

THEME SUMMARY

Theme:

Isaiah 54:10

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

Key Thought:

If God is good, why do bad things happen?

How would you answer someone if they asked you that? What if that person was fighting cancer, had just lost a sibling to violence or their parents were going through a messy divorce? Do you feel anxiety rising in you as you imagine that scenario and how you might respond? You're not alone: even adults who have followed Jesus for years struggle to answer this question.

The question forces us to wrestle with two deep, significant issues: do I believe God is actually good? If I do believe God is good, then what does that say about suffering? These are good, yet complex questions to contemplate and work through as believers. At times, we ignore these questions because they're overwhelming, and we feel like we might need a seminary degree just to scratch the surface. Other times, we might try to oversimplify the answers with Christian cliches like, “God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good,” or “You just have to have faith”. While there is some truth in these statements, they are a flimsy comfort during the storms of life and insufficient to alleviate human suffering. Simple answers do not satisfy complex problems.

Throughout the week of SERVE, participants will be invited to turn to Scripture to explore these questions about God's goodness and love, to think about and discuss what suffering is and what can be done to alleviate it and to engage with brokenness in the world. They will reflect on the beauty of God's love, of redemption, of community and of God's invitation to follow him. They will also be challenged to consider the brokenness of the world and themselves, considering how to love God and love others in the midst of suffering. Ultimately, participants will be invited to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him, even if they may not have the answers to all their questions.

The reality of the Christian life is that we are living in the tension of the “already, but not yet” of God's kingdom. It's messy, it's hard and it's complicated, but there is beauty to behold because of the truth that God's “unfailing love for you will not be shaken” according to Isaiah 54:10.

The Gospel as reflected in the Theme:

As Christians, we long for people to see and experience the beauty and the goodness of Jesus. The gospel message has often been reduced to the simplistic idea that following Jesus equals a life full of ease and things working out how you think they should. We perpetuate the idea that Christians are happy and joyful and rarely experience hardship. When difficulties arise, we mistakenly blame people's lack of faith or their sin. When this is our gospel message, we have neglected the suffering of the cross and our need for a Savior. Jesus becomes a magical genie in the sky, ready to grant us whatever we “name and claim.” That is not the gospel.

The gospel message is clear: the brokenness inside of us and around us in the world today is not what was intended. The world and our experiences were not meant to be challenging and marked by suffering and brokenness. But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we soon realize that we are all sinners in need of grace. We need to understand

that the world is broken, our communities are broken, our churches are broken and we are broken. However, the gospel message does not end there. When we acknowledge our brokenness and our need for saving grace, Jesus is faithful to provide for that need. He invites us into something beautiful: a life and relationship with him that gives meaning and purpose to the suffering we experience. However, he also helps us see how God is good, how he is at work in the world and how we can join with him in loving and caring for our neighbors, both here and around the world.

SERVE participants are coming into this experience with a variety of thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding Jesus, the church, the world and themselves. Some students may arrive bogged down with guilt and fear of never living up to what they believe they need to do or be to follow Jesus. They are dwelling in the brokenness of the world, with little hope that they, or anyone else, can be redeemed. Others may be coming with a sense of pride over how good of a person or Christian they are. They may believe their life is working out well because of their own goodness. Perhaps some participants will come having never heard the true gospel message before, but only warped versions of half-truths. Others may have grown up entrenched in church and surrounded by Christians, but have never made their faith their own.

The beauty of the gospel is that it is for everyone: those who come without hope, those who come with pride, those who come with doubts, those who come with apathy, those who come as students, those who come as leaders, those who are there to host, those in the community, those who serve the food, those who claim to love Jesus and even those who claim to hate Jesus. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword...” and Isaiah 40:8 says, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” May the enduring, active, alive word of God do its work in all SERVE participants this week!

SESSION OUTLINE

Session 1: Broken and Beautiful

- **Session Focus:** Too often we are tempted to put life into fixed categories. In this first session, participants will be challenged to consider how they interpret the world around them and how they respond to beauty and brokenness.
- **Key Passage:** Isaiah 54:10
- **Small Group Discussion:** On this first night, small groups will get to know each other and talk about the places where they have seen or experienced beauty and brokenness.

Session 2: The Beauty of God's Love

- **Devotions:** This morning participants will focus on several scriptures that tell of God's love for us and for others.
- **Session Focus:** This session will focus on the attributes of God recorded in scripture. Participants will be challenged to consider what they believe to be true about God and his love for creation.
- **Key Passage:** 1 John 4:16
- **Small Group Discussion:** During small groups, participants will be asked to consider what they believe to be true about God. Participants will also be challenged to consider what questions or wonderings they have about God.

Session 3: The Brokenness of the Creation

- **Devotions:** Participants will be asked to consider if they look at the world and only see its beauty or if they also see and acknowledge the brokenness in the people and places around them.
- **Session Focus:** On this evening participants will unpack the Creation / Fall story and consider the differences between sin and brokenness in our world.
- **Key Passage:** Genesis 1-3
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will explore living in a broken world and will be asked to consider how to walk alongside people in their suffering.

Session 4: The Beauty of Redemption

- **Devotions:** Participants will read about the history of Rwanda and how forgiveness and redemption are key pieces of this country's story.
- **Session Focus:** In this session, participants will consider how a person is brought from death to life. Because of our sin and brokenness, we all need redemption and grace. Through Jesus, we can have new life! But that doesn't mean we live this new life free from all brokenness! Instead, we learn to be content with the tension
- **Key Passage:** Ephesians 2, Acts 20:7-12
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will reflect on the ways people try to save themselves and discuss the tension of what it means to be a sinner and to be forgiven and redeemed.

Session 5: The Beauty of Community

- **Devotions:** This devotion tells the story of a person arriving in a new country and the community that surrounded them in their time of need. It goes on to share the need for and importance of an active Christian community in each of our lives.
- **Session Focus:** This session highlights the loneliness epidemic occurring in our world today. Participants will be encouraged to consider why people avoid community and why it is important to embrace both the beauty and brokenness of living in community with others.
- **Key Passage:** Matthew 22:36-40, Hebrews 10:24-25
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will be challenged to consider how living in community helps people to love God and love others. Participants will also be encouraged to take a look at the reasons why people might choose convenience over community.

Session 6: The Tension

- **Devotions:** On this morning participants will read about a place where brokenness and beauty exist side-by-side. They will be challenged to consider what it is like to live in the tension of living a life redeemed by Jesus, and yet, still experiencing brokenness all around the world.
- **Session Focus:** In this session, participants will be asked to consider the definition of peace. Participants will also be challenged to resist the urge to focus only on beauty or only on brokenness in our world. As Christians, we are called to recognize both and to notice God's presence in all places and circumstances.
- **Key Passage:** Ecclesiastes 3:11
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will be asked to consider which one they more naturally gravitate towards, beauty (the positive) or brokenness (the negative). They will be challenged to consider that life is not either/or but a tension of both beauty and brokenness existing at the same time, often in the same places.

Session 7: The Beauty of God's Invitation

- **Devotions:** Participants will be asked to consider Jesus' invitation to "Follow me." Often the call to follow Jesus is complex and challenging. It causes us to say "yes" to some things, and "no" to other things. But we can find comfort in knowing that Jesus is already in all the places we live, work, and play. Jesus is present in the beauty, and he is present in the brokenness.
- **Session Focus:** On this evening participants will reflect on what it is like to receive a special invitation. Birthday parties, graduations, weddings and baby showers are great. But Jesus invites each of us to something even greater. Jesus is calling, will you answer?
- **Key Passage:** Matthew 11:28, John 1:39, Mark 1:16-18
- **Small Group Discussion:** Participants will have an opportunity to share about an invitation they have received and how it made them feel to be included. They will also be asked to consider what it looks like to accept Jesus' invitation to "follow me" once they are home again and back to their usual routines.

BROKEN &
Beautiful