

Aim of lesson

To help the young people to understand that the suffering in the world is not a sign that God does not care, but is an indication of the lengths he is willing to go to in order to bring men and women to repent.

Bible background

Romans 8:18-32.

Preparation required

You will need to familiarise yourself with the subject and with the content of the lesson. The frame of mind in which you present the subject is very important. If we are teaching the young people about a compassionate, loving God, the lesson needs to be presented with much the same attitude.

Suggested outline of lesson

The scope of this subject is large, and it is important that you should reach a conclusion at the end. You need therefore to keep track of time quite carefully, and you need to be prepared to reduce the content of the lesson, or to spend two weeks on the subject. You should try to avoid spending the time discussing the problem without ever finding any answers.

Definition

Start by introducing the subject, maybe in the context of a recent item of news. Get the young people to make a list of examples of suffering. Make sure that these include:

- Natural disasters which are beyond the control of man - like floods, tornadoes and drought
- Man-made disasters such as wars
- Natural problems which we make worse - like famines exacerbated by war and greed
- Personal suffering caused by illness
- Personal violence, bullying and selfishness
- Unhappiness caused by difficult relationships with other people

Summarise them by saying that they include suffering:

- On a global scale, affecting all nations, as well as personal
- Natural and man-made disasters
- Suffering that affects people who know the gospel as well as those who don't

Causes

Ask the young people about the causes of these things. Some are beyond human control; some are directly attributable to sin; others are a combination of the two.

Does God know?

Ask the young people whether they think God knows what is going on. They will probably answer that he does, but it is still worth referring to the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:29-30, even if you don't turn up the passage: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.'

Clearly the Almighty knows and understands every detail of the world that he has made.

How does God feel?

There is a sense in which this is not our business. God is the potter, we the clay, and we have no real right to question his motives or feelings. He has however given us some indications in scripture of how the suffering in the world affects him.

Genesis 6:5-6: At the time of the flood, God was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and 'his heart was filled with pain' (NIV).

1 Chronicles 21:15: When God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem he 'was grieved because of the calamity' (NIV), or 'repented him of the evil' (AV).

Isaiah 63:9,10: God explains his distress at the sufferings of his people, then his vexation (grief NIV) at their disobedience.

Lamentations 3:31-40: God brings suffering reluctantly, not to crush men and women but to cause them to return to him.

Jonah 4:11: God explains his reasons for not destroying Nineveh by saying to Jonah "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Ezekiel 33:11: God has no desire that anyone should die, but wishes everyone to repent.

Luke 19:41-44: Jesus wept over the faithlessness of Jerusalem and their impending destruction.

So, in summary, God is grieved by the wickedness of men and by the suffering that they experience. This applies to all men on the earth, not just his people.

Does God cause suffering?

1 Samuel 2:6-7: God brings life and death; poverty and wealth.

Amos 3:6: Nothing happens without God.

Isaiah 45:5-10: God is the bringer of both good and bad.

Luke 13:1-5: Jesus refers to two disasters - the first man-made, the second natural. In both cases he makes the point that these things did not come as a direct result of the sufferer's sin; we should however learn from them the need for repentance and personal salvation.

Why?

Hebrews 12:5-11: God disciplines his people in the same way as a father disciplines his children.

Ask the young people if they know of any children who always got what they wanted immediately; did they become considerate, compassionate people, or spoiled and selfish.

Hebrews 2:10: Jesus was perfected through his sufferings.

Deuteronomy 8:1-3: God let his people hunger so that they would learn their dependence on him.

1 Peter 5:6-10: Peter writes to disciples who were about to be persecuted, to encourage them with the thought that through their suffering God would strengthen them.

Finally, think about the qualities that are central to God's character - 'the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness'. Can we really understand or develop these characteristics if nobody ever does anything to us that we need to forgive; if there is nobody who needs our help.

Summary

Romans 8:18-25 summarises all of these points. Try to use a modern translation, as the AV is a little obscure. These verses tell us that

- It was God who made his creation 'subject to frustration'. Not only natural disasters, but all the things wrong with the world, were brought about by God.
- He did this 'in hope' - for a positive reason, wanting people to be 'brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God!' So the suffering in the world, even if we do not understand it, is not pointless.
- At the moment life is hard and painful - 'the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time'.

- These things grieve us - we 'groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies'. We long for something better. We have also learned that they grieve the Almighty.
- It is this hope that brings us to salvation. If everything were perfect now, we would not want God's salvation - 'Who hopes for what he already has?'
- But since it is not perfect, we long for his kingdom to come.

Now read Romans 8:28-32 and talk about the impact they should have on the way we look at life.

Finally you may like to discuss with the young people the quotations on the last page of their notes.

Relevance to our lives

Some people seem to sail through life with no real problems; others lurch from one crisis to another. But at some point in our lives most of us will experience a real difficulty. We have no idea what it will be; it could be a sudden death of a loved one, or an illness, or unemployment ... who knows? We cannot tell the future, and to us it appears that 'time and chance' happen to us all; but it is good to know that all these things are in the hands of a loving creator.

Prayer

You may like to say the Lord's prayer with the young people, thinking especially about the words 'Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', and 'deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever', Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

You could talk about what you would say to someone who was suffering. How much might it help them to think about this subject? Is it best to get the topic in perspective at a time when we are not suffering?

The CSSU has published a leaflet called 'Why Bad Things Happen'. You may like to obtain copies for the young people in your class, and to discuss it with them.