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FOREWORD FROM JONI

What brings you to a Bible study with *Hard Times* in the title? Divorce, disease, a financial crisis with no relief in sight? Perhaps your life has been altered by disability, like mine, or maybe you are here as support for a friend going through a difficult season? Regardless of what brought you here, I can assure you that you're in the right place.

I'm Joni Eareckson Tada. After I broke my neck in a diving accident at seventeen, I faced many of the same questions you may have: Why me, God? How can such tragedies be part of your plan? Looking back on more than fifty years as a quadriplegic in a wheelchair, having endured chronic pain, as well as a battle with breast cancer a few years ago, I can assure you that God isn't afraid of our questions. In fact, he wants us to cry out—scream out to him if we must—because when we turn to God and his Word for answers, we'll find a loving Father who promises to never let us out of his sight and who wants to turn our tragedies into triumphs.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹ When we trust God through life's hardships and struggles, we find our own faith strengthened—and our friends and neighbors notice. When the church rallies around those in need and becomes a safe place to find hope and healing, the world takes notice. My prayer is that this study will start that awakening within you and within your congregation.

As a restless teenager watching my friends leave for college while I learned to navigate life with limited mobility, I couldn't have known that God would call me to start an international disability ministry and travel the world as an advocate on behalf of those affected by disability. What might God want to do as you trust him with your struggles?

I have a *great* idea. Let's seek him and find out.

[JONI SIGNATURE]

INTRODUCTION

Hard times come to every human being in various forms, degrees, and stages of life. We live in a broken world, so we all suffer for all kinds of reasons—poverty, disease, disability, loss, broken relationships—the list is as long and unique as each of our circumstances. We can't really compare our hard times to others, but we can be assured that God knows all about what we are experiencing and will not leave us or forsake us.

Suffering is a catalyst that can deepen our understanding of God's plan. How we choose to react to hardship has life-altering potential. Conflict and pain force us beyond our comfort zone to seek answers. We seemingly understand this better on a physical level than in the spiritual realm. For example, we take vitamins for a weak body, seek education to improve our minds, go to physical therapy for aching joints, or join a dating website for a lonely heart. While these efforts are useful, hard times usually bring us to a spiritual fork in the road as well. We ignore this truth at our own peril.

Augustine of Hippo said, "Thou has made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." Herein lies the good news of the gospel. Regardless of the source or duration of our hardships in a broken world, God has created us for his glory. And Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has opened the door to the forgiveness, restoration, relationship, and the assurance of eternal life.

In this small group Bible study we'll look to Jesus, our Great Shepherd, for answers to today's hard questions. Why am I going through this? Where is God when I need him? Can the church help me carry this burden? We'll discover how a diverse faith community—"one body with many parts"—can not only meet our needs but help us reach out to those in society who are afflicted and marginalized. The church holds the healing and hope the world needs. Regardless of current circumstances, we can boast in our afflictions because we know Christ's power rests in us.

"That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9 NLT).

The gospel works—especially in hard times.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Gospel in Hard Times is a small group study intended to help you understand the presence and power of God in the midst of life's hardships and struggles. God wants to redeem every situation and use it to deepen your faith and make you more like Jesus Christ. In these lessons, you will meet real-life people in crisis—ordinary people in a sea of hopelessness who have watched God turn their darkness into light.

There are eight lessons. Each lesson is self-contained, featuring clear teaching from Scripture, and requires no extra work outside of the group setting. You will have optional ways to keep applying what you've learned between lessons, but you will be able to fully participate in each group meeting whether or not you've done the optional activities.

Lesson 1:
Hard Times, Hard Questions

Hard times are part of the human condition. They come in various forms, degrees, and life stages to both the innocent and the guilty. Some struggles originate from false beliefs, misguided choices, or selfish behaviors, and others seem arbitrary. But none of our troubles surprise God. In John 16:33 Jesus warned his followers, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." As believers, we face a choice: Will I allow suffering to overwhelm me and drive me away from God? Or will I cry out to God in my distress and come to Christ, the overcomer?

Lesson 2:
Jesus Identifies with Our Sorrow

In this lesson, we see Jesus as our fellow-sufferer who identifies with all our struggles. Isaiah 53:3 says, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." It is natural to wonder why God allowed his Son to endure such affliction and pain. But Jesus suffered willingly on the cross to become "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). So in your loneliest, darkest hour, you can rest assured that Jesus understands, cares, and has a plan of redemption.

Lesson 3
An Ever-Present Help

In this lesson, we'll consider how our Good Shepherd knows the way through life's valleys. While we tend to give in to sadness and isolation, the Good Shepherd is always beside us, prodding us to higher ground. He never forgets or abandons his own. He knows his sheep and leads each one to new strengths in difficult seasons. As we follow Jesus, we remember his gentle faithfulness and give thanks in every circumstance.

Lesson 4
A Place of Healing

In this lesson, we examine God's call to lay down our heavy burdens and remove the masks that prevent us from living authentic lives. Whether we face chronic pain, mental

disorders, broken relationships, or isolation due to a disability, suffering can prevent us from fully participating in life, as well as in the family of God. Only as we embrace the biblical meaning of healing can we comfort others and transform our churches into places of healing and hope.

Lesson 5

Bring in the Broken

In this lesson, we discover that God’s mission for the church includes all people, especially those who are treated unjustly by society. In Jesus’s time on earth, he often stopped to help the sick, poor, and disabled. In Luke 14:12–24, he used a parable to give his followers a powerful mandate about welcoming and including people who are marginalized and disabled into the life of the church.

Lesson 6

One Body, Many Parts

In this lesson, we focus on making disciples of all who believe in Jesus Christ. People who are disabled and marginalized often feel they have nothing to offer or they don’t belong—even in the church. But God’s spiritual gifts are for all people, without exception and regardless of abilities. In 1 Corinthians 12:22 the Apostle Paul describes the church as one body with many parts. He goes a step further saying the church is incomplete when it fails to include those “parts of the body that seem weakest and least important [because they] are actually the most necessary” (NLT).

Lesson 7

Living for Christ: Joni’s Story

In this lesson, we consider how we can honor God and serve others through our suffering. We’ve all read about people who have faced unimaginable affliction and pain but somehow continue to remain steadfast in their Christian faith. Over the past few lessons, we’ve learned that no one is immune from suffering in our world. We’ve also seen how God can redeem our struggles for his purposes. Joni Eareckson Tada has triumphed through tremendous adversity for more than fifty years by trusting in God’s redemptive plan and believing that his incredible power rests upon her.

Lesson 8

Reasons for Hope

In this lesson, we celebrate our hope in Jesus Christ who died in our place and swung open the door to spiritual healing and eternal life. This is the good news of the gospel. Regardless of our abilities, fears, or weaknesses, our hope must be in “the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). Even when our prayers seem to go unanswered, we can trust that God is working all things together for our good (see Romans 8:28).

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each lesson follows a similar format, beginning with a quote and a promise statement that prepare your thinking, and with a summary of the lesson to come. From there, the lesson includes the following elements:

Hard Times in the World

These articles begin with original stories that show we’re not alone in our struggles. Whether problems are physical, emotional, or intellectual, you will meet men and women with whom you can identify and relate to their suffering and their victories. The articles will show how we, according to God’s plan, live in a world and a time of many struggles. Acknowledging this will prepare us for the Bible discussion that follows. You will usually read through this article on your own, with a chance to discuss your thoughts with the group when you’re done, unless your group prefers to have someone read it aloud.

Bible Foundation

In this section, you will read along with your group and study together what the Bible says about the lesson topic, applying it through exercises and discussions. Relevant Scripture passages will provide direct insights using biblical characters that illustrate the lesson.

The Witness

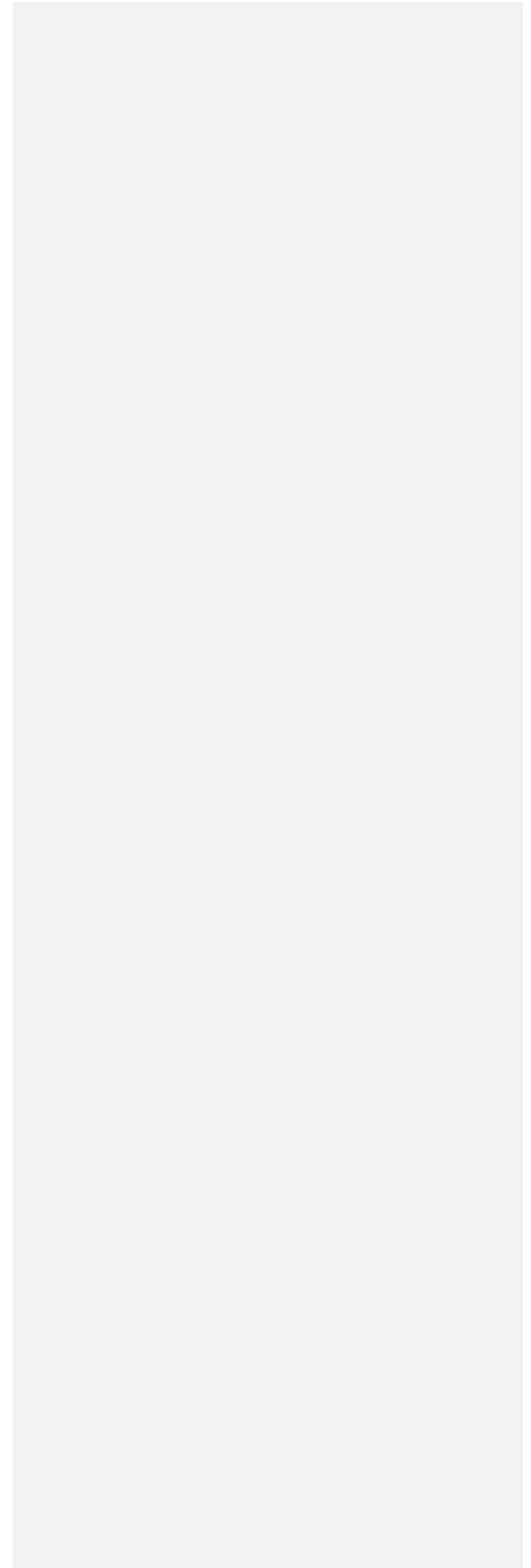
Just as Jesus taught through story, video can be an effective tool for many learners. The video clips provided from the *Joni and Friends* television series feature real-life testimonies that illustrate the biblical teaching and lesson objectives. As Joni Eareckson Tada likes to say, “These episodes are about friends who have changed my life.”

Prayer Focus

It's important to plan for prayer time at the beginning of the lesson. Prayer may be the most crucial part of your time together. You can use the suggested prayer focus or feel free to pray about specific needs expressed in your group discussions. Close with a reminder to continue praying for one another throughout the week in anticipation of your next session together.

Action Plan

There is a tried-and-true teaching philosophy that says: Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand. The action plans are designed to apply God's Word between lessons, in ways that transform our actions and keep us in touch with what we've learned. Some reinforce regular practices, while others can help establish new habits. We encourage group members to share their experiences with the previous week's plan.



LESSON 1: Hard Times, Hard Questions

“Our Father works a most kind good through our most grievous losses.”¹
—David Powlison

Takeaway: God wants to bring good from our suffering as we lean into him and trust him with the results.

Hard times are part of the human condition. They come in various forms, degrees, and life stages to both the innocent and the guilty. Some struggles originate from false beliefs, misguided choices, or selfish behaviors, and others seem arbitrary. But none of our troubles surprise God. In John 16:33 Jesus warned his followers, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” As believers, we face a choice: Will I allow suffering to overwhelm me and drive me away from God? Or will I cry out to God in my distress and come to Christ, the overcomer?

On your own, read the article below until you get to the reflection questions. Think about your answers, or write them down. When everyone is ready, share some of your thoughts with the group if you’re comfortable doing so.

“Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?”
(Job 2:10 NLT).

HARD TIMES IN THE WORLD: Facing the Unimaginable

Michael Hoggatt, a special educator and social worker, and his wife Mandy adopted their daughter Summer, knowing she had lived in nine foster homes before the age of three. They knew Summer had some intellectual and physical disabilities but were unaware she had suffered sexual abuse. In the midst of juggling her multiple services, Summer’s behavior and anger haunted Michael. He began to question his role as her father and blamed himself. He wondered if they were the right “forever family” for her. Then, the unimaginable happened.

A few days after Summer’s fifth birthday, she started bleeding. After months of tests, the doctor said Summer’s kidney showed stage-four cancer, which could prove fatal. Mandy and Michael were in shock as they rushed Summer to the hospital. Suddenly their worries over her behavior seemed insignificant. The night before surgery, Michael drove home at 2:00 am to pick up some things. David Crowder’s song, “How He Loves,” played on the

car radio.² It reminded Michael how God's love for him was weighty and powerful, like a hurricane full of mercy.

Michael pulled off the freeway, unable to see through his tears. At that moment, he didn't ask God to fix Summer's disabilities; he begged God to help Summer through the surgery and give him another day with her. Michael realized how much he wanted his daughter—not the child she could be, but his little girl, disabilities, anger, and all. God was faithful. Two years later, Summer was cancer-free and enjoying her real forever family.³

Why, God, Why?

Why did a young mother's legs have to be amputated after the bombing at the Boston Marathon? Why did a gunman open fire in a Charleston church one June evening killing nine innocent people? Why are forty-three young children diagnosed with cancer every day in America?⁴ Why was a mom saved alone while nine members of her family drowned when a tourist boat capsized in Branson, Missouri?

These tragedies make no sense to us. Attempts to explain them frequently lead to conflicting views about how God works in the world. For example, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's popular book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, describes God as a bystander who neither causes nor participates in any tragedy we might face. God's only role is to come alongside us after the fact, according to Kushner. If this were true, how can we call God the Sovereign Ruler of the universe? Other contemporary authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (known atheists) pit the scientific community against Christianity, declaring war on the very existence of God. Such suppositions are in conflict with the truths in God's Word.

While Christians should be mindful of useful medical and scientific advances, we must remember whose we are and what we believe. It's okay to wrestle with God's truth, knowing he welcomes our questions.

Why can't I pay my monthly bills when I'm working two jobs?

Why does my son get bullied at school over his learning disabilities?

Why can't my grandma remember my name anymore?

Why this? Why now? Why me?

The Bible tells us God knows what he is doing even when we can't understand it. He "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who had been his counselor?"

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen. (Romans 11:33–36)

God is involved in our pre-suffering and post-suffering, as well as being present in all the circumstances of our lives. No one is immune to the effects of living in a fallen, broken world.

At some point, most of us will experience one or all of the four basic kinds of suffering.

- **Physical suffering** can include bodily pain and discomfort, as well as cognitive and mental health issues.
- **Spiritual suffering** is a consequence of sin and separation from God.
- **Emotional suffering** is brought on by life circumstances such as heartbreak, divorce, loss of a loved one, and other disappointments.
- **Social and/or cultural suffering** involves religious rejection, economic exclusion, social segregation, and/or political discrimination.

Suffering is a great equalizer, but the degree and duration of our pain may be very different. Some experiences are lifelong; others can be a one-time crisis with a beginning and an end. In all of them, however, we have God’s promise to sustain us: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Reflection questions:

What areas of hardship are you dealing with today—a hard season of parenting, a marriage on the verge of collapse, financial struggles, or a health crisis?

Have your hardships tended to pull you away from God or draw you closer to him? How?

After sharing some responses, have someone read aloud as you complete the rest of the lesson together, or take turns reading.

BIBLE FOUNDATION: Our God is Steadfast, Not Heartless

If you have experienced suffering of any kind, you are in good company. Throughout Scripture, we see God using disability and hardship in the lives of his people to accomplish his purposes. Hannah grieved over infertility (1 Samuel 1:10–11). Moses had a speech problem (Exodus 4:10). Joseph endured slavery and later languished in prison for years even though he was an innocent man (Genesis 37:28; 39:20). Paul experienced a “thorn in his flesh” which some believe affected his vision (2 Corinthians 12:7). God’s prophets promised a future to those who have suffered yet remained faithful (Micah 4:6–7; Zephaniah 3:19).

The life of Job helps us gain a renewed perspective on how to trust God in hard times, knowing that even the worst suffering has first been sifted through his hands. Dr. Larry Waters taught extensively on the life of Job, and offers this overview: “The book of Job is a mixture of divine and human wisdom which addresses a major life-issue: why righteous people suffer undeservedly. It shows that the sufferer can question and doubt, face hard questions of life with faith, maintain an unbroken relationship with God, and still come to a satisfactory resolution for personal and collective injustice and undeserved suffering.”⁵

We see all four basic kinds of suffering revealed through Job: physical, spiritual, emotional, and social. Look up the passages below and identify the kind of suffering exemplified in each verse.

Job 12:4 _____

Job 2:7–8, 12 _____

Job 23:8–9, 15 _____

Job 7:4, 13–14 _____

How is it possible that such a good, God-fearing man like Job suffered so much? How was he able to continue to trust God? Instead of providing straightforward answers to hard questions, God showed himself to be a glorious, all-knowing, and almighty God (Job 38–41). During it all, Job proclaimed his faith: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25).

Throughout Job’s season of great sorrow and suffering, he discovered three truths about godly wisdom.

1. We cannot always count on truth from those around us.
2. God knows the way to wisdom because it resides in him alone.
3. Human beings can only find ultimate wisdom in a relationship with God.

“God understands the way to [wisdom], and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:23–24).

Discussion Questions:

Since the answers to hardship are in your relationship with God, how are you developing that relationship? What could you do to develop it further?

THE WITNESS: Good Can Come Out of Hard Times

Nick Vujicic is a people person and a hugger, which is incredible since he has no arms. Nick travels the world speaking to millions, which is astounding because he has no legs. He is also an author, worldwide evangelist, husband, father, and founder of Life Without Limbs (www.LifeWithoutLimbs.org).

Nick's disability gives him a platform to share new hope for whatever situations his audiences face. Just as God has used Nick to draw people to himself, he can use all believers to tell the gospel story.

Watch a clip from Nick's story (VIDEO ONE at joniandfriends.org/gospel-hard-times). Then discuss the questions below.

Discussion Questions:

How does God bring good out of Nick's circumstances?

How do you see yourself in Nick's story, and what are you willing to do to let God use you to draw attention to himself?

In the video, Nick shared that he lived with an *if only* mindset for years until he realized that God wanted to use his struggles to help others find joy in spite of their circumstances. Like the apostle Paul who wrote, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37), Nick has learned what it takes to find victory through hard times.

When you can put your faith in God's grace, in God's plan for you, even when you don't understand, that's more than a conqueror. A conqueror is someone who defeats and overcomes a circumstance. But more than a conqueror is already having victory over something that's still there in your life as a circumstance and you didn't have to do a thing. It's that change of the Holy Spirit that comes in your heart that gives you that ability and transformation as more than a conqueror.

Like Nick, Joni Eareckson Tada had questions about how to live with her disabilities. She too discovered the answer was part of trusting God with her imperfections.

When we wonder why we suffer, we are asking a question of someone. That someone is God. Why he created suffering doesn't matter as much as how we respond. When we can't find answers, we can find peace in the simple truth that we need him. After years of suffering, I've concluded that God uses suffering like a sandblasting machine stripping away our anxiety, complaints, and "I don't care" attitudes. Our afflictions rip away these things so we can see others with the eyes of Christ. When our hearts hurt, God feels that pain first. Suffering strengthens our souls and helps us know him better. And as we do, we become less "me" focused, and more God-focused.⁶

In hard times, we each face a choice. Will we listen to the critical voices, those outside and within? Or will we choose to believe what God says? Job chose to listen to God's voice, not the voice of Satan or others. Job 42:5 records how suffering deepened his relationship with God: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."

In the next lesson, we'll discover how God the Son endured suffering of every kind here on earth. In this way, Jesus Christ became our fellow-sufferer who identifies with all of our struggles.

"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake" (Philippians 1:29).

PRAYER FOCUS

Consider making the following items part of your closing prayer time together or part of your personal prayers in the coming week.

- Lord, thank you for the love letters in your Word that bring me peace, even when I don't understand.
- Lord, use me to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). I'm willing to befriend others through their grief. Keep me alert to recognize their needs and bold enough to share my faith journey.
- Lord, thank you for these friends who support me and pray for me. (List their names below.)

Use the action plan below to stay involved with what you have learned, on your own, until the next time the group meets. You will have a chance to discuss it at that meeting.

ACTION PLAN: Grief Recovery

Have you noticed that the more you feed a problem, the bigger it gets? Our emotions can become so overbearing that they block our vision, crush our good intentions, and drain our energy. Emotions, however, are much like pain receptors for the body. They sometimes serve as God-given indicators that something is wrong. In seasons of crisis

and sorrow, we tend to stuff our emotions, hiding our feelings from others—even God. When this happens, we need a plan that can lead us through our grief.

Are you currently experiencing anxiety and stress over a situation that seems out of your control? Have you prayed about it repeatedly without getting an answer? If so, you may be stuck on one or more of these stages of grief recovery.

NOTE: Grief is very personal. It's not merely for end of life issues. It can include any life-changing situation: medical diagnoses, injury, job loss, divorce, chronic pain and many others. The steps to recovery can move forward or backward over different periods of time.⁷ This is an introduction to the grief recovery process. To learn more, visit the Biblical Counseling Coalition at biblicalcounselingcoalition.org (see endnote for reference for a Christian perspective on the stages of grief).

1. **Denial** – “I can’t believe this is happening to me.” Denial is an initial stage of confusion that comes when we get bad news. It can also be a valuable form of self-protection.
2. **Anger** – “I see what is happening, and I’m really mad about it.” Anger is a natural response to helplessness. It can be directed inward or toward God and others. Yet, a healthy amount of anger and fear can be good because it motivates us to consider our options.
3. **Bargaining** – “I’ll do anything I can to make it stop.” In this stage, we try to change the situation ourselves by bargaining with God, rather than trusting his divine will.
4. **Depression** – “I’m very sad because I realize I can’t change my situation.” Depression is a period of hopelessness. With God’s help, it can lead to a more honest evaluation of the situation, allowing us to wrap ourselves in his comfort.
5. **Acceptance** – “I see that my life won’t ever be the same, but maybe good will come from this.” Acceptance is not resignation or giving up. It is a time of understanding and relaxing with the change. It says yes to the life God has given you.

Read through these steps several times, and consider which of them might describe you. Pray about them, sharing your emotions with God and asking him to do his work in you. You might also talk about them with a good friend or family member.

If you identify with one of these steps, you are not alone. Christian brothers and sisters stand ready to walk with you. Even more importantly, Jesus Christ has experienced it all before you. Victory is yours in him! “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).