

JOHN 19:29

JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON

that the Scripture might be fulfilled, He said, "I'm thirsty!"²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was sitting there; so they fixed a sponge full of sour wine on hyssop and held it up to His mouth.

^aPs 69:21

³⁰When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" Then bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

^aJn 17:4 ^bPhp 2:8

Jesus' Side Pierced

³¹Since it was the preparation day, the Jews did not want the bodies to remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a special day). They requested that Pilate have the men's legs broken and that their bodies be taken away.³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first one who had been crucified with Him. When they came to Jesus, they did not break His legs since they saw that He was already dead.³³ But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.³⁴ He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows he is telling the truth.³⁵ For these things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: Not one of His bones will be broken.³⁶ Also, another Scripture says: They will look at the One they pierced.³⁷

^aMk 15:42 ^bDI 21:23 ^cEx 12:10
^dZch 13:1 ^eJn 21:31 ^fJoh 1:1
^gEx 12:46; Ps 34:20 ^hZec 12:10

Jesus' Burial

After this, Joseph of Arimathea secretly because of his fear of the Jews—asked Pilate that he might remove Jesus' body. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took His body away.³⁸ Nicodemus (who had previ-

ously come to Him at night) also came, bringing a mixture of about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes.³⁹ Then they took Jesus' body and wrapped it in linen cloths with the aromatic spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews.⁴⁰ There was a garden in the place where He was crucified. A new tomb was in the garden; no one had yet been placed in it.⁴¹ They placed Jesus there because of the Jewish preparation and since the tomb was nearby.

^aMt 27:57 ^bMk 29:35 ^cJn 3:1-2
^dMt 27:60; Lk 23:53 ^eJn 19:39

The Empty Tomb

20 On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw the stone rolled away from the tomb. She ran to tell Peter and the other Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!"

^aMt 28:1 ^bJn 19:23

At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, yet he did not go in. Then, following him, Simon Peter came also. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. The wrapping that had been on His head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself. The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, did not understand the Scripture that He must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went home again.

^aLk 24:12 ^bJn 19:41
^cPs 16:10; Mt 16:21

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LASTING TRUTH FOR TRENDING QUESTIONS



CHRISTIAN THINKERS
SOCIETY WITH JEREMIAH JOHNSTON PH.D.

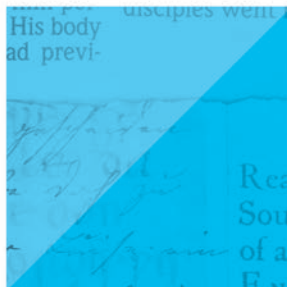


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JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON

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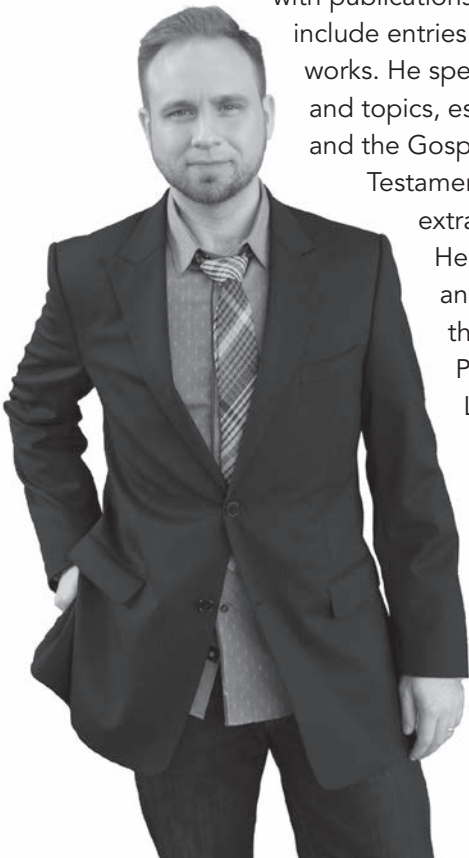
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR




Dr. Jeremiah J. Johnston is a New Testament scholar, professor, pastor, apologist, and regular speaker on university campuses, at churches, and at conferences. His passion is equipping Christians to give intellectually informed accounts of what they believe. Jeremiah completed his doctoral residency in Oxford in partnership with the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and received his PhD from Middlesex University (United Kingdom), with commendation. He has master's degrees from Acadia University (Canada) and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (United States). He has lectured throughout the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Jeremiah serves as the founder and president of Christian Thinkers Society, a Resident Institute at Houston Baptist University, where he also serves as Associate Professor of early Christianity. Christian Thinkers Society produces live events, media productions, conferences, and publications to teach pastors and Christians to become thinkers and thinkers to become Christians. Jeremiah resides in Houston, Texas, with his wife and two children. For more information visit www.christianthinkers.com.

In addition to his popular publications, Jeremiah has distinguished himself with publications in scholarly, refereed journals and serials. These include entries in Oxford University Press and E. J. Brill reference works. He specializes in Christian origins; Jesus and the Gospels; and topics, especially apologetics, that closely relate to Jesus and the Gospels. These include the resurrection of Jesus, New Testament manuscripts (their number, nature, and reliability), extracanonical gospels, resurrection, and afterlife beliefs. He has presented academic papers at learned meetings and has examined ancient texts (papyri, codices, and the like) at renowned libraries, such as the Griffith Papyrology Room of Oxford University's Bodleian Library and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University.



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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Hi, I am Jeremiah, and I am honored to lead you through this Bible study. I live at the intersection of the scholarly and popular worlds; therefore, I have a passion for teaching and inspiring people like you to own your faith and to engage confidently with the world around you. I am honored you have committed to invest your time with me in this study.

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to explore Scriptures that equip believers to offer biblical responses to the following challenging questions:

What do we do when God seems silent?

Why can we trust in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?

How should Christians respond to spiritual darkness and paranormal activity?

How can I know for sure the Bible is true and trustworthy?

What should Christians understand about suicide and mental health?

Why do we experience suffering and pain?

One week of Bible study is devoted to each of these topics, and each week is divided into five days of personal study. In the personal study you will find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, six group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into three sections:

START focuses participants on the topic of the session's video teaching.

WATCH provides key ideas presented in the video.

RESPOND guides the group in a discussion of the video teaching.

To go deeper in your study, you may want to purchase the book *Unanswered: Lasting Truth for Trending Questions* (Whitaker House, ISBN 978-1-6291-1656-3).

TIPS FOR LEADING A GROUP

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE

Prepare for each meeting by—

REVIEWING the weekly material and group questions ahead of time;
PRAYING for each person in the group.

Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Create a comfortable environment. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience. Plan ahead by taking into consideration—

**SEATING, TEMPERATURE, LIGHTING, FOOD OR DRINK,
SURROUNDING NOISE, AND GENERAL CLEANLINESS.**

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted. Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

INCLUDE OTHERS

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to—

INCLUDE any people who visit the group;
INVITE new people to join your group.

TIPS FOR LEADING A GROUP

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure that your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half of your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending. Encourage group members with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through—

EMAILS, TEXTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

When possible, build deeper friendships by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for—

MEALS; FUN ACTIVITIES; AND PROJECTS AROUND YOUR HOME, CHURCH, OR COMMUNITY.

WEEK 1

JOHN 19:29

that the Scripture might be fulfilled, He said, "I'm thirsty!" ²⁹A jar full of sour wine was sitting there; so they fixed a sponge full of sour wine on hyssop^a and held it up to His mouth.

^aPs 69:21

³⁰When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" Then bowing His head, He ^bgave up His spirit.

^aJn 17:4 ^bPhp 2:8

Jesus' Side Pierced

³¹Since it was the preparation day, the Jews ^adid not want the bodies to remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was ^a special^b day). They requested that Pilate have the men's legs broken and that their bodies be taken away. ³²So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man and of the other one who had been crucified with Him. ³³When they

came to Jesus, they did not break His legs, since they saw that He was already dead. ³⁴But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. ³⁵He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows he is telling the truth. ³⁶For these things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: Not one of His bones will be broken. ³⁷Also, another Scripture says: They will look at the One they pierced.^d

^aMk 15:42 ^bDt 21:23 ^cEx 12:18

^dZch 13:1 ^eJn 20:31; 1Jn 3:1

^fEx 12:46; Ps 34:20 ^gZch 12:10

Jesus' Burial

who was a disciple of Jesus—but secretly ^abecause of his fear of the Jews—asked Pilate that he might remove Jesus' body. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took His body away. ³⁹Nicodemus (who had previ-

ously come to Him at night) also came, bringing a mixture of about 75 pounds^a of myrrh and aloes. ⁴⁰Then they took Jesus' body and wrapped it in linen cloths with the aromatic spices, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹There was a garden in the place where He was crucified. A ^bnew tomb was in the garden; no one had yet been placed in it. ⁴²They placed Jesus there because of the Jewish preparation and since the tomb was nearby.

^aMt 27:57 ^bPr 29:25 ^cJn 3:1-2

^dMt 27:60; Lk 23:53 ^eIs 53:9

The Empty Tomb

²⁰On the ^afirst day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran to Simon Peter and to the ^bother disciple the Jesus loved and said to them, "I have taken the stone away from the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!"

^aMt 28:1 ^bJn 13:23

³At that, ^aPeter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. ⁵Stooping down, he saw ^bthe linen cloths lying there, yet he did not go in. ⁶Then, following him, Simon Peter came also. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷The wrapping that had been on His head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself. ⁸The other disciple, who had preceded him, saw, and believed. ⁹For they still did not understand the ^cScripture that He must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples went home again.

^aLk 24:12 ^bJn 19:40

^cPs 16:10; Mt 16:21

GOD ON MUTE

WHAT DO WE DO WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT?

Great and manifold were the blessings (most d
Souveraigne) which Almighty God, the Fa
of all Mercies, bestowed vpon vs the peopl
ENGLAND, when first hee sent your Maie
Royall person to rule and raigne ouer vs,
wheras it was the expectation of many,
wished not well vnto our STON, that vpon

START

Welcome to session 1 of *Unanswered*. Tough questions are being asked about Christianity, both inside and outside the church. If we are honest, we as believers sometimes struggle to understand the salient issues of our faith and explain them to our friends who want answers to difficult questions.

We will start by talking about our comfort levels and abilities to respond to tough questions. To get the most out of this study, let's commit to be transparent as we discuss these unanswered questions together.

How comfortable do you usually feel when someone asks you questions about your faith?

How comfortable do you usually feel discussing your own faith questions?

How comfortable did you feel answering the first two questions?

Our purpose in this six-session study is to be equipped, as thoughtful ambassadors of Jesus, to respond to tough questions in a way that attracts people to the truth of Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

Too many Christians are in retreat mode, shying away from the tough questions. This study provides precisely what many people in the church need today: tools and answers. Believers who possess the power to explain and answer tough questions about their faith meet the needs of friends who are searching for the truth. Just as important, they prove that they understand the meaning of their own faith.

Our goal as a group is to leave this study enriched by the truth of Scripture, characterized by a thinking faith, equipped to communicate confidently, and committed to escape the tendency to offer trite answers to a skeptical world.

In session 1 we will begin by seeking the answer to the tough question, What do we do when God seems silent?

UNANSWERED

WATCH

1. God's silence is real, biblical, personal, common, and not always bad.
2. When the silence is real, I should saturate myself in the psalms.
3. Silence should always lead me to stones of remembrance.
4. The silence of God can lead us from transformation to triumph.

RESPOND

What one truth from Jeremiah's teaching resonated most with you?

Did Jeremiah's discussion of God's silence remind you of a time in your life when God was silent about a particular issue? If you feel comfortable, describe this experience.

In Scripture God called people by name. God never says, "Hey, you!" God is personal and present. Nonetheless, God can sometimes be silent. Two people who experienced both the personal presence and the silence of God were Abram and Sarah. Actually, they experienced the silence of God not once but twice.

Read Genesis 15:1-6.

How would you describe Abram's state of mind and the condition of his heart in this passage?

Try to imagine that. God had promised Abram that through his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed (see Gen. 12:3), and yet he and his barren wife waited, sometimes not very patiently, to see God's promise become reality. Nothing had worked. The first period of God's silence was 10 years (see Gen. 12-16); the second period of silence, 13 more years (see Gen. 17-18). Abram and Sarah spent nearly 25 years of their lives grappling with God's silence.

What words would you use to describe the relationship the Lord was seeking with Abram?

GOD ON MUTE

Abram had been looking around for answers to his uncertainties, but God wanted him to look up. God gave Abram a vision for what He would do through his example of trust and obedience (see Gen. 15:1-6).

If you had been Abram, what would have been going through your mind?

While it might not be the issue of infertility, we can all point to a time in our lives when we have wondered whether God has forgotten us. Imagine that you were in Abram or Sarai's place. For many years God had been silent about how and when His covenant with you would be fulfilled. Then God appeared to you and showed you the stars of the sky and gave you a promise about the immeasurable number of offspring you would have.

Why do you think God delayed the fulfillment of His promise to Abram?

Abram struggled with the absence of God's presence. He worried. He looked elsewhere for answers. Yet, when God finally spoke, illustrating His promise with a beautiful analogy of the stars in the heavens, Abram "believed in the LORD" (15:6, NASB).

Part of having faith is recognizing that God is always at work, even though He may appear to be silent. How can we respond to express our faith and to open ourselves to the work He wants to do in our character as we wait?

How does God's faithfulness in the past—through biblical stories, stories of people you know, or your own experiences—help you stay faithful during times of God's silence?

In our personal study this week, we will look more deeply into the story of Abram and Sarai and learn what eventually happened.

PRAY

- Begin your prayer time acknowledging God's presence in your group.
- Pray for people in your lives, including members of your group, who are struggling with God's silence.
- Pray that you can each be thoughtful ambassadors for Jesus in your lives.

Read week 1 and complete the activities on the following pages before the next group experience.

DAY 1

ABRAHAM: FAITH AND SILENCE

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *despair* is defined as “complete loss or absence of hope.”¹ I think my wife and I reached that point when we wanted to have children but were unable to conceive. For nearly five years we experienced God’s deafening silence.

Identify a time in your life (which may be currently) that you have faced a trial, adversity, or God’s lingering silence. Now place an X on each scale to indicate how you are responding or have responded to it.

JOYFUL	DESPAIRING
CALM	ANGRY
PATIENT	ANXIOUS
COMPOSED	FRANTIC
HOPEFUL	HOPELESS

Would you say your responses were normal, healthy ways to function in difficult, painful circumstances, or do any of these responses reveal areas where you need to grow in trusting God? Why?

In our group time we studied God’s renewed promise to Abram as he and Sarai were waiting to conceive the child of promise, and we observed Abram’s faithful response (see Gen. 15:1-7). But Sarai wasn’t with Abram when he experienced God in Genesis 15. Notwithstanding God’s promises, Sarai convinced Abram to allow Hagar to act as a surrogate mother (see 16:1-3), and Ishmael was born to Abram (see v. 15).

Read Genesis 17:1-8,15-22.

GOD ON MUTE

As Genesis 17 begins, 13 years have passed since Ishmael was born (see 16:16). We have no other details about what was happening during these years of silence between Genesis 16 and 17. We can only speculate that God left Abram, for a time, to do things his own way—having a child with Hagar instead of waiting for God to enable him and Sarah to have a son—and God stopped speaking to him.

When God greeted Abram after years of silence and everything that had occurred in between, why do you think He reminded Abram that He was El Shaddai—“Almighty God” (Gen. 17:1, NKJV)?

God made a number of promises to Abraham in this passage. A few of these would be fulfilled in Abraham’s lifetime, but most were promises for the generations to come, as a result of Abraham’s obedience. Throughout these chapters in Genesis, we see Abraham and Sarah trying to resolve their personal concerns and questions, but God had a much bigger picture—a much bigger purpose—in mind. This is a wonderful reminder that our personal obedience and trust in God are blessings not only for our lives but also for generations to come.

Read Genesis 21:1-7.

Why God might have waited so long to fulfill His promise?

As we study the account of Abraham and Sarah, we see that God had much bigger and better plans for and through them than they could even “conceive.” They desired a child. God wanted to start a faith movement. They were thinking about the continuance of their family line. God was thinking about the messianic line of Jesus. They were worried about not having an heir. God’s concern was for the salvation of all humankind (see Gal. 3:29; Titus 3:7; Jas. 2:5).

How does Abraham and Sarah’s story help you put your hopes and dreams, as well as God’s silence, in perspective?

In the midst of God’s silence and their circumstances, Abram and Sarai turned to human solutions (see Gen. 15:3; 16:2-3) rather than trusting God for His provision. God was asking, “Will you trust Me to love you and keep My covenant promises to you? Do you trust Me to straighten out the mess in your life? Do you trust Me to give you a child?”

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Do you trust me bring the Savior through your family?" God's plan for the messianic line was to begin with a miraculous birth and end with the even more miraculous birth of Jesus of Nazareth. In spite of his doubts and attempts to get ahead of God, Abraham is cited throughout the New Testament as an example of faith (see Rom. 4:3,9,22; Gal 3:6; Jas. 2:23). God wants us to trust Him. To trust His way as well as His timing.

In December 2007 Audrey and I felt convicted to pray daily for the Lord to work miraculously and allow us to grow our family. We gathered each day and carefully prayed through our struggle. We came to a point of having total peace with God, no matter what He decided. In August 2008 we were on a spiritual retreat and decided to study passages in the Bible related to trusting God.

Early one morning in October of that year, Audrey took a home pregnancy test. Those pregnancy tests had become a reminder of no to us. After five years of no, my wife could barely walk through the aisle of a pharmacy without seeing a home pregnancy test, being reminded that nothing had worked. However, that October morning was different. I remember Audrey running toward me, collapsing in my arms, and saying, "It said yes!" Nine months later, my wife gave birth to our child of promise, Lily Faith (who now also has a little brother, Justin). God reminded us, just as He had reminded Abraham and Sarah, that He is El Shaddai—Almighty God.

These stories remind us that when we cannot see the hand of God, we must trust His heart and character. When I fail to understand why things are going the way they are in my life, I must remember that God sees the end from the beginning, and He wants me to trust Him. Just like Abraham and Sarah.

If you had a friend who had continually asked God for something but had experienced His silence, what would you encourage him or her to do?

Close your time today in prayer, acknowledging that God is sovereign (in control) even when He seems silent to us.

Pray, trusting the Lord hears the cries of your heart and knowing He will answer. Meditate on the following verse, thanking God for His love, patience, provision, and power.

Is anything too hard for the LORD?

GENESIS 18:14, NKJV

DAY 2

DEBUNKING THE MYTH

Does your life ever feel as if God has “unfollowed” you because of sin or maybe for unknown reasons? Have you ever sensed that God was playing a game of hide-and-go-seek with you? It is anything but fun. It can even seem to be a cruel, cosmic timeout—a heavenly ignore. God’s hiddenness can be isolating, especially when you think God is being silent because of your sin.

But there is a myth to be debunked about God’s silence. There is an erroneous understanding among many Christians that God’s silence always equals His chastisement in our lives. *Chastisement* is a word we rarely hear in modern churches, but it is found in the Bible. Chastisement is the experience of God’s discipline in our lives. God’s silence and God’s chastisement are very different things and certainly are not synonymous. If God is silent toward us, it does not always mean that He is disciplining us.

In Psalm 66 David suggested that God would not listen to his prayers because of sin, but this sin referred to the potential of specific, unresolved sin in David’s heart (see v. 18). We all sin, so we must constantly search our hearts for unresolved sin, repent of that sin, and rest in God’s promise that He is working for our ultimate good (see Rom. 8:28). Then we can affirm with David:

God has surely listened
and has heard my prayer.
Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me!

PSALM 66:19-20, NIV

On the other hand, when God is silent, we must not assume that the cause is our sin. Recall the episode in John’s Gospel in which Jesus saw a blind man and His own disciples questioned Jesus about the cause of the man’s suffering:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

JOHN 9:1-3, ESV

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Jewish families in the first century who suffered with handicaps, birth defects, or special needs were considered outcasts. I am sure they felt that God was distant. However, as we learn in John 9, God had a greater plan for this particular family to experience the power of God with healing and deliverance (see vv. 6-7). It is incorrect to view every case of God's silence as discipline for sin.

In what ways are God's discipline and God's silence different?

When you have experienced a time of God's silence, what did you attribute that silence to?

If you are experiencing the silence of God, do not believe the lie that you are a second-tier, second-rate Christian. In reality, it is possible, even probable, that it means quite the opposite. God has entrusted you with His apparent silence for a greater reason. When you sense God's silence, trust is the central issue that needs your focus. Will you trust God to straighten out this mess in your life? Will you trust Him to see you through the desert? Will you trust Him, even when He says no, wait, or not now?

What are three things in your life right now that you need to submit and trust in God for?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The Bible is a time machine, a portal to the historical past, providing access to examples of common men and women who transcended extremely difficult moments with profound courage and faith. As we search the Scriptures for answers to the unanswered questions, we must remember that the Bible is history, not mythology. The stories of the Bible reflect the real world in which they took place. Have you considered that God's silence is biblical? Casual readers of the Bible are often surprised to learn that several major Bible characters faced moments of deafening silence from God.

A CASE STUDY OF JOSEPH

Consider Joseph's experience with the silence of God. Joseph was obedient to God; he trusted, obeyed, and followed, yet he ended up in a foreign land, Egypt, a teenage victim, sold in a human-trafficking transaction to become a slave in Potiphar's house. Joseph was wrongly accused, and Potiphar had Joseph thrown into an Egyptian prison. Joseph's suffering is captured in this portion of Psalm 105:

... Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
They hurt his feet with shackles;
his neck was put in an iron collar.
Until the time his prediction came true,
the word of the LORD tested him.

PSALM 105:17-19, HCSB

Genesis 40 concludes by saying Joseph was forgotten in prison. God was silent. The bigger story was that God did not want Joseph to remain in the land of Canaan, where his family would have most likely died in the coming famine. God did not want Joseph to remain as a slave in Potiphar's house either. God wanted Joseph to be Pharaoh's prisoner. Why? Because God wanted to favor him in the eyes of Pharaoh. God's silence was a test. Joseph's transformation to becoming the second most powerful man in Egypt happened through a period of God's silence.

■ HENRY BLACKABY ON THE SILENCE OF GOD

I went through a lengthy time when God was silent. ... I did not frantically search for an answer but continued my daily reading of God's Word. I was convinced that as I regularly read the Word of God, the Spirit of God—who knew the mind of God for me—was in the process of helping me understand what God was doing in my life. God will let you know what He is doing in your life when and if you need to know.²

When I pray and God is silent, I still pray through my sin checklist. Sometimes God's

silences are caused by sin in my life. If unconfessed sin is in my life, I confess it and make it right. If God is still silent after that, I get ready for a new experience with Him I have never previously experienced. Sometimes God is silent as He prepares to bring you to a deeper understanding of Himself. Sometimes His silence is designed to bring me into a state of absolute dependence on and trust in God. Whenever God is silent, continue doing the last thing God told you and watch and wait for a fresh encounter with Him.³

UNANSWERED

**What might Joseph have learned during his imprisonment? About himself?
About God?**

God uses this time of waiting to prepare us to receive the plans and tasks He has for us. He is refining our character and forging stronger reliance on and faith in Him so that we will be prepared for what He wants us to do.

Remember that you are not alone in the stillness. You are in good company. When you realize that Abraham, Joseph, and many of the great prophets all persevered and were eventually promoted through God's silence, you recognize that you are not alone. You are not the first Christian facing the juxtaposition of maturing in your faith yet sensing that God is further from you. The reality is God's silence is real, biblical, personal, common, and not always a bad thing. This principle is not something I learned in a seminar; rather, it was reality for me and my beloved wife.

These stories remind us that when we cannot see the hand of God, we must trust in His heart and character. When we fail to understand why things are going the way they are in our lives, we must remember that God sees the end from the beginning, and He wants us to trust Him.

Close your study time in prayer. Ask God to reveal unrepentant sin in your life that needs to be resolved. Express your willingness to place your full trust in Him. Ask God to draw you closer to Him, especially in a time of trial and confusion.

DAY 3

WHAT TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT, PART 1

Two themes quickly rise to the surface when we read Paul's letters: (1) the trials that brought him physical and emotional pain, perplexity, and sorrow and (2) the encouragement and strength God gave him during his time of waiting. In fact, Paul was able to thank God for his trials, rejoice in them, and use the lessons he learned to encourage others.

How could your perspective on trials and silence affect the way you respond to them?

We can learn much from the life of the apostle Paul about how to live so that when difficulties and silence come our way, God can position us to experience a transformed life as we wait.

Read Acts 20:13-17.

Paul decided to stay at Troas while his companions sailed around Cape Lectum. He arranged for them to pick him up at Assos because he wanted to walk the 20-mile journey alone. Why would he do this? Paul needed time with God alone before this strategic meeting with the leaders of Ephesus. Paul loved the Lord and wanted to spend time alone with Him. If you tend to rush from one Sunday to the next without making time to be alone with the Lord, you are missing something in your life. Frankly, sometimes the answer to the question "What do I do when God is silent?" is to get away from the noise and spend time alone with God, listening to Him through the Word and prayer.

How much interaction do you typically have with God while waiting?

How will you apply the example of Paul's commitment to spend more time in solitude with God? Prayerfully record a plan for how, when, and where you will spend time with God.

UNANSWERED

Paul had spent three years in Ephesus, and he wanted to meet with the leaders of that church. In the interest of time, Paul sailed past Ephesus and asked the leaders to meet him at Miletus, 30 miles south of Ephesus. This address to the Ephesian elders is the only sermon in Acts addressed to a Christian audience and, as such, is the most similar to the teachings in Paul's epistles. The sermon is unique in that it reveals Paul the caring pastor rather than Paul the bold evangelist or ardent defender of the faith.

Read Acts 20:18-19. From what you know about Paul and have seen in these verses, how would you describe Paul's heart and character? What inspired him? What was important to him? What kept him going?

In these two verses we discover the first 3 of 12 principles drawn from Acts 20 for continuing to live for God and serve Him while undergoing trials or waiting for Him to speak or act in our lives (You will study the other 9 tomorrow).

1. BE AN EXAMPLE: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you" (v. 18, NIV). There was no question how Paul lived. His life was above reproach; it was an open book to these men. He didn't say to them, "You know how I spoke" or "You know all the accolades I gained." He said, "You know how I lived." Our commitment to Christ is an example to others when we wait or suffer for Him.

In what ways can you be an example to others in the midst of your waiting?

2. SERVE HUMBLY: "I served the Lord with great humility" (v. 19, NIV). Paul used the word *douleúo*, which means *slave*, to express the idea "When I came to Ephesus, I served as a slave to Jesus Christ." What do slaves do? They immediately, unquestioningly obey the master. Seventeen times in his letters Paul wrote that he was a slave of Jesus Christ. This was an important indication of the way Paul saw his relationship with the Master.

Paul had served "with great humility" in a world in which humility was deemed to be a fault, not a virtue—a quality befitting only a slave. Even in a time of waiting, Paul continued to humbly serve the Lord and the churches.

What can you do to follow Paul's example by being a humble servant (slave) of Jesus?

GOD ON MUTE

3. SERVE WITH PASSION: “I served the Lord ... with tears” (v. 19, NIV). Paul experienced God’s silence with many tears, as he described in his letters:

I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

2 CORINTHIANS 2:4, NIV

As I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 3:18, NIV

The Corinthians had written Paul about all the problems in their church. As he wrote back to them, tears christened his response. Yet he continued serving because he considered the gospel more important than trying to escape suffering or personal discomfort.

Until our hearts are broken for lost people, we will never be able to reach them. Until people sense the love of God in us, they will never respond to the love of God we describe.

■ WHEN GOD’S SILENCE IS CONFUSING

When you face confusing circumstances, don’t blame God. Don’t give up following Him. Go to God. Ask Him to reveal the truth of your circumstances. Ask Him to show you His perspective. Then wait on the Lord.⁴ You cannot know the truth of your circumstance until you have heard from God.⁵

Even as you wait for God to speak or act, you can focus your heart and mind in these ways to hear from Him.

1. Settle in your mind that God has forever demonstrated His unfailing love for you on the cross. That love will never change.
2. Do not try to understand what God is like from the middle of your circumstances.
3. Go to God and ask Him to help you see His perspective on your situation.
4. Wait on the Holy Spirit. He may take God’s Word and help you understand your circumstances.
5. Adjust your life to God and to what you see Him doing in your circumstances.
6. Do all He tells you to do.
7. Experience God working in and through you to accomplish His purposes.⁶

Take a moment to examine your heart. Even if you are personally experiencing God's silence, God desires for you to be an example, to serve humbly, and to serve with passion. Think about the people who live near you or the people you work with. Does it ever cross your mind where they will spend eternity? Think of one person or group of people you know who do not have a relationship with Jesus as their Savior. Write a prayer for them below. I encourage you to personalize it with a first name. Simply pour out your heart to God for them and how He wants you to be an example for them and to serve them.

DAY 4

WHAT TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT, PART 2

Yesterday you studied the first 3 of 12 principles drawn from Acts 20 for living in obedience while you wait on God. Today you will examine the last 9.

Read Acts 20:20-38.

How would you describe the tone of Paul's remarks?

What were Paul's priorities, according to these verses?

GOD ON MUTE

4. BE COMMITTED TO TRUTH: “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you” (v. 20, NIV). Paul came to Ephesus, with all the decadence and occultism in that city, and instead of trying to fit in, he simply asked God to give him strength and power to confront that culture with God’s love. Paul had a total, not a partial, commitment to truth. Are we committed in whole, not in part, to the truth of God’s Word? We cannot pick and choose what we like about God’s message and what we do not.

Record a couple of ways you can teach the truth to people by your words and actions in your circumstances.

5. DO NOT COMPROMISE: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (v. 21, NIV). The arrangement of the words in the Greek text presents a vital lesson: we will never have repentance without faith, and we will never have faith without repentance. Think of the prodigal son’s father, who rejoiced that his son had returned (see Luke 15:22-24). The Hebrew word *teshuvah*⁷ means *to return*. Paul never compromised that message of returning to God.

When people believe in Jesus Christ, He will change the way they live. And when He changes the way they live, they will grow in their faith in Him. Our goal as the church is to make people true disciples whose spiritual maturity is evident.

6. PERSEVERE: “Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem” (v. 22, NIV). The word *compelled* refers to physical binding with chains and ropes. Paul was “bound” in his spirit to fulfill the ministry God had called him to do. What waited for him in Jerusalem? Paul understood that imprisonment, persecution, and even death were possible. Yet he was not afraid.

If we are going to be faithful to God even during His silence, we must learn how to persevere. Trials will come. Perseverance will energize us to transcend those trials.

7. BE COURAGEOUS IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY: “The Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (v. 23, NIV). We’ve all had difficulties in life, but have you ever been physically persecuted for your faith? Have you ever been beaten as Paul was in Acts 16:22? Have you ever been publicly maligned or put in prison for two years? Yet in spite of all Paul had been through, he was undeterred. It was as if he were saying, “I cannot wait to go to Jerusalem; I must finish my ministry.”

UNANSWERED

Think of a time that you have waited on God. How was courage needed during that experience?

8. HAVE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE: “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to ... complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (v. 24, NIV). Paul’s attitude was: Jesus first; everything else, second. Until we emulate this attitude, this mind of Christ, see Phil. 2:1-18), we will not allow Christ to be preeminent in our lives.

Use Paul’s statement as a prompt to write your own life statement, specific to you and your circumstances.

“I _____ [your name] consider my life worth” ... (list what your life entails):

“... nothing to me; my only aim is to ... complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me” (record the task[s] the Lord has given you to accomplish):

Read your statement aloud. Do you have trouble believing any of this statement? Why or why not?

9. COMMIT TO FINISH STRONG: “My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me” (v. 24, NIV). A great start is no guarantee of a great finish. There are too many shooting-star Christians. We must pray for greater resolve and long-term faithfulness to wait on the Lord and follow through with what He wants you to do.

10. BE RESPONSIBLE; PROTECT THE SHEEP UNDER YOUR CARE: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock. ... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (vv. 28-30, NIV). These wolves were coming from inside, not from outside, the church. Paul founded this church, and yet he warned its leaders that these wolves would come from “among you” (v. 29, NIV). Take responsibility for the things God has given you to do even if you are waiting.

GOD ON MUTE

11. DO NOT QUIT: “Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears” (v. 31, NIV). Paul had said in verse 26, “I am innocent of the blood of any of you” (NIV). Paul could leave a city of approximately 250,000 and know he had presented the gospel to every single one of them. That was an effective ministry!

How are you tempted to quit while waiting for God to speak or act?

12. PRAY AND LOVE: “When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him” (vv. 36-37, NIV). This is the kind of love that needs to characterize our families and churches. Our pastors and our people should sense this kind of love. Seventeen times the New Testament instructs us to “love one another” or “love each other.”

What do you sense God has asked you to do in response to the past two days of study? What will be required to do it? What would you be willing to give up to complete it?

Response:

Requirements:

Willing to give up:

The founding pastor of the Ephesian church was Paul, its second pastor was Timothy, and its third pastor was the apostle John. Yet in Revelation 2:4 we learn that the Christians in Ephesus had lost their first love, their love for Christ. It is vital for the church today to heed this passage. You are still responsible for showing Christ’s character and for being on mission even as you wait on God.

Review the 12 principles for staying faithful to God while you wait for Him to act. Circle or highlight the ones you most need to work on. Then pray that you and your group will be obedient in these ways.

DAY 5

LIVING FOR GOD OVER A LIFETIME, EVEN WHEN HE IS SILENT

Begin today's lesson by reading and reflecting on Jesus' words:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

MATTHEW 7:7-8, NIV

How do Jesus' words resonate with you when God seems silent?

All three verbs—*ask*, *seek*, and *knock*—are in the present tense: keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. Most important, keep trusting God, no matter what. Jesus was not giving us a magic formula as if He were a genie in a bottle; He was teaching us how to live a consistent, persistent life of faith and total dependence on God.

One of the Bible's best models of this kind of life is Daniel. When Daniel was a young man, he was taken from his home in Jerusalem against his will when King Nebuchadnezzar forced him to move to Babylon, a very evil, decadent city that was filled with idols to false gods, sexual deviance, and human sacrifice.

When the Jews were finally able to return to Jerusalem, Daniel was apparently too old to travel back. According to tradition, Daniel died and was buried outside Babylon. After all of Daniel's years of faithfulness, he was not able to return to his homeland, but apparently, that hope was not what had driven him. He had lived a principled, God-centered life while he waited on God's deliverance, both for him and for the nation.

The Book of Daniel is composed of 12 chapters, and each one contains an important principle that reveals how Daniel was able to overcome his circumstances and transcend his trials as he waited on God.

GOD ON MUTE

Read the following verses from each of the 12 chapters of the Book of Daniel, along with the principles they reveal. Prayerfully note anything you sense God wants you to focus on, do, or change as you wait for Him to speak or act.

DANIEL 1:8 Absolute resolve: I have made up my mind.

DANIEL 2:17-19,26-28 God is my ultimate source of insight and understanding.

DANIEL 3:8-12 I can expect opposition and harassment when I do God's will.

DANIEL 4:13 Because of His love for us, God has angels who watch over us.

DANIEL 5:1-4 I will always stay in control of my actions.

DANIEL 6:4 My life work will be marked by integrity.

DANIEL 7:28 When overwhelmed, I will go to God first and others later.

DANIEL 8:27 My faith will never be an excuse not to give my employer or family my very best effort.

DANIEL 9:23 I can change things in heaven and on earth by my prayers.

DANIEL 10:12 When I meet the qualifications, I know God will grant endless blessings to me.

DANIEL 11:35 Nobody knows my future better or understands my needs more clearly than God.

DANIEL 12:12-13 God will give me a great inheritance someday because of my faithfulness.

Daniel 12:12-13, the last two verses of the book, contain a vital principle for Christians: we must be faithful to God as we wait for Him to complete His work in our lives. In fact, the Bible describes us as a people who wait:

If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

ROMANS 8:25, NIV

UNANSWERED

I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.

PSALM 27:13-14, NIV

What do these verses teach you about what to do and how to live when God is silent?

When you struggle with God's apparent silence, you are in very good company. King David wrote:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

PSALM 22:1-2, NIV

The first part of that passage may sound familiar. Jesus spoke those words from the cross as He took our sins on Himself (see Matt. 27:46). Read David's next statement:

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.
In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

PSALM 22:3-4, NIV

David turned from focusing on his own difficulties and his questions about God's silence to trusting and praising God for who He is and what He had already done.

How can worshipping God and recalling His provision in the past help you understand God's silence and maintain a faithful perspective?

GOD ON MUTE

We generally see our lives from a limited point of view. God has an eternal perspective on everything that happens in His universe. As we have seen this week, our best response—actually, our only response—is to trust Him.

List names of people you know who are experiencing God’s silence.

Ask God to help you listen and respond in a winsome, attractive way as a thoughtful ambassador of Jesus.

Close your time in this study by praising God for His lovingkindness and power. Express your trust in Him even though you may not have all the answers you want. Thank Him for being present with you right now. Ask for His strength as you keep asking, keep seeking Him, and keep knocking. Finally, read Revelation 3:19-22 and hear Jesus’ appeal and promise to you.

■ ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Here are five important principles for engaging in a conversation about tough questions of faith. We will focus on a different principle at the end of each week of this study to stimulate ideas for engaging people with the love of God and the truth of His Word.

- 1. SHUT UP AND LISTEN.** To guide someone to the truth, you must be a great listener. Remember, your goal is not to win a debate at all costs but to build the foundation of a trusting relationship through which you can show compassion and share biblical truth when the person is ready to hear it.
- 2. AVOID ISLAND FEVER.** To engage, you must get out of your comfort zone.
- 3. BE COOL.** The more you know, the more relaxed you should be.
- 4. BE CURIOUS.** Ask questions; allow the other person to be an “expert.” Being smart does not mean you think others are stupid.
- 5. DON’T GO BEAST MODE.** Learn how to answer tough questions in a winsome way as a thoughtful ambassador for Christ.