

RANDY ALCORN

Best-Selling Author of *Heaven*

If
God
Is
Good
Study Guide



Companion to *If God Is Good*
Includes 4-week, 8-week, and 13-week studies
Perfect for groups and individuals

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If
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RANDY ALCORN



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Contents

Introduction: Three Ways to Use This Study Guide 1

PART I

The Burning Question

- 1-A: Something's Wrong 11
Facing the Hurt and Confusion
Understanding the Problem of Evil and Suffering
- 1-B: Tragic Choices 33
Understanding Evil: Its Origins, Nature, and Consequences

PART 2

Our Search for Solutions

- 2-A: Alternative Answers 55
Problems for Non-Theists: Moral Standards, Goodness,
and Extreme Evil
Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Evil and Suffering:
Limiting God's Attributes
- 2-B: The Great Drama 83
Evil and Suffering in the Great Drama of Christ's
Redemptive Work

PART 3

God at Work

- 3-A: Who's in Control? 97
Divine Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice:
Accounting for Evil and Suffering

3-B: Eternal Perspectives 117
 The Two Eternal Solutions to the Problem of Evil:
 Heaven and Hell
 God’s Allowance and Restraint of Evil and Suffering

PART 4
 Our Best Response

4-A: Accepting God’s Purposes 141
 Evil and Suffering Used for God’s Glory
 Why Does God Allow Suffering?
 4-B: What We Can Do 163
 Living Meaningfully in Suffering
 Final Thoughts About God, Goodness, Evil, and Suffering
 Group Leaders’ Guide 184

Introduction

Three Ways to Use This Study Guide

Welcome to an exploration of the vital and universal themes that are discussed in Randy Alcorn's book *If God Is Good*.

This study guide will be the most help to you if you're going through it as part of a small group or class (see the "Group Leaders' Guide" at the back of this book). But of course you can benefit greatly from going through it on your own as well.

What's Here?

This is a thorough guide to a fairly large book, but the structure is simple. This guide includes components and questions that link to each chapter in *IGIG*. You'll see four elements here for each *IGIG* chapter, marked by these four headings:

- Focus In
 - Interact
 - Explore Further
 - Investigate Deeper
-
- *Focus In*—This component briefly highlights a few of the most important points made in the *IGIG* chapter. Reading this will get you "warmed up" to the topic.
 - *Interact*—Here you'll find a few brief excerpts reprinted from the *IGIG* chapter, and each excerpt is followed by a question to help you interact with it.

- *Explore Further*—These questions help you reflect further on the chapter’s topic, and they often direct you back into the pages of *IGIG* to scan the chapter and look for certain things.
- *Investigate Deeper*—These are the most comprehensive questions; they assume you are fully acquainted with the *IGIG* chapter’s content.

You’ll see subheadings throughout this study guide that tell you which chapter in *IGIG* these elements correspond to, so you may easily go back and forth from the book to the study guide.

The Pace and Approach

This companion guide to *IGIG* is designed for use in a variety of ways. Choose which best suits your schedule.

We suggest you follow one of three approaches:

- *Overview*—This is designed as a **four-week course**. You’ll notice from the contents page that this guide is divided into four parts; in this overview approach, you study one part each week. (As you do, complete everything under the “● Focus In” and “● Interact” headings, but skip all the rest.)
- *Exploratory*—Here we suggest an **eight-week course**. With this simple structure, each of the four main parts is split in two—with an “A” unit and a “B” unit. So alternate each week between units A and B until all four parts are completed. (You’ll complete “● Focus In” and “● Interact” and also the questions under the “●● Explore Further” heading.)
- *Intensive*—This is a suggested **thirteen-week course** linked closely to the structure of *IGIG*, which includes an introduction, eleven sections, and a conclusion (1 + 11 + 1 = 13). You’ll see headings here in the study guide text that exactly match those section headings in *IGIG*. (In this intensive approach, you’ll complete everything in this

study guide—not only the elements mentioned above, but also everything under the “●●● Investigate Deeper” heading for each chapter.)

You’ll notice that the number of “bullets” you see helps you remember which elements in the study guide go with which approach:

- *Overview* (four weeks): Do everything under any heading that has a single bullet (●), and skip the rest.
- *Exploratory* (eight weeks): Complete *both* the single-bullet and the double-bullet (●●) sections, and skip the rest.
- *Intensive* (thirteen weeks): Complete *everything*—including the triple-bullet (●●●) sections.

Summary: The Three Approaches

To summarize, here are the three approaches we suggest:

OVERVIEW (FOUR WEEKS)

Each week you’ll do one of the four main parts in this study guide:

Week One—*Part 1: The Burning Question*

Week Two—*Part 2: Our Search for Solutions*

Week Three—*Part 3: God at Work*

Week Four—*Part 4: Our Best Response*

Within each of these parts, you’ll do everything under any heading that has a single bullet (●) and skip the rest.

EXPLORATORY (EIGHT WEEKS)

Each week you’ll do half of each main part in this study guide:

Week One—*1-A: Something’s Wrong*

Week Two—*1-B: Tragic Choices*

Week Three—*2-A: Alternative Answers*

Week Four—*2-B: The Great Drama*

Week Five—3-A: Who’s in Control?

Week Six—3-B: Eternal Perspectives

Week Seven—4-A: Accepting God’s Purposes

Week Eight—4-B: What We Can Do

Within each of these parts, you’ll **complete both the single-bullet (•) and the double-bullet (••) sections** and skip the rest.

INTENSIVE (THIRTEEN WEEKS)

Each week, you’ll complete the study guide contents that correspond to each of the numbered sections in *IGIG* (you’ll see the headings clearly marked within the study guide text):

Week One—Facing the Hurt and Confusion (corresponds to the introduction in *IGIG*)

Week Two—*Section 1*: Understanding the Problem of Evil and Suffering

Week Three—*Section 2*: Understanding Evil: Its Origins, Nature, and Consequences

Week Four—*Section 3*: Problems for Non-Theists: Moral Standards, Goodness, and Extreme Evil

Week Five—*Section 4*: Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Evil and Suffering: Limiting God’s Attributes

Week Six—*Section 5*: Evil and Suffering in the Great Drama of Christ’s Redemptive Work

Week Seven—*Section 6*: Divine Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice: Accounting for Evil and Suffering

Week Eight—*Section 7*: The Two Eternal Solutions to the Problem of Evil: Heaven and Hell

Week Nine—*Section 8*: God’s Allowance and Restraint of Evil and Suffering

Week Ten—*Section 9*: Evil and Suffering Used for God’s Glory

Week Eleven—*Section 10*: Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Week Twelve—*Section 11*: Living Meaningfully in Suffering

Week Thirteen—Final Thoughts About God, Goodness, Evil,
and Suffering (*IGIG* conclusion)

Throughout these weekly assignments, you'll **complete everything**—including the triple-bullet (●●●) sections.

At a Glance

Here's a chart to help you remember the week-by-week structure, depending on which approach you choose:

Study Guide Structure	Links to These Sections in the <i>IGIG</i> Book	4-Week Track (Overview)	8-Week Track (Exploratory)	13-Week Track (Intensive)
Part 1: The Burning Question		Week 1		
<i>I-A:</i> Something's Wrong	<i>Introduction:</i> A Note to Readers, Especially to Those Hurting and Confused		Week 1	Week 1
	<i>Section 1:</i> Understanding the Problem of Evil and Suffering			Week 2
<i>I-B:</i> Tragic Choices	<i>Section 2:</i> Understanding Evil: Its Origins, Nature, and Consequences		Week 2	Week 3

Study Guide Structure	Links to These Sections in the <i>IGIG</i> Book	4-Week Track (Overview)	8-Week Track (Exploratory)	13-Week Track (Intensive)
Part 2: Our Search for Solutions		Week 2		
<i>2-A:</i> Alternative Answers	<i>Section 3:</i> Problems for Non-Theists: Moral Standards, Goodness, and Extreme Evil		Week 3	Week 4
	<i>Section 4:</i> Proposed Solutions to the Problem of Evil and Suffering: Limiting God's Attributes			Week 5
<i>2-B:</i> The Great Drama	<i>Section 5:</i> Evil and Suffering in the Great Drama of Christ's Redemptive Work		Week 4	Week 6

Study Guide Structure	Links to These Sections in the <i>IGIG</i> Book	4-Week Track (Overview)	8-Week Track (Exploratory)	13-Week Track (Intensive)
Part 3: God at Work		Week 3		
<i>3-A:</i> Who's in Control?	<i>Section 6:</i> Divine Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice: Accounting for Evil and Suffering		Week 5	Week 7
<i>3-B:</i> Eternal Perspectives	<i>Section 7:</i> The Two Eternal Solutions to the Problem of Evil: Heaven and Hell		Week 6	Week 8
	<i>Section 8:</i> God's Allowance and Restraint of Evil and Suffering			Week 9

Study Guide Structure	Links to These Sections in the <i>IGIG</i> Book	4-Week Track (Overview)	8-Week Track (Exploratory)	13-Week Track (Intensive)
Part 4: Our Best Response		Week 4		
<i>4-A:</i> Accepting God's Purposes	<i>Section 9:</i> Evil and Suffering Used for God's Glory		Week 7	Week 10
	<i>Section 10:</i> Why Does God Allow Suffering?			Week 11
<i>4-B:</i> What We Can Do	<i>Section 11:</i> Living Meaningfully in Suffering		Week 8	Week 12
	<i>Conclusion:</i> Final Thoughts About God, Goodness, Evil, and Suffering			Week 13

PART I



The Burning Question

*(Links with the introduction and sections 1–2 in
If God Is Good, pages 1–92)*

Something's Wrong

FACING THE HURT AND CONFUSION

(Links with the introduction in *If God Is Good*, pages 1–5.)

Again, a quick reminder: Here and throughout this study guide...

- *if you're following the less intensive overview approach* (typically a four-week course), do all the sections that begin with a single-bullet (•) heading.
- *if you're pursuing the more exploratory approach* (typically eight weeks), complete *both* the single-bullet *and* the double-bullet (••) sections.
- *if you're taking the most intensive approach* (thirteen weeks), complete *everything*—including the triple-bullet (•••) sections.

Review the introduction for more details.

● FOCUS IN

Our outlook on God and the world around us will be radically affected by how we answer this question: if God is good...*why all this evil and suffering?*

In our search for answers, all of us bring our own burdens to the journey—burdens that can shake our faith to the core. Meanwhile, to find the right perspectives as we try to make sense of life, we need to let our thinking be shaped by the truth of God's Word.

● INTERACT

Think about your own experiences and perspectives regarding evil and suffering as you read the following brief excerpt from Randy Alcorn's *If*

God Is Good. (Throughout this study guide, all the excerpts from Randy's book will be set off with pointers (✂ ✂), like the quote below. Each time you see that mark, read the excerpt, think about it, and then respond to the question that follows.)

✂ How we answer this book's central question will radically affect how we see God and the world around us.

We may want to turn away from world suffering and refuse to reflect on the significance of our own pain; we just want it to go away. But despite the superficiality of our culture, we remain God's image-bearers—thinking and caring people, wired to ask questions and seek answers.

No question looms larger than the central question of this book: If God is good...*why all this evil and suffering?* If God loves us, how can he justify allowing (or sending) the sometimes overwhelming difficulties we face?

Does this great question interest you? If so, I invite you to join me on a journey of discovery. ✂

1. How would you describe your own interests and concerns regarding this topic? Why is that "central question" Randy mentioned an important issue for you personally?

✂ While traveling this long road (researching what Scripture says about evil and suffering), I found something surprising: the journey was not only rewarding, but fascinating, enlightening, and at times downright enjoyable. I know it sounds counterintuitive—shouldn't it depress someone to meditate on evil and suffering? In fact, I'd already seen enough evil and suffering to feel deeply troubled. What I needed was perspective. Instead of being disheartened, I'm encouraged.

In this process, I've taken the most pleasure in focusing on God, exploring his attributes of goodness, love, holiness, justice, patience, grace, and mercy. While my journey

hasn't unearthed easy answers, I'm astonished at how much insight Scripture offers. ✂

2. To what extent do you share with Randy the sense of being "deeply troubled" by the evil and suffering you've seen?

✂ We each bring our own burdens on the journey.

If abuse, rape, desertion, paralysis, debilitating disease, or the loss of a loved one has devastated you, then this issue isn't theoretical, philosophical, or theological. It's deeply personal. Logical arguments won't satisfy you; in fact, they might offend you. You need help with the *emotional* problem of evil, not merely the *logical* problem of evil.

Though I write personally, from the heart, and tell stories of great courage and perspective, I must also present a case from Scripture and appeal to logic. But remember this: you are a whole person, and the path to your heart travels through your mind. Truth matters. To touch us at the heart level—and to keep touching us over days, months, years, and decades—truth must work its way into our *minds*. ✂

3. Randy mentions approaching this topic *emotionally*, as well as *logically* and *scripturally*. For you personally, what part does God's Word play in your understanding of absolute truth?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, notice the **bold-text** sentences as you page through *IGIG*'s introduction, and read them over. Take time to stop and read the continuing paragraphs that interest you most. Then respond to the questions below.)

4. Glance over the text of the *IGIG* introduction, look for the following quoted scriptures, and highlight or underline

them (or you can simply look them up in your own Bible): Exodus 3:7 and 1 Peter 1:7. Together, what perspective from God do these two verses give us about this topic of evil and suffering?

5. Look also at these two quoted scriptures in the *IGIG* introduction: 2 Timothy 3:16 and Isaiah 55:11. How do they reinforce your need to have true biblical convictions and perspectives on this sometimes confusing and disturbing topic?
6. What do you need to understand more thoroughly in order to trust and accept God's goodness in the face of the world's suffering and evil?
7. As you look over the bold-text statements in *IGIG*'s introduction, which one do you think is most important right now, and why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

(For more intensive study, first read through all of the *IGIG* introduction. Then answer the questions below.)

8. Randy writes in *IGIG* that he desires for God to “give us the strength to face a world that is not what it once was, or what it one day will be” (page 5). How would you explain those phrases about the world from your own understanding of biblical teaching?

9. Which stories or illustrations in the *IGIG* introduction did you find yourself most drawn to, and why? How were they helpful for you?

10. Look up these scriptures in your own Bible, and record the truths you find regarding this topic of suffering, evil, and God: Judges 10:16 and Revelation 21:4.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

(Links with section 1 in *If God Is Good*, pages 7–44.)

Why Is the Problem of Evil and Suffering So Important?

(See also chapter 1 in *IGIG*, page 9.)

● FOCUS IN

People point to the problem of evil and suffering as their greatest reason for not believing in God—it's not merely *a* problem, it's *the* problem. In almost any serious conversation about Christianity with those who reject it, you're likely to hear the problem of evil raised. It looms as a seemingly insurmountable barrier to accepting the existence of the kind of wise, loving, sovereign God proclaimed by Christians.

Suffering and evil exert a force that either pushes us away from God or pulls us toward him. If you base your faith in God on lack of affliction, your faith lives on the brink of extinction and is liable to collapse with the news of a frightening diagnosis or a shattering phone call. Token, fair-weather faith will not survive suffering, nor should it.

● INTERACT

(As before, read each *IGIG* excerpt, and then answer the question that follows.)

✂ If we open our eyes, we'll see the problem of evil and suffering even when it doesn't touch us directly...

I once had to tell a wife, son, and daughter that their husband and father had died on a hunting trip. I still remember the anguished face of the little girl, then hearing her wail, "Not Daddy, no, not Daddy!"

Years ago I had to tell my mother that her only brother had been murdered with a meat cleaver.

A Christian woman tipped over on her riding lawn mower and fell into a pond. The machine landed on top of her, pinning her to the bottom and drowning her. Such a bizarre death prompted some to ask, "Why, God?" and "Why like this?"...

Our own suffering is often our wake-up call. But even if you aren't now facing it, look around and you'll see many who are. ✂

1. What current experiences of suffering—either yours or someone's you know—are you most aware of at this time?

✂ More people point to the problem of evil and suffering as their reason for not believing in God than any other—it is not merely *a* problem, it is *the* problem....

You will not get far in a conversation with someone who rejects the Christian faith before the problem of evil is raised. Pulled out like the ultimate trump card, it's supposed to silence believers and prove that the all-good and all-powerful God of the Bible doesn't exist. ✂

2. In your opinion, what is it about the problem of suffering and evil that causes so many people to question or reject either the existence or the goodness of God?

✂ A faith that leaves us unprepared for suffering is a false faith that deserves to be lost....

Believing God exists is not the same as trusting the God who exists. A nominal Christian often discovers in suffering that his faith has been in his church, denomination, or family tradition, but not Christ. As he faces evil and suffering, he may lose his faith. But that's actually a good thing. I have sympathy for people who lose their faith, but any faith lost in suffering wasn't a faith worth keeping. ✂

3. Do you agree or disagree that "any faith lost in suffering wasn't a faith worth keeping"? Why?

✂ Suffering will come; we owe it to God, ourselves, and those around us to prepare for it.

Live long enough and you *will* suffer. In this life, the only way to avoid suffering is to die....

A young woman battling cancer wrote me, "I was surprised that when it happened, it was hard and it hurt and I was sad and I couldn't find anything good or redeeming about my losses. I never expected that a Christian who had access to God could feel so empty and alone."

Our failure to teach a biblical theology of suffering leaves Christians unprepared for harsh realities. It also leaves our children vulnerable to history, philosophy, and global studies classes that raise the problems of evil and suffering while denying the Christian worldview. Since the question *will* be raised, shouldn't Christian parents and churches raise it first and take people to Scripture to see what God says about it? ✂

4. What are some things that parents or churches could do to better prepare those under their care for handling various experiences of suffering?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, look over especially the **bold-text** sentences as you page through *IGIG* chapter 1, read the continuing paragraphs that interest you most, and then answer the following questions.)

5. In the most difficult suffering you've experienced, how prepared were you for it—spiritually, emotionally, mentally, even physically?
6. If you have ever had a serious conversation with anyone about the problem of evil and suffering, how prepared did you feel to tackle the subject? If you haven't, how do you think you would approach it now?
7. On the last page of this chapter, look at these quoted scriptures: Philippians 1:23 and Revelation 21:3–4. How do they affect our perception of suffering?
8. In this chapter of *IGIG*, as you look over the bold-text statements, which one do you think has the most significance for your life, and why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

(For more intensive study, read *IGIG* chapter 1.)

9. What's the best answer to the question in this chapter's title: why is the problem of evil and suffering so important?
10. In what ways is this problem of evil and suffering a “cornerstone” for atheism (see page 11)?
11. Which stories or illustrations in *IGIG* chapter 1 did you find most compelling, and why?

What Is the Problem of Evil and Suffering?

(See also chapter 2 in *IGIG*, page 17.)

● FOCUS IN

If God is all-good, then he must want to prevent evil and suffering. If he is all-knowing, then he must know how to prevent it. If God is all-powerful, then he is able to prevent it. And yet...a great deal of evil and suffering exists. Why?

The problem of evil has found a prominent voice in what may seem the most unlikely place...the Bible. No other book asks so bluntly, passionately, and frequently why God permits evil and why evil people sometimes thrive while the righteous suffer. Barely has the first chapter of the Bible described the original creation—saying, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good”—before a terrible shadow falls: evil and suffering burst into the world.

● INTERACT

✦ Philosophers throughout the ages have pondered the problem of evil and suffering.

Three centuries before Christ, the Greek philosopher Epicurus asked, “Whence evil—if there be a God?” In 1776,

skeptic David Hume asked a series of questions about God: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"...

Recently I received this e-mail: "I have family members who tell me it is evil and suffering that keeps them from seeing God as good; or if he's good, they say he must not be powerful enough or interested enough to do something about it." Neither the writer of the note nor his family members claim to be philosophers. Nonetheless, they wrestle with exactly the same question: why would a good and all-powerful God permit evil and suffering?

This problem crosses all barriers of time and culture.... The problem of evil is a central theme in human storytelling. ❖

1. What books or films are you familiar with that especially address the problem of evil?

❖ The problem of evil has found a prominent voice in what may seem the most unlikely place...the Bible....

If atheists would read Scripture, they'd find their best arguments articulated there....

The problem of evil lies at the very heart of the biblical account and serves as the crux of the unfolding drama of redemption....

The Bible never sugarcoats evil....

The fact that the Bible raises the problem of evil gives us full permission to do so. ❖

2. From what you know of the Bible, what are some things it says about suffering? What stories of suffering does it tell?

✂ Some perspectives can give great help in dealing with the problem, but none bring neat and tidy solutions....

I've read books by atheists and Holocaust survivors, and have interviewed dozens of men and women who have endured extreme evil and suffering. The more I've done so, the more I've asked God to give me wisdom—and I've discovered that wisdom begins with the humility to say there's a great deal I don't understand. ✂

3. When you think about evil and suffering, what aspects of it cause you to humbly admit (as Randy does), "There's a great deal I don't understand"? What are your most persistent questions in this area?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, look over especially the **bold-text** sentences in *IGIG* chapter 2, read the continuing paragraphs that interest you most, and then answer the following questions.)

4. During your years in school, how was the problem of evil and suffering dealt with in the classroom?
5. When has the problem of evil and suffering surfaced in your personal experience, or in that of your family and friends?
6. Glance over the text of *IGIG* chapter 2, looking for and marking the following quoted passages: Revelation 6:10; Habakkuk 1:2–3; Psalms 10:1; 42:9; 44:23–24. What words are used to show the deep disturbance the biblical writers sensed regarding suffering and evil?

7. Based on the scriptures quoted in this chapter—Matthew 12:39; 6:13; Romans 12:21; Luke 13:27—what is the Bible’s view of evil?

8. In this chapter of *IGIG*, as you look over the bold-text statements, which one has the most significance for your life, and why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

(For more intensive study, read *IGIG* chapter 2.)

9. What’s the best answer to the question in this chapter’s title: what is the problem of evil and suffering?

10. What convinces you that the Bible addresses the problem of evil and suffering with complete candor and openness?

11. Which stories or illustrations in *IGIG* chapter 2 did you find yourself most drawn to, and why?

What Is Evil, and How Does It Differ from Suffering?

(See also chapter 3 in *IGIG*, page 24.)

● FOCUS IN

Evil, in its essence, refuses to accept God as God and puts someone or something else in his place. In the Bible, anything that goes against God’s moral will is presented as evil—starting with Adam and Eve’s first transgression in Eden. Their act was a blatant offense against God and his righteousness, and it brought human *suffering* as the result. So

while suffering is clearly an effect of moral evil, suffering itself is not the same as moral evil.

● INTERACT

✂ Most people today understand evil as anything that harms others. The more harm done, the more evil the action.

Cornelius Plantinga named his book about sin after a line from the movie *Grand Canyon*: “Not the way it’s supposed to be.” Evil is exactly that—a fundamental and troubling departure from goodness. The Bible uses the word *evil* to describe anything that violates God’s moral will. The first human evil occurred when Eve and Adam disobeyed God. From that original sin—a moral evil—came the consequence of suffering. Although suffering results from moral evil, it is distinguishable from it, just as an injury caused by drunken driving isn’t synonymous with the offense.

Evil could be defined as “the refusal to accept the true God as God.” True evil elevates itself or another to replace God. For this very reason, the Bible treats idolatry as the ultimate sin, since it worships as God what is *not* God. ✂

1. How does the Bible’s view of evil differ from the more popular understanding of evil as “anything that harms others”?

✂ Some view evil as the absence of good.

The logic goes like this: There is no such thing as cold, only lower degrees of heat (or the complete lack of it). Darkness is not the opposite of light, but the absence of light. Death is not the opposite of life, but its privation. A cloth can exist without a hole, but that hole cannot exist without the cloth. Good can, did, and will exist without evil. But evil cannot exist without the good it opposes. A shadow is nothing but the obstruction of light—no light, no shadow....

More than merely the absence of good, evil is the corruption of good....

Perhaps we could better conceive of evil as a parasite on God's good creation, since a parasite is something substantial. Without the living organism it uses as a host, the parasite cannot exist. Likewise, cancer thrives on, consumes, and ultimately kills healthy, living cells. As metal does not need rust, but rust needs metal, so good doesn't need evil, but evil needs good. ✂

2. Why is it important to understand that evil is more than merely the absence of good?

✂ Disobeying God, inseparable from the failure to trust God, was the original evil. From that sin—a *moral* evil—came the consequence of suffering. So suffering follows evil as a caboose follows an engine. Scripture sometimes refers to calamities and tragic events as evils. To distinguish these, we can call moral evil *primary* evil and suffering *secondary* evil....

Secondary evils point to primary evil, reminding us that humanity, guilty of sin, deserves suffering. ✂

3. How does our sin contribute to the existence of suffering?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, look over especially the **bold-text** sentences in *IGIG* chapter 3, and then answer the questions below.)

4. How exactly would you define *evil*?

5. How would you define *suffering*?

6. Glance over *IGIG* chapter 3 and look for these quoted passages: Isaiah 5:20; Hebrews 5:14; Joshua 23:15; Romans 1:27. What information do they provide about God's view of evil and the causes of evil?

7. Look also at these passages quoted in chapter 3: Ephesians 2:7 and Jeremiah 32:38–42. What do they teach about God's grace and mercy toward us in the midst of an evil world?

8. In this chapter of *IGIG*, as you look over the bold-text statements, which one seems most important to you right now? Why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

(For more intensive study, read *IGIG* chapter 3.)

9. In your own words, how would you explain the distinction Randy makes between the “primary” evil of sin and the “secondary” evil of suffering?

10. Which stories or illustrations in *IGIG* chapter 3 did you find most valuable, and why?

11. Look up the following passages in your Bible, and record what they teach us about the tragic consequences of evil: Genesis 6:11–13; Isaiah 13:11; 24:4–6; 59:1–3.

What Are Some Possible Responses to the Problem of Evil and Suffering?

(See also chapter 4 in *IGIG*, page 30.)

● FOCUS IN

The irrational solution is to say that evil and suffering are illusions—that they don't really exist. The atheistic solution is to say that God doesn't exist. The more common way of addressing the problem of evil is to minimize one or more of the attributes of God, particularly his power, his knowledge, or his goodness. The Bible, however, consistently portrays God as infinite and limitless in all of his attributes.

To glorify and magnify God is not to make more of him than he is; that's impossible. Rather, it's to affirm his greatness, attempting to do justice to his infinite majesty, power, wisdom, love, etc., even though inevitably we'll fall short.

To address good and evil without gazing upon God is fruitless. Good flows from the life connected to God. Evil flows from the life alienated from God.

● INTERACT

✂ *How can we reconcile evil and suffering with a God who is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing?* I will present and comment briefly on six answers, returning later to develop several of them....

1. There is no evil and suffering....
2. There is no God....
3. God has limited goodness....
4. God has limited power....
5. God has limited knowledge....
6. God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing; he hates evil and will ultimately judge evildoers, and remove evil and suffering after accomplishing a greater, eternal good.

How does your own worldview stack up against the real world around you? Does it credibly explain the way things are and offer persuasive reasons for believing in a hopeful future? Or do you need to revise or abandon it in order to embrace the biblical worldview because it better explains your condition and that of the world around you? ✂

1. How would you personally respond to the questions in the paragraph above?

✂ A friend wrestled with the problem of evil after a terrible accident. He concluded that we err whenever we speak of only two or three attributes of God in relation to the problem of evil. He meant that we must bring *all* of God's attributes to the table.

If we see God only in terms of his love, mercy, and compassion, we will not envision the true God, but only an idol of our own imagination—and that is precisely what we see in the airbrushed God of various modern solutions to the problem of evil. ✂

2. Why is it inadequate to “see God only in terms of his love, mercy, and compassion”? What other important aspects of his character do we need to understand?

✂ We must form our perspective from God's Word, not popular culture.

We live in an era when popular culture, despite its shallowness, has a far-reaching influence on the average person's worldview. This entertainment-driven and self-gratification-obsessed blend of pop psychology, pop philosophy, and pop theology has become its own worldview. Never have people needed to hear the biblical worldview

more—and perhaps never have they been more culturally conditioned to dismiss it....

Studying about evil and suffering doesn't equal facing it, but the study and discussion can go a long way in preparing us for it. It will provide a reservoir of perspective from which we can draw. It will minimize disorientation and panic when we plunge into life's turbulence. This is why I encourage you to meditate on and discuss with others the themes of this book.

We shouldn't wait until suffering comes to start learning about how to face it any more than we should wait until we fall into the water to start learning how to scuba dive. ✂

3. You're to be commended for pursuing more understanding of God's perspective on this topic by working through this study guide! From your perspective, what would it mean to be adequately prepared for suffering? What would that look like in your own life?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, review the **bold-text** sentences in *IGIG* chapter 4, and then answer the following questions.)

4. Mark these quoted passages: Isaiah 25:8; Deuteronomy 10:17; 32:3; 1 Chronicles 29:11. What do they show us about God's character and personality? And why is it important to understand these things as we search for answers about evil and suffering?
5. Look also at these scriptures in chapter 4: Luke 1:46; 3 John 11; Psalm 119:92. What additional insight do they provide about God, evil, or suffering?

6. In this chapter of *IGIG*, as you look over the bold-text statements, which one is the most significant for you right now, and why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

(For more intensive study, read *IGIG* chapter 4.)

7. Look over the six worldviews Randy mentions in this chapter (pages 30–34). Setting aside the last one for now, which of the first five worldviews seems to have the most credibility?
8. What's the right heart and mind attitude to have toward God as we investigate the problem of evil and suffering?
9. Which stories or illustrations in *IGIG* chapter 4 did you find yourself most drawn to, and why?

A Closer Look at Central Issues in the Problem of Evil

(See also chapter 5 in *IGIG*, page 40.)

● FOCUS IN

Believers and unbelievers alike are horrified by the degree and extent of suffering in the world around us. Seeing and hearing about such vast affliction and anguish, we find it impossible to view it as an acceptable norm. This abhorrence of evil and suffering can help nudge unbelievers toward greater attentiveness to the Bible's promise of something better.

For the New Testament lets us know that our present sufferings ultimately serve our greater good. We're told, in fact, that this ultimate,

eternal good will be so surpassingly wonderful that our present sufferings aren't even worth comparing to it.

In fact, the argument for the *greater good* may be the strongest biblical case for God permitting evil and suffering. Is it possible that we learn things through suffering that otherwise we might not understand so clearly? Can we trust the testimony of God's Word that in permitting evil he has good eternal purposes that are beyond our comprehension?

● INTERACT

✦ As frequently expressed, the problem of evil assumes that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God cannot have good reasons for creating a universe in which evil and suffering exist. But shouldn't this assumption require some proof?

We may not understand why a good God would allow terrible suffering. But this merely establishes that if there is a God, we do not know everything he knows. Why should this surprise us?

Suppose we add only one premise to the argument that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, and yet evil exists: *God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil*. You may disagree with this premise, but it does *not* contradict the others....

To disprove the God of the Bible exists, someone must demonstrate there can be no moral justification for an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God to allow evil. Has this been proven? No. This doesn't mean the question isn't valid, only that a question is not the same as a proof. ✦

1. What is your initial reaction to the statement, "God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil"? Do you tend to agree or disagree—and what are your reasons?

✂ Believers share common ground with unbelievers. We feel mutual horror at the reality, depth, and duration of human and animal suffering. We share a conviction that this kind of pain is terribly wrong and that it should be made right. In this way, evil and suffering serve as a bridge to the biblical account and its promise of redemption.

Consider two claims of Scripture: “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17)....

Paul insists that our sufferings will result in our greater good—God’s people will be better off *eternally* because they suffer *temporarily*. From Paul’s perspective, this trade-off will in eternity prove to be a great bargain....

Suffering reminds us to stop taking life for granted and to contemplate the larger picture. God intends that it draw our attention to life-and-death realities far greater than ourselves....

The dysfunction of the present is the exception, not the rule—a small fraction of our history. Evil, suffering, and death will end forever (see Revelation 21:4). May we learn now what Paul knew: our present sufferings are a brief but important part of a larger plan that one day will prove them all worthwhile. ✂

2. When we’re experiencing suffering, why is it often hard for us to look beyond our pain toward eternity? What can help us have a stronger eternal perspective?

●● EXPLORE FURTHER

(For more exploration, review the **bold-text** sentences in *IGIG* chapter 5, and then answer the following questions.)

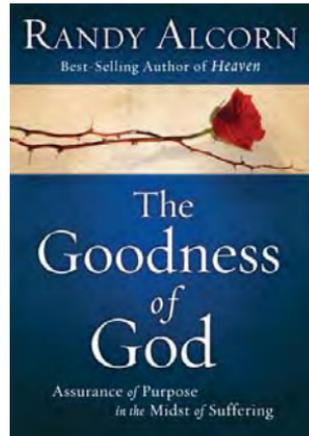
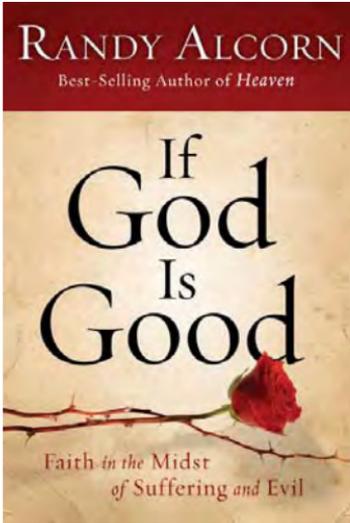
3. Find and mark these quoted passages: Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17. According to these verses, what factor should we always remember as we evaluate our sufferings?
4. Look at Psalm 16:11 and Matthew 8:12, quoted in this chapter. What specifics about our future do they describe?
5. Find 1 Corinthians 15:32, quoted in this chapter. How does our future resurrection relate to our current existence and behavior?
6. In this chapter of *IGIG*, as you look over the bold-text statements, which one is most significant right now for your life, and why?

●●● INVESTIGATE DEEPER

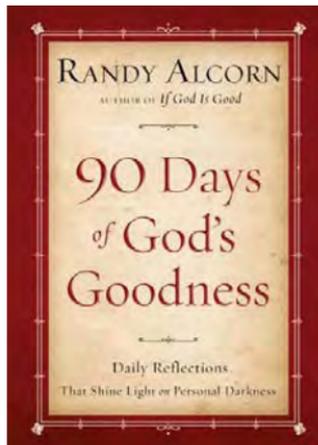
(For more intensive study, read *IGIG* chapter 5.)

7. What is the meaning of the term *theodicy*?
8. Which stories or illustrations in *IGIG* chapter 5 did you find yourself most drawn to, and why?
9. Look up 2 Corinthians 11:23–33 in your Bible. What specific hardships did the apostle Paul have to suffer in his life?

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