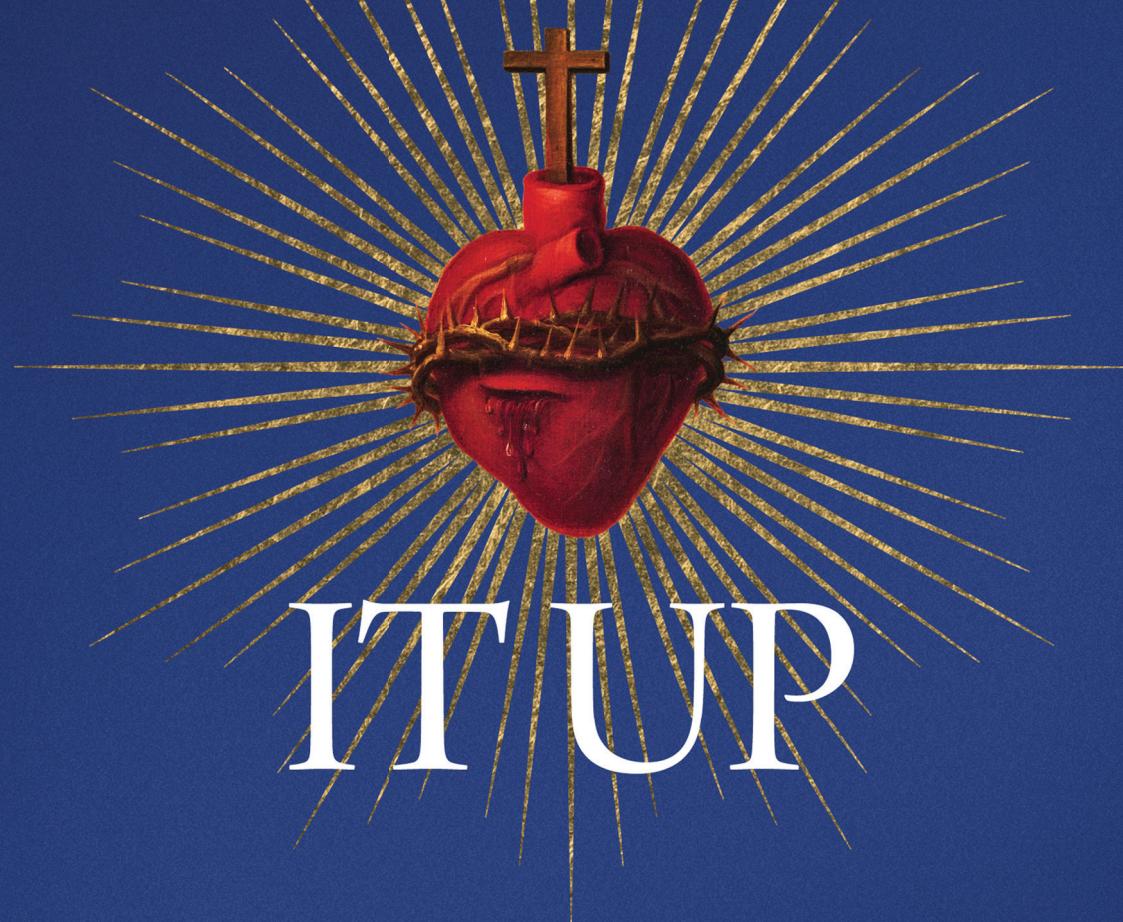


MEGAN HJELMSTAD

OFFER



IT UP

DISCOVERING
THE POWER AND PURPOSE
OF REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

Offer It Up: Discovering the Power and Purpose of Redemptive Suffering is an invitation to transform sufferings into a source of healing. In this discussion guide, readers will have the opportunity to unite their suffering—physical, emotional, and spiritual—with Christ. By more closely studying Catholic teaching, exploring your own experiences, and sharing vulnerably with others, you will be challenged to embark on a journey into the very heart of Our Lord.



SUGGESTED STUDY PROGRAM

SESSION 1:

Introduction, Chapter 1

SESSION 2:

Chapter 2 + Chapter 3

SESSION 3:

Chapter 4 + Chapter 5

SESSION 4:

Chapter 6 + Chapter 7

SESSION 5:

Chapter 8 + Chapter 9

SESSION 6:

Chapter 10 + Chapter 11

SESSION 7:

Chapter 12 + Chapter 13

SESSION 8:

Chapter 14 + Chapter 15





OPTIONAL OPENING GROUP PRAYER FOR EACH SESSION

Lord God of heaven and earth, we praise You for bringing us together as a community of faith in the model of the Holy Trinity. Holy Spirit, we invite You to lead our conversation and inspire in us the kind of thoughts and resolutions that bring us closer to You. Heavenly Father, we thank You for giving us every good and perfect gift for our healing and salvation, including the gift of our suffering.

We make an act of faith in this moment that You can and will redeem all things. Help us to cooperate with Your redemption and invite You into our suffering. We offer our suffering, present and future, to You now. We offer any doubts, that You might redeem them, too—especially our doubts about whatever seems most impossible, painful, or hopeless.

Lord Jesus, Healer and Redeemer, be present to us now and always. Give us the grace to trust You more and more. Help us to welcome You into the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls. Thank You for giving us Your Holy Mother to accompany us along the way, as only a mother can.

Our Lady of Sorrows, intercede for us, that God may enlighten our hearts and lead us ever nearer to the joy of heaven that awaits us. Amen.

“It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls. Suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the Redemption.”

—POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II, *SALVIFICI DOLORIS*, § 27





INTRODUCTION

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. Life doesn't often fit into neat categories of "all good" or "all bad." What are some moments you've experienced the tension of both good and hard things at the same time?
3. What is your own story of suffering?
4. How has your experience of suffering impacted you as a person—in positive or challenging ways?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

What does the word "redemption" mean to you, especially in relation to suffering? Consider looking up the definition and inviting God to more clearly reveal His desire for redemption in your life.

"This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

—2 CORINTHIANS 4:17–18





CHAPTER 1

THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION: OUR STORIES OF SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. When did you first hear the phrase “offer it up”? What feelings or connotations does it evoke for you?
3. How do you usually perceive God’s presence in your suffering: disinterested and distant, stern and authoritative, attentive and compassionate, or something else?
4. How have your perceptions of God’s presence in suffering shaped your understanding of life’s trials?
5. How has God redeemed some of those difficulties in your life, or how do you think He might desire to redeem them in the future?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

How might the Lord be inviting you into a renewed or deeper understanding of His particular love for you in every part of your life—even in suffering?

“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

—2 CORINTHIANS 11:30





CHAPTER 2

SUFFERING: AN ORIGIN STORY— WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. What platitudes have you encountered in difficult times? How have they made you feel?
3. On the other hand, what words and actions have proved the most consoling to you in suffering or helped lead you to God?
4. Do you fully believe that God is good? How do you reconcile this truth when you experience or hear about unjust suffering?
5. What does the word “mystery” mean to you in your relationship with God? How would you rate your personal “tolerance” for mystery?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

As you ponder the mysteries of the spiritual life more deeply, consider how the Lord may be inviting you to surrender your limits of understanding more freely to Him.

“[Y]our Father who is in heaven . . . makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

—MATTHEW 5:45





CHAPTER 3

WHY SUFFERING? A KEY TO THE MYSTERY

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. When have you experienced something difficult but in hindsight realized that it was for your greater good or that it benefitted you in some way?
3. How well do you wait? Has your ability to wait improved or worsened in recent years, and why?
4. When has waiting for something good paid off for you?
5. Share about a time when seeking more information in an effort to understand “why” has been more detrimental than helpful.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Consider what is underneath your desire for instant gratification, more information, or perfect understanding. Could it be fear or an effort to control an outcome according to your will? Bring these feelings and fears to the Lord in prayer.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

—ISAIAH 55:9





CHAPTER 4

THE MEANING OF THE CROSS: HOW SUFFERING BECOMES REDEMPTIVE

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. Share a time when you expected a certain outcome, only to be disappointed. How did you feel, and how did it affect your spiritual life?
3. Do you believe that God's love for you is overabundant? What are some personal examples of God's love that you've experienced?
4. What does Christ's Passion, Death on the Cross, and Resurrection mean to you?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Consider how Christ does not redeem suffering by removing it—for Himself or us—but rather by transforming the effects of it. How might you invite Him more willingly into your suffering and unite your pains to His?

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

—MATTHEW 16:24





CHAPTER 5

CALLED TO BE CO-REDEEMERS: A DIVINE MISSION

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. Share about a time when you felt prompted to pray for someone else. What was it like?
3. How have you experienced God inviting you into His work, regardless of your “qualifications”? What fruits have resulted from your cooperation?
4. How much do you trust that God is making use of your prayers and offerings, whether or not you can see the impact?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Consider the truth that our sufferings, when offered to Jesus, are more valuable than any other tasks or accomplishments lauded by the world. How might this help you understand God’s view of authentic human value, identity, and self-worth?

“The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.”

—MATTHEW 9:37–38 (NABRE)





CHAPTER 6

HOW TO “OFFER IT UP”

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. Have you ever offered up your difficulties? If so, how? Share any ways it made a difference in your suffering.
3. Consider a moment where you felt helpless or grieved by someone else’s suffering. How could offering your grief over others’ suffering help you and them?
4. What are some meaningful personal intentions that you could incorporate into a regular routine of offering?
5. What are some difficult or undesirable tasks in your life that you could offer up for a specific intention?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Contemplate the power of offering your suffering. Think of how Christ’s love in your suffering can minister to your own soul while helping others. Ask the Lord to inspire you with helpful habits of offering that are unique to your season and state in life.

“I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions,
and thanksgivings be made for all men.”

—1 TIMOTHY 2:1





CHAPTER 7

HEAVENLY HELP IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. When have you been aware of someone praying for you—be they on earth or in heaven—and how have these prayers helped you?
3. Which saints have you noticed “showing up” in your life? What can you learn from them, or what are some things they’ve already taught you?
4. In what areas of your life do you long for the unconditional love and understanding of a mother? How might Our Lady’s motherly love help you in those places?
5. Which of the seven sacraments are you most drawn to and why?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Consider all the holy help the Lord generously offers in our trials: access to sacramental graces, angels, saints, and Our Lady. Which of these might God be calling you to turn to or make use of more often to help you persevere?

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

—HEBREWS 12:1





CHAPTER 8

SETTING LIMITS IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. When have you taken on too much, and what prompted you to do so?
3. Consider your prayer life, your health and bodily needs, your spouse and kids, and your obligations to others. Which do you usually put first, and why? Which do you usually put last, and why?
4. What are some small steps you can take to simplify your life, set limits, or reorder your priorities to align with God's divine order for your life?
5. How difficult is it for you to say no to a request when necessary? Have you made any commitments under pressure that would be prudent to re-examine now so that you can be freer to say yes to God's call for you?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Your truest, most authentic identity is not what you do but who you are—a child of God. Consider how the world has wounded your identity or fed you lies about who you are. What specific truths is God responding with in order to lead you to deeper healing and flourishing?

“You are anxious and worried about many things.

There is need of only one thing.”

—LUKE 10:41–42 (NABRE)





CHAPTER 9

ASKING FOR AND ACCEPTING HELP IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. Is asking for help easy or difficult for you? What is behind any hesitation, and how has self-sufficiency failed you in the past?
3. Asking for help often requires being vulnerable, being seen at our “worst,” or letting go of control. Which of these can you grow in most? What are some examples that inspire you?
4. Have you ever considered that asking for and accepting help allows others to serve Jesus in you? How does this change your perspective on receiving help?
5. How can you lovingly maintain healthy boundaries and protect your discernment when well-meaning people make unhelpful suggestions? On the other hand, how can you charitably accompany others without merely “fixing” their problems?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Consider how Christ, the only truly self-sufficient human being, continually humbled Himself to ask for and accept human help. What does His example teach you about your human need for help? Where might He be inviting you to greater humility in this area?

“Then he said to them [his disciples], ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.’”

—MATTHEW 26:38





CHAPTER 10

ISOLATION IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. When have you needed or asked for help, but help didn't come? Looking back, where was Jesus in that moment?
3. Is there a time in your life when Our Lord felt especially close in your trials, even when the outcome wasn't what you originally wanted? What was that like?
4. Think of a time you placed unrealistic expectations on another limited person. What deeper desires were behind these actions? How might Our Lord, who is unlimited, want to fulfill these deeper desires in your heart?
5. How honest are you able to be with the Lord in prayer? What might help increase the freedom to be truly vulnerable with Him?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

When have you felt abandoned by God? Have you ever told Him directly about it? Consider writing your own Psalm of Lamentation and pouring out your heart honestly to the Lord.

“He has said, ‘I will never fail you nor forsake you.’
Hence we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper.’”

—HEBREWS 13:5–6





CHAPTER 11

COMING TO TERMS WITH GRIEF AND LOSS IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. In what ways has a specific suffering impacted other areas of your life, either directly or indirectly?
3. What are some experiences of grief or loss in your own life?
4. Have you ever blamed yourself for some suffering or loss? If you had a conversation with the Lord about it, what do you think He would have to say to you in response?
5. When has a painful loss in your life—maybe a dream, a relationship, or an ability—also made way for unexpected fruit?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Have you allowed yourself to fully grieve the losses in your life? Consider revisiting one of them in prayer with Jesus, remembering that He Himself wept and that He will remain lovingly by your side.

“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold.”

—MARK 10:29–30





CHAPTER 12

COMING TO TERMS WITH GRIEF AND LOSS IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. How has fear impacted your life?
3. What are some common ways that you try to prevent, escape, deflect, or minimize the things you fear most?
4. God gives us many tools within the safety of Church teaching to help us face fear in healthier ways. What are some tools you can make use of?
5. How has disordered fear hurt your spiritual life? How might right-ordered fear help it?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

Courage is not the absence of fear but the presence of God. What fears control you most? Consider sharing these fears with the Lord and listening for His response. Ask for His supernatural fortitude to help you face your fears with more confidence and trust.

“Fear not, for I am with you,
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

—ISAIAH 41:10





CHAPTER 13

OVERCOMING COMPARISON IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. How has comparison affected your perception of suffering?
3. When have you minimized, dismissed, or hidden your suffering? Alternatively, when have you overemphasized its power over you?
4. What are some ways that you can acknowledge your suffering more objectively in order to recognize its value and offer it more effectively? Share any words or phrases that might help.
5. How might the practices of gratitude and self-compassion help you to push back against the temptation of comparison in suffering?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

When you are tempted to compare your situation to someone else's, be it for better or for worse, seek God's perspective. Ask Him for the spiritual eyes to see how He views things. How is He accompanying you in this suffering? How might He desire to redeem it?

“When they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.”

—2 CORINTHIANS 10:12





CHAPTER 14

FORGIVENESS IN SUFFERING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. What makes forgiveness so difficult? What are we afraid might happen if we forgive someone?
3. We can make the mistake of assuming that forgiveness requires reconciliation. How does the difference between the two—and the importance of healthy boundaries—help us to better understand true forgiveness?
4. What do you need to forgive yourself for?
5. What do you need to forgive God for?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

What hurts have cut you the deepest? Who do you need to forgive for these hurts? God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. Take time in prayer to acknowledge the full extent of your injuries and ask His help in forgiving more deeply—so He can lead you to greater freedom and healing.

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

—COLOSSIANS 3:12–13





CHAPTER 15

THE END OF THIS ROAD: SALVATION IS THE ULTIMATE HEALING

1. What stood out to you in the opening story?
2. How has the ultimate physical suffering of death touched your life?
3. What can Christ's willing Passion, Death, and miraculous Resurrection teach us about our own mortality—as well as our incomparable value in His eyes?
4. How often do you contemplate heaven? How do you imagine heaven? What does God's gift of salvation mean to you?
5. We are called to acknowledge both the evil of human death and its redemptive, eternal hope in Christ. What are some ways you can hold this tension for yourself and for others?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, OR PRAYER

You were made for heaven, where there will never again be suffering or pain. Consider the passing nature of this earthly life and how God wants to purify you so that you can be with Him forever in glorious paradise. How can you more faithfully offer your suffering to Him going forward—up to and including your death—for the sake of your soul and others?

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.”

—ROMANS 6:5, 8–9





CLOSING REFLECTION

As Heidi Keiser wrote, “Every occasion of suffering presents the choice of whether to naturally sink with it toward hell or to surrender to God and rise with grace toward heaven.” Suffering is a natural evil; redemption is God’s supernatural solution.

Let us pray for the grace to cooperate with God’s supernatural grace in every moment of our lives and seek His redemption in every misstep or difficulty—that we may steadily rise toward the joyous salvation He has prepared for us.

Lord Jesus, Redeemer, hear our prayer!

