

Further Information for Leaders and Facilitators

General Guidance

General tips and guidance about how to organize an event and facilitate discussion are contained in the *Scripture & Violence Event Leader's Guide*, available at www.scriptureandviolence.org.

While the current module can be used on its own, it may help the quality of your discussion to have your group watch the introductory videos on our website first, or to read some of our other introductory resources. Scriptural interpretation is a complex process, and the relationship between scriptural texts and real-world actions is multi-faceted. Our introductory resources give a brief overview of key concepts and ideas.

Tips and Guidance on Module Questions

Here are some tips and guidance on the questions posed in this module.

In order to allow participants to make their own discoveries, it is best to read the scriptural passage and discuss the questions in an open-ended manner first, before referencing these notes. Often, group members will come up with these ideas themselves, as well as many other interesting thoughts and questions that are not discussed below.

This guidance is not meant as a set of “answers” that participants need to reach, but is designed to help leaders feel confident facilitating discussion. Leaders do not need to be “experts.” The group can have a stimulating discussion, even if some questions arise that no one in the group is able to answer.

Participants should generally be allowed to discuss freely. Leaders should draw upon the material in these notes primarily when the conversation gets stuck.

Getting Familiar with the Text

1. *What actions are spoken of positively in the passage? Negatively?*

With regard to actions spoken of positively in the passage, participants may come up with somewhat different lists, depending on whether they consider some actions to be spoken of positively or in a neutral fashion, e.g., harm being requited by an equal harm, defending oneself after one is wronged, and acting against those who oppress people and transgress against justice. Participants could be asked how they decided which actions are spoken of positively, which could help to illuminate how different individuals read the text. Various “degrees” of positivity or affirmation within the passage could also be discussed.

With regard to actions spoken of negatively in the passages, some participants may list “great sins” and “gross indecencies.” Some may observe that these terms are vague and do not refer to specific actions, but broader categories of action. The ideas of doing “harm” and “wrong,” “oppressing” people and “transgressing against

all justice” may also be mentioned. Participants can be encouraged to explain how they identified certain actions as being spoken of negatively. Answers may include the association of some actions with God’s punishment, or the permission granted for people to respond to some actions.

2. *According to the passage, what different responses are allowed when one is harmed or wronged, or against oppression and injustice? (See verses 39-42.)*

Responses to Question 2 may overlap with answers to Questions 1.

Participants may observe that the passage does not provide precise details about what may be done in some cases. For example, what exactly does it mean to “defend oneself” (verse 39), or to “act against” those who oppress others (verse 42)?

Participants may also note the ambiguity of the statement “Let harm be requited by an equal harm” (verse 40). Is the verse merely giving permission for “equal harm” to be carried out, or actively encouraging it?

3. *What incentive does the passage offer for choosing to forgive?*

With regard to incentives for forgiveness, it is a common Quranic trope to draw unfavorable comparisons between the fleeting joys of this world and the more permanent and greater rewards available in the afterlife. “Reward from God” in verse 40 suggests rewards in the afterlife. (These ideas also appear in Biblical texts. See, e.g., Proverbs 25:21-22; Luke 6:23, 35.) Participants may note that forgiveness is linked with patience and praised in verse 43, but that reward is not mentioned in that context.

Digging Deeper

4. *The passage says forgiveness is “one of the greatest things” (verse 43), but also allows for other responses to being harmed, wronged, or oppressed.*
 - a. *In what sorts of circumstances do you think it might be important to leave room for other possible responses to being harmed, rather than insisting people simply forgive? Why?*
 - b. *Would you answer question 4a differently depending on whether the harm was done to yourself or to someone else? Or to an individual vs. to a group or community?*

Question 4 encourages participants to think more deeply about the various possible responses to harm, wrong, and oppression. It is designed to help participants think about a wide range of scenarios in which forgiveness and other responses to harm, wrong, and oppression may need to be balanced. Some participants may say that they themselves would try simply to forgive (without taking any other action), but would not demand that of others (or vice versa). Some participants may con-

sider simply forgiving (without taking any other action) easier or more preferable in minor or individual cases of harm, and harder or less preferable when the harm is severe or inflicted on a large group of people, or where there is a concern about ongoing harm. In answering this question, participants should be encouraged to give concrete examples.

5. *For participants who are familiar with Jewish or Christian traditions and scriptures, does the Quranic emphasis on forgiveness strike you as similar to or different from those?*

Question 5 is designed to help participants become aware of their pre-existing assumptions about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some Christian participants may be surprised at the emphasis on forgiveness in the Quranic passage, since Christians sometimes mistakenly believe that this is a unique emphasis of Christianity. (Note that forgiveness is also a key aspect of the Jewish tradition.)

If participants suggest that the other possible responses to harm and wrong mentioned in the Quranic passage differ from Christianity – e.g., if they suggest that Christianity emphasizes simply forgiving, without allowing for other possible responses to harm – they should be gently prodded to rethink that assumption. Referring back to discussion of Question 4 may be helpful here, or participants can be asked what they think a “Christian” response to actions such as murder or child abuse would be.

To deepen their self-reflection, participants can also be encouraged to identify where they were gained their existing understanding of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, and to consider ways in which that understanding might be inaccurate or incomplete.

6. *In this passage, the Quran does not give definitions for “wrong” and “harm,” and does not provide precise details about exactly what actions should be taken in response to what circumstances. What might be some of the challenges and benefits of being vague in this way?*

Question 6 delves deeper into the ambiguity within the passage. Participants may suggest that the vagueness means it is not straightforward how the passage should be implemented in actual practice, or might lead to extended debate among interpreters. They may also identify benefits of this ambiguity, e.g., that the generality of the Quran’s statements allows them to be applied in a variety of different situations.

Participants can be encouraged to search for a term suitable for the kind of message that the Quran gives about forgiveness and retribution in the face of harm. Would it be fair to call it a rule, law, command, principle, etc.?

Facilitators can also share an example of how Quranic commentators have filled in some of the gaps left by the passage. In the Islamic tradition, great or grave sins (mentioned in verse 36) include idolatry and murder and are contrasted

with minor sins. “Gross indecencies” may refer broadly to going against God’s commands and prohibitions, or more specifically to transgressing limits and restrictions on sexual behavior.