



UNIT: SUFFERING

LESSON 1 | DEATH AND DISASTER

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN: Death and disaster are both inevitable parts of living in a world that has fallen. However, God promises to bring an end to both of these things, and to be with us in times of suffering.

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO DO WITH WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED: Understand why death and disaster take place, and look for God in the midst of their suffering, leaning into the comfort He offers.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: John 11, Revelation 21:1-4, Matthew 5:4, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

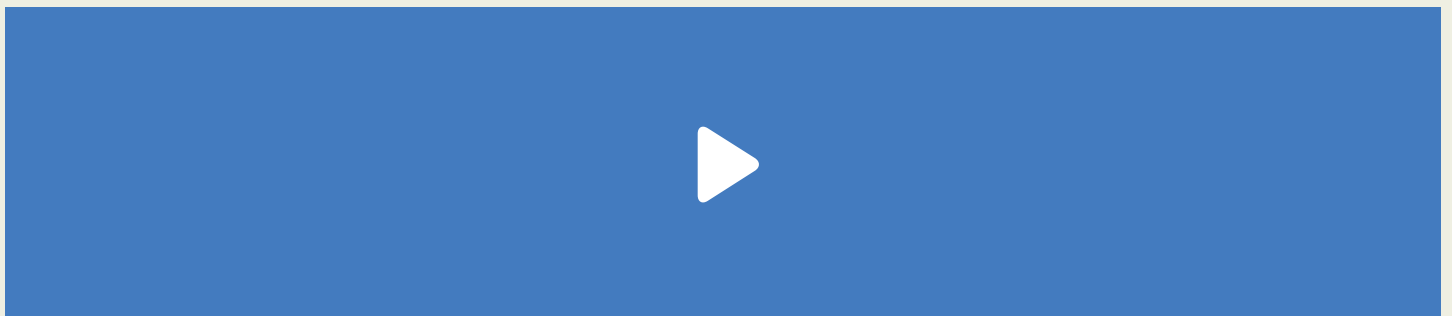
ANCHOR STATEMENT: God is powerful enough to overcome death and disaster. Although sin has caused great suffering, God brings great hope and healing.

OVERVIEW:

Suffering comes in many forms. But there is one form of suffering that seems to impact us all: Loss. When a loved one dies or a friend is tragically taken from us, we experience loss and confusion. When natural disasters tear apart our communities, we experience loss and fear. This type of suffering is the most common introduction to the question, if God is good, then why does suffering exist? During this lesson, we will wrap our minds around the fact that suffering exists because sin exists. But God offers us hope that although these things will impact us for a time, they are not His final plan for our lives.

TEACHER PREP VIDEO:

Each *Anchored* lesson comes with a Teacher Prep Video. These short videos are designed to help you grasp the lesson's main point as you prepare to teach.



BIBLE BACKGROUND

The *Bible Background* is a focused, brief overview of some of the background info for the main passage you will be teaching.

- **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CONTEXT"?** In every YM360 Bible study lesson, you'll notice we make a point to encourage you to provide the context for the passages you study. By "context" we mean at the very least helping students know *who* wrote the book, *when* it was written, and *why* it was written.
- **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?** When we teach the Bible without giving context, students don't get a "big picture" understanding of the story of the Bible. But this view is vital to grasping the story of God's plan of redemption for humankind. As you teach, use the *Bible Background* to help summarize the context.

THE DETAILS

Matthew

- *Author:* Matthew, a former tax collector, was a disciple of Jesus and a firsthand witness to the stories he relates in his Gospel.
- *Time frame:* Most people hold to Matthew's Gospel being written in the late A.D. 50s or 60s, though there are some who think it was written after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.
- *Purpose:* Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. But he was probably aware of a Gentile audience, as his Gospel makes the case that the saving truth of Christ is for all nations.

John

- *Author:* The Gospel of John was written by John the Apostle, son of Zebedee. A fisherman who left his trade to follow Jesus, John also penned the Book of Revelation, as well as the three letters in the New Testament that bear his name.
- *Time frame:* The Gospel of John was probably written between 85 and 95 AD. John most likely wrote his gospel in Ephesus before he was exiled to Patmos.
- *Purpose:* John's stated purpose for writing this book can be found in John 20:30-31: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John's goal seems to have been to clearly communicate a full theology of Jesus as the Messiah, the promised Son of God.

Revelation

- *Author:* The writer of Revelation identifies himself as John four times. Scholars agree that it is most likely John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' most beloved disciples.
- *Time frame:* Revelation was written toward the end of John's life somewhere between 90 and 95 AD.
- *Purpose:* The purpose of Revelation was to reveal the fullness of Christ's identity and to provide hope for suffering Believers at the time who were encountering grave persecution and suffering. Today, it provides us hope for what is to come, as well as a stark warning of the battle that rages until Christ returns.

THE SETTING

In our primary passage, Jesus and His disciples get word that Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus, has fallen ill and will die. Jesus makes it clear to His disciples that they will arrive after the death of Lazarus, and that He will perform a miracle that brings many to faith. However, their arrival in Judea is lined with danger. Jesus is a wanted man at this point.

THE MAIN POINT

God has a plan to end our suffering. Whether it is death or destruction, God is right there beside us in the face of these tragedies. None of us are strong enough to remain unbothered by grief. God knows this, and He promises that although sin has spread suffering across our world, He will lead His people into a land where suffering is no more. God's design for His people is that they live eternally alongside Him, without death and loss. Although sin causes suffering for us now, it will not cause suffering forever.

LESSON PLAN

The *Lesson Plan* contains three elements: an introductory activity called *The Lead In*; the Bible Study section called *The Main Event*; and an application-focused segment called *The Last Word*.

THE LEAD IN

- *Goal:* To help students start thinking about death, destruction, and suffering.
- *Set-Up:* Make sure there is a way to display this five-minute video about a young woman's journey after the death of her brother.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMTLgBLFCOM>
 - If the link does not work, you can search "How God Helped Anne Wilson Heal."

FIRST, welcome students. Today will likely bring up some very personal pain points, so it would be best to open this lesson with a prayer. **Pray something like:**

- **Lord, we are coming to you with confidence that no matter how difficult today's topics can be, You will be present with us and provide us with the comfort we need. We know that you are strong and gracious enough to handle our tough questions. We understand that our perspective on these things is small, and that you know far more about death and disaster. Please use Your word to instruct and comfort us today. Amen.**

NEXT, explain to students that today's lesson is going to focus on the suffering we experience through death and disaster. Make sure the video is ready to show, and **say something like:**

- **We are about to watch a short video about someone who experienced the tragedy of losing her brother. She is going to talk about how her experience with this was changed entirely when she went to the Lord.**

Show the video to students.

THEN, ask:

- **Does Anne Wilson's experience seem normal in comparison to how the world typically deals with death and disaster? How is it different?**
 - *Answers will vary.* It should seem very different to students. We are often encouraged to search for answers and seek some sort of vengeance or retribution.

FINALLY, explain to students that one thing we will not do in this lesson is try to diminish how much pain we experience in the midst of disaster and loss. God does not diminish our suffering or make us feel like we have to ignore our pain. Instead, He acknowledges it. He lives it with us. And most importantly, He promises to be there with us.

If there are no questions, transition into the Main Event.

THE MAIN EVENT

- *Goal:* To help students understand that death and disaster are a part of a fallen world which has strayed from God. Despite this, God seeks to comfort and give hope in the midst of these things.
- *Set-Up:* Make sure students have a Bible or Bible App.

FIRST, ask students to think of a few words that describe how suffering feels. They may say a variety of things, but some good words to get them started might be: hopeless, sad, painful, lonely, or discouraging. **Say something like:**

- **When something happens around us that causes us to suffer, it is very easy to cast blame on something or someone, rather than deal with the loss at face value. This happens most often with things like death and disaster. Even though death and disaster can be a preventable result in some situations, ultimately, we do not have any sort of control over when and where it happens. Which leaves us with some pretty tough questions.**

THEN, have students open to John 11. Explain that in this passage, we are given one account of how God deals very directly with death. At the beginning of this chapter, we are going to see that one of Jesus' very good friends is unwell. And this doesn't appear to be something that is occurring because of old age. Instead, we gather that Lazarus is going to die from an unexpected illness.

Read or have a student read John 11:5-16. This is a long passage, but it is going to give us a great introduction to what was going on in this narrative. **Ask students:**

- **What does the vibe seem like among the group when they find out that Lazarus is sick?**
 - *Answer:* The disciples seem far more worried about their own death if they return to Judea.

Say something like:

- **While Lazarus was dealing with his illness, Jesus and the disciples were doing ministry outside of Judea for a purpose. Jesus was a wanted man. There is very little chance that He and all of His followers could make it safely in and out again without someone being arrested or worse. This is why you see Thomas make a comment along the lines of 'I guess we'll go die with him' at the end of verse 16. Jesus was faced with a situation where not only did His friend's life loom in the balance, but His disciples didn't seem to care all that much. Let's read on to see how this plays out.**

Read or have a student read John 11:17-27. Then **ask:**

- **We can see from this passage that Lazarus was not only dead, but he had also been dead for a good while. How does Martha react when she learns that Jesus has come to see them?**
 - *Answer:* First, she says something pretty powerful about Jesus' ability to prevent her brother's death. Then, she says that even though the situation seems impossible, she still believes that Jesus can do something about it.

Explain to students that Martha's reaction should be a little shocking. She believed something about Jesus that very few people understood at that time. Throughout His time preaching and doing ministry, Jesus said something that clicked with Martha. She understood that His purpose on Earth was to defeat death and bring life to those in its grasp. Both spiritually AND physically. **Say something like:**

- **Martha was experiencing something that all of us experience at some point in our lives... the death and loss of a loved one. Instead of letting her grief consume her, she actually does something really brave when she sees Jesus. She says "Hey- I know you could have prevented this. But I also know that nothing is beyond your reach." That is a really big claim, and one that Jesus encourages her for.**

NEXT, read or have a student read John 11:32-37. Explain that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, echoes what Martha said to Jesus when He arrived. And even though both of the women believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and capable of giving life to their brother, they are still clearly grieving. **Ask students:**

- **What do you think this passage is telling us about how we should or shouldn't feel when we experience suffering like this?**
 - *Answer:* We are allowed to be emotional! In fact, Jesus Himself was moved to tears in this moment.

Say something like:

- **One thing that you will not find in this narrative is God telling us to act unbothered by grief and loss. When we lose someone, or when disaster takes away things like our homes or communities, it is absolutely okay for us to grieve that. Both death and disaster are a part of living in a fallen world. But God has given us a message to carry close to our hearts when we are in the midst of this suffering. With God, death and disaster are not final. And God does not leave us alone in our suffering. He is right there with us!**

Explain to students that there is a tension within our understanding of who God is and what He is capable of. On one hand, just like the people who surrounded Mary and Martha during the loss of Lazarus, we believe that God is capable of preventing death and disaster. After all, if God claims He loves us, and He is all-powerful, shouldn't He make sure the world is never grieving the loss of a loved one? Or that no natural disaster leaves us broken and homeless? **Say something like:**

- **Just like Mary and Martha, we often look back to the time before tragedy struck and wonder, "How could this have been different?" This is actually a very common way that our brain functions. God created the human brain to continually learn. That is a wonderful thing when we are learning a new instrument, position on a field, or even mathematics. But when a bad thing happens, like death or disaster, our brain immediately analyzes the things that led to the bad thing and tries to make sure that bad thing NEVER happens again. We look for causes and people to hold accountable. We might even blame ourselves! We can get stuck in that loop for a long time if we try to handle suffering on our own because something as big as death and disaster was not a part of our original purpose.**

Read or have a student read Revelation 21:1-4. Then **ask:**

- **Can you think of anywhere else in the Bible where God's people lived without death or disaster?**
 - *Answer:* The Garden of Eden. If students aren't quite sure, you can refer them to Genesis 1-3.

Say something like:

- **The Bible tells us that God's creation and desire for humanity is that we lived alongside Him WITHOUT death and disaster. It was not until our sin against Him that we were introduced to a world where we could experience this type of suffering. But the wonderful news of the Gospel is that God made a way for us to rejoin Him in eternal life. That doesn't mean that suffering will not continue to happen, but it means that not a single event that causes suffering in this world will be the final word for God's people.**

THEN, have students return to John 11. Explain that in this passage, we get to witness Jesus show an entire crowd a portion of what He came to do for His people. Read or have a student read John 11:38-44. **Ask students:**

- **What kind of message is being communicated by the miracle Jesus performs?**
 - *Answer:* Jesus is showing the people that what Martha said about Him being capable of bringing the dead to life is true. He is essentially giving them a demonstration of God's promise to give life to His people after death.

Remind students of the video that you watched in the Lead In activity. Explain that when we suffer the loss of a family member or friend, we are unlikely to see God work the same way He did with Lazarus. But that doesn't mean that He has left us alone in our suffering or that He can't use suffering to bring something good forth. Most of us will experience something closer to Anne Wilson. **Say something like:**

- **When you watched the video of Anne, you saw that she was only able to discover her gift of worship because she leaned into God during the loss of her brother. Now, keep in mind that her brother didn't die just so she could figure out that she has a great singing voice. Not at all. Instead, it was in the midst of this tragedy that Anne's relationship with God took on a whole new meaning. She started to understand Who God is, and that the purpose of the Cross was to one day take away what she was feeling right now for good. Her voice wasn't a consolation prize for losing her brother. Her suffering wasn't a test to see if she could prove herself worthy of getting a blessing. It was something that she found when she was comforted by His presence in the middle of her heartbreak.**

NEXT, read or have a student read Matthew 5:4. **Ask:**

- **What do you think Jesus is telling us in this verse?**
 - *Answers will vary.*

Explain to students that this verse is a part of a bigger passage with several similar phrases. They may have heard of the Beatitudes before, but if not, explain that the Beatitudes are a series of God's blessings for His people, even in the midst of difficulty. The word blessing can be described as protection or favor. This means that even during the suffering we face, God has promised to extend His favor, or His support, to us. **Say something like:**

- **The Beatitudes are another example of God acknowledging the suffering that happens in this life. Sometimes, we want to believe that we can live without suffering. But when sin is present, suffering is present. In each of the Beatitudes, Jesus addresses the realities of the world we live in. He knows we will need mercy for people who wrong us. We will need to be peacemakers in a world without peace. And we will need His comfort when we mourn the loss of life or home.**

FINALLY, close by sharing the Anchor statement with students:

**GOD IS POWERFUL ENOUGH TO OVERCOME DEATH AND DISASTER.
ALTHOUGH SIN HAS CAUSED GREAT SUFFERING, GOD BRINGS GREAT HOPE AND HEALING.**

Ask if anyone has any thoughts or questions, then transition to the Last Word portion of your lesson.

THE LAST WORD

- *Goal:* To think about some ways that God can use us to minister in the midst of suffering.
- *Set-Up:* A chalkboard or dry-erase board.

FIRST, ask students to think about any death and disaster that has occurred in their own lives. Odds are, students have faced the death of a loved one or a natural disaster. However, encourage students to think about other types of loss as well, such as a friend moving far away. The point will be to get them thinking about how they felt during that time. Then, **ask:**

- **Now, think about something that someone did during that time that meant a lot to you. Obviously, in the midst of loss, there isn't much that can make us feel 'better,' but there was probably something that someone did that helped ease your suffering. What did they say or do?**
 - *Answers will vary.* Be sure to write these things on the board.

THEN, ask students:

- **What are some things that you wish someone might have done when you were suffering?**
 - *Answers will vary.* Be sure to write these things on the board.

AFTER THAT, ask students:

- **Of these things listed on the board, how many of them are you able to do for a friend when they are suffering?**
 - *Put a checkmark next to each one, even if students say "all of them."*

Explain to students that we often don't realize how much we are equipped to offer encouragement and love to others when they are hurting. Read or have a student read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. Then **ask:**

- **What does this passage seem to be saying about our ability to comfort others?**
 - *Answer:* We are able to comfort because we are comforted by God.

FINALLY, explain to students that God not only comforts us on His own, but He also can work through us and others to comfort His people. This is an incredible honor, when you consider that He doesn't have to involve us. End by challenging your students to thank those in their life who offered comfort when they were hurting. Encourage them to use that as an opportunity to talk about the comfort that God offers us in the midst of tragedy and loss.

If there are no more questions, close the lesson in prayer.

- Don't forget to remind students about their devotions this week. If you're posting them on Social Media or some other means of electronic distribution, make sure you inform students of when they will be receiving them.