

WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT

WEEK 2: THE DARK NIGHT

Scripture says that God is committed to his children's spiritual formation. He actively cares for us, seeing to it that we grow up to maturity in Christ.

It's easy to mentally assent to spiritual growth on paper: we start out immature and ultimately grow to Christlikeness. But the reality of life between sanctification's starting point and finish line includes many spiritual ups and downs. Spiritual highs are easy and expected, but spiritual lows are often confusing and painful. So that's where we want to focus our attention this week as we take a look at what it feels like for a believer to walk through seasons of desolation.

Our hope is that you are comforted and strengthened in faith as you consider the common language and experience found in Scripture.

CONSOLATION.

Sometimes, when we walk through extremely difficult times, we experience the Lord in ways we never have before. Scripture speaks to us, prayer is intimate, communion with God feels almost tangible. We are able to find purpose in our trial and we come out the other side knowing the Lord in deeper ways. These times of consolation—the felt-presence of God for the purpose of growth—leave us unexpectedly grateful.

Take a minute and gather a reference point.

- Can you think of a season like that?
 - Have you known any sort of consolation from the Lord in a season of difficulty?
 - What was that season like?
 - How were you able to see God's faithfulness?
-
-
-
-

DESOLATION.

But it doesn't always *feel* that way.

Sometimes, there seem to be no spiritual consolations—no sense of communion with God and no confidence in the faith that previously held you secure. These seasons of desolation, when God feels noticeably absent, are lonely, dark, and often isolating times. Without fail, doubts emerge when we experience dry or dark seasons. Existential thoughts and fears can't help but rise to the surface.

Thankfully, as Christians, we have a framework for how to make sense of our suffering. We see patterns in Scripture for how God uses darkness, trials, and doubts to bring his children to spiritual maturity. Despair and questioning is regularly referenced,¹ and crises of faith—these dark nights of the soul—are evident in the lives of David, Job, Paul, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Elijah, Moses, Abraham, and others. However distressing it may seem, we are informed by

¹ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 10.

Scripture that suffering is part of the process of sanctification. There is comfort to be had in knowing that the desolations are purposed, accounted for, and even extremely vital for maturity.

But reading about it in someone else's life is one thing; experiencing it is something different. Personal seasons of desolation can be disorienting and leave us reevaluating our belief system. Such upheaval could be for any number of reasons, including the duration of the trial, a sense of purposelessness in the suffering, the sheer intensity of pain or fear, or even just profound disappointment and disillusionment. We are tempted to see our difficulties as revealing either something wrong with God, or something wrong with self.

Passages like James 1:2-4 might be familiar to us, but the practice of how to believe it and live into it can feel elusive. The struggling Christian can't help but notice that there is an immense gap in this verse between the "trials of various kinds" and "complete and lacking in nothing." Bridging this gap is painful and difficult, and usually terrifying. We wrestle to know how to let "steadfastness have its full effect," and we wonder how we will survive the process.

That gap is the focus of today's time: the actual experience of this lonely darkness.

READ AND DISCUSS.

Out of respect for the sensitive nature of the subject, we will move slowly and contemplatively through the content today. We'll spend time individually in Scripture looking for concepts that give voice to our personal experiences. We will prayerfully work through 4 passages on our own and come back together after each passage to discuss.

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, be sure to look for where you can identify words or phrases that give language to your experience. Notice the approach, methods, and manner used to express thoughts and emotions.

Psalm 42:1-10 (8 minutes)

Commentator James Montgomery Boice highlights some of the causes of spiritual crisis listed in Psalm 42.² Use his identified themes to filter through your experiences.

1. Read verses 1-2 | *Isolation and Alienation*

In these first 2 verses, the psalmist is lamenting a loss of both his community and the felt-presence of God. He is far from the temple and is experiencing the slow “agony of drought”³ that comes from feeling alienated by God and isolated from his people.

Q: What words resonate in these two verses?

Q: Has isolation played any role in how you’ve experienced suffering? If so, in what way?

2. Read verses 3 and 10 | *Hurtful Words from Others*

Q: Have things been said to you in your suffering—by friends or adversaries—that have compounded the pain?

Q: How have external factors played a role in your suffering?

3. Read verse 4 | *Memories of Better Days (nostalgia/pining)*

Q: How do you process the past? Are your memories accurate?

Q: When were your “better days?” How were they better?

Q: Do the memories help or hurt?

4. Read verse 7 | *The Overwhelming Trials of Life*

“Deep calls to deep” can be translated as “abyss calls to abyss,” or even more relatable, “blow follows blow.”⁴ The “roar of your waterfalls” implies violent, successive rains or sudden destructive torrents. This is likely a reference to the destructive and deadly flooding in that region. This verse is meant to convey a sense of being engulfed, afflicted, overwhelmed, and suffering “a sea of troubles.”⁵

Q: What abyss have you felt engulfed by? What are the deep things that have threatened your sense of survival?

Q: What are some of the waves that have overwhelmed you?

5. Read verse 9 | *The Failure of God to Move Quickly on Our Behalf*

Q: How has duration been a factor in your suffering?

Q: What questions has the waiting caused you to ask?

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

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-106*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 367-369.

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 183.

⁴ H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, *Psalms*, Vol. 8, The Pulpit Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980), 331.

⁵ Charles Ellicott, *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, Vol. IV (London, Paris, and New York: Cassell & Company., 1884), 148.

Psalm 77:1-9 (8 Minutes)

Boice gives the following summation of this passage: “He was happy with God then. He is not now. God seems to be utterly absent, to have abandoned him. And he is afraid that this apparent abandonment will go on forever. He is afraid that he will never get out of his depressed state and that depression will lead to blank despair.”⁶

Q: Can you see that in the text? Have you ever been able to relate to any of those feelings?

1. Read verses 1-3.

We see that the psalmist cries out in distress earnestly and repeatedly. Affliction had burdened every element of being—mind, body, soul... he is encumbered by it day and night.

Q: Has there been a season of such affliction that even prayer did not seem to bring comfort?

Q: Has there been an experience that has caused you to be uneasy or angry at the thought of God?

2. Read verses 4-6.

The *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary* notes that the psalmist has been completely reduced. He is both sleepless and speechless. He is entirely uncomforted.⁷

Q: Have you experienced a time when you have been tormented by your inability to understand the activity (or seeming lack of activity) of God?

Q: What has it looked like for your soul to make a “diligent search?”

3. Read verses 7-9.

These verses pose a list of honest questions that are difficult to voice and distressing to consider. They are important questions, though, to ask. J.M. Boice quotes Alexander Maclaren in saying, “doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening, like poisonous mists, in his heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.”⁸

Q: What are your own honest questions?

What verse stands out most to you? Why?

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

⁶ Boice, *Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-106*, 640.

⁷ Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Job-Isaiah*, vol. III, A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1866), 263.

⁸ Boice, *Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-106*, 640.

Psalm 119:25-31 (6 Minutes)

1. Read verse 25.

The phrase “soul clings to dust” can be interpreted in two different ways. The first interpretation is that the dust represents the things of earth, as in “my soul clings to the things of this world.” The second suggests a picture of being laid low, feeling near death and barely holding on. In sifting through this passage, it would be helpful to read it with both considerations in mind. The worldly things that we cling to will inevitably be a source a pain if not surrendered. The things of heaven are tied to joy and eternity. The things of earth are here one minute and gone the next.

Q: What cares have laid you low?

Q: What have you clung to?

Q: What have you become despondent over?

2. Read verses 26-27.

The request of verse 27 is about more than trying to make sense of what God does or doesn't do. It's about better knowing the nature of the Lord and his ways.⁹

Q: What do you sense you might need to learn in a season of darkness or suffering?

Q: What has suffering caused you to want to better understand about who the Lord is?

3. Read verses 28-31.

Verse 29 addresses “false ways.” These might include lies you are believing, false comforts you cling to, the ways you are deceiving yourself, the ways you manage your struggles, and even the sins that you don't yet recognize as sins.

Q: What feels relatable in these 4 verses?

Q: What false ways do you feel drawn to? Do you sense the Lord wanting to free you from any of those?

Q: In what way are you afraid the Lord might (or has) let you down?

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

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

⁹ Boice, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 107-150*, 987.

Psalm 88:1-18 (8 Minutes)

On this psalm, Derek Kidner writes, “There’s no sadder prayer in the Psalter.”¹⁰ While most psalms move toward hope or resolution in some way, Psalm 88 does not.

We’ll work through the passage using James Montgomery Boice’s outline and titles as our framework.¹¹

1. Read verses 1-2 | *By Day and Night*

Verse 1 holds the only glimmer of hope in the whole psalm.

Q: If there has been a single thread of hope that has held you during a dark season, what has it been?

Q: Aside from asserting that the Lord is the only hope for salvation, what other evidence can be seen in these two verses that hope is holding out though every line might appear hopeless?

2. Read verses 3-5 | *The Shadow of Death*

Verse 3 conveys that he had “reached his utmost point of endurance; he had no power to bear anymore.”¹²

Q: Can you think of these moments in your life?

Verses 3-5 progress quickly to feelings of a darkness like death... a hopelessness that felt close to the grave or hell. He feels troubled, defeated, despairing, and isolated.

Q: Which of these feelings has felt heaviest as you have walked through dark seasons?

3. Read verses 6-9a | *This Present Darkness*

Here, the psalmist writes that it is the Lord who has put him in the place. When we suffer, we are likely to believe one of two lies: either, (a) we think the Lord doesn’t have ultimate control over our lives, or (b) we believe that he is unkind to allow our suffering.

Q: Do you know which misconception you tend to believe?

Q: How can we accurately view verses 6-9a as we hold to the ultimate truth that a kind and good God ordains suffering for people he loves?

4. Read verses 9b-12 | *No Praises from the Dead*

The Hebrew understanding of “Sheol” involved elements of “destruction, darkness, and forgetfulness... by God and man.”¹³ These are primary fears of not only the psalmist, but primary fears of all people.

Q: As you walk through hard seasons, which of these concepts tends to cause you the most fear?

5. Read verses 13-14 | *The Silent God*

Here is the heart of the psalmist’s agony: he feels cast off, ignored, hidden from, abandoned by God.

Q: When, if ever, have you felt this way?

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 348..

¹¹ Boice, *Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-106*, 715-721.

¹² Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: The Book of Psalms*, vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 363.

¹³ Charles Ellicott, *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, 218.

6. Read verses 15-18 | *A Lifetime of Sorrows*

Usually, by the end of a psalm, the movement has turned upward. There is often a moment where the psalmist redirects his soul to hope in God. This psalm literally ends with the word “darkness.” There is no recovery, no reframing or redirecting. And it is just as important, sacred, and worshipful as every other psalm.

We know that hope and victory stand secure outside of all of our difficult seasons, experiences, and perceptions. There will be times for all of us, however, where we won’t be able to reconcile that tension in real time. This psalm holds space for what isn’t reconciled yet.

Q: What has yet to be reconciled or recovered for you?

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

Group Discussion (5 Minutes)

CONSIDER CHRIST.

Christ also experienced the felt-absence of God.

Hebrews 4:15 - ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Psalm 22:1-2 - ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

There is comfort to be found in the fact that the Lord himself put on flesh and endured the darkness. We aren't alone in our experience of darkness, and we are not alone in the actual darkness—no matter how it may feel.

LOOKING FORWARD.

We all experience desolation, but what does it look like to faithfully endure? As we walk these seasons of spiritual crisis, our human nature will be inclined to solve our spiritual issues with human solutions. Depending on our personalities, histories, and religious backgrounds, we will find ourselves tempted to either work harder or walk away. Either way we go, we'll be fueled by guilt, despair, and shame.

But there is another way. A way that trusts that he who calls us is faithful to keep us. A way that resolves to lean hard on the hope that when we are weak, he really is strong.

HOMEWORK | PRAYER PROJECT #2.

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

- Review the passages and notes from this session.
- Following their example of crying out to God, write a psalm of your own.