

JONI AND FRIENDS

THE
GOSPEL
IN
HARD
TIMES

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES

FOR STUDENTS

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Joni Eareckson Tada

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FOREWORD BY JONI

What brings you to a Bible study with “Hard Times” in the title? Struggles with your family, depression, loneliness, or illness? Are you being bullied or find yourself with few friends? Perhaps your life has been altered by disability, like mine, or maybe you are here to support a friend who is struggling. 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 works in every experience for our good.

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 classmates 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 your youth group.

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?

Let’s seek him and find out.

[Joni Signature]

INTRODUCTION

No matter how much we want life to be filled with “good vibes only,” hard times come to all of us at some point. Then suffering brings us face-to-face with God and his plans, which may be very different from our plans (Isaiah 55:8–9).

How we handle hard times has life-altering potential. Conflict and pain force us beyond our comfort zone to find answers. We may understand this better on a physical rather than spiritual level. For example, we work out and train to strengthen weak muscles, we study to improve our minds, we go to physical therapy to recover from an injury, and we text a friend when we’re feeling alone. When we face struggles that threaten to shake our faith, we need to be intentional about looking to Jesus with some of the hard questions. It’s dangerous to mask our doubts and stuff our pain.

“God never wastes pain. He always uses it to accomplish his purpose. And his purpose is for his glory and our good.”¹ This is 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 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? We’ll discover how a diverse faith community—“one body with many parts”—can meet our needs and help us understand the importance of reaching out to others who are hurting. Instead of living by a motto that attempts to hide and deny pain, we will live by “real truth only.” The church has the healing and hope needed by the world. Regardless of our circumstances, we can trust that God is still working and wants to use every weakness.

“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 12:10 NLT).

The gospel works—especially in hard times.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Gospel in Hard Times for Students 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, features clear teaching from Scripture, and requires no extra work outside of the group setting.

Lesson 1: Hard Times, Hard Questions

Hard times are part of life. They come in various forms, degrees, and stages of life. Some struggles result from false beliefs, bad choices, or selfish behaviors, and others seem to come at us out of nowhere. 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 the hard times to overwhelm me and drive me away from God? Or will I turn to God and trust that he has a plan even when things don't make sense?

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 knew what was ahead and willingly went to 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 look at Psalm 23 and 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, encouraging us to get back up and keep moving to higher ground. He never forgets or abandons his own. He knows his sheep and meets our needs through good times and bad. As we follow Jesus, we remember his gentle faithfulness and trust him in every circumstance.

Lesson 4: A Place to Belong

Most of us struggle with our identity in a deep sense and have some area of our life where we feel different, alone, or that we don't measure up. When we embrace the truth about who we are in Christ, it changes how we see ourselves first, and then how we see others. Knowing who we are sets us free but also allows us to offer that freedom, comfort, and

belonging to others. God has designed us to receive his comfort and truth so we can offer that to others around us who struggle.

Lesson 5: An Open Invitation

In this lesson, we will be challenged to look at our part in God's mission to reach *all* people, especially people who are often overlooked. During his time on earth Jesus spent time with people many of us would never consider—people who experienced serious illnesses, disabilities, those considered untouchable or downright crazy. In the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:12–24), the host went beyond an open invitation to anyone who wanted to come, or to those a little further out socially and geographically. Jesus said the man sent his servant out to *compel* the “poor and crippled and blind and lame” to come (Luke 14:21, 23). Pursuing people who aren't “cool” or may not appear to have something to offer us will not only give them a chance to experience God's love, but it changes our lives as well.

Lesson 6: One Body, Many Parts

In this lesson, we'll explore what the Bible says about the body of Christ, the gifts we're given, and some of the unique ways God may choose to use those that the world sees as weaker. As young adults in the church, it's easy to feel as though our gifts don't matter as much as our parents' or youth leaders' gifts. When we're enduring hard times or living with disability, we can often feel as though we have nothing to offer or we belong on the sidelines, even at church. But God has given every person spiritual gifts—without exception and regardless of abilities. In 1 Corinthians 12:22 the apostle Paul describes the church as one body with many functioning 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

We've all read about people who have faced unimaginable pain or tragedy, but they somehow continue to remain steadfast in their Christian faith. Over the past few weeks we've learned that no one is immune to 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 over 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 (Romans 8:28).

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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

HARD TIMES IN THE WORLD

These original stories show we're not alone in our struggles. Whether problems are physical, emotional, or intellectual, you will meet other young adults you can identify with and relate to in their suffering and victories. The stories 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 story 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."

ACTION PLAN

There's a 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 in smaller groups or one-on-one conversations in ways that will transform our actions and keep us in touch with what we're learning.

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 group's 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 for your next session together.

Lesson 1: Hard Times, Hard Questions

You can get through even the toughest of circumstances because God is on your side. He loves you more than you know. And He's got everything under control more than you know. He's got plans for you. Awesome plans! You and God are unstoppable!
—Tim Tebow

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 life. They come in various forms, degrees, and stages of life. Some struggles result from false beliefs, bad choices, or selfish behaviors, while others seem to come at us out of nowhere. 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 the hard times to overwhelm me and drive me away from God? Or will I turn to God and trust that he has a plan even when things don't make sense?

On your own, read the story 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

At sixteen, Jamie was the oldest of five children. She'd always taken pride in leading the way for her younger brothers and sisters—first to ride a bike, then to school, and then to drive. Their little eyes watched with admiration as Jamie pushed herself in all she did, including to an elite level as a gymnast. Whether they faced a school bully or a hard test, Jamie would encourage her siblings with the words she'd heard their father repeat often: "Don't give up! God's got this."

But a cute family mantra didn't seem to apply when Jamie found out she was facing the fight of her life—stage four cancer. Could she continue to trust in God's plan for her after learning that even if her cancer was healed, she may never be able to have children?

Jamie's parents and doctors had explained to her that the pain and swelling she'd experienced were from advanced ovarian cancer. She would require surgery to remove a tumor and then harsh chemo that could destroy her eggs, likely leaving her infertile.

“We knew people who had fought cancer, but never in a million years did I think this would happen to my child,” her mother Cynthia shared in an update on social media. “Our family has been on an emotional roller coaster, but we cling to our faith and trust God’s plan for Jamie.”

Markers and crayons came out and Jamie’s home cheering section went to work. The walls of her bedroom and hospital room were covered with flowers and hearts and reminders of God’s promises. And one big poster read: *Don’t give up! God’s got this.*

Why, God, Why?

Why are forty-three young children diagnosed with cancer every day in America?¹ Why would a young man walk into his high school and open fire, killing innocent people? 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 on how God works in the world. Some people believe God is a bystander who neither causes nor participates in any tragedy we might face. But if this were true, how can we call God the Sovereign Ruler of the universe? Some contemporary authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (known atheists) try to pit the scientific community against Christianity, declaring war on the very existence of God.

While Christians should be mindful of useful medical and scientific advances, we must remember whose we are and what we believe based on the Bible. It’s okay to wrestle with these truths when circumstances don’t seem to make sense. God welcomes our questions.

Why can’t my parents pay our bills when they work so hard?
Why am I bullied at school over something I can’t control?
Why can’t my grandma remember my name anymore?
Why can’t I seem to work hard enough to overcome this eating disorder? This depression?
Why this? Why now? Why me?

When you endure hardship for a long time, you feel more and more as though you’re walking on a tightrope instead of a steady, secure road for the future.²

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 every moment of our lives—good or bad. He is 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.

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

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 can trust that God knows and he is still in control.

Reflection Questions:

What areas of hardship are you dealing with today—body image issues, rejection, a friend who let you down, anxiety over the future, pressure to succeed in school or sports, family struggles, or a health crisis?

Do your hardships tend 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: Painful Promises

If you've experienced suffering of any kind, you're in good company. Throughout the Bible we see God using disability and hardship in the lives of his people to accomplish his purposes. Moses had a speech problem (Exodus 4:10). Joseph was young when he was sold into slavery and spent years in prison even though he was innocent (Genesis 37:28; 39:19–20). Hannah grieved over infertility (1 Samuel 1:10–11). Paul experienced a thorn in his flesh, which some believe affected his vision (2 Corinthians 12). From the books of Isaiah to Malachi, 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. Author Carolyn Custis James writes about Job in her book *When Life and Beliefs Collide*:

The book of Job drives home the point that God is the central figure behind even the tragic events in our lives. He is the one who is in charge and who holds us in his hands. Not even the devil can touch us without God’s permission, and even then God overrules and works through Satan’s schemes to accomplish good for us.”³

We see all four basic kinds of suffering revealed through Job: physical, spiritual, emotional, and social. Look up the passages below and identify the different kinds 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 when he had so many unanswered questions?

Carolyn James writes, “God never explained to Job why all these afflictions had fallen on him. Job would always have unanswered questions, and so will we. God’s plan for Job, as for all of us, went much deeper than material blessings or divine explanations. . . . Through the eyes of suffering, Job saw more of God than he would ever see through the eyes of prosperity.”⁴

“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you”
(Job 42:5).

Discussion Questions:

Which areas of hardship are you dealing with today—struggles in your family, a breakup, loneliness or feeling like no one cares, an injury that’s changed your future plans?

What does your relationship with God look like right now?

THE WITNESS: Good Can Come out of Hard Times

Even though Nick Vujicic was born with no arms or legs, he didn’t really understand that he was considered disabled until he started kindergarten and other kids made sure he knew. With the help of his mom, Nick learned how to get others to look past his physical differences. Nick now travels the world speaking to millions and encouraging them to look beyond their circumstances to see how God might want to use them.

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 for God to use you to draw attention to himself?

In the video, Nick shared that he lived with an "if only" mind-set for years, until he realized God wanted to use his struggles to help others find joy in spite of their circumstances. He is now an author, husband, father, and a worldwide evangelist traveling with the ministry he founded, Life Without Limbs (www.lifewithoutlimbs.org). 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.⁵

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, Nick, and Joni all chose to listen to God's voice, not the voice of Satan or others.

Break into smaller groups or partners and read the action plan below to stay involved with what you are learning.

ACTION PLAN: Silencing the Critics

Have you noticed that the more you focus on a problem, the bigger it seems to get? Our emotions can become so overwhelming that they can hinder us 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 pain, we tend to stuff our emotions and hide our feelings from others—even God. When this happens, we need a plan to deal with our emotions and understand what we’ve been focused on.

In Philippians 4:8–9, Paul gives us a filter we can use to examine our focus—beginning with our thoughts: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

We have to make a decision every day, and sometimes multiple times a day, to silence any negative thoughts we may have allowed to take root in our minds. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul writes, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” This requires us to stop and be more aware of the damaging thoughts we have.

Jennifer Rothschild, a Christian author and speaker who lost her sight at fifteen, calls these inner thoughts “self-talk.” She says we all have a silent dialogue going on with around 50,000 thoughts each day, and those thoughts can be constructive or poisonous, building us up or damaging us.⁶

Think about your week so far. What were some of your negative or positive thoughts or self-talk? With your partner or small group, discuss where your focus was and what emotions you experienced as a result.

PRAYER FOCUS

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).

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 promises from your Word that bring me peace, even when I don’t understand.
- Lord, help me to see how you can use my struggles, and help me to stop listening to the critical voices from within and without.

- Lord, thank you for these friends who support me and pray for me. (List their names below.)