

WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT

WEEK 3: A DISPOSITION OF TRUST

Christians will endure periods of desolation along the road to maturity. This means that as lonely or isolating as the darkness can seem, you have a lot of company. As we saw last week, Scripture is filled with examples of people crying out to the Lord in the midst of their struggle. Their circumstances, words, and emotions seem so familiar. As comforting as it may be to read their stories, though, we cannot stop at merely acknowledging the similarities; instead, we must go further and allow their model to help us answer the question, “How do *I* faithfully endure *my* present darkness?”

In this session, we will examine their model and seek to apply it to our lives. Our hope is that you feel strengthened in faith, better equipped to face the days ahead.

POINTS OF PAIN.

One of the reasons that we struggle with the concept of *faithful endurance* is that it can feel like we’ve been forced to live an oxymoron. The initial burst of consolation in our spiritual infancy leaves us assuming that the life of faith should be accompanied by feelings of comfort, direction, and hope. So, when those things fade, and God feels absent, it’s hard to reconcile what is actually happening.

Often, our natural response when the easy comfort and joy of spiritual things gives way to feelings of fear and spiritual numbness is to *try harder*. Read more, pray more, go to church more, etc. But when consolation doesn’t quickly return and we realize that $a + b \neq c$, it becomes easy to make rash judgements about God and his activity. Like a child in the weaning process who doesn’t quite understand the kind actions of a good parent moving us toward maturity, we cry out in anguish.

- **Cry #1:** “I feel like a fraud!”
This cry is the outburst of a person who places significant premium on personal authenticity. When I keep on with something I don’t feel, it feels so fake and inauthentic.
- **Cry #2:** “I feel like you’re a fraud!”
This cry turns the blame outward. Since I don’t feel anything, then I am wondering if God is a fraud. Is he not as kind as he says? Or perhaps he doesn’t exist at all?

Both cries are uttered by a person utterly exhausted from living in the discontinuity between how they expect God to act and their experience of him in the moment.

Which cry do you think you are most prone to express? Have you recently done so?

DEVELOPING A MATURE LOVE.

The anger we experience and rash judgements we make expose an immaturity in our relating to God. It’s possible that we’ve fallen in love with a mere aspect of God, the process of hearing from him, or the initial feeling of closeness to him. But there’s more to be experienced and known about him. And remember, he is committed to seeing us grow to

maturity. So, in these dark nights, “God is growing spiritual beginners away from mere love of God for pleasure’s sake to love of God for *love’s* sake, a relationship involving the real self and not merely a love for pleasure in the relationship.”¹ Sometimes, he allows us to realize that a (*reading*) + b (*praying*) $\neq c$ (*felt-presence of God*), so we don’t merely fall in love with a and b . He is not a fraud.

Just because reading, praying, going to church, etc. doesn’t always result in feelings of consolation doesn’t mean those disciplines ought to be abandoned. Your practice of them doesn’t make you a fraud, either. Instead, we must look to them to fulfill their proper function. They are not God; they do not summon or direct his movements; they do not make him indebted to us. Instead, they lead us to God, and by them, we come know how to experience and encounter him—even when we can’t discern the way ourselves.² Consider the way Jon Bloom speaks of them in his article, *Learn to Fly By the Instruments*:³

“Spatial disorientation” is something that happens to an aircraft pilot when his plane enters dark storm clouds and he can no longer see the horizon or the ground. Points of reference that guide his senses disappear and he can no longer be sure which way is up or down. His perceptions are unreliable.

The only way a pilot can overcome spatial disorientation is to fully trust his cockpit instruments to tell him what is real. That’s why flight training instructors force student pilots to learn to fly planes by instruments alone...

As I experienced my own spiritual “spatial disorientation,” the thought hit me, “Fly by the instruments, Jon. Don’t trust your perceptions. Place your faith in the instrument panel of God’s Word. It’s always been reliable in the past.”

So I decided to steer by the Bible’s direction until I had enough evidence to establish that it was a faulty instrument. I also opened my heart to trusted friends and mentors and asked for counsel. I remember John Piper saying to me: “Jon, the rock of truth under your feet will not long feel like sand.” It was very hard to believe when he said it, but he was right.

I continued the spiritual disciplines of devotional Bible reading, prayer, church and small group attendance. I had been trained that abandoning these instruments of grace would result in greater disorientation. I thank God for that training.

After months of darkness, light pierced the clouds as the Holy Spirit illuminated Hebrews 12:3-11 for me.

Have you ever loved a gift of God more than God himself? How might he be guiding you to greater maturity?

Have you ever had to “fly by the instruments”? Has the fog lifted? If so, when, and how? If not, write a prayer.

¹ John H. Coe. 2000. “Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality.” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 28 (4): 300.

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, CO, 1991, 2014), 9.

³ Jon Bloom. “Learn to Fly By the Instruments.” *Desiring God*, December 1, 2006, Retrieved from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/learn-to-fly-by-the-instruments>.

A DISPOSITION OF TRUST.

If you feel totally disoriented in your faith right now, it may be comforting to know the Bible invites us to do more than just believe its words. We can adopt the same disposition of trust exemplified by its authors. Their model shows us how to interact and cry to God in our pain and suffering. So how do they do it?

- **Honest with God**⁴ | The psalmists didn't sugarcoat their pain; instead, they vocalized it clearly and often.
- **Humble before God**⁵ | The authors confessed their lack of understanding, while affirming God's control.
- **Hope in God**⁶ | Despite the pain and seeming silence, the psalmists appealed to God's promises and character.

None of the aspects above stand on their own. It can be tempting to rush to hope, but true hope in God requires a willingness to be honest about our experience, as well as a humble admission that only he can make sense of the pain and mend the wound. This is a difficult thing to accept because reflecting on darkness may itself feel unbearable, but the right medicine often increases symptoms as it begins to work. It may not be quick work, but we have confidence that we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is working within us, and will ultimately restore our hope.

John 14:25-26 - ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

2 Corinthians 12:7-9 - ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

READ AND APPLY.

Out of respect for the sensitive nature of the subject, we will move slowly and contemplatively through the content today. We'll read some of the same passages as last session, but this week, focus on bringing your own heart to the Lord by approaching them with the same disposition of trust as the authors. Don't rush; this is important work.

A few instructions as you get going:

- Read through the entire passage before beginning the reflection questions.
- Mark your start and stop verses.
- As you work through each section, identify the author's disposition, and adopt it for yourself. Notice the tone and posture, and voice similar prayers for yourself.

⁴ Ps. 42:3-4, 9-10; Ps. 77:2-4, 7-9; Ps. 88:3-8, 14-18.

⁵ Ps. 42:1-2, 6-8; Ps. 77:4-6; Ps. 88:9-12.

⁶ Ps. 42:5, 11; Ps. 77:1; Ps. 88:1-2, 13.

Psalm 42:1-11 (10 minutes)

When things are going wrong, where do you turn? The author of Psalm 42 turned to the Lord and prayed, but not as a way of tricking himself into thinking of positive things. Instead, he laments God’s felt-absence in his moment of need. It’s a Psalm full of honesty, humility, and yes, a thread of hope.

1. Read verses 3-4, 9-10 | *Honesty*

Honesty can make us a bit uncomfortable. We are unaccustomed to reading such language in the Bible. But these passages prove God’s ability and willingness to “go there” with his children. The author of Psalm 42 felt isolated from God, unable to experience the joy of worshipping with his people. Not only that, but it felt like God had forgotten about him, leaving him open to the taunts of the enemy.

Prayer Point | Using these verses as a guide, write a brief prayer to the Lord regarding your current situation. Open yourself up honestly. Be willing to voice your pains and trouble to God. He cares for you.

2. Read verses 1-2, 6-8 | *Humility*

Throughout the psalm, the author confesses his neediness, and affirms his confidence that God—only God—could truly solve his problems.

Prayer Point | Using these verses as a guide, briefly confess your neediness to the Lord. Describe your inability to solve the situation on your own, and declare your confidence in God’s ability to fix it.

3. Read verses 4-5, 11 | *Hope*

It may feel strange at first, but sometimes we have to tell ourselves to hope in God.

Prayer Point | Using these verses as a guide, briefly express what you’re hoping for God to provide or accomplish. Have you given up on certain hopes? Have you been afraid to hope? Dare to believe he is as good as he says.

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

Psalm 77:1-20 (10 minutes)

Once again, the psalmist cries out to God for help, but not like we might expect. He doesn't find immediate hope; instead, he "flies by the instruments," as evidenced by his honesty and humility, and finally, hope.

1. Read verses 1-9 | *Honesty*

Similar to our experience, $a + b \neq c$ for the psalmist. Even though he's praying to the Lord, he initially experiences no comfort. And in fact, it's that silence that seems to be causing him the most pain (v. 3).

Prayer Point | Using these verses as a guide, write a brief prayer to the Lord about a time in your life you've experienced a similar feeling.

2. Read verse 10 | *Humility*

The author appeals to God the Most High for help, not to his own wisdom or strength. What a great reminder that only he can turn back his darkness.

Prayer Point | Using this verse as a guide, briefly confess your neediness to the Lord. Describe your inability to solve the situation on your own, and declare your confidence in God's ability to fix it.

3. Read verses 10-20 | *Hope*

For a person enduring a period of desolation, remembering the way things used to be can be sad; however, it's important to keep a storehouse of memories of God's kindness and power. Even though such memories initially caused him to moan and faint (v. 3), the psalmist continues to remember the Lord, appealing to him to once again act in accordance with his character.

Prayer Point | Using these verses as a guide, briefly express what you're hoping for God to provide or accomplish. What past memory gives you confidence today? What would it look like if he acted on your behalf?

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

HOMEWORK | PRAYER PROJECT #3.

This week, take 30-60 minutes and complete the following prayer project. Feel free to look over the notes and passages from this week's passage.

- Spend a portion of your time opening up to the Lord in honesty. What sort of loss are you experiencing? How might the Lord be turning you away from lesser loves in order to develop a mature love for him in your? How does it feel to lose undergo that process? Do you feel like he is listening?
- Spend a portion of your time confessing your neediness, and declaring your confidence in God to solve the situation for you. What about his character and past actions informs your confidence? How has he acted on your behalf in the past?
- Spend a portion of your time expressing your hope in God. Ask the Lord to help you hope again. What is something you've grown weary of bringing to the Lord and asking for help? Dare to do it again.