

SOLITARY REFINEMENT

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE (Three-Week Series)

presented by



A NOTE TO MINISTRY LEADERS: This small group discussion guide is designed for facilitators' use during the three-week discussion sessions on the Biblical worldview of persecution. Ideally, the first small group discussion would begin within a week of the *Solitary Refinement* presentation.

*“How can an underground church evangelize?
On the covers of our Gospel
tracts, we put photographs of Marx.
The censors stamped the booklets as
approved and we passed out
thousands of copies of the Gospels:
Matthew, Marx, Luke and John.”*

Quote by Rev. Richard Wurmbrand

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SCHEDULE

Opening Prayer	00:00 - 00:05
Worship Songs	00:05 - 00:15
Icebreaker	00:15 - 00:20
Scripture Reading	00:20 - 00:25
Devotional Reading	00:25 - 00:30
Group Discussion & Sharing	00:30 - 00:50
Group Prayer & Closing	00:50 - 01:00

THE ENTIRE KIT CONSISTS OF: (Use as planned)

1. Sermon Series Planning Guide
2. Sermon Series Media Kit
3. Three-Week Small Group Discussion Guide
4. Single Session Follow-Up/Review Session (booklet size)

DISCUSSION PREPARATION

WHY:

To continue the conversation on global persecution.

WHEN:

Best scheduled after the group has viewed the *Solitary Refinement* production. However, this is designed in such a way that it may be conducted as a stand-alone study. Additionally, these sessions may be used by the weekly small groups as part of the church's sermon series on *Solitary Refinement*. (Online download of the Sermon Series Kit is available.)

WHAT:

As a facilitator, lead discussions and encourage a commitment to become a 'voice of the martyrs.' Read *Tortured for Christ* and *In the Shadow of the Cross* for additional insights. (Both books are available for purchase from VOMC online store.)

HOW:

Ideal group size consists of eight to ten participants.

TIME:

60 minutes

- Follow the schedule and facilitator hints that are provided to navigate the discussion.
- Suggested time for each activity is provided to help you keep to the schedule (00:00).
- Divide into three groups, each taking one question to discuss and share.

EMAIL:

If possible, email participants the devotional reading and questions for the week. (Separate document is called "Weekly Devotion & Questions Email.")

HANDOUT:

Photocopy "Discussion Handouts" in this guide for use by the participants. Pass around the discussion handout specific to that particular week.

WHERE:

Free download is available at: www.vomcanada.com

INVITE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS:

Encourage members to post promo videos, quotes and talking points from the discussion, etc.

USE HASHTAG:

#SolitaryRefinement

Media link to be shared with members => www.vomcanada.com/Dramas/Drama-Social/

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WEEK ONE: Small Group Discussion

THEME

- Our God Suffers With Us

BEGIN SESSION BY SAYING SOMETHING LIKE...

Welcome to this Small Group Session - Week One.

(Insert icebreaker.)

Our theme for today is "Our God Suffers with Us." This is how the session will look. We will begin with prayer and worship songs. Our Scripture reading for today is based on this week's theme. I also have a brief reading to give us context, reading from "In the Shadow of the Cross" by Glenn Penner. We will be discussing the questions in the handout which I will pass around later, then we'll conclude with prayer. The whole session will take about an hour.

ICEBREAKER (00:15 - 00:20)

(Use icebreaker to introduce theme.)

- Use an icebreaker provided in the *Follow-Up Discussion Guide* (Single Session), or
- Ask group participants to share examples of when they felt the presence of God in the midst of their suffering.
- Keep one of your own ready to share as needed.

SCRIPTURE READING (00:20 - 00:25)

Acts 9:1-22

KEY VERSE

"And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:5a NKJV).

DEVOTIONAL READING (00:25 - 00:30)

The Doctrine of Impassibility

The question of whether God can actually suffer has traditionally been dealt with in what has been called “the doctrine of impassibility”: “*The doctrine that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.*”

Such emotions that would involve change were seen to be incompatible with the perfect, unchanging character and tranquility of deity. As time went on, this view was accepted quite uncritically by the early Greek church fathers and, in consequence, as Stott rightfully notes, their teaching about God sometimes sounds more Greek than Hebrew.² They relegated all Old Testament descriptions of the love, jealousy, anger, sorrow and pity of God to the realm of anthropomorphisms that could not be taken literally, because they believed the divine nature is unmoved by all emotions.³ The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) declared the idea that the divine nature could suffer as “vain babblings,” and condemned those who believed it.

While the church fathers recognized that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, had suffered, they contended that God Himself did not; He was impassible.... There is often a fear that ascribing suffering to God would ascribe to Him an attribute that would be inconsistent with His omnipotence and immutability. To some, a suffering God implies a weak and frustrated deity.

This need not be the case. Ohlrich correctly points out that “many objections to passibility would be dispelled if we would keep in mind that God chooses to suffer; the God of suffering does not passively endure pain, but actively chooses to embrace it.”⁴ As Dennis Ngien writes, “Our Christian foreparents were right to speak of God as impassible if that means God is not emotionally unstable and cannot be manipulated by humans.”

If impassibility is properly understood to mean that God cannot be forced against His will from either inside or outside influences – and that He is never the helpless victim of circumstances, actions or emotions – then this is obviously in line with the revelation of God given in Scripture. God cannot be unconsciously or unwillingly moved. God suffers because He chooses to love.⁵

It is completely in line with Scripture to say, as C.S. Lewis does, that just as God “perfectly uses His intellectual and volitional powers, He perfectly uses His emotional powers.... God is not overcome by emotions; has no emotions out of control, out of balance or inappropriate.... Affirmatively, the God of the Bible has appropriate, healthy, self-controlled emotional experience.”⁶

The above text was written by Glenn Penner, author of *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), pp. 88-89.

¹G. R. Lewis, *The Impassibility of God*, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell. Baker Book House, 1984: 553.

²Stott: 330. See also Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* in *Early Christian Fathers*. trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. *To Polycarp*, *Early Christian Fathers*. trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. David Ray Griffen, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*. Westminster Press, 1976: 40, 41; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. SCM Press, 1974: 227-231, 267-270.

³Stott: 330; Lewis: 553.

⁴Ohlrich: 57.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Lewis: 553.

HANDOUT: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Week One)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Acts 8:3. "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

What is our confidence that no one can destroy the church?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Acts 8:1; Acts 8:1-3; Acts 8:8; Acts 9:2; Acts 9:10; Acts 9:25.

What types of persecution do we face where we live, work and play?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3

As Christians, how can we find comfort in suffering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS EXPLAINED

(00:30 - 00:50)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1: “Saul began to destroy the church.”

Acts 8:3. “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”

What is our confidence that no one can destroy the church?

Say something like...

- Satan is already defeated: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, [the Lord] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2:15).
- The righteous will be victorious: “For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity” (Proverbs 24:16).
- Our Lord keeps His promise: “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18b).

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2: “Persecution affects us differently.”

What types of persecution do we face where we live, work and play?

(Download persecution scale, if necessary, to show to the group:

<https://www.vomcanada.com/images/download/pers-scale-bookmark.pdf>)

Say something like...

The six different ways Christians were affected by persecution are:

Acts 8:1 - Apostles remained in Jerusalem seemingly unaffected in the midst of persecution.

Acts 8:1-3 - Christians imprisoned, killed or scattered.

Acts 8:8 - New Christians in Samaria (Philip the Evangelist).

Acts 9:2 - Christians in Damascus who had this impending threat of arrest.

Acts 9:10 - Christians in Damascus (Ananias) who would minister to the “persecutor.”

Acts 9:25 - Christians who help other persecuted Christians.

- The persecution scale helps us understand the levels of persecution that we may face today.
- It is an escalation scale starting with: *ridicule* (2 Chronicles 36:16); *harassment* (2 Corinthians 7:5); *discrimination* (John 15:18-21); *attacks* (Acts 16:22); *imprisonment* (Revelation 2:10); *torture* (Matthew 10:17); *martyrdom* (John 16:1-4).

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3: “Finding comfort in suffering.”

As Christians, how can we find comfort in suffering?

- We are comforted through Godly examples, such as the psalmist David who experienced God’s presence and help in the midst of his own suffering. Psalm 119 addresses: *provision* (v. 50), *prevention* (v. 67), *purpose* (v. 71), *providence* (v. 75) and *protection* (v. 92).
- We are comforted because Christ is already the Victor (John 16:33).
- We are comforted and, in turn, comfort others: (2 Corinthians 1:4).

WEEK TWO: Small Group Discussion

THEME

- We are invited to suffer with Christ.

BEGIN SESSION BY SAYING SOMETHING LIKE...

Welcome to this Small Group Session – Week Two. Our theme for today is: “We are invited to suffer with Christ.”

(Insert icebreaker.)

This is how the session will look. We will begin with prayer and worship songs. Our Scripture reading for today is based on this week’s theme. I also have a brief reading to give us context. I will be reading from “In the Shadow of the Cross” by Glenn Penner. We will be discussing the questions in the handout which I will pass around later, then we’ll conclude with prayer. The whole session will take about an hour.

ICEBREAKER (00:15 – 00:20)

(Use icebreaker to introduce theme.)

- Ask participants in the group to share examples of when they were bearers of either good news or bad news. What did they learn from the experience?
- Keep one of your own examples ready to share as needed.

Say something like... “Ananias was to take the good news of the Gospel to Saul, the Christian killer. His bold obedience paved the way for Paul to be the greatest apostle to the Gentiles.”

SCRIPTURE READING (00:20 – 00:25)

Acts 9:1-22

KEY VERSE

“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake” (Acts 9:16).

DEVOTIONAL READING (00:25 - 00:30)

The key questions that stand before us are, “What exactly is the cross that the follower of Jesus is called to carry?” We know what the cross of Christ achieved – the propitiation of our sins. “What do our crosses accomplish, however, within God’s plan?”

Please remember that Jesus does not call us to carry *His* cross. Rather, He calls each of us to pick up our own cross and follow Him.

The Meaning of the Cross

What is worth noting is that the call here is not simply an exhortation for the disciple to be prepared for death by crucifixion.... Cross-bearing is presented as being indicative of the level of life-commitment that will be necessary as a follower of Jesus.

The first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch wrote that “every criminal who is executed carries his own cross.” Unfortunately, I suspect the sense that the early church had of this saying is largely lost on us today. The “cross” of the believer has been trivialized into meaning pretty much anything that is unpleasant. But this is not the meaning that Jesus had when He said these words!

The “cross” does not consist of ordinary human troubles and sorrows such as disappointments, disease, death, poverty, and the like.⁷ If they are going to follow Him, Jesus told them, the disciples must deny themselves (renouncing their right to life), take up their cross and follow Him on the same path to death. They must be prepared every day to face death in their allegiance to their Master, after His example. Even more than that, they throw themselves into the purposes of God to such an extent that sacrifice at any level becomes the accepted norm. This is the cost of following Christ.

In order to build His church (Matthew 16:18), Christ’s death was necessary, as He points out in Matthew 16:21. This is the foundation. Without His death, there is no redeemed community.

But just as Christ’s cross was needed to establish His church, our crosses are needed to build His church.

In order to accomplish Jesus’ plan to build His church, both crosses are needed.

There is no better way to put it than to follow the lead of Josef Ton: “Christ’s cross was for propitiation. Our cross is for propagation.”⁸

The above text was written by Glenn Penner, author of *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), pp. 135-137.

⁷ L. W. Hurtado, *Jesus’ Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament*. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Society for Systematic Theology, April 7-10, 2003: 2.

⁸ Ton: 90.

HANDOUT: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Week Two)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

Acts 9:10. “Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’”
What are the implications of Ananias being sent to lay his hands on Saul for healing?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Acts 9:15a. “But the Lord said...‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name....’”
What does bearing the name of the One who was crucified mean to us in the 21st century?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3

Richard John Neuhaus wrote in *Death on a Friday Afternoon*:
“We will die anyway. The question is whether we will die senselessly or as companions and coworkers of the crucified and risen Lord.”
How will we choose to live and die in the light of this reality?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS EXPLAINED

(00:30 - 00:50)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1: "Here I am, Lord."

Acts 9:10. "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.'"

What are the implications of Ananias being sent to lay his hands on Saul for his healing?

Say something like...

- The body of Christ is to be involved in the restoration of people - even the persecutors.
- The sacrificial partnership of the church in helping, supporting and restoring men and women is a Biblical mandate.
- Another example is that of Lazarus. Jesus, who raised him from the dead, could have arranged for the grave clothes to be untied. Instead, He invited those around to unbind Lazarus. The church carries on this command of the Lord even today. Are we willing to say, "Here I am, Lord"?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2: "Chosen to bear My name."

Acts 9:15a. "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name....'"

What does bearing the name of the One who was crucified mean to us in the 21st century?

Say something like...

- We must not forget that we are the vessels or instruments God has chosen to carry His name to the rest of the world.
- Jesus Christ is still the rejected King in this world; therefore, carrying the name of Jesus into the world will not be without its challenges.
- We are all called to be the Lord's witnesses. The specific call on how each of us are to be His witness may differ, but the command is given to all of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3: "Choosing to live or die in the light of this reality."

Richard John Neuhaus (in *Death on a Friday Afternoon*) states: *"We will die anyway. The question is whether we will die senselessly or as companions and coworkers of the crucified and risen Lord."*

How will we choose to live and die in the light of this reality?

Say something like...

- We realize that we will all die. Yet to die fulfilling the purpose for which we have been kept here in this world will alter the way we live.
- When we choose to die daily to self, we practise the ability to make the choice of laying down our physical lives when circumstances require it.
- Conquering the fear of death through the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ helps us to fearlessly participate with our Lord in the salvation of the world.

WEEK THREE

Small Group Discussion

THEME

- Fulfilling What is Lacking in Christ's Sufferings

BEGIN SESSION BY SAYING SOMETHING LIKE...

- *Welcome to this Small Group Session - Week Three. Our theme for today is "Fulfilling What is Lacking in Christ's Sufferings."*

(Insert icebreaker.)

This is how this final session of the series will look. We will begin with prayer and worship songs. Our Scripture reading for today is based on this week's theme. I also have a brief reading based on the book, "The Triumphant Church," to give us context. Afterwards, we will be discussing the questions in the handout which I will pass around later. Then we will conclude with prayer. The whole session will take about an hour.

ICEBREAKER (00:15 - 00:20)

(Use icebreaker to introduce theme.)

- Ask your group members to write with their non-dominant hand as you read out the verse from Hebrews 13:3.
- Read at writing speed - neither too slow, nor too fast.
"Remember the prisoners as if chained with them - those who are mistreated - since you yourselves are in the body also."
- Compare to see how well they did - or did not - write. Have fun as people try to read aloud what they wrote.
- The lesson is that every part of the body in the Lord is useful for the proper functioning of the body as a whole.

Say something like... *"Just as we are unable to write well without the use of our dominant hand, we undertake tasks that make it apparent how indispensable every member is to the body of Christ."*

SCRIPTURE READING (00:20 - 00:25)

Colossians 1:24-29

KEY VERSE

"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

DEVOTIONAL READING (00:25 - 00:30)

How Can We Complete the Sufferings of Christ?

What does Paul mean by saying he completes what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Is this an unspeakable belittling of the all-sufficient, atoning worth of the death of Jesus?

Did not Jesus Himself say as He died, *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30)? Is it not true that *"by one offering He [Christ] has perfected forever those who are being sanctified"* (Hebrews 10:14)? And that *"with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption"* (Hebrews 9:12)?

Paul taught that the afflictions of Christ were a complete and sufficient ground for our justification. We are *"justified by His blood"* (Romans 5:9). Paul taught that Christ chose suffering and was *"obedient to the point of death"* (Philippians 2:8). That obedience of suffering was the all-sufficient ground of our righteousness before God. *"For as by one man's [Adam's] disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's [Christ's] obedience many will be made righteous"* (Romans 5:19). So Paul does not mean that his own sufferings complete the atoning worth of Jesus' afflictions.

There is a better interpretation.

Paul's sufferings complete Christ's afflictions not by *adding* anything to their worth, but by *extending* them to the people they were meant to save.

What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ does not mean they are deficient in worth, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions is not fully known and trusted in the world.

These afflictions and what they mean are still hidden to most people. And God's intention is that the mystery be revealed to all nations. So the afflictions of Christ are "lacking" in the sense that they are not seen and known and loved among all the nations. They must be carried by ministers of the Word.

The ministers of the Word "complete" what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others.

The Triumphant Church: A Three-Part Study from the Writings of Richard Wurmbrand, John Piper and Milton Martin, compiled by The Voice of the Martyrs, 1999, pp. 54-55.

HANDOUT: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Week Three)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1

The expression “crux of the matter”⁹ originated from the centrality of the cross. Also, we know that the crux of the Gospel is the cross.

How does the understanding “at the heart of the Gospel is the cross” make a difference to our Christian living?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, and yet it is also the most persecuted.¹⁰

How has the persecution of Christians globally affected your faith - both in conviction and in response?

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3

Proverbs 31:8. “Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die.”

Paul said that he was fulfilling what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? What about you?

How will you in North America be a ‘voice of the martyrs’ on behalf of those who are suffering for the cause of Christ?

⁹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/crux>

¹⁰ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/why-are-christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-group-115410/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS EXPLAINED

(00:30 - 00:50)

DISCUSSION QUESTION #1: “Crux of the matter.”

The expression “crux of the matter”¹¹ originated from the centrality of the cross. Also, we know that the crux of the Gospel is the cross.

How does understanding “at the heart of the Gospel is the cross” make a difference to our Christian living?

Say something like...

- There is no separating suffering and persecution from the Christian faith.
- Following a crucified Christ implies being willing to die.
- There is a faulty understanding that Christ has removed all suffering. While this is true in the case of the atoning work needed for salvation, suffering is still being experienced by Christians who are advancing the work required for the spreading of the Gospel.

DISCUSSION QUESTION #2: “Conviction and response.”

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, and yet it is also the most persecuted.¹²

How has the persecution of Christians globally affected your faith - both in conviction and in response?

Say something like...

- Christianity is not for those seeking a “comfortable” and “easy” lifestyle. It’s a radical faith requiring allegiance beyond the armchair mentality that can be reflective of Christianity in North America.
- The truth of God’s Word requires action of Christians, moving us from mere passive agreement to a passionate commitment.

DISCUSSION QUESTION #3: “Be a voice of the martyrs.”

Proverbs 31:8. “Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die.”

Paul said that he was fulfilling what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? What about you?

How will you in North America be ‘a voice of the martyrs’ on behalf of those who are suffering for the cause of Christ?

Say something like...

Here are some important ways in which you can be “a voice....”

¹¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/crux>

¹² <http://www.christianpost.com/news/why-are-christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-group-115410/>

- *Pray:* Commit to praying for their continued faithfulness.
- *Participate:* Write letters of encouragement; help financially; organize events to increase awareness of the plight faced by our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.
- *Proclaim:* Be willing to engage in difficult conversations with people; talk to legislators as needed; preach or teach on suffering and persecution.
- *Persist:* Live the life that Christ demands in order to complete “*what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.*”

GROUP PRAYER

(00:50 – 01:00)

SAY SOMETHING LIKE...

Nothing can be done without prayer.

Prayer acknowledges our weakness, affirms our faith, and strengthens our resolve that God will do His mighty work through us.

PRAY FOR:

- The persecutors to come to know Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.
- The government and the country leaders, so they will lead their people well.
- The persecuted who are imprisoned.
- The families of the persecuted who are lonely, marginalized and suffering.

DOWNLOAD/SUBSCRIBE

- Weekly prayer list from => <https://vomcanada.com/pnpord.htm>

CLOSE IN PRAYER

SOLITARY REFINEMENT

An immersive live stage experience based on the best-selling books of Richard Wurmbrand, and on persecution around the world today.

The Voice of the Martyrs Canada makes each performance free to the host church and to audiences in your entire community.

Running Time: 75 minutes | For Ages 13+
Free admission | Reception follows
Contributions gratefully accepted

This fully realized play takes you deep into the underground church, tales of unimaginable suffering -- and unmistakable joy.

In the midst of our deepest darkness, comes God's overwhelming light.

The script is written and performed by award-winning international artist Dennis J. Hassell, directed by triple Dora Award nominee Tom Carson (five nationally touring productions), with original music composed by Emmy-winner and renowned recording artist Tom Szczesniak.

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