

WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT

WEEK 4: HOPE AND JOY

This is a four-week session and yet, most dark seasons last much longer than four weeks. In light of the completion of this class, we have to examine what it looks like to come to a peaceful non-resolution—a faithful waiting.

As we arrive at the final week, we will continue examining what it means to have a sustainable framework to endure our desolations without answers, clarity, and sometimes even comfort. We will conclude our time by considering what it means to eventually emerge from a season of desolation.

READ AND CONSIDER.

Psalm 131

As we come to verse 3, we find the psalmist instructing his soul: “Oh Israel, hope in the Lord...” That imperative prompts an important question: why must we be told to hope?

We know that seasons are appointed (Ecclesiastes 3:4) and that there will be a time to look up, and, at some point, there will be a time to move forward. This can be just as difficult to recognize as the original realization and acceptance of being in a dark season. While some struggle to acknowledge suffering, others struggle to let go of suffering. Why?

- The struggle is where we found consolation.
- Comfort of chaos.
- Felt compassion.
- Shame.
- Not safe to hope anymore.

Why do you struggle to hope? (1 minute)

Group Discussion (4 minutes)

Seasons of desolations are intended to address each of these points of reluctance so that we can hope freely.

A DISPOSITION OF TRUST HELPS US HOPE.

Remember, the Bible invites us to do more than just believe its words; we are invited to adopt the same disposition of trust exemplified by the Biblical authors. Just as they did, we are invited to: (1) be honest with God, (2) be humble before God, and (3) hope in God.

As we examine the model in action, we can see how it helps to strip away layers of our excess and moves us closer to genuine hope.

(1) **As we are honest...**

- We identify the pride behind the limitations we place on the Lord, and we are encouraged to move forward, knowing the Lord's presence is also beyond the suffering.

- We see the truth about what we create and what we gravitate toward, and we gain a desire and courage to leave behind the comfort of chaos.
- We identify the truth about how we see ourselves and our situations, and we recognize the insatiable nature of needing the compassion of others.
- We identify lies we are believing about ourselves and our situations, and we recognize that shame has no place in our identity as sons and daughters of God.
- We identify what we're truly clinging to and hoping in, and we realize that our hope was disordered.

(2) **We become humble.**

Like the Biblical authors, our neediness forces us toward the truth of our human limitations.

- I do not see things accurately, because my heart is deceitful. (Jeremiah 17:9)
- I do not know all the answers, because his ways are not my ways. (Isaiah 55:8-9)
- I cannot lean on my own understanding, so I must trust in the Lord with all my heart. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

We are left emptied. This is where the desolations bring us. The lack of “felt-presence” forces us toward honesty and humility. Our desperate search for consolation drives our roots deeper and exposes our errant and minimized means of managing ourselves.

These “felt-absences” can also be called “periods of unselfing”—the stripping away of the self. The ultimate goal of our spiritual transformation is to be like Christ. John 3:30 says, “He must increase and I must decrease,” and so in this process we come to have less of us and more of him. As milk is removed, we are required to grow, forced to trust, and inevitably transformed. We are led into fuller maturity and there is a new depth to our walk with God. This depth has been realized through the stripping away that has happened and it has removed a bit more of the residual “self” in us.

(3) **We are free to hope.**

Having spent time being honest and being humbled, our hope can be developed and directly anchored in Christ.

- Read Romans 5:3-5 | Notice how against all odds, hope is being produced. As we suffer, we are being changed and becoming aligned to hope.
- *Read Hebrews 6:19* | Hope is our anchor to Christ.

What is safe to hope in? (1 minute)

Group Discussion (4 minutes)

A PERSPECTIVE SHIFT.

As the Lord gives us hope, a sense of security starts to develop and we start to recognize the greater work that is happening. Though we have struggled and might still be struggling, there is a shift happening in our position—a widening of our lens and an increasing steadiness in our stance—leading to a greater clarity in our perspective.

- *Recall Deuteronomy 8:2-5* | The Lord tested them to show them what was in their heart. He humbled them.

Not only did he allow them to see what was in their hearts, but, in his kindness, he also provided for them. He taught his people to trust his direct care for them.

- *Recall Psalm 42* | The psalmist learns/practices having honest conversations with the Lord and then redirects his soul.
- *Recall Psalm 119:32* | We see that through his suffering, the Lord has given the psalmist an “enlarged heart.”

GOING FURTHER: CONSIDER JOY.

Recall James 1:2-4. We looked at this passage in week 2 when we talked about how trials lead to steadfastness and eventually maturity, but there is another word that stands out in the passage: joy.

In your own words, describe joy.

Our joy, and our rejoicing, is a key element of who we are as believers. In fact, it’s actually listed as evidence of being a Christian in Romans 12:12 when it says that Christians will “rejoice in hope.” Of course, having joy—especially in seasons of suffering—can only be miraculous. It’s not something that can be conjured up or manufactured, though; instead, Romans 15:13 reveals joy is evidence of the work of the Spirit and the overflow of what happens when our hope is rightly fixed.

In particularly dark seasons, the absurdity of it can feel offensive, but when we correctly understand the relationship between joy and suffering, we can see a kingdom paradox at work. If hope looks to the future, joy celebrates and appreciates the assurance of what we are guaranteed.¹

Consider this: hope has an expiration. Though it anchors us to our future reality, we will not need it once it is fully realized. It is the same with faith. It will eventually be made sight. But not so with joy. Joy is eternal. When describing what is to come for the people of God, some Bible translations have Isaiah 35:10 written as “Joy and gladness will overtake them...” To be overrun by joy is an amazing concept to look forward to. When we really comprehend the true nature of joy, we can appreciate the gift we have in it. It isn’t a way to avoid suffering, rather it’s a way to endure suffering. It is the divine fruit of a season of struggle.

It has to be noted that though joy is a gift, it is also a command. When we see it listed in verses on suffering, we see it as an instruction: “consider it joy” or “rejoice.” It is being given as the means by which you will endure soundly—by living into what is already yours and can never be taken from you (John 16:22). Seasons of darkness, when they have their full effect, remove the things that distract us from our ultimate reality. This contrast of this darkness and light more clearly illuminates the glory of God and the glory that awaits us as kingdom citizens. A beholding of glory always produces a joy we are eager to take hold of. So, we “count it all joy” and we “rejoice.”

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s good news for the world*. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994),

READ AND REFLECT.

Psalms 42 and 43 (12 minutes)

1. Recount the psalmist's honesty.

2. Find evidence of humility.

3. Identify hope.

Group Discussion (5 minutes)

ALREADY AND NOT-YET.

The truth is that in this life, we hold both the honest sorrow of sadness, fear, feelings of abandonment, feelings of confusion and disappointment and we hold to truth. We hold to the realities that God is sovereign and good, that we can trust his purposes, that as we struggle, we are gaining ground in knowing him, and that we are ever in his presence. We live in the tension of the already and not-yet. This is who we are created to be—we are people who live in the reality of two vastly different worlds.

As we endure the “not yet,” we stay the course.

- We believe what we've known to be true in the past (our theological backbone).
- We practice the spiritual disciplines (fly by the instruments).
- We adopt a disposition of trust (honest, humble, hopeful).
- We look to Christ.

LOOKING TO JESUS.

As we consider the already and the not yet, we look to Christ, “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” (Hebrews 12:2). In him, we find the present consolation of one who has fully endured darkness and the example of one who's heart was set on the promise of the fullness of joy.

And we are invited into that same paradox: the good eternal fruit that comes from difficult things. The fellowship of sufferings (Philippians 3:10). We hold to what the Lord has already begun and the access that we already have to him. We look to Christ, we hide ourselves in Christ, and we entrust ourselves to Christ.

A Personal Psalm (10 minutes)

Individually, take time to reengage with your psalm. Instruct your soul with elements of an honest, humble, hopeful posture. If, like Psalm 88, you can't yet find a way to look up, spend time writing a separate prayer.

Group Discussion (5 minutes)

We began with Psalm 131 and we will close this time with Psalm 131. Know that every silent season is bringing you to a place where your soul might eventually be calmed and quieted. Notice the posture and the discipline: the humility, the sober-mindedness, the contentment, the trust, the maturity, and finally the hope. See how the faithfulness of God has been experienced and is now deeply and intimately known by the psalmist.

Psalm 131

¹ O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

³ O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore.