

WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT

WEEK 1: SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Our hope is that this is a place you can voice questions, pain, anger, and then experience hope in God. Along the way, we will spend time reading and reflecting on Scripture passages to gain clarity on our situation. Let's begin...

READ AND REFLECT.

Psalm 131 (8 minutes)

Though this poem is one of the shortest of the Psalter, its words, imagery, and theme reach deep into the heart. As you read it, take your time and consider what's going on inside of you as you do. Are you numb? Do the words resonate with you? What is true or not true about you right now?

1. Read verse 1.

These opening lines introduce us to the theme of the psalm: humility before God. But it's more than lip service. Just as sin infects the whole person, David says that true humility involves the whole person. There is no room for personal pride in his heart (v. 1a), his eyes (v. 1b), his feet (v. 1c, *occupy*), or his soul (v. 2a), so he offers all of himself to Yahweh.

Q: What is the state of your heart, eyes, feet, and soul today?

Q: In what areas of your life do you have an over-inflated view of self?

2. Read verse 2.

The imagery David uses to reveal where to find peace is important: "the psalm emphasizes the word 'weaned', thereby drawing an analogy between the child which no longer frets for what it used to find indispensable."¹ The process of moving a child from milk to solid food can be difficult, but its necessary for maturity and growth. They fight back, crying for what they once knew, but in the end, their hunger is satisfied and they experience peaceful rest. We also must undergo the weaning process. It may even be painful and scary, but in the end, we are freed "from the nagging of self-seeking,"² and experience real peace in God.

Q: Do the words "calmed" and "quieted" characterize your soul today? If not, what words do?

Q: What scares you about the "weaning" process? Are you able to trust God with your care?

3. Read verse 3.

The meaning of *hope* "is not a passive wish, but it is an active expectation."³ If you've been too nervous or hurt to expect anything from God lately, let this be an invitation for you to believe that God really does care for you.

Q: What are hoping to receive from the Lord today or through this class?

What part of the passage stands out most to you? Why?

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 484.

² Ibid.

³ Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73-150*, vol. 13, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 502.

AN IMPORTANT TOPIC.

Why this topic? Because, at some point nearly every Christian's life, he or she experiences the almost-unbearable feeling that God is dealing with you differently than he used to.

What is going on here? Does he not care? Did he forget about me? Have I done something horribly wrong that has caused him to turn his back on me? Is my past too bad? Or is all of this even real in the first place?

Those are the questions that affect us. And unfortunately, the church doesn't talk about this enough.

Some of the reasons why people experience pain are self-inflicted due to blatant sin. If that's you, this is your notice.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

Nobody is the same today as they were 10 years ago, 5 years ago, or even yesterday. We are always changing as we deal with the daily realities of life. It's easy to observe the physical changes to our bodies by looking at an old picture of ourselves. And it's equally easy to think of some of the habits and experiences which have formed our physiques.

And we are all growing and changing spiritually, too. Though it may be more difficult to observe the internal changes; they're happening. The Bible speaks explicitly to our spiritual formation in Romans 8:1-11 and Galatians 3:1-3. Each of those passages make it clear that there are two types of spiritual formation: the flesh or the Spirit.

Common Fleshly Formations

- Secular (active and passive)
- Religious Moralism
- Modern Experientialism

Life in the Spirit

- Impaired moralism (Gal. 3:1-3)
- Impaired immorality (Gal. 5:18-23)
- In step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:24-26)

As Christians, we have an additional assurance: God is committed to our spiritual formation. Though we continue to fight the flesh residue inside, we cling to hope of God's good work in our lives.

Romans 8:28-30 - ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

A THEOLOGICAL BACKBONE OF GOD'S CARE.

But the process of spiritual formation is not always fun (2 Cor. 4:16). In fact, it can be extremely painful and scary. To arrive at Christlike maturity, we will come face to face with the fruit of our flesh, something many of us simply wish we could bypass. And in those dark moments, we will be tempted to doubt of God's kindness, his cares for you, or even his existence. So how does the Bible describe his concern and care for his children?

- He sees you, hears you, and knows. (Exodus 2)
- He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)
- He will help you. (John 14)
- He won't abandon you or forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5-6; Deuteronomy 31:6; Romans 8:35)
- He is always present with you. (2 Peter 1:4; 1 Corinthians 6:17; Colossians 1:27)

CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION.

There are times in the Christian life when God seems so close, and it feels like the Christian life is just the way it's supposed to be. Reading the Bible is rich and nourishing, prayer is sweet, church feels exciting, and life seems to point clearly to God's activity. But there are other times in the Christian life when God seems so distant and deafeningly silent. What felt full of life now seems so dry and dead. Reading, praying, going to Church, and thinking of things of the faith are painful.

It's easy to affirm God's care in the times when he feels close, but what is happening when he seems silent? How are we to reconcile what Scripture says about him with the way we feel then?

One way to understand it is to think of the lifecycle of Christian maturity as similar to the process of physical maturity. This seems to be what David does in Psalm 131, as he compares a humble and calm Christian to a weaned child. If this is true, then God's commitment to seeing us raised up to maturity never changes, but his process might. In this workshop, we'll define his activity toward us in this way:⁴

- **Consolation** | The felt-presence of God for the purpose of growth.
- **Desolation** | The felt-absence of God for the purpose of growth.

Neither God's character, nor his love for his children ever changes. Instead, as a good Father, he knows exactly how to care for his children to see them realize maturity. In times of consolation, treats us like a parent with a bottle, nourishing a child to maturity. And in times of desolation, he allows us to experience sorrow, isolation, pain in order to allow what needs to change to bubble within us (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

HIDDEN HEART.

There's no sugar-coating it: times of desolation are painful and scary. So why do we experience them? Scripture says that God gives us these times, so that we come to know things hidden in our hearts and bring those things to him for change.

Jeremiah 17:9-10 - ⁹The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? ¹⁰“I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”

Proverbs 14:13 - ¹³Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief.

Deuteronomy 8:2 - ²And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

There is always more going on inside our hearts than we are aware of on the surface. Beliefs, expectations, hopes, sinful patterns, etc. may stay buried until something on the surface of our life causes it to bubble up. Those hidden contents of the heart are not harmless, though. They will leak out, impacting our lives and the lives around us. Instead of ignoring them and only focusing on the *good* of spiritual formation, God invites us to bring those contents to him.

Psalms 139:23-24 - ²³Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! ²⁴And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

⁴ Definitions taken from Dr. John Coe at Biola University.

HOMEWORK | PRAYER PROJECT #1.

This week, take 30-60 minutes and complete the following prayer project.

- Spend a portion of your time opening up to the Lord about how you were formed in the flesh before becoming a Christian. How is the fruit of that still showing up in your life? Spend some time opening up to the Lord about how you've been formed as a Christian. How has the church, your devotional life affected your growth? Read Romans 8:28-30 and ask him to help you believe this for yourself.
- Spend a portion of your time reflecting on Psalm 131 and your answers to your questions. Open up to the Lord about your experiences in the weaning process. What sin or method of self-seeking is he weaning you off? Open up to him about why it is difficult to hope in him, and then voice your hopes to him again.
- Spend a portion of your time considering the backbone of God's care we covered in class. Open up to the Lord about how you've received his care in the past, and how you are hoping to in the future.