then used the imagery of “singing in jail” to highlight how being in touch with your suffering clause offers us a platform to be able to thrive emotionally when times are tough.

Have you seen someone who was able to “sing in jail”—able to handle a tough spot in an inspiring way? Who were they, and what did they do? What do you think might have motivated them to act that way?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

In the case of Paul, Steve believes that the reason for his ability to sing in jail came from today’s Bible story that we want to take a closer look at. Note that in this story, Paul is referred to by his Hebrew name of “Saul.”

Story and Read Acts 9:1-22 (NIV)

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in

Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.* ⁴ *He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”*

⁵ *“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.*

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ *“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”*

⁷ *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.* ⁸ *Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.* ⁹ *For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

¹⁰ *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”*

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ *The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.* ¹² *In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”*

¹³ *“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.* ¹⁴ *And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”*

¹⁵ *But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.* ¹⁶ *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”*

¹⁷ *Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”*

¹⁸ *Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,* ¹⁹ *and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ *At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.* ²¹ *All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”* ²² *Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.*

What was Saul doing before heading to Damascus on his journey? What happened on the way? How did he wind up getting to Damascus?

Who did God assign to restore Saul’s sight? How did he do it?

What was the message that God wanted Ananias to give to Saul in verses 15 and 16? What is the phrase in that message that Steve has dubbed “the suffering clause?”

What happened after Saul could see again? What did Saul do for many days in Damascus?

In chapter four, Steve shared about a defining moment when he was confronted with his suffering clause. Have you or anyone close to you ever experienced anything like that in your

walk with God? If you feel comfortable sharing with the group, share what you sense God might be doing in your life with regard to your tough times.

Partner to Partner:

1. With your partner, share how you feel you are doing at “singing in jail”—handling tough times in an inspiring way.

Do I...

- Tend towards personal pity parties?
- Tend to avoid confronting my circumstances?
- Tend to blame others for my situation?
- Tend to say, “If only”...at the beginning of any statement about my life?
- Face my circumstances, and am I learning how to sing occasionally in the tough stuff?

2. Steve made the case that the secret for outlasting tough times comes from getting in touch with your suffering clause. Do you feel that you already have an idea of what that means for you? Or do you need more time to figure this out?

3. Bonus question if you have time: In chapter five, Steve shared about being a workaholic for God—believing that his suffering during that era was brought on by his own poor choices. Do you feel that you have some suffering in your life that is self-induced?

Write any insights you have about where you are right now in your quest for discovering your suffering clause and coming to terms with it.

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: If you haven’t already done so, read up to and including chapter 6 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #3 - Praying Dangerous Prayers
Reflecting on Chapter 6

Icebreakers:

1. Do you have any stories to share related to how you did with your “One Thing” item from the last session?
2. How would you describe your family’s prayer life as you were growing up?
 - a. Non-existent.
 - b. Prayer at meals.
 - c. Prayer at bedtime.
 - d. Prayer at church.
 - e. Prayer when we needed something.
 - f. Other _____
3. Do you remember any answers to prayer you received as a child? Tell the group about it if you feel comfortable doing so.
4. How satisfied are you with your current prayer life?
 - a. Very satisfied.
 - b. Moderately satisfied.
 - c. Not satisfied.
 - d. Greatly dissatisfied.
 - e. Not sure how I feel about this subject.

Book Observations and Highlights:

1. In today’s chapter, Steve talked about praying dangerous prayers—simple prayers that could radically transform your life but could also unsettle your current way of living. What was your first reaction to the concept?

Have you ever prayed a “dangerous prayer?” If you feel comfortable sharing, tell the group what your prayer was and what the result has been to this point.

2. In this chapter, Steve quoted Oswald Chambers...

“Prayer does not equip us for greater works. Prayer *is* the greater work.”
(Oswald Chambers...*My Utmost For His Highest*, October 17th meditation)

What might be some possible reasons why this statement could be true?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read John 15:4-7 (The Message)

(Jesus speaking) “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon.”

To those who might have different versions from the Message translation, what other words are used to describe “living in Jesus?”

How do we stay connected to Jesus?

So if we are connected to Jesus, we have great potential to bear spiritual fruit, and if we are not connected, we are dead. How connected do you feel to God these days? If you feel comfortable sharing with the group, do so.

Partner to Partner:

Do my prayers tend to be wimpy prayers, or am I learning to pray dangerously?

About what area of my life do I tend to pray wimpy prayers?

About what area of my life do I tend to be courageous in my prayer life?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

If you are brave and willing to take a tangible step in this arena of prayer, think about adopting a dangerous prayer. Try this:

1. Find a passage of scripture that inspires you.
2. See if there might be a dangerous prayer in it that you could adopt for the next year.
3. Write down the verse and the prayer here:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 7 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #4 - The Ministry of Tears
Reflecting on Chapter 7

Icebreakers:

1. Last week, we talked about the counter-intuitive practice of praying dangerous prayers and looked at a three-step process for arriving at a dangerous prayer. Here was that assignment:

1. Find a passage of scripture that inspires you.
2. See if there might be a dangerous prayer in it that you could adopt for the next year.
3. Write down the verse and the prayer.

Does anyone have something that struck them in that process? Do you have any scriptures that you are mulling over with the idea of praying something dangerously transformational? If you feel comfortable sharing any discoveries you've had about this, please share with the group. If you feel stuck or unable or unwilling to take this step, feel free to share that. Be careful as a group to be gentle with one another, because this is something that must be a "want to" thing and not a forced thing for it to be helpful in our walks with God.

2. When someone I'm close to cries, my tendency is to try to...

- Get away from the person as quickly as possible.
- Tell them not to cry.
- Crack a joke or distract them from what is making them sad.
- Cheer them up with something positive.
- Cry along with the person.
- Other _____

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter seven, Steve told his story of how he spent a day in Costa Rica weeping and being unusually vulnerable with people and then seeing how God used his tears to minister to people. Have you ever had someone cry with you and encourage you with their tears?

Have you ever done that with someone else?

Does this idea of being vulnerable appeal to you? Scare you? Or seem crazy to you?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Jesus said in his famous Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) Why do you think someone might be "blessed" if they cry? Do you think that there is any scientific reason that this might be true?

Paul, our suffering clause hero, had something interesting he wrote in this regard at the beginning of a letter he wrote to some churches in Corinth and the region surrounding that city.

Story and Read 2 Corinthians 1:1-11 (The Message)

¹⁻²I, Paul, have been sent on a special mission by the Messiah, Jesus, planned by God himself. I write this to God's congregation in Corinth, and to believers all over Achaia province. May all the gifts and benefits that come from God our Father and the Master, Jesus Christ, be yours! Timothy, someone you know and trust, joins me in this greeting.

³⁻⁵All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from following the Messiah, but no more so than the good times of his healing comfort—we get a full measure of that, too.

⁶⁻⁷When we suffer for Jesus, it works out for your healing and salvation. If we are treated well, given a helping hand and encouraging word, that also works to your benefit, spurring you on, face forward, unflinching. Your hard times are also our hard times. When we see that you're just as willing to endure the hard times as to enjoy the good times, we know you're going to make it, no doubt about it.

⁸⁻¹¹We don't want you in the dark, friends, about how hard it was when all this came down on us in Asia province. It was so bad we didn't think we were going to make it. We felt like we'd been sent to death row, that it was all over for us. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we were forced to trust God totally—not a bad idea since he's the God who raises the dead! And he did it, rescued us from certain doom. And he'll do it again, rescuing us as many times as we need rescuing. You and your prayers are part of the rescue operation—I don't want you in the dark about that either. I can see your faces even now, lifted in praise for God's deliverance of us, a rescue in which your prayers played such a crucial part.

Why does Paul praise God in this passage? What does Paul seem to imply that a believer should do with comforts received during hard times? (You might want to compare another translation to the Message version above.)

What does Paul say about suffering? How bad did it get for him in his suffering? What does he do with it? Who does he ask to pray for him?

Partner to Partner:

Are there people you know who are suffering from something you have been through or are going through right now? Can you see yourself comforting someone else with the comfort that you have received or are receiving? Is there someone you need to reach out to this week?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

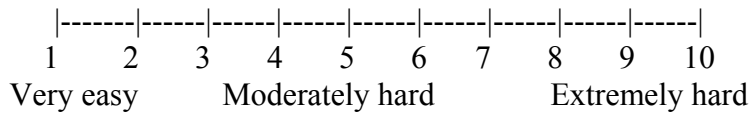
Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 8 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #5 - Forgiveness
Reflecting on Chapter 8

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” that you wanted to do from last time?
2. Today the topic is “Forgiveness.” When you were a kid, did you have a family member or friend that you didn’t get along with? On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy was it to forgive them when they wronged you?



As you have grown, has forgiveness become easier or harder for you? Why?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In today’s chapter, Steve talked about how he had to deal with a person who wronged him. Before going any further, let’s make sure that we personalize this. Think of someone who has wronged you. With this person in mind, which attitude presented below best represents how you feel about this person? If you feel comfortable sharing, do so.

- “I can’t forgive that person yet, because they don’t deserve forgiveness. If I forgive, I am letting them off the hook, and they need to suffer more.”
- “I ought to forgive the other person, but right now I just can’t do it.”
- “I can’t forgive this person unless God does it through me.”
- “I have already forgiven them, and it’s easy for me to forgive.”

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Matthew 18:21-25 (NIV)

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (several million dollars) was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master

ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (a few dollars). He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

In Jesus' day, conventional wisdom said that if you forgave someone three times, that was enough, but on the fourth offense you weren't bound to forgive. In light of this, how radical was Peter's view on forgiveness? What about Jesus' view?

How does Jesus' teaching about the unmerciful servant relate to the idea of forgiveness?

Do we forgive others so God will forgive us, or does God forgive us so that we can forgive others? Explain your reasoning.

Based on this passage, is God's forgiveness of us limited or unlimited? Conditional or unconditional? Explain.

Partner to Partner:

What person (or persons) in my life am I harboring bitterness toward? Name them.

Have I wronged someone and need forgiveness from someone else? If so, name them.

In Matthew 18:15-20 (a passage that comes right before the one we dealt with above), Jesus offers a process for dealing with someone who wrongs you or who you have wronged. Outline the steps suggested, and then pray about any step you need to take with this person. Ask God for wisdom, and then write down your thoughts about what you should do.

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 9 before your next group meeting.

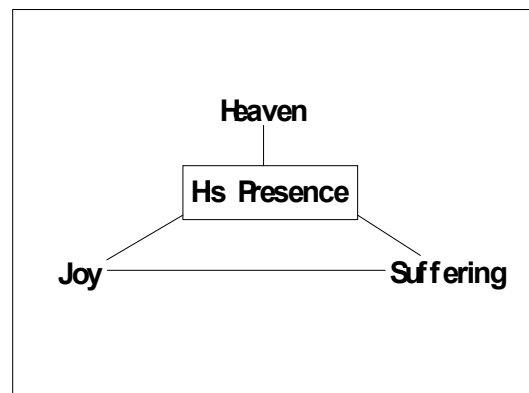
Transformed by Tough Times
Session #6 - Jesus' Promises to His Followers
Reflecting on Chapter 9

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your "One Thing" that you wanted to do from last time?
2. If you were given a promise by one of these people, in which one would you place the most confidence?
 - a. Your parents
 - b. Your closest friend
 - c. Your spouse
 - d. Your favorite teacher
 - e. The president of the United States
 - f. Your boss
 - g. Other - _____
3. Answer one of the following: What has been the best promise that someone has made to you and kept? What was a big promise that someone made to you that they didn't keep?

Book Observations and Highlights:

1. In chapter 9, Steve talked about Jesus' promises to His followers. Below is the diagram Steve used to highlight Jesus' promises. Of these promises, which one was the greatest surprise to you?



2. Which promise that Jesus made has the potential to be the most life transforming for you? Why?
3. If Jesus' presence is at the center of His promises, what implication does that have in the way we relate to...
 - God? Any implications for how we do our devotional lives?
 - Others? Any implications for how we treat other people?
 - Self? Any implications for finding meaning and purpose in our lives?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Mark 10:17-31 (NIV)

¹⁷As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁸"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

²⁰"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

²¹Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²²At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁶The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

²⁸Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"

²⁹"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

If you were the rich young man who approached Jesus, do you think you could have done what Jesus asked him to do? Why do you suppose Jesus asked so much of him? Inside this interaction, did Jesus make a promise to the young man? If so, what was it?

When Peter mentioned to Jesus that he and his buddies had left everything (which the young man didn't do) to follow Jesus, he asked what was in it for them. What did Jesus promise them? Why do you think Jesus included "persecutions" in His promise? What could possibly be beneficial from persecutions?

What do you think Jesus meant by "the first will be last and the last will be first?"

Partner to Partner:

What can you do to experience Jesus' presence in your everyday life right now? List what you believe you can do to better recognize His presence in your life. Share with your partner.

My "One Thing" I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 10 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #7 - The Secret to Outlasting Tough Times
Reflecting on Chapter 10

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” that you wanted to do from last time?
2. If told a secret, who is the first person you would want to tell? Why?
3. What is the best secret someone has ever told you that improved your life?

Book Observations and Highlights:

According to the book, what is the secret to outlasting tough times?

What were the three ways Steve mentioned that we can experience the presence of Jesus? Which of these three do you gravitate toward the most?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Paul gives a theological treatise on his faith in a letter he wrote to Roman Christians. Here is part of that letter.

Story and Read Romans 8:28-39 (NIV)

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

³¹What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present

nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage has inspired millions of Christians through the centuries, and it has also challenged the theologians as well.

What parts of this stand out to you? What parts do you have difficulty with? Take the time as a group to dialogue over what strikes you in these verses.

What part of this passage relates to experiencing the presence of Jesus? What is Paul convinced of that speaks directly to you?

Partner to Partner:

Of the three categories of experiencing Jesus' presence, how am I doing with...

My prayer life?

-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Nothing	Going through the motions					Getting Connected			

My Bible study?

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1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Nothing	Going through the motions					Getting Connected			

My connection to others in the body of Christ?

-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Nothing	Going through the motions					Getting Connected			

What do I need to do next to bring greater connection with Jesus?

My "One Thing" I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 11 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #8 - In His Steps
Reflecting on Chapter 11

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” that you wanted to do from last time?
2. Growing up, did you get “hand-me-down” clothes and shoes from other siblings, friends, or relatives? If so, what was one of the most “interesting” or strange clothing items you ever received? (Can be good or bad interesting!)
3. One of the most comical scenes we see of children is when little kids step into the big shoes of their parents and pretend to be like the big people in their lives. Perhaps that scene is what is behind the cliché, “He or she has big shoes to fill.” We often hear that when we talk of someone taking another’s place on a team or in a job.

With that image in mind, whose shoes have you had to try to fill in your life? You might think of a parent, a brother or sister, a mentor, a co-worker, a teacher, a coach, a friend, etc.

Book Observations and Highlights:

1. In chapter 11, Steve talked about how Jesus’ early followers had big shoes to fill when Jesus left His sandals in their hands.

Before Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples did not understand His teachings about suffering, but they seemed to understand it afterwards. What were some things they did after the resurrection to fill Jesus’ shoes—indicating that they “got it” and understood more of Jesus’ promise of suffering?

If you were in their shoes, do you think you would have what it takes to follow in their steps if you were called to do the same? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Peter 2:13-25 (NIV)

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

¹⁸ Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is commendable if a man

bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? **But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.**²¹ **To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

²² “He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

This passage deals first with honoring the king and giving advice to slaves. Some have taken this passage and declared that God advocates slavery or harsh governments. How do you respond to that? What do you think is the point of Peter’s words to his listeners? What is the teaching we get for us when we don’t have a king or have never been slaves?

When it comes to enduring suffering for doing good, does this happen much in the world you live in today? Explain why or why not.

According to Peter, what was one thing mentioned here that Jesus did to endure suffering? What kind of healing do you think Peter was talking about when he said that “by his wounds you have been healed?” What do you think Peter meant by “now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls?”

Partner to Partner:

This week review your progress from the past few weeks.

1. Do you feel that you have gotten in touch with your suffering clause?
2. Have you locked in on a dangerous prayer for yourself for this next year?
3. Have you been able to comfort someone because of your tough times?
4. Have you dealt with some of your issues of forgiveness?
5. Have you followed through on the one thing you’d like to do to experience more of Jesus?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapters 12 and 13 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #9 - Who Gets to Suffer
Reflecting on Chapters 12 and 13

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” that you wanted to do from last time?
2. If you were to win the lottery this week, what would you spend your money on? Do you think you’d become a better person because of it, or do you think some of your good character qualities might slide?
3. If you were to be in an accident this week and would be confined for the rest of your life to a wheel chair, do you think you’d become a better or worse person? Why do you say that?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 12, Steve answered the question, “Who gets to suffer?” What was his answer? How do you feel about that answer? If you have already made the decision to follow Jesus, when you came to that decision, was this idea of suffering communicated to you? If not, do you feel ripped off a little in hearing that now? Why or why not? Do you think more people or less people would come to faith in Christ if this information were proclaimed more? Why or why not?

In chapter 13, Steve talked about how he believes that in our country we’ve been sold a theological bill of goods with regard to what he calls “the health and wealth gospel.” Do you agree or disagree with his analysis? Why or why not? At the end of the chapter, Steve stated, “In God’s economy, His power is made most evident in our weaknesses and not in our strengths.” Have you seen God do something powerful in your weakness? If you are comfortable sharing, please do.

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Matthew 16:13-28 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and

whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

What kind of a place was Caesarea Philippi? Why was it significant in Jesus day? (Before the study, the facilitator might want to Google for pics and info. It is a beautiful place in the foothills of Mount Hermon.)

What was Jesus’ question, and what were the answers given to Him? What was Peter’s answer, and how did Jesus respond to it?

Jesus then explained that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed. How did Peter handle that? And what was Jesus’ response?

Then in verse 24 and following, Jesus gave us the answer to our question about who gets to suffer. What did He say? What do you think someone has to do to “deny oneself?” to “take up a cross?” to “follow Jesus?”

For you, what are you having to deny (say “no” to yourself) in order to follow Jesus? What are you having to carry symbolically that represents your “cross” that you are being called to carry at this juncture in your walk with Jesus? Do you see this “cross” as the same as your suffering clause? Why or why not?

Partner to Partner:

What is the one thing that you need to do (or not do) in order to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus this week?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 14 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #10 - Bold Love
Reflecting on Chapter 14

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” that you wanted to do from last time?
2. Sing (or recite) a line from one of your favorite love songs that was popular during your adolescent or young adult years.
3. What was one of the boldest/most courageous things your parents or one of your family members ever did for you?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 14, Steve talked about biblical love. He mentioned that in the Greek language there are several different words for love. Can you name the ones he mentioned? Which word was the one that equates to the “bold love” concept for today?

Steve also mentioned that the early followers of Jesus exemplified this characteristic of bold love. What were some things cited as indicators of this?

There was one emotion referred to in the book that is pushed aside when love enters the picture. What emotion was mentioned? Do you think love pushes out other negative emotions as well? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Corinthians 13 (The Message)

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

*Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.
Love never dies.*

Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation:

*Trust steadily in God,
Hope unswervingly,
Love extravagantly.*

And the best of the three is love.

Make two lists. One list is what *love is* according to 1 Corinthians 13. The other list is what *love isn't* or what it doesn't do. (Feel free to use another translation to compare to.) After making the lists, look at them and decide which list seems more descriptive and helpful to you in determining what actions you need to focus on for loving more completely. There is no right or wrong answer, so relax as you share what you think.

Love Is

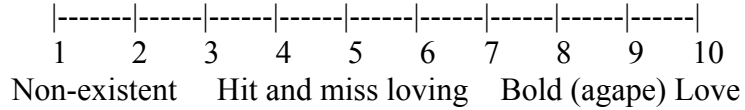
Love Isn't

Paul says that while love won't die, there are some things that will eventually cease. What are some of those things that he says won't last forever?

Paul finishes his chapter by encouraging us to do three things. What are they? Which one is the greatest?

Partner to Partner:

Ask one another, “How are you doing at loving people?” Give yourself an arbitrary score for each area that applies to you: Work/school ____; Family ____; Spouse/Significant other ____; Church/Small group ____; Team/Affiliation group ____; People I meet at random ____.



My “One Thing” I want to do: (Suggestion: Pick one word for what love is that you want to exhibit this week, e.g. patient, kind, perseverant, etc. Then say how you might be able to love with that characteristic in mind.)

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 15 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #11 - Jesus' Other Model Prayer
Reflecting on Chapter 15

Icebreakers:

1. Last week, the “Partner to Partner” assignment was to review your “love” life. Do you have any insights from that or from your “One Thing?”
2. What has been the happiest day of your life? What has been the saddest day of your life?
3. Tell about one of the most difficult times you tried to stay awake to keep someone company through a long night or an exhausting situation.
4. Can you recite what has been called “The Lord’s prayer?” Hint: it begins with “Our Father who art in heaven...” If so, when did you learn this, and how did you learn it?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 15, Steve talked about how Jesus went through great fear and distress before the crucifixion—citing a passage of scripture that Steve called “the other Lord’s prayer.” When you read that, did it surprise you that Jesus prayed a prayer like this? Does Jesus’ fear in that situation encourage you or worry you in any way? In a moment we’ll take a closer look at that passage, but before we do, let’s review a couple more ideas in the book.

Steve also quoted the author of Hebrews to point out a major coping mechanism Jesus used to endure the cross. What was it? Have you ever used this kind of approach to deal with one of your tough situations? If so, how did it go for you?

When Steve talked about some of his adventures in the jungles of Guatemala, did these stories make you more or less likely to want to go on a mission trip? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Mark 14:32-42 (NIV)

³² *They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”* ³³ *He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.* ³⁴ *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”*

³⁵ *Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.* ³⁶ *“Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”*

³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Note that Matthew 26:36-46 is very close to the same as this passage in Mark. Luke has complementary information in Luke 22:39-46, as does John in his gospel in John 18:1-3. If you'd like to take the time to compare these passages, go for it.

In verses 35 and 36, Jesus prays what Steve called “the other model prayer.” How did Jesus address God? What did Steve say in the book were the two sides to Jesus’ prayer? Which side of this prayer spectrum are you most comfortable with? Explain why.

Bonus thoughts: Why do you think the disciples couldn’t stay awake? What all had they done that day? Any idea how far they might have walked?

Partner to Partner:

When you pray, do you tend to pray that God delivers you from your painful situations more or do you tend to pray prayers of acceptance?

Based on this idea of praying prayers of both deliverance and acceptance, what is one prayer that you need to start praying this week?

My “One Thing” I want to do: (Suggestion: you might want to make this prayer of deliverance and acceptance your one thing this week. Or perhaps you might want to focus on a future joy you need to visualize when you face a particularly tough situation.)

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 16 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #12 - We Want to Pump You Up
Reflecting on Chapter 16

Icebreakers:

1. How did it go with your “One Thing” last week?
2. At what point in your life were you in the best shape of your life? If it’s not right now, do you see yourself surpassing that level of fitness again? Why or why not?
3. In your spiritual life, where would you describe your current “fitness” level? Beginning? Flabby? Couch potato? Healthy? Consistently working out? Pumped? Injured?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 16, Steve talked about how Paul compared the church body to a human body. What was Paul’s main point he wanted to make in this comparison?

What are the three things that a church body needs that parallel what a human body needs? Of these three things, which do you think you need most?

Steve also talked about how expecting a suffering-free church body is about as unrealistic as expecting a suffering-free human body. With regard to suffering, why do you think it is so important for each body part/member to be fulfilling their God-given function in the church?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NIV)

¹²The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

¹⁴Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker

are indispensable,²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty,²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

In these verses, what is Paul's big idea about how differences are to be handled in a church? Paul also takes a comical look at body parts getting all upset over their roles. What is Paul's main point in the comedy?

In verse 26, Paul talks about how when one part suffers, every part suffers. If you've ever suffered in relating to a team at work/school, or in relation to your church, what made your situation so painful? Did you or anyone else take on a role in helping to alleviate the suffering? If so, how did that work out?

Partner to Partner:

With all the talk about body parts, use this metaphor to say what part, if any, you believe is your current or potential role in a church body. In other words, what body part most reflects your connection to your church body? Why do you say that?

Do you feel that you need to step up your role or change it in some way? Why or why not? What one thing do you want to do about this?

My "One Thing" I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 17 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #13 - Wolfy Sheep
Reflecting on Chapter 17

Icebreakers:

1. Last week, the “Partner to Partner” assignment was to review your role in “the body” (the church). Did you have any insights from that reflection?
2. Have you ever lived on a farm where you had to care for animals? What were the different animals? In what different ways did you have to care for the different kinds of animals? (If no one in the group has experience, take some educated guesses at the answers.)
3. Since the late 1600’s, there have been many versions of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Can you tell a brief summary of the version that you were told as a child? What happened to Grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood at the end of your story? How politically correct is that version for today?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 17, Steve talked about how Jesus likened His followers to sheep. What were some of the animals he mentioned besides sheep that we could have been compared to but weren’t? What were a couple of animals Jesus mentioned that we should be like?

Steve also talked about what he calls “wolfy” sheep. These are people who come into churches who look like dedicated followers of Jesus but who have agendas that are not in line with Jesus’ ways of living. Have you ever encountered a “wolfy” sheep, and if so, how did you feel about the situation?

When Steve mentioned that sometimes we’re “wolf bait,” how did you react to that idea? Have you ever seen a dedicated follower of Jesus lead an antagonist (someone who opposed their faith) to actually decide to follow Jesus? What happened in that situation?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Matthew 10:16-31 (NIV)

¹⁶(Jesus speaking) *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.*

¹⁷*“Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. ¹⁸On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

²¹*“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²²All men will hate you because of me,*

but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

²⁴"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!

²⁶"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

This passage is a part of Jesus' instructions before He sent His disciples out on a mission trip. On this assignment they were not to take any extra money or clothes, and they were to rely on the generosity of people along the way. (That info can be found in Matthew 10:5-15. It might be worth having someone read that.) If you were one of those followers, how would you feel about having so little for your trip? How would you feel about Jesus' warnings that it was going to be difficult, as He described it in verses 16-25? (FYI...For a similar passage to study, look at Luke 10.)

Which of Jesus' words seems the hardest to understand? Discuss as a group what you think was the most important thing Jesus was trying to communicate in His directions.

Which of Jesus' instructions seems the most comforting? How can these words be used to help us get in touch with our suffering clauses and actually help us thrive under duress?

Partner to Partner:

Do you have a "wolf" or a potential wolf in your life? If so, what do you think Jesus is asking you to do about that person? If you don't feel that you have a wolf right now, what do you think you need to do to be prepared when one comes? Can you see yourself loving that wolf in any way? What might that look like? If you are open to demonstrating this kind of love, consider making this a part of your "One Thing" this week.

My "One Thing" I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapters 18 and 19 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #14 - Planting Seeds of Greatness
Reflecting on Chapters 18 and 19

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. Did you have a favorite superhero as a child? If so, name the hero, and share one reason why you liked that hero.
3. As a child, did you have a favorite real-life hero you looked up to? If so, who were they, and why did you look up to this person?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapters 18 and 19, Steve talked about true greatness and gave several examples of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. What did Jesus say we needed to do to become great?

Steve mentioned stories of how Christians in other parts of the world are still being killed for their Christian faith. How did you feel when you heard about these people?

Did you know that there are many groups trying to help bring the worldwide plight of our persecuted Christian brothers to the forefront of government officials—suggesting using our pull as a nation to relieve their persecution? Perhaps some in the group might like to research this issue this week and find out what we can do on their behalf.

In chapter 19, Steve also talked about God’s Suffering Clause Hall of Fame. What stood out to you as you read that chapter?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Hebrews 11:1 to 12:3 (NIV)

*¹ Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
² This is what the ancients were commended for.*

³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴ By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God,

because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ *By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

⁸ *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.* ⁹ *By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.* ¹⁰ *For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

¹¹ *By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.* ¹² *And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.*

¹³ *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.* ¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.* ¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* ¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,* ¹⁸ *even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”* ¹⁹ *Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.*

²⁰ *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.*

²¹ *By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.*

²² *By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.*

²³ *By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.*

²⁴ *By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.* ²⁵ *He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.* ²⁶ *He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*

²⁷ *By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.* ²⁸ *By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.*

²⁹ *By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.*

³⁰ *By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.*

³¹ *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.*

³² *And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷ They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

³⁹ *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. ⁴⁰ God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

12 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

As you read of these biblical heroes, which ones stand out most to you? Which ones do you not know much about? Which ones seem confusing to you?

How do you feel about the section of this passage that is dedicated to those who were commended for their faith but never got a reward in this life? What might God have planned that is “something better?”

Partner to Partner:

Have you dealt with the fact that you may be one of those people who will not be vindicated in this life? Are you at a place where you can be at peace with this possibility? Discuss this in depth with your partner.

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 20 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #15 - The Suffering Clause Hall of Pain
Reflecting on Chapter 20

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. Have you or anyone close to you experienced chronic pain that lingered for months or years? If so, share about it.
3. What is the most physically painful thing you have had to experience so far in your lifetime? How did you get through it?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 20, Steve interviewed his mother about her tough battle with Lyme disease. Out of that conversation, Steve extracted five things from her experience that can help someone facing chronic pain. Can you name the five things?

5 Suggestions for Dealing with Chronic Pain:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Of these five things, which one speaks most directly to you?

Since each of these suggestions would make a great study by itself, this session could be very broad in scope. For the sake of time, we’ll offer an in-depth look at a passage that highlights the first suggestion (Live one minute at a time) and the fifth suggestion (Give God your worries). If you feel one of the other ones would be better for your group, use some of the passages quoted in the respective part of chapter 20, take a close look at the greater context of those scriptures, and see where they take you.

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:25-34 (NIV)

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Right before Jesus spoke these words, he talked about how His followers should be storing up treasures in heaven where things don’t rust out or get eaten up by bugs or stolen by thieves. Then He shares this information about not worrying. Of the things Jesus mentioned in this passage, which is the thing you tend to worry about the most?

Can you identify with Steve’s mom, who had to deal with her pain on a moment by moment basis? In moments of physical pain, how much do you worry about clothes or food or drink? To you, do worries about food or clothes pale in comparison to physical pain? Share why you believe this.

Partner to Partner:

Of the five suggestions for dealing with pain, which one do you want to focus on this week? Why is it more important for you right now? Write this down as your “One Thing,” and make a note about how you think this might play out for you in a specific situation this week.

My “One Thing” I want to do: (and how it might play out this week)

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapters 21 and 22 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #16 - Where is God When it Hurts?
Reflecting on Chapters 21 and 22

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” from the last session?
2. In your family of origin, when someone was hurting physically or emotionally, how did your parents and/or your siblings handle the hurt? Did they ignore it? Laugh? Cry? Get mad? Blame someone or some thing? Become serious?
3. If you have kids, what is the best thing you can do to help your child get over a hurt? Does it work every time?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 21, Steve talked about five possible answers to the question, “**Where is God when it hurts?**” Can you name them? Which one makes the most sense to you?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

In chapter 22, Steve told a story from the book *Pain, the Gift Nobody Wants*. In the story, Dr. Paul Brand shared about the plight of a little girl named Tanya who could feel no pain. By the end of that story, he calls pain a “gift.” Do you feel that most pain is a gift? Are there some pains that you believe are unnecessary? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Matthew 28:1-20 (NIV)

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him,

clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

While this passage has been widely read at Easter time or when a minister wants to talk about the church, it has some very strong implications for us when we're dealing with God. What encouragement do you see in this story as it relates to who God is and where He is when you hurt? How does this passage address the five views of God mentioned in the book?

Where did this story start geographically, and where did it finish? Who are you most like in the story? Does anything in the story make you upset? How do you respond to Jesus' final words to His followers? Are you inspired? Confused? Nervous?

In this story, what is the most important fact you gleaned with regard to being in pain and suffering?

Partner to Partner:

Looking back on this past week, where did you cooperate with God? Where did you resist God? When you cooperate with or resist God, how do your actions indicate what you really believe about God's involvement in your life? What one thing do you want to do differently this week to be more receptive to God's leading?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 23 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #17 - Why Me, Lord?
Reflecting on Chapter 23

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. When you were younger, what was the best excuse you ever had for why you couldn’t get your homework done? What was the worst excuse?
3. Of all the punishments you ever received from your parents, which one was the most deserved? Which was the least deserved?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 23, Steve talks about **12 reasons I might suffer**. Can you list them here?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

In looking at these reasons for suffering, which one do you feel you are currently dealing with? Of the 12, how many can you say that Jesus experienced?

At this point in your life, have you ever had to deal with #12, the mystery reason for suffering? If so, how have you dealt with it so far?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Peter 4:1-20 (The Message)

¹⁻²Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.

³⁻⁵*You've already put in your time in that God-ignorant way of life, partying night after night, a drunken and profligate life. Now it's time to be done with it for good. Of course, your old friends don't understand why you don't join in with the old gang anymore. But you don't have to give an account to them. They're the ones who will be called on the carpet—and before God himself.*

⁶*Listen to the Message. It was preached to those believers who are now dead, and yet even though they died (just as all people must), they will still get in on the life that God has given in Jesus.*

⁷⁻¹¹*Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and he'll get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!*

¹²⁻¹³*Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.*

¹⁴⁻¹⁶*If you're abused because of Christ, count yourself fortunate. It's the Spirit of God and his glory in you that brought you to the notice of others. If they're on you because you broke the law or disturbed the peace, that's a different matter. But if it's because you're a Christian, don't give it a second thought. Be proud of the distinguished status reflected in that name!*

¹⁷⁻¹⁹*It's judgment time for God's own family. We're first in line. If it starts with us, think what it's going to be like for those who refuse God's Message!*

If good people barely make it,

What's in store for the bad?

So if you find life difficult because you're doing what God said, take it in stride. Trust him. He knows what he's doing, and he'll keep on doing it.

How did Peter encourage his readers to think about suffering? What were some of the sinful ways Peter's friends had handled life in their past? What pieces of advice did Peter offer them? According to Peter, what was the most important of these bits of advice?

What did Peter say NOT to do when life gets tough? What did he say to do instead? What bad thing does he say that we should rejoice in? So if we're suffering for doing what God says, what should we do?

Based on this passage of scripture, what do you think Peter might say to you about why you are suffering right now?

Partner to Partner:

In what way are you suffering right now that would be considered a natural consequence or something you deserve? In what way are you suffering something that you don't deserve?

Is there any way in which you are suffering and still can't figure out why? What do you believe you need to do with this information?

My "One Thing" I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 24 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #18 - Unanswered Prayer
Reflecting on Chapter 24

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. What is the biggest answer to prayer you’ve had to date? What is the most frustrating response you’ve had to a prayer to date?
3. Who is the most high profile person (not including God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit) from whom you’ve ever asked anything? How did it go?

Book Observations and Highlights:

Earlier in the book, we looked at praying dangerous prayers. Now, we want to look at some of the disappointments we have in prayer. In chapter 24, with a little help from his buddy Garth Brooks and a few others, Steve talked about possible answers to prayer. What are **the four possible answers to prayer?**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Do any of these answers clear up any hang-ups you’ve had about prayer? Why or why not?

List the five reasons for anything less than a “yes” answer:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Do any of these reasons help you better understand God’s plans for you? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read James 5:7-20 (The Message)

⁷⁻⁸Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master's Arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time.

⁹*Friends, don't complain about each other. A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know. The Judge is standing just around the corner.*

¹⁰⁻¹¹*Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course! You've heard, of course, of Job's staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail.*

¹²*And since you know that he cares, let your language show it. Don't add words like "I swear to God" to your own words. Don't show your impatience by concocting oaths to hurry up God. Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can't be used against you.*

¹³⁻¹⁵*Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven—healed inside and out.*

¹⁶⁻¹⁸*Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. Elijah, for instance, human just like us, prayed hard that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't—not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again.*

¹⁹⁻²⁰*My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.*

James likens the patience of a farmer to the way we should be in waiting for Jesus' arrival. How might this picture play out with regard to prayer?

What kinds of prayers are mentioned in this passage? With regard to prayers for the sick, what does James suggest we do? What do you think the anointing with oil has to do with prayers for sick people?

From where do some of the most powerful prayers come? Do you see yourself becoming a powerfully prayerful person? Why or why not?

Partner to Partner:

What are you praying right now for which you seem to have no answer? Which of the four possible answers do you think you are getting at this point?

Do you need to change your mind in any way about this request? Do you need to accept something that is too hard to accept? As it relates to this request, what is the one thing you need to do or the one thing you need to become for you to trust God in this?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 25 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #19 - Job, the Guy Who Wrote the Book on Suffering
Reflecting on Chapter 25

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. Who do you think is the luckiest person in the world? Who do you think is the unluckiest person in the world? Why do you think that?
3. Name someone you admire who has dealt with high levels of adversity.

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 25, Steve took us through the highlights of the entire book of Job as if we were watching a play. Did that imagery of seeing the events transpire on an upper stage and a lower stage give you a helpful vantage point to your own difficulties? How so?

After Job’s disasters had hit him full force, what did Job’s wife say to him? When several of his friends came to see him, what did they do for the first seven days? After the seventh day, what did they do? What was the gist of the advice Job got from his friends? What was the gist of Job’s response?

When God spoke to Job in the story, what did He say? Then what did Job say? What did God say next to Job and then to the friends? What happened at the end of the story? What were two points Steve made about the story of Job?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

In the book, Steve mentioned that Jesus dealt a blow to the doctrine of retribution. Let’s take a closer look at this story for today’s Bible discussion.

Story and Read Luke 13:1-5 (NIV)

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

It is interesting to note that Jesus responded to people who wanted to talk about two well-known news flashes of their day. One was a despicable slaughtering by the appointed Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate. Evidently he ordered the executions of some Galilean rabble rousers on the sacred

altar of the Jewish temple. Note that Pilate is the same man who later had a role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Do you think Jesus knew that He and Pilate would eventually cross paths? Hmmmm.

The other incident mentioned seems to have been a more random accident of a tower falling. Nowhere else in scripture are these two incidents mentioned. But archaeologists have uncovered a fallen tower near Siloam Springs in Jerusalem. It was about 22 feet in diameter and was a part of the city wall. Googling for some info about these verses might be interesting to some in your group.

Do you see in these instances any similarities to any recent events?

How do you think Jesus might respond to those who claim that victims of disasters or calamities deserve to die or suffer because of some sin?

Earlier in the book, we talked about the “nail it” way of thinking. What was Jesus’ “nail it” statement that he wanted people to do after hearing about a disaster? (Hint: He said it after talking about each tragedy.) In your own words, what does this mean? What does this mean today with regard to our tough times?

Partner to Partner:

After hearing the story of Job, what belief do you need to change? How will this affect the way you listen to a friend who is hurting?

With regard to Jesus’ words of warning about the disasters, what do you need to do? Might this lead you to your “One Thing” for the week?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 26 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #20 - Hope with Your Name on It
Reflecting on Chapter 26

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” from the last session?
2. Name someone who has given you hope when you needed it.
3. What is one possession that you want right now more than just about anything else? How hopeful are you that you will get it?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 26, Steve talked about how the Apostle Paul prayed that we would know and experience God’s hope. When Steve had you pretend like the old apostle prayed this prayer over you, could you imagine that happening? Did anyone have an “aha” moment thinking about that?

In Romans 5:3-5, Paul said that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. So if we are looking for a lasting hope, what do we need to start with? Therefore, according to Paul, true hope comes through the grid of what? How does Romans 5:3-5 compare to James 1:2-3?

When Steve told the story of Dr. Habermas and his wife Debbie, what was the point to that story? What gave Dr. Habermas his hope when Debbie died?

Steve shared about his friend, Tony Rengifo. When Tony died, what gave people hope?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Ephesians 1:15-23 (NIV)

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

By whose faith was Paul encouraged? What did that cause Paul to do? What did Paul pray that God would do for his friends? What is the power source for what Paul prayed would happen to his friends? Is this the power source that Dr. Habermas relied upon when his wife died?

What is Jesus' position in the universe? Is there anything that He does not have authority over? If this is true, is there anything in your life that He does not have a rightful authority over? In addition to the universe, what else did Paul say that Jesus is the head of? How should this affect the way we do church?

Partner to Partner:

When you die, what do you want to have said at your funeral that would give people hope? To have that said about you, who do you need to become for that to happen?

If you could have the Apostle Paul physically lay his hands on you and pray one thing for you, what would it be? Perhaps your "One Thing" for the week could be this prayer. Before you leave, put your hands on your partner and pray for the "One Thing" they long to have prayed over them.

My "One Thing" I want to do: (Perhaps this could be from the prayer above, or maybe it might be related to the changes you need to make in order to become the person you want to become before you die.)

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week's story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 27 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #21 - Helping Those Who Hurt
Reflecting on Chapter 27

Icebreakers:

1. Did anything happen with your “One Thing” from the last session?
2. What is your most embarrassing moment that you are willing to tell the group?
3. What is the best thing anyone has ever said to you when you were hurting?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 27, Steve quoted Phillip Yancey when he talked about how there is no “one-size-fits-all” formula for saying something that would make everyone feel encouraged. According to Yancey, what is the one thing that can help someone who hurts? Do you believe his conclusion is correct? Why or why not?

Steve also shared a story about T.B. Maston and how he and his wife loved their son, Tom Mac, who was confined to a wheelchair for more than 60 years. Also mentioned was the fact that T.B. was a great advocate for missionaries. What was his advice to those who wanted to minister in other places in the world? Steve believes this same advice applies to those who deal with hurting people. Do you agree with his conclusion? Why or why not?

When Steve referred to the movie about C.S. Lewis and his wife Joy, what was the point that he made about loving a person who is dying? How can love help when it seems that the more you love, the more you hurt?

What was a common focal point that helped both Joni Erickson Tada and Mel Gibson deal with their pain? What did some of Jesus’ earliest followers say about looking to the cross for inspiration?

Steve mentioned Bill Burrows’ definition for love. What is it? Can you demonstrate with arms and hand motions how this works?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV)

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵ *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*
⁶ *Who, being in very nature God,*
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷ *but made himself nothing,*
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,*
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death —
even death on a cross!
⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place*
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,*
to the glory of God the Father.

Paul implores his friends who have been encouraged by their connection to Jesus to do what? In verse 2, to what or to whom is Paul referring when he says he wants us to have the “same love?” What do you think this passage has to say to us when we want to help someone who is hurting?

Note that verses 6 through 11 are considered the lyrics to a song that might have been sung in the early church. What is the basic theme of the song? If you were to put music to this, what style of music would you use, and what mood would you set with it?

Partner to Partner:

Who have you tried to encourage lately who has been hurting? Has the person been responsive or resistant to your encouragement?

In your own heart, have you been responsive or resistant to that person? Share openly and honestly with your partner.

My “One Thing” I want to do: (Idea: pick one person you need to love this week and strive to be responsive to them, both while you are with them and when you think about them.)

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 28 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #22 - Run to the Cross
Reflecting on Chapter 28

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. What is the farthest you’ve ever run or walked in a day? Why did you do it?
3. If you were to pick a place to experience your ideal adventure of a lifetime, where would it be and what would you do?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 28, Steve told the story of Yungay, a small town in the Andes Mountains. What happened in that town on May 31, 1970? Of those who survived, what did they do to live?

How is this catastrophe an illustration of our human predicament? What insight can we gather from this story as it relates to helping hurting people?

What perspective does this story give you as you consider what is most important in your life?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NIV)

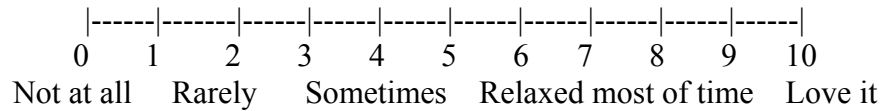
¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

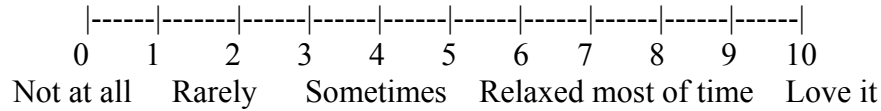
²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.

Before you became a follower of Jesus, what was your understanding of the cross? After you decided to follow Jesus, what did you think about the cross?

How comfortable are you with appearing foolish to your friends and loved ones? Why?



How comfortable are you hanging around people who you perceive to be foolish? Why?



Can you think of someone today who is considered wise, scholarly, or a deep thinker by the world’s standards yet is clearly foolish from God’s viewpoint? Who?

In verse 22, Paul mentioned the hot buttons that Jews and Greeks have when it comes to faith. Jews of his day wanted miracles. Greeks wanted wisdom. What are the non-believers you hang around with most impressed by when it comes to a belief in something? Do you think there is a logical link or idea that could be used to build a bridge from their starting point to the truth about Jesus and what He did on the cross? What might it be?

Partner to Partner:

Where do you feel weak or vulnerable in your witness to other people?

Is this weakness because you don’t have the strength or ability to do something God would want you to do, or is it because it might be considered a “foolish thing of God?”

What is one thing you would ask God to help you with that is foolish to men but wise in God’s ways?

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 29 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #23 - Back to the Future
Reflecting on Chapter 29

Icebreakers:

1. Has anything happened with your “One Thing” from any previous session?
2. If there were a movie made about your life, what famous actor would you choose to play you in the movie? (Don’t be bashful!) Why would you choose him or her?
3. What character in the movie “Back to the Future” do you identify with most?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 29, Steve talked about how we need to look at this world from God’s eternal dimension and be striving to pass the torch of faith on to the next generation. He also talked about how generational differences have created conflict in many churches today. How do you think your church is doing with regard to generational differences? Do you feel that people are being valued and loved no matter who they are or how old they are?

Do you agree with Steve’s assessment that we need to pass on this information about suffering and how to be transformed by it to the next generations? Why or why not?

Group Bible Exploration and Discussion:

Story and Read Acts 2:1-47 (The Message)

¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

⁵⁻¹¹ There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, “Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?”

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; Even Cretans and Arabs!

“They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!”

¹²*Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?"*

¹³*Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."*

¹⁴⁻²¹*That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:*

"In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy.

*I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below,
Blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red,
Before the Day of the Lord arrives, the Day tremendous and marvelous;
And whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved."*

²²⁻²⁸*"Fellow Israelites, listen carefully to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you—the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge—this Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him. David said it all:*

*I saw God before me for all time.
Nothing can shake me; he's right by my side.
I'm glad from the inside out, ecstatic;
I've pitched my tent in the land of hope.
I know you'll never dump me in Hades;
I'll never even smell the stench of death.
You've got my feet on the life-path,
with your face shining sun-joy all around.*

²⁹⁻³⁶*"Dear friends, let me be completely frank with you. Our ancestor David is dead and buried—his tomb is in plain sight today. But being also a prophet and knowing that God had solemnly sworn that a descendant of his would rule his kingdom, seeing far ahead, he talked of the resurrection of the Messiah—'no trip to Hades, no stench of death.' This Jesus, God raised up. And every one of us here is a witness to it. Then, raised to the heights at the right hand of God and receiving the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he poured out the Spirit he had just received. That is what you see and hear. For David himself did not ascend to heaven, but he did say,*

*God said to my Master, “Sit at my right hand
Until I make your enemies a stool for resting your feet.”
“All Israel, then, know this: There’s no longer room for doubt—God made him Master
and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross.”*

*³⁷Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles,
“Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?”*

*³⁸⁻³⁹Peter said, “Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name
of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise
is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact,
our Master God invites.”*

*⁴⁰He went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, “Get out while you
can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!”*

*⁴¹⁻⁴²That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed
up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the
common meal, and the prayers.*

*⁴³⁻⁴⁵Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the
apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in
common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each
person’s need was met.*

*⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home,
every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general
liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.*

When you read passages of scripture like Acts 2, do you walk away feeling motivated to experience that kind of thing today, or do you tend to chalk that up to something that was exciting for people way back then, but not entirely relevant to today?

If you could experience one thing that these believers experienced, what one thing might you want to experience?

Partner to Partner:

While there are a lot of implications that can be drawn from this passage with regards to how we want to experience church life today, Steve honed in on the generational aspects of Peter’s message and what that looked like in the early church. Do you personally long for more or less connection with people from different generations?

Who do you feel you need to bless that is older than you? Who do you sense that you need to touch in some way who is the next generation down from you? As people come to mind, be open to God leading you to reach out to one of these folks as a part of your “One Thing” this week.

My “One Thing” I want to do:

Closing Prayer: *(Before leaving the group, assign next week’s story, and then take a moment to pray for one another.)*

Reading Assignment: Read through chapter 30 before your next group meeting.

Transformed by Tough Times
Session #24 - Where Do We Go from Here?
Reflecting on Chapter 30

Icebreakers:

1. Summarize what you have seen happen with your “one thing” assignments since you began this study.
2. What is the best ceremony you have ever been a part of? What was the worst?
3. If you were to pick a song that best summarizes your life to this point, what song would you pick?

Book Observations and Highlights:

In chapter 30, Steve offered a glimpse at an exercise that can help each of us get us in touch with what our next step needs to be in our transformational process. Below is a brief listing of the process with blanks provided as necessary to help you personalize the exercise. Be familiar with the imagery used in the book, and use helpful props as you help one another go through this ceremony. This might even be something for which each person is prepped ahead of time to bring all the items needed to personalize this activity. Be creative!

The Ceremony of the Cross

1. What is the most important thing in your life? (Hold an item that represents this to you.)
-

2. Stand by Jesus’ cross at Golgotha and listen to Jesus speak. (Note that it would be good to have a six foot cross as a prop for this.)

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”

(Jesus) Luke 9:23-24

3. Remember Jesus’ perspective of not just looking *to* the cross but *through* the cross to joy.
(Hebrews 12:2)

4. See your little cross leaning against Jesus’ big cross. This small cross can represent both your suffering clause and your joy-filled calling on the other side of the cross. Write down what you believe that your cross represents. (It would be great if each person had his or her name on a separate little cross located at the base of the big cross and this information were written on or taped to it.)
-

5. Lay down your prized possession at the foot of Jesus' cross, and pick up your cross and embrace it. Note that the laying down of your important possession represents your denial of yourself, and then when you pick up your cross, you are embracing your suffering clause that Jesus gives you. (If it seems appropriate for your group, have each person share what their prized possession is and then what they believe is their suffering clause that they are picking up. Use your own judgment as to what works best for your group.)

6. Embrace Jesus. In this step, we have an opportunity for Jesus' body to act. We each can stand in for Jesus and embrace one another as Jesus would to welcome one another to this new journey of suffering with Jesus.

7. Begin your walk with Jesus. Talk directly to Jesus in prayer about whatever you want to say. If your group feels comfortable doing so, have them speak to each other the things that they would say to Jesus.

8. Join up with other cross-bearing followers in fellowship and encouragement. Hold hands with your partner, and think about what you are doing with both hands. With one hand, you are linked to your partner, a fellow traveler in Christ. With the other, you will want to reach out to someone who is struggling that is not yet part of the family. Write down names below of people you need to reach out to, and then in this part of the ceremony, pray with your partner for these folks. When you are done praying, high five, shout, sing, cry, or whatever seems appropriate in that moment. You are now free to move about the country in your adventure with Jesus.

Reading Assignment: If you haven't already done so, high five someone else! You're done reading the book! Congratulations. But consider making the Bible your next big read. Feel free to start a group of new people who could benefit from what you've learned here.

You can go to www.TransformedbyToughTimes.com
to get this material for your next group!