

Disaster

Dr. Park Sung-hyun (Papa Simon) · Lay Missionary · Good Shepherd Hospital, DR Congo

The Story

When we watch disaster news on TV, the camera almost always shows collapsed buildings or bridges. But those of us who do disaster relief work think about it differently. We focus on the people — on the lives that have been affected.

We define a disaster as any situation where people — or other living things — cannot get back to normal life on their own. This includes not only humans but also animals, plants, and the wider natural world.

So disaster relief means walking alongside people until they can stand on their own again — until they can live a full life. And the real work of relief actually begins after the TV cameras and reporters have left.

What a Full Life Looks Like

Let me give some examples.

- If someone falls into a river, we pull them out. That is relief — they can go on with their life.
- A teenager who has lost both parents to AIDS needs more than food. We must stay with them until they have healed from the emotional wounds of loss and can support themselves.
- A village hit by famine needs food right away. But they also need seeds and support until they can farm and harvest again. And in the longer term, they need help building their own system — so they can grow enough food and share it fairly.

But getting back to normal is not enough on its own. A full life means three things more:

- Being able to carry the hard experience — not just surviving it, but growing through it.
- Working to prevent man-made disasters from happening again.
- Finding ways to reduce the damage when a natural disaster strikes in the future.

Small Group Discussion Guide — Church Community

This story offers a working definition of disaster — and then quietly asks what it would mean to take it seriously. If disaster is defined by the life that cannot return to normal on its own, then every community has its own disaster zone: the family in crisis, the elderly person living alone, the immigrant who has not yet found footing. The story does not make that connection explicitly. The group will.

Young Adults (20s–35)

Opening (5 min)

Think of a moment when you needed help getting back on your feet — something you could not have managed alone. What did that help look like?

Discussion (20 min)

1. Dr. Park defines a disaster as a situation where someone cannot return to normal life on their own. Does that definition surprise you? How is it different from how the news defines disaster?
2. "The real work begins after the TV cameras have left." What does that mean in practice — in disaster zones, and in ordinary life?
3. The three examples — the drowning person, the AIDS orphan, the famine village — are very different situations. What do they have in common? What does that tell us about what relief actually is?
4. Where in your own community might there be a disaster — by Dr. Park's definition — that is not being covered by any camera?

Scripture (10 min)

Isaiah 58:6–7

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice... to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?"

Isaiah connects true fasting — spiritual devotion — to the concrete act of relief. Dr. Park's definition of disaster is very similar: it is not about visible damage, it is about life that cannot return to normal. How does this passage speak to what Dr. Park is describing?

Application (5 min)

This week: who in your immediate circle is in a situation they cannot get out of on their own? What would one step of genuine relief look like — not a short-term fix, but a step toward a full life?

Adults (36–60)

Opening (5 min)

In your professional or personal experience, have you been part of a relief or care effort — formal or informal? What did it teach you about what people actually need?

Discussion (20 min)

5. "The real work begins after the TV cameras have left." In your experience — in disaster response, in caregiving, in any sustained effort to help — what happens after the cameras leave? What is required?
6. Dr. Park's definition includes not just humans but animals, plants, and the wider natural world. Does that expand your sense of what relief work is? Does it feel right or does it stretch the concept too far?
7. The third example — the famine village — requires not just immediate food but long-term work to build fair food systems. At what point does relief become development? Where does neighborliness end and structural change begin?
8. "Growing through it, not just surviving it" — what does it mean to help someone reach that, rather than just stabilizing them?

Scripture (10 min)

Luke 10:33–35 — The Good Samaritan

"He went to him and bandaged his wounds... Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper."

The Samaritan's relief had stages: immediate care, transport, shelter, payment for ongoing care, and a promise to return. How does that multi-stage response connect to Dr. Park's definition of what full relief looks like?

Application (5 min)

Is there an ongoing situation in your community — a family, a person, a neighborhood — that has passed the acute phase but still needs sustained presence? What would it take to stay?

Seniors (60+)

Opening (5 min)

Over a long life: has there been a time when you were the one who needed sustained help — not just immediate rescue, but someone walking alongside you for a longer stretch?

Discussion (20 min)

9. Dr. Park says the real work of relief begins after the cameras leave. Looking back at your life — when have you seen that kind of sustained, quiet care? Who gave it?
10. "A full life" — at this stage of life, how do you understand that phrase? Has its meaning changed over the years?
11. The story says relief includes helping people grow through hard experience, not just survive it. What does that kind of growth look like in a person? Have you seen it?
12. What do you think the church's role is in the slow, un-photographed work of recovery — for individuals, for families, for communities?

Scripture (10 min)

Psalm 23:4

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Walking through, not around. The Psalm does not promise that the valley is avoided — it promises presence inside it. How does Dr. Park's vision of relief connect to that image of accompaniment?

Application (5 min)

Who in your life is still walking through a valley — not in crisis, but not yet through? What would it mean to be present with them this week?

Small Group Discussion Guide — Community Groups

This guide requires no faith background. Dr. Park's definition of disaster is a civic and human one: a situation where someone cannot get back to normal life on their own. That question — who is not getting back to normal, and what do they actually need? — belongs to everyone.

Young Adults (20s–35)

Getting In (5 min)

When you see disaster coverage on the news, what do you usually see? What does the camera focus on — and what do you think it misses?

Discussion (20 min)

13. Dr. Park defines disaster not by the damage to buildings, but by whether people can return to normal life on their own. Does that definition change how you think about what a disaster is?
14. "The real work begins after the cameras leave." Have you seen that — in any context, not just disaster response? What does that sustained, invisible work actually look like?
15. The AIDS orphan example: getting to a full life requires not just food but healing from loss and the ability to support oneself. What would it take — practically — to provide that kind of support? Who is responsible for it?
16. "Growing through it, not just surviving it" — is that a realistic goal for relief work? Who decides what growing through it looks like?

Going Further (10 min)

Dr. Park includes animals, plants, and the wider natural world in his definition of what a disaster affects. Does that broaden the concept usefully — or stretch it too far? What are the implications of taking that seriously?

One Step (5 min)

Where in your community is there a situation — by Dr. Park's definition — that has passed the acute phase but still needs sustained help? What would one practical step look like?

Adults (36–60)

Getting In (5 min)

Have you been part of a relief, care, or recovery effort — in any context? What did you learn about what people actually need versus what helpers usually offer?

Discussion (20 min)

17. The three examples in the story require very different timelines: the drowning person needs minutes; the AIDS orphan needs years; the famine village needs a generation. How does that range shape what we think effective help looks like?
18. "Building their own system — so they can grow enough food and share it fairly." At what point does helping someone become making them dependent? How do you think about that line?
19. The story says a full life means not just returning to how things were, but being able to prevent future disasters and reduce future damage. Is that a realistic ask of relief work — or does it overload what any one effort can do?

20. Who in your community is not getting back to normal, but is no longer in a stage where anyone is paying attention?

Going Further (10 min)

Most disaster coverage ends within days. Most recovery takes years. What structures — in government, in civil society, in communities — exist to sustain the long work? What is missing?

One Step (5 min)

What was the most striking thing from today's discussion — in one sentence?

Seniors (60+)

Getting In (5 min)

Over a long life, have you seen a community — a neighborhood, a family, a group of people — go through a disaster and come out the other side? What did that recovery actually look like?

Discussion (20 min)

21. "A full life is not just a return to how things were before." Looking back — have you seen someone grow through a hard experience rather than just survive it? What made that possible?
22. Dr. Park says relief includes preventing man-made disasters from happening again. Have you seen that kind of learning actually happen — in communities or institutions? What does it take?
23. The real work begins after the cameras leave. In your experience — who does that work? What sustains them?
24. What do you think younger generations misunderstand about what long-term recovery actually requires?

One Step (5 min)

Share the one thing from today's story that stays with you most.

Small Group Discussion Guide — Immigrant and Multicultural Communities

For many immigrant families, Dr. Park's definition of disaster describes their own experience. Leaving everything behind, arriving in a new country, and not being able to return to normal life on their own — that is precisely what migration often feels like. The story opens a conversation about what genuine relief looks like, and who provides it.

All Ages

Getting In (5 min)

When you or your family first arrived in this country, what did the first weeks and months feel like? Was there a moment when you felt you could not manage on your own?

Discussion (20 min)

25. Dr. Park defines disaster as a situation where someone cannot return to normal life on their own. Does that definition fit the experience of immigration? In what ways?
26. "The real work begins after the cameras leave." In immigrant communities, there is often early attention — aid organizations, churches, welcoming events. What happens after that fades? Who stays?
27. The AIDS orphan needs not just food but healing and the ability to support themselves. What does that kind of support look like for a newly arrived immigrant family? Who provides it — realistically?
28. "Growing through it, not just surviving it" — what would it mean for an immigrant community to reach that, rather than just stabilize? What conditions make that possible?

Going Further (10 min)

Facilitator note: *This section works especially well when there are both newer arrivals and longer-established community members in the room. The contrast between their experiences of what 'getting back to normal' looked like is itself the conversation.*

For those who have been here longer: looking back, what was the turning point — the moment when life began to feel full again, not just functional? What made that possible?

For those newer to this country: what would a full life here look like? What is still missing?

One Step (5 min)

Is there someone in your community who is still in the early, difficult phase — and who the wider community has stopped paying attention to? What would one step of sustained presence look like?

Leader's Guide

For Church Groups and Community Groups

In Dr. Park's Own Words

"When the cameras are there, it looks like help. When they leave, you find out what help actually is. The drowning person needs to be pulled out — that takes minutes. The orphan needs someone to walk alongside them for years. The village needs a generation. That is what disaster relief actually means."

Reflection questions from Dr. Park:

29. What does the camera show — and what does it miss? What are the consequences of that gap?
30. "A full life" — what does that mean to you, for the people you have worked with?
31. At what point does relief become accompaniment? And when does accompaniment become the point?
32. Have you seen someone grow through a disaster — not just survive it? What made that possible?

What This Story Is Really About

This story has four layers:

- A definition of disaster that shifts focus from buildings to lives — from visible damage to invisible need
- A definition of relief that stretches from minutes to generations — and insists that the real work is the long work
- A quiet challenge to the camera — to the way attention works, who gets it, and when it leaves
- An invitation to find the un-photographed disaster in every community — the situation that is real but no longer visible

What makes this story unusual: it does not tell a personal narrative. It offers a framework — but a framework with real examples from Dr. Park's own experience. The facilitation task is to make that framework personal for each group. The story gives people a new lens; the discussion is about what they see when they look through it.

How to Open the Session

For all groups, begin before reading with:

"Think about the last time you saw disaster coverage on the news. What did the camera show? Now think about what the camera probably didn't show. What was missing?"

For immigrant and multicultural groups, an alternative opening:

"Has there been a time in your life when you could not get back to normal on your own — when you needed someone to walk alongside you? What did that feel like?"

Facilitator note: *This story is shorter than most in the collection. It works well read aloud slowly, pausing after each example. The three examples — drowning person, AIDS orphan, famine village — have very different emotional weights. Let each one land before moving to the next.*

Watch for These Three Risks

Risk 1: The discussion stays in the abstract — global disasters, not local ones

What it looks like: The group discusses earthquake zones and famine regions but never connects the definition to their own neighborhood, family, or community.

Why it matters: Dr. Park's definition is deliberately broad — it is meant to be applied locally. The story's power is precisely that it reframes what is already around us as a disaster zone that no camera is covering.

Redirect: "Where in our own community — by this definition — is there a disaster that no one is filming?"

Risk 2: "Growing through it" becomes a demand placed on survivors

What it looks like: Participants conclude that people who have been through disasters should grow from the experience — and implicitly judge those who seem not to have.

Why it matters: Growing through hard experience is a hope for what relief can make possible — not a requirement placed on those who have suffered. The conditions for that growth are what the community is responsible for providing.

Redirect: "What conditions make it possible for someone to grow through a disaster — rather than just endure it? Who creates those conditions?"

Risk 3: The story becomes a critique of media coverage and stops there

What it looks like: The discussion focuses on media criticism — cameras, attention spans, news cycles — without moving to personal or community application.

Why it matters: The observation about cameras is meant to reveal something about where help actually happens, not to generate a media critique. The point is not that media is bad; it is that the real work is invisible and sustained.

Redirect: "Setting aside the media question for a moment — what does the work look like that happens after everyone has stopped paying attention? Have you seen it? Done it?"

Notes for Specific Groups

Church groups:

The scripture connections are strong here — Isaiah 58, the Good Samaritan, Psalm 23 all speak directly to the sustained, embodied nature of relief. Church communities often have experience with acute response (food drives, disaster fundraisers) but less with the long accompaniment the story describes. The question worth extended time: what would it take for this community to be present for the long work, not just the visible moment?

Immigrant and multicultural communities:

The definition of disaster maps directly onto the experience of immigration for many people in the room. This can be acknowledged directly — it is not a metaphor but a description. The most generative question for these groups is often the one about what a full life here actually looks like, and who has been part of making that possible.

Professional and caregiving groups:

Social workers, nurses, teachers, and community organizers will recognize Dr. Park's framework immediately — and may have strong reactions to the gap between what institutions fund (acute response) and what people actually need (long accompaniment). Give space for that frustration. It is the story's point made personal.

Young adults:

This generation tends to be deeply engaged with structural questions — why do disasters happen, who is responsible, what systems need to change. The story supports that instinct with its third bullet about prevention and mitigation. Channel the energy toward the question of sustained presence: not just what needs to change, but who stays.

Closing the Session

Personal reflection:

Invite each person to finish this sentence quietly: "Someone in my life right now cannot get back to normal on their own — and what they need is ____." This need not be shared aloud.

Community commitment:

Ask the group: is there one person, family, or situation in our community that has passed the acute phase — where the cameras have left — but where the work is not done? Could this group commit to staying?

Church groups:

Close by reading Isaiah 58:7 together: "to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter." Ask: what is our version of this — concrete, local, sustained?

Community groups:

Close with: "The real work begins after the cameras leave. This week — what is one thing you could do that no camera will ever film?"

*"The real work begins after the TV cameras and reporters have left."
That is where the neighbor is.*