

Discussion Guide for *Holding on in the Storm*

By Bob Cutillo, MD

Each year, millions of Americans suffer the death of a loved one or experience other profound losses involving their health, relationships, or careers. People live with such grief for a long time—even after the point of expressing that grief to others. Nationwide studies of work life and productivity show that grief is a major factor compromising employees' welfare and longevity. As individuals and congregations, we can help to support those around us who are experiencing grief. Dr. Bob Cutillo's book, *Holding on in the Storm* , can help to raise awareness of the long process of grief—and may spark interest in developing new ministries.

After many years of active involvement in church life, Cutillo has organized his book both for individual reading and reflection—as well as group discussion. Each chapter concludes with questions, which is a great starting point for planning a group study of his book. Whether you choose to move chapter by chapter through a discussion over many weeks or prefer to discuss the book in a few weekly sessions, a group leader can easily select questions they find most appropriate to raise.

This book inspires readers on so many levels—starting with the book's cover. This famous 1633 painting by Rembrandt is called “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee.” The opening pages of Cutillo's book provide his inspiring reflection on the painting—which is brief and suitable for reading aloud to your group as you start your discussion. He also provides readers with a QR code to download a free, high-resolution copy of this image.

If you are planning a discussion group, remember that participants will come with their own stories to share. Books like *Holding on in the Storm* are both memoirs and invitations to readers to remember similar moments in their own lives. So, as a group leader, before diving into the questions from the book, you may want to make time for the people who have gathered with you to share from their own lives. You might start with an open question, such as: “What brings you to our discussion today? Are there experiences in your life that draw you toward the stories Dr. Cutillo is sharing in this book?” Depending on the size of your group and the level of comfort among the participants, you may find that an

initial hour could be filled with your introduction, the reflection on the painting, and then stories from the men and women in your circle.

If you intend to discuss Cutillo's book on a single day, you might want to structure your conversations to start with these shared stories, then take a break for refreshments, and come back into your circle for another hour that is focused on the questions from the book that seem most relevant to you. For your convenience, this Discussion Guide lists all of the questions from the book's chapters below.

If you have more than one session, you could organize a series of several discussions around the phases Cutillo covers in this memoir. One session might focus on "coping with a diagnosis and chronic illness." The next session might move on to discuss death and all the arrangements surrounding a death, followed by a session on the long-term nature of grief. Of course, if you find a deep interest in your congregation, you could move through the book more slowly over a longer series of weeks—and perhaps your discussion might lead to ideas for ongoing ministries in your church.

Cutillo has provided a number of resources to help you and your congregation consider further learning. Explore your copy of his book for more ideas. For example, Cutillo has included in his book an eight-page, easy-reference list of passages from the Bible that have been useful to people going through these phases of life. You will want to remind people of this resource and, as the group leader, these selections also can prompt you to choose some appropriate verses to read aloud during your sessions.

Finally, in keeping with the spirit of this book, remember to plan your sessions so they open and close with prayer. Of course, prayer takes many forms, but one of the core lessons of Cutillo's book is that we should pray often—and never stop seeking God.

In fact, his book ends with his prayer:

*May you live always in God's steadfast love—
and may your journey lead you, each day,
closer and closer to God.*

NOTE: In exploring grief with friends, be alert to people expressing suicidal thoughts. Keep the national 24/7 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline handy: 988

Here is a convenient list of chapter-by-chapter questions in *Holding on in the Storm*:

There are no questions in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2

1. When was the last time your world was turned upside down by news of a sad and unexpected event? How did you react?
2. When bad things happen in your life, do you assume it is your fault? Or do you blame others? Or do you turn your anger toward God for allowing it to happen?
3. Does the model of the psalmist help you to better prepare to receive bad news?

Chapter 3

1. Are you the kind of person who wants to know the odds when you are trying to predict how something will turn out or would you rather take it as it comes?
2. What does it mean to know you are not a statistic but that you have your own particular path to forge?
3. How do you understand God's promises of deliverance? Do you expect complete healing or a full resolution of your problem as the only way God can answer your prayer?
4. When you face uncertainty, pain, and suffering, do you have trouble experiencing God as one who loves you as a unique and particular person and is always at work for good in your life?

Chapter 4

1. How do you and your family think about the relationship between God's compassionate care for us and the wisdom of medical science?
2. When you pray for loved ones undergoing medical treatment, what kinds of things do you say to God? And what has been your experience in these crises?
3. Have you ever reached a point of real terror and desperate "crying out" to God?
4. What Scriptures have helped you in these crises?

Chapter 5

1. What does it mean to have someone hold you in their heart, the way Paul held the people in the Philippian church in his heart?
2. What questions have you heard friends and family raise when someone you love becomes seriously ill? What questions have you asked? In light of this chapter, and these readings from Scripture, are you rethinking any of those questions?
3. Do you find yourself worrying about your own future health? How do you cope with such worries?
4. In your life, do you know someone who will listen to your fears and questions and respond in a supportive way?
5. Have you experienced being in the center of a circle of prayer during a crisis you've faced? What happened?

Chapter 6

1. Do you tend to take your health for granted? Are you surprised when sickness arises or your body fails?
2. What has caused you to experience wonderment in your life? How can you nurture a sense of amazement and marvel at the ways you might experience God in your life?
3. What role does gratitude play in your life? Are there ways you practice gratitude—or teach gratitude to others like your children?
4. Do you have a favorite psalm to which you turn in times of crisis? Or is there another passage from the Bible you recall in hard times?

Chapter 7

1. Have you experienced a time when a family member or close friend was nearing the end of life? Was it difficult to know when to fight and when to let go?
2. Why do so many see letting go as giving up? What are some of the influences from our culture that you see contributing to that attitude?
3. How can you increase your sensitivity to God's timing in life and death? What Scriptures help you to understand these questions from God's perspective?
4. Do you find it hard to support family and friends when there is no way to "fix" their suffering?

Chapter 8

1. Have you been through times when all you could do was sit and be present with a loved one who was dying? In what ways were you able to express love in those difficult days?
2. For those who follow Jesus, we know he has gone to prepare a place for us. Has that truth consoled you as you consider your own death, or helped you to let go when a loved one has passed on?
3. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, in the context of physical disability, God told Paul “My power is made perfect in weakness.” What does this mean for you?
4. We all desire to live a full life. What do you think about the idea that completing our journey is less about quantity of time and more about finishing what we were sent to do? Is that comforting? Challenging?
5. What does it mean to number our days? There are websites online that will calculate how many days you’ve already had since your birth date. Calculate those numbers for the folks in your small group—and you may be surprised at how much time you’ve had—or may still have ahead of you.

Chapter 9

1. How do you think about the union of marriage? If you’re married, can you describe an example of the “mystical union” of becoming one? What married couple do you know who exemplifies this union?
2. Have you experienced a loss that made you feel as if a part of you was taken from you? In what ways were you able to restore some sense of wholeness over time?
3. What relationships have you had that most reflected the unconditional love of God?
4. How can we let loving relationships in this world draw us toward a more intimate relationship with God?

Chapter 10

1. Do you find it hard to be honest and vulnerable with others when you are in pain? Can you describe a time when you found that was a real challenge? How did you resolve that?

2. What does it mean to you to “make vows and keep them” as a daily practice to keep you actively engaged in life?
3. Is “giving thanks in all things” a challenge for you? Have you found that’s a useful practice? Do you have any suggestions for how to more regularly express gratitude?
4. And how well do you do in “calling upon the name of the Lord” in times of need? What does that involve for you? And can you share an example?

Chapter 11

1. Have you had an experience of God speaking to you? Did you tell other people about it—or keep it to yourself? Can you describe it to friends in your small group?
2. Where are the places you are most likely to see Jesus in your life?
3. Are you in danger—or do you know someone in danger—of dying in spirit before dying in body?
4. How do you number your days? Do you have a daily spiritual discipline, perhaps of reading and prayer? Do you keep a diary or journal? What can you suggest to others about such daily practices?

Chapter 12

1. In polls about the Bible, Psalms ranks as the most frequently read book of the Bible. Why do you think that’s so?
2. What’s your favorite psalm? If you’re in a group, consider making a list of your favorites to share with each other.
3. What do you think of Frederick Buechner’s idea of “stewardship of pain”?
4. What attributes of God most delight you? How does looking at the goodness of God impact how you view your circumstances?
5. Are there groups in your community like GriefShare that you’ve found helpful and can recommend to friends?

Chapter 13

1. Where do you encounter suffering? In your own life? Your family? Your neighborhood or place of work?

2. What helps you to endure? What inspires you to service?
3. More than fifty million Americans are daily caregivers among family and friends—and some studies estimate that number may be as high as one hundred million, depending on the definition of “caregiving.” That means your workplace, your neighborhood, and your congregation all include many full-time caregivers. Encourage these folks to tell their stories of service. What can you tell others about your experience with caregiving?
4. What strengths and challenges have you encountered as a caregiver?

Chapter 14

1. When have you felt like a stranger in a strange land?
2. What are some of your favorite Bible passages illustrating God’s steadfast love?
3. How does your awareness of God’s *chesed* shape your own responses to the world’s needy people?
4. What do you think of this journey of *theosis*? Are there ways you see that playing out in your own life? Are there people you regard as spiritual mentors who might embody aspects of *theosis*?
5. Are there passages from this book that you would like to share with family and friends?