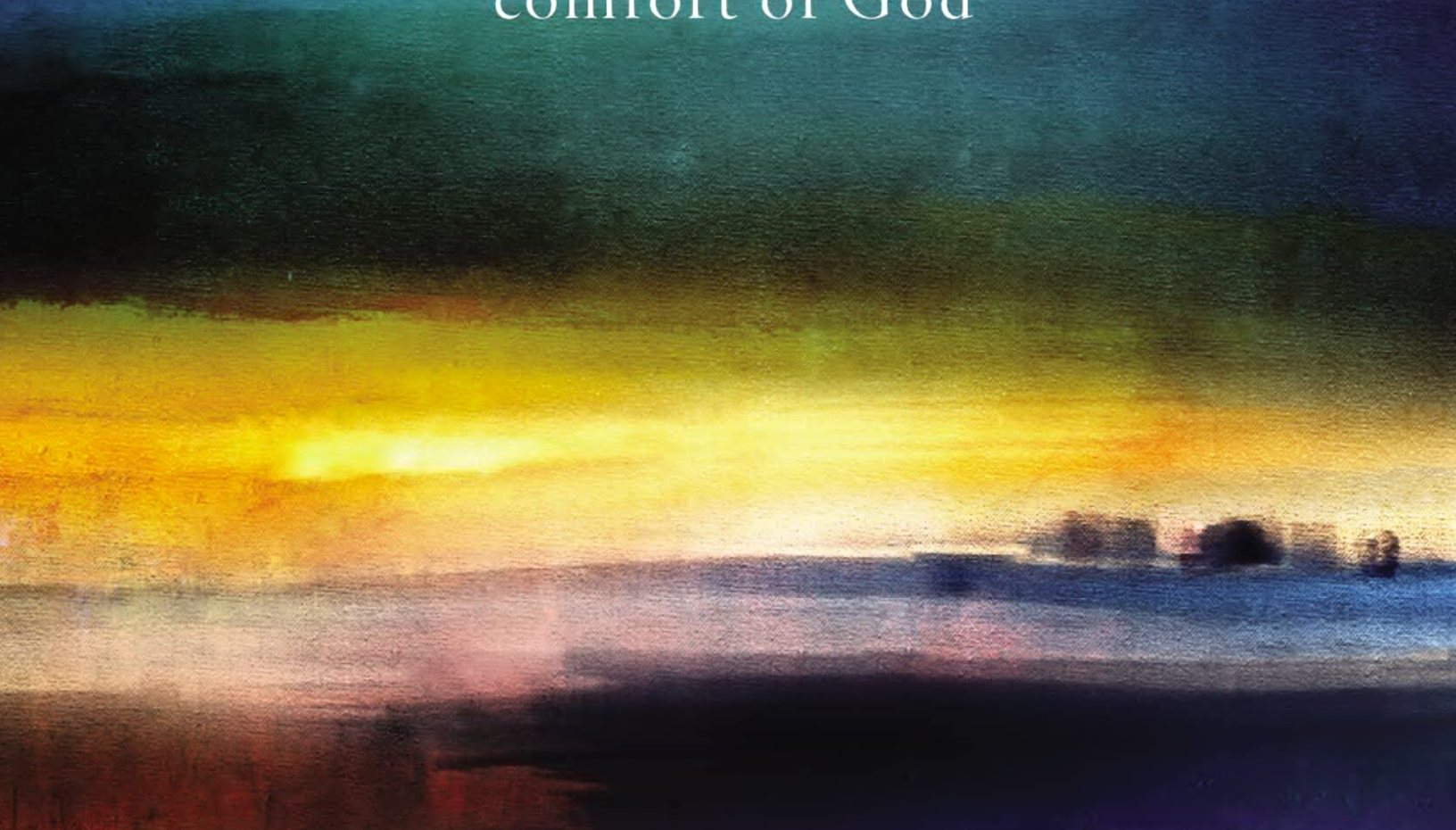


T I M C H A L L I E S

seasons
of SORROW

the pain of loss and the
comfort of God



Seasons of Sorrow

Personal Application Questions & Group Study Guide

Some who read *Seasons of Sorrow* will benefit from meditating upon questions meant to personally apply what it teaches. This guide contains questions drawn from each of its chapters that are meant to provoke meditation and application.

Seasons of Sorrow can also be used in group settings—Bible studies, reading groups, family devotions, and so on. It can be read at whatever pace is most suitable for the purpose. However, it falls quite naturally into four or eight sessions:

Four Sessions

- Session 1: Prologue & Fall (chapters 1-11)
- Session 2: Winter (chapters 12-21)
- Session 3: Spring (chapters 22-31)
- Session 4: Summer (chapters 32-42) and Epilogue

Eight Sessions

- Session 1: Prologue and chapters 1-5
- Session 2: Chapters 6-11
- Session 3: Chapters 12-16
- Session 4: Chapters 17-21
- Session 5: Chapters 22-26
- Session 6: Chapters 27-31
- Session 7: Chapters 32-37
- Session 8: Chapters 38-42 & Epilogue

This guide provides questions divided into eight sessions. If you choose to read the book in more or fewer sessions, simply adapt accordingly. And, of course, feel free to skip over any of these questions or supplement them with your own.

Prologue & Chapters 1-5

Why are you reading *Seasons of Sorrow*? What do you hope to gain from it?

In the Prologue Tim says that he wrote—in fact that he *had* to write—in order to process his grief. “I *had* to write because I had to know what to think and what to believe, what to feel and what to do. I had to know whether to rage or to worship, whether to run or to bow, whether to give up or to go on.” What is your naturally tendency when processing your sorrows? Do you process internally or externally? Do you talk, write, think, or perhaps avoid processing it altogether? (Prologue, page xiv)

“I wrote my praise and my lament, my questions and my doubts, my grief and my joy.” What are some of the laments, questions, and doubts you’ve had to grapple with in your times of suffering? Do you believe that Christians can lament, question, and doubt without sinning? (Prologue, page xiv)

“The hope his Christian faith offered him is not of a future in which humanity becomes disembodied souls or angelic beings or a part of the cosmos, but something so much better, something so much more fitting for our humanity.” What are some of the false beliefs you have heard people express about what happens to human beings after they die? Why is it so important to understand that we remain as human beings after death and that we will be resurrected as human beings rather than angels or other creatures? (Chapter 1, page 5)

Tim says, “Nick was ready. Even though he was young, he was ready to die. He had settled the state of his soul. He had prepared for the day of his death.” Are you ready to die? Have you settled the state of your soul? Have you prepared for the day of your death? If so, what makes you so sure? If not, why? What will you do about it? (Chapter 1, page 6)

In chapter 3 Tim talks about being overcome by a kind of mental, emotional, and spiritual fog in the days following Nick’s death. Have you ever experienced something like this? How might you be able to help someone who has experienced loss and is in this state? What might prove unhelpful for them? (Chapter 3, page 12)

“A wise man once said that the true victory of faith is to trust God in the dark and through the dark.” Have there been times when you have had to trust God in the dark and through the dark? Were you able to do so? How was God present with you through those times of darkness? (Chapter 3, page 14)

Tim was comforted to have expressed his love for Nick and his pride in him before he died. “I love you as much as any father can love a son; I’m as proud of you as any father can be proud of a son; I miss you as much as any father can miss a son.” Is there something you would regret having neglected to say to one of your loved ones if they were to be suddenly taken from you? What’s stopping you from saying it today? (Chapter 4, page 17).

Pondering his confidence in a future day of resurrection, Tim says, “This is not a fingers-crossed, wish-upon-a-star kind of hope, but a sure and steady conviction that what is sown perishable will be raised imperishable, that what is sown in dishonor will be raised in glory, that what is sown in weakness will be raised in power.” Why is it so important to the Christian faith that we have an unshakeable confidence in a literal, physical resurrection? What would be left of the Christian faith if we removed this? (Chapter 5, page 21)

Chapters 6-11

“Nick is at rest. He is asleep. Yet I’m relieved to know it is merely his body that sleeps, not his soul. Though his body lies in the grave, his soul has gone to be with Christ.” Why is it such a blessing to be able to speak of those who have died in Christ as merely being asleep? How do you find this metaphor comforting? (Chapter 6, page 25)

“God’s goodness does not vary with our circumstances but is fully present and on display in our worst moments as well as our best, in our most lamentable experiences as well as our most joyful.” Are you ever tempted to believe that God has stopped expressing his goodness during your times of suffering and sorrow? How does faith answer this kind of doubt or uncertainty? What are some of the ways you have seen God express his goodness in your trying circumstances? (Chapter 7, page 28)

What kinds of situations tempt you to doubt that God really knows best—that his will is truly better than your own? How does the faith that saved you also call you to trust God in all of life’s circumstances—both the ones you would choose anyway and the ones you would never choose? (Chapter 7, page 30)

“It falls to me ... not to take blame for what happened, nor to attempt to determine God’s reasons for it, but simply to accept this as his will—his divine will, his secret will, his good will.” Do you struggle with the reality that God often doesn’t answer the “why” questions that may plague us in our times of sorrow and suffering? Can you understand why it’s better that he doesn’t? How does faith express itself in the absence of such answers? (Chapter 8, page 35)

In his manifesto Tim says, “I will grieve but not grumble, mourn but not murmur, weep but not whine.” How is it that Christians can grieve, mourn, and weep yet without grumbling, murmuring, or whining? What is the distinction between lament, which the Bible both models and permits, and grumbling, which it does not? (Chapter 9, page 36)

“This sorrow will not make me angry or bitter, nor cause me to act out in rebellion or indignation. Rather, it will make me kinder and gentler, more patient and loving, more compassionate and sympathetic.” What Christians have you heard of or seen first-hand who have become godlier—more conformed to the image of Christ—as they have endured deep sorrows? How does this challenge you in your times of suffering or grief? (Chapter 9, page 37)

“One of the realities of grieving as a Christian is the coexistence of heights of joy alongside depths of sorrow. They run in parallel, like two streams flowing from a common mountain peak and traveling through the same valley, yet never quite touching, never quite emptying into the sea to become one.” Have you ever experienced joys and sorrows side-by-side and in the same circumstance? How does the Christian faith enable you to grieve and rejoice all at once? And why it is important that you don’t minimize either one? (Chapter 10, page 40)

Have there been times in your life when you haven’t merely had a fear of God but been actually afraid of God—afraid of his power, afraid of his sovereignty, afraid of what he might ask of you? What did this tell you about your faith? How did God meet you in those fears? (Chapter 11, page 43)

Chapters 12-16

“Surely he is not a God who forsakes his people when they need him, his children when they cry out for him. Surely he is not a God who is least present when most needed.” What are some times in your life that God has been most present when you have most needed him? How has he cared for you in your most difficult circumstances? How has he been faithful to his promises? (Chapter 12, page 50)

An honest and sorrowful man once cried out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief.” When have you encountered times when your faith was tested to the max, when you believed in God’s promises, yet also grappled with unbelief? How did God help you through those times? (Chapter 13, page 53)

Tim says that grief, like love, “has many hues, many shades, many facets.” Have you seen it to be true that, just like we naturally express love in different ways, we also naturally express grief in different ways? How could this knowledge challenge you in times when you are sorrowful and suffering? How do you tend to express your grief? And how can you be patient with others and loving toward them as they grieve in different ways? (Chapter 15, page 58)

Why do we visit the graves of our loved ones? What are some appropriate things to say or do when we make such visits? What are some inappropriate things to say or do—things that may show a misunderstanding of the Bible or a mistrust in God? (Chapter 15, page 62)

Tim prayed, “If I can best bring glory to you through weakness, then I say take my strength; if I can best bring glory to you through poverty, then I say take my riches; if I can best bring glory to you through loss, then I say take it all.” How does your faith in God enable you to truly commit all you are and all you have to God’s purposes? Is there anything or anyone you are unwilling to surrender to the Lord? If so, what will you do about it? (Chapter 16, page 67)

Chapters 17-21

How is the biblical concept of stewardship helpful when we consider our suffering and sorrows? What difficulties may God be asking you to faithfully steward for his glory? (Chapter 17, page 69)

“Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” Are there some areas of life in which you are unwilling to surrender to God’s will? What are you afraid to commit to his care and what might this say about your faith or spiritual maturity? (Chapter 18, page 75)

“I know God promises grace sufficient for every trial, but only trials that have actually happened, that exist in the real world, rather than the world of fantasy. I know God’s power is made perfect in genuine weakness, not imagined.” What are some areas in which you are tempted to imagine trials and then feel all the grief and emotion that may come with them? Why is it so important to keep yourself from this kind of fantasy? (Chapter 18, page 75)

“I’m so proud of you, Nick. I’m proud of the life you lived and the legacy you left. Everyone who knew you has spoken well of you. Friends, neighbors, students, cousins, church members—all spoke of a man who was gentle and kind, godly and good.” How

would you like people to remember you if you are taken very suddenly? What are you doing today to ensure that people will, indeed, remember you in these ways? (Chapter 19, page 79)

“What comfort there is in knowing that when we come to the end of our lives, we do not depart into the ether or disappear into the void, but simply go home.” How does it comfort you to know that the Bible speaks of heaven as “home?” Do you find yourself homesick? If not, what might this say about your understanding of heaven? (Chapter 20, page 84)

“Those who love God and are loved by him can have confidence that he is working through all of life’s circumstances to bring good out of bad, light out of darkness, joy out of sorrow.” What are some of the ways you have seen God work all things for good in your times of difficulty? How is it comforting to know that “it’s not that God is especially agile, a kind of cosmic PR man adept at manipulating circumstances, but rather that he is the planner, the engineer, the designer, who has ordained the means just as much as the end”? (Chapter 21, page 87)

“All things for good’ is God’s assurance that if I trust him with the present, he will make good on the future.” What are some of the areas in which you are trusting God with the present and believing he will make good on the future? What are some areas you are not trusting him in this way but ought to? Where is God calling you to believe in his “afterward” promises? (Chapter 21, page 89)

Chapters 22-26

“I trust that Nick lived the number of years, days, hours, minutes, and seconds that were perfect for him. His life was not cut short but lived to the final moment of God’s good plan. He was kept by God until he was ready to go and ready to be taken, ready to be gathered in. And then God called him home.” How does the Christian faith offer us this kind of hope, this kind of confidence? How is it better that we trust God even ahead of our own desires? (Chapter 22, page 95)

“In a place where so many are buried beneath vapid platitudes and trite iconography, I want the world to know that this man loved Jesus and has gone to be with him.” Have you ever thought about what you would wish to have inscribed on your gravestone? In what way could your gravestone “preach” even long after you have been buried and even forgotten? (Chapter 23, page 97)

As he emptied out Nick's room, Tim told of a kind of divided loyalty in which his heart was split between a desire to remain here on earth and a desire to be in heaven. Do you have that kind of divided heart? Do you long to be in heaven? Who is in heaven and almost beckoning you toward a great reunion? (Chapter 24, 104)

Jesus explained to the religious leaders of his day that it was very significant that God had once said, "I *am* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" rather than "I *was* their God." How does this distinction make all the difference when you are grieving your loved ones? How does it give you hope and confidence? (Chapter 25, page 107)

"God makes it clear that he is the one who begins life and ends life, who raises up and brings back down. The Lord is the one who gives and who takes away, so that each of us is born according to the will of God and dies according to the will of God." Do you agree with this? Does it provoke worship or anger to read "In the most ultimate sense, Nick's cause of death is God himself"? Do we have anything to fear from so boldly asserting God's sovereignty over all things? What do we stand to gain? (Chapter 26, page 112)

"I believe and profess there is nothing better than for God to do whatever he pleases, nothing more suitable than for God to work his will. That is true, whether it leads to laughter or tears, whether it brings me pleasure or pain, whether it gives or takes away." Can you believe and profess this? Are you willing to worship God even through tears, even in pain, and even when he takes those you love? Have you honestly considered if there is a point at which you might be tempted to no longer consider God worthy of your worship? (Chapter 26, page 114)

Chapters 27-31

"What seemed to be a great defeat on Friday was turned into a great triumph on Sunday! Easter is the day of resurrection, the day of victory, the day of hope." How is our hope for the future of our loved ones completely and unashamedly grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? If Christ has not been raised, how does that destroy any hope you may have for your resurrection or that of those you have loved and lost? (Chapter 27, page 118)

Are you afraid to die? What is it about death that is scary to you? What can you do to counter those fears with truth? (Chapter 28, page 122)

Charles Spurgeon once said that "the singularity of sorrow is a dream of the sufferer." Have there been times in your sorrows that you believed no one could sympathize with

you? How is it helpful in these times to consider Jesus as “a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief?” (Chapter 29, page 124)

In chapter 30 Tim recounts a day when the Lord arranged providence to provide comfort in a time of especially deep sorrow. What are some of the special providences you have witnessed in your life? Who has God provided to minister to you in times when you were desperate for help? (Chapter 30, page 131)

In the wedding speech he never got to deliver, Tim says, “We cannot live in the past, and we cannot live in the future. We can only ever live in the day God has created for us. The key to living life well is to live each day well.” What disciplines have you integrated into your life to ensure you are living each day well? How is God calling you to live each of your days with meaning and significance? (Chapter 30, page 135)

“Is it not appropriate, then, that I should turn my lamentation into praise, my grief into hope, my sorrow into expectation, confident that Nick has gone where he can thrive, where he can flourish, where his every dream can be made good?” Do you truly believe that heaven is a better place? That it is a place where your loved ones can thrive and flourish and see their every dream made good? Where do you think your understanding of heaven has been too earthly? (Chapter 31, page 139)

Chapters 32-37

“If in the early days we needed strength to keep our heads above water, strength to simply keep us from drowning in sorrow, we now needed endurance, the fortitude to carry a heavy burden through a long journey.” There are some sorrows we may have to carry for only a short while, but others we may need to carry for a lifetime. What are some sorrows you will be carrying for the rest of your life? Do you believe that God can strengthen and equip you to carry them faithfully to the end? In what ways should you pray for him to give you the courage you need? (Chapter 32, page 144)

“Just as [God] calls some to proclaim his gospel in far-off lands, he calls some to bear witness to his goodness in grief. Just as he calls some to bravely face the fire of persecution, he calls some to courageously face the pain of bereavement. Just as he calls some to give generously and some to act mercifully, he calls some to grieve faithfully.” Who have you known who has been called to a ministry of sorrow and how have they ministered to you? In all honesty, are you willing to have God call you to this ministry if that is his will? (Chapter 33, page 150)

“I’m not the same man I was when Nick was alive. I’m deeply wounded, deeply scarred, deeply broken. Yet I know it is God who decreed this suffering, and I accept it as something meaningful, something precious, something sacred.” How does the Christian faith call and equip us to accept even the deepest suffering as meaningful? Is there a kind of suffering God is wanting you to accept as meaningful, precious, and sacred? Will you accept it as a gift from his hand—a gift to be used for the good of others and the glory of God? (Chapter 33, page 153)

“I have never been more willing to simply trust him with my life, my heart, my prayers. And so, for the time being, I will continue to pray with hope, with faith, and even with some expectation.” Where may God be wanting you to pray with hope, with faith, and even with some expectation? Where may he be willing to reward your prayer, if only you will persevere in it? (Chapter 34, page 156)

How does it make all the difference to our understanding of Psalm 23 to acknowledge that the Shepherd is not merely present in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but has actually led the sheep by that way? How is it comforting to know that “the shepherd who leads them in will lead them through and lead them out.” If not Psalm 23, what passage in the Bible are you most likely to turn to in your moments of suffering and loss? (Chapter 35, page 159)

Are there any particularly precious objects you cling to in order to remind yourself of those you have loved and lost? What makes those objects so meaningful? What is especially precious to you that someone may cling to after you have passed away? (Chapter 36, page 163)

Part of what makes death so difficult is that we can no longer express love toward the people we have lost. Yet we can still take action toward those that they loved and cared for. Why is it actually such a good thing that our loved ones no longer need anything from us? Who could you show love to as a means of loyalty toward someone you have lost? (Chapter 37, page 169)

Chapters 38-42 & Epilogue

“My challenge for today is not to bear the grief of a lifetime or to be faithful to the end, but only to carry today’s grief and only to be faithful on this one little day that he has spread out before me.” How does it help us faithfully carry our griefs and sorrows when we focus on one little day instead of an entire lifetime? What are some ways you are

tempted to be overwhelmed by the responsibilities of a lifetime rather than faithful in just one little day? (Chapter 38, page 172)

As you think of a fellow Christian you have loved and lost, can you say with confidence, “death did him no harm” or “death did her no harm?” What might be keeping you from believing this, professing this, and living like it’s true? Do you have confidence that death will do you no harm? (Chapter 39, page 175)

After describing the day of resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 Paul says, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Do you ponder the day of Christ’s return—the day when the dead will rise? Do you encourage others with this truth? Why is it so important that we not only believe in this reality, but also meditate upon it and speak to others about it? (Chapter 40, page 180)

Do you expect to leave a great mark on this world and be remembered for generations to come, or do you expect that within a few decades you will be forgotten on earth? How does the gospel ensure your life is meaningful even if it is short or even if you are not remembered for long after your death? (Chapter 41, page 185)

Do you have a vision for your life and death—a vision that gives birth to purpose? How are you living in such a way as to make this vision become reality? (Chapter 42, page 189)

“To keep one hand on the plow while wiping away tears with the other—this is the essence of living and laboring as a Christian.” In what ways are you working and weeping as you make your journey to heaven? Are you confident that you can keep your hand on the plow to the very end? What gives you this confidence? (Epilogue, page 195)

What have you learned from *Seasons of Sorrow* that you hope will be in your mind and on your heart during your inevitable times of suffering, grief, or loss? In what ways has it better equipped you for life’s sorrows?

What have you learned from *Seasons of Sorrow* that you believe may better equip you to comfort friends or family members when they go through times of grief?