## Session 7. Called *in*Suffering

**Supplies Needed**

* Leader: Chapter 7 in *The Stories We Live*
* Participants: *The Stories We Live.*
* Participant Handout: “Called in Suffering”
* Equipment for viewing videos

**Some Bible Texts about How God Calls in Times of Struggle**

* How God meets us in our suffering: Psalm 107:1-32
* Moses’ despair and God’s call to continue leading his people: Exodus 17:1-7
* Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law who then gets up to serve: Mark 1:29-31
* A prayer for help in times of pain and difficulty: Psalm 22
* Jesus’ call to the crowd to take up their cross and follow him: Mark 8:31-35
* How God calls through and beyond our present suffering: Romans 8:18-39
* Jesus calling his followers into new relationships after his death: John 19:25-28

#### Opening Prayer (2mins)

Welcome everyone by name as they enter. You may wish to provide nametags or table tent name cards for your group members.

Open the session with a prayer. You may wish to use this prayer or another of your choosing.

*Ever-present God,*

*you walk with us*

*through good times*

*and bad,*

*mountain top*

*and valley deep,*

*your footsteps our guide,*

*hands our support.*

*Ever-present God,*

*you are close to us*

*when life is smooth*

*or rough,*

*in wholeness*

*and brokenness,*

*your healing our hope,*

*your touch our desire.*

*Ever-present God,*

*bring comfort and peace*

*and the warmth*

*of your presence*

*and I shall fear no thing,*

*for you are with me,*

*always.*

Faith and Worship: <http://www.faithandworship.com/Prayers_comfort_healing.htm#ixzz5QbWt20jV>

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#### Part 1. Introduction (2 mins)

Introduce the concept of *called in suffering* using this information from Kathleen Cahalan:

The truth about vocation is that it does not always involve choice or movement. It is not always going *to* or *from*. Sometimes it is about figure out God’s call *in* the place that you are.

Sometimes being called *in* a situation are times when you have little choice. About the only choice you have is how to live out your calling *in* the situation. You can find yourself *in* situations that require patience and waiting or duty and obligation. Such situations can entail suffering and pain, not joy and peace, at least not initially. It may not be what you want, or where your gifts lie, but it is in fact where you are. *In* that place, you ask: God, what are you calling me to *in* this circumstance?

​(From: *The Stories We Live: Finding God's Calling All Around Us*. Kathleen Cahalan. Eerdmans, 2017.)

#### Part 2. Explore: Called in Suffering (25 mins)

Use the following insights by Laura Kelly Fanucci to present an understanding of suffering and vocation. A handout is provided as well, which you may want to give to each participant.

“Called to Suffering”. (Excerpts from *Called to Life Participant Guide* by Laura Kelly Fanucci. Collegeville Institute, 2016. Pages 28-31)

Our vocations can be affected in profound ways by suffering. Who we are, how we live, and what we do are each impacted by situations of stress or struggle.

The challenges we face in our own callings may be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. We may struggle with our health: disabilities, disease, mental illness or addictions. We may struggle with our families: estranged relationships, abuse, or divorce. We may struggle with work: job burnout, ethical dilemmas, or financial difficulties. We may struggle with loss: of a loved one, an opportunity, an ability or a dream. We may struggle with our faith: where is God in this mess and chaos? Is this part of what God is calling me to?

As difficult as they can be to bear, times of darkness do not mean an absence of God’s call. Sometimes if we reframe our understanding of how vocation relates to suffering, we gain a new perspective on how God has been calling us all along.

Consider how changing the preposition that is used with the verb of “calling” can transform its meaning:

We can be **called in** a difficult situation: to act in a certain way or to have a particular attitude. Even if we cannot change the circumstances, we can respond in ways that allow our vocation to flourish. For example, people suffering from serious illness sometimes surprise their families and caregivers with the positive perspective they are able to develop—virtues of compassion, patience, or gratitude.

We can be **called away** from a situation—whether an abusive relationship, a toxic workplace, or a negative environment. Though it can be painful to leave, God sometimes asks us to do the difficult work of closing a door and moving on.

We can be **called for** something, as we come to see a purpose greater than our own comfort or happiness. Perhaps we can become a companion or mentor for others grappling with the same difficulties, as people sometimes do after they have lived with depression, addictions or eating disorders. The fundamental Christian call to discipleship always beckons us towards those most in need of God’s love and light.

We can be **called to** a new part of our vocation as a result of loss or difficulty, as our eyes are opened to a new possibility, opportunity or way of thinking. For example, a couple who has lived through years of infertility may find themselves called to adopt or foster a child. Experiences of pain or loss can bring a deeper sense of empathy with others or gratitude for other gifts we have received.

We can be **called by** God in the suffering we experience. We feel moved to respond by doing what we can to change the painful situation or to bring new life from an experience of loss. For example, a person may change careers or take on a new volunteer opportunity once they have experienced the loss of a loved one or witnessed first-hand the suffering that comes from extreme poverty. God can work through our anger, frustration or sadness to create something positive.

Invite the participants to pick one of these prepositions and share in triads an example of a time when they felt called in suffering—in a difficult situation, away from a difficult situation, towards something new, or for a deeper purpose than you first thought.

* Share a story of a time that you felt called in a struggle, away from a difficult situation, towards something new, or for a deeper purpose than you first thought.
* What unexpected opportunities, deepened awareness, or surprising gifts did this painful experience ultimately hold for you?
* How did you hear God’s call?
* What did you learn about your callings in times of suffering?

Ask them to share their responses in a group of three.

#### Part 3. Joyce’s Story of Being Called in Suffering (20 mins)

Introduce the video with these insights by Laura Kelly Fanucci. (Excerpts from *Called to Life Participant Guide* by Laura Kelly Fanucci. Collegeville Institute, 2016. Pages 28-31)

Sometimes it comforts us to see how God may be calling us through the difficulties with face. At other times we simply have to take on a challenging responsibility—like caring for an aging parent or staying in a difficult job—without having any sense of being called. And sometimes, in life’s most difficult experiences of loss, illness or death, our suffering often seems far too painful or unjust to be meaningful. Our struggle to understand why this is happening to us may lead us to wrestle with God or even lose faith.

These dark moments of questioning our vocation may change our understanding or image of God. For example, after a divorce, someone may wonder why or if God called them to marriage in the first place. When a child is stricken with a life-threatening illness, the parents question how a loving God could possibly allow this to happen. The events of our lives, as well as the sufferings caused by evil and injustice in the world, can pose deep challenges to our view of vocation and of God.

But the obstacles we meet through times of crisis may eventually be found to reveal God’s presence, too. The God who calls us remain the God who hears us.

**“Joyce’s Story” –** After domestic abuse and divorce, Joyce felt called by God from chaos to a new vocation. See how this surprising twist allowed her to serve others.

<http://bit.ly/JoycesStory>

In their small groups invite the participants to share their insights on the video(s):

* How did Joyce find God and hear God’s call in suffering?
* What can you take from her story that can inform, inspire, or sustain your own calling?

Close the session by inviting people to share reflections on what they learn about being called in suffering.

#### Closing Prayer (2 mins)

Close with the prayer below or a prayer of your choosing.

*Bless all whose journey,*

*that search for faith,*

*acceptance and identity,*

*is made more difficult*

*by circumstance, doubt,*

*diversions, exhaustion,*

*stumbles along the road,*

*and the load they carry.*

*May they hear your voice,*

*and see your footsteps,*

*know how close you are,*

*lay down their burden,*

*reach for your hand*

*and allow you to lead*

*them into their promised land.*

Faith and Worship: <http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_strugggling_life_faith.htm#ixzz5QbWSsFjE>

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