



LESSON 1: PERMISSION AND PRESENCE

Introduction

Opening activity: Take 3 minutes and write down as many questions about faith and life that you or others ask of God or of the church.

Follow-up: What prompts these types of questions?

Why are we nervous or afraid to verbalize difficult questions sometimes?

What are the results when we don't ask these questions out loud?

Oftentimes, church is the last place that people want to ask questions. We're afraid that God will abandon us (or perhaps His church will). This study is designed to change that expectation, and invite you into the truth of God's invitation to you. God does not leave us empty-handed when it comes to the difficult issues, situations, and questions of life. In the midst of questions, we have a speaking God and a giving God. The purpose of this study is not to answer every one of your questions, but to point you to the sure and certain gifts that God gives in the midst of your questions.

God's Gift of Permission

The first gift that God gives us is permission. God gives us permission to ask our questions, no matter what they are. What are your initial reactions to this gift?

One of the places that we clearly see this gift of permission given in Scripture is in the psalms of lament. These psalms are a great example for us of how God's people deal with questions, doubts, and trials that they cannot understand.

Look up Psalm 13:1-2. How does David respond to the trials and questions he is going through?

Why is this better than bottling up all his questions inside? What is significant about who David is bringing his questions to?

What benefit is it to us, that God gives us permission to...

- Ask any question to Him

- Admit that we don't know the answers to our questions oftentimes

- Express the full range of our emotions

- Wrestle with the reality that things are not the way they should be

In the midst of your questions, you can be fully honest with God. Your questions will not scare Him off. They will not surprise Him. God does not respond to your questions by saying, "Oh myself! I never thought about that one before! I have no answer!" Nor does He abandon you, saying, "I can't believe you asked that!" God doesn't leave David because of his questions, troubles, or even his sins. And He promises that He won't leave you because of yours. He doesn't want you to go anywhere else you're your questions, because He knows that the world will cannot give you true hope, comfort, or answers. That's why the second gift He gives you in the midst of questions, is His presence.

God's Gift of Presence

The psalms of lament demonstrate that we have permission to bring our questions, doubts, and struggles to our heavenly Father. But they also show us that we are meant to do more than simply ask questions. The lament psalms direct us to what we do next: we trust in the Lord in the midst of what we do not understand.

Read Psalm 13:5-6. How do these verses answer David's questions from earlier in the psalm? Where do they shift his focus?

Read Psalm 73:23-26, which is the "trust" section of another lament psalm. Where do we turn, especially when we don't have answers to our questions?

Read Isaiah 53:3-6. Then discuss these two questions, which are the key questions for the whole lesson:

Where is God in the midst of your questions?

What difference does this make?

Lament Activity

My struggles/questions/troubles/laments:

My reflections on the faithfulness of God and His presence with me always:

Conclusion

As His dear children, God gives us permission to be honest with Him. He would much rather us wrestle with the struggles of life in the context of the church, and in conversations with His Word and other believers than to try to find answers apart from Him. While God does give us permission to ask questions, He does not guarantee that He will give us answers, especially not answers that make sense to us. But that does not mean that He leaves us empty-handed. No, He gives us what we really need: Himself. We have the presence of God, so we are never alone in the midst of questions, doubts, and trials.

In the words of Psalm 73:28: "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord my refuge, that I may tell of your works." It is indeed good that God draws near to us, through His Word, through His Sacraments as He is truly present with us through His body and blood in the Lord's Supper and adopts us into His family in the waters of baptism. Even with these great gifts in the midst of our questions, God still has even more to give. We'll talk more about that next time, and in the meantime, God will be with you wherever you go. Just like He promises.



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LESSON 2: PROMISES

Introduction

So far in this study, we've asked a lot of questions. In this lesson, we're going to dive into one of the biggest questions of all: why?

What are some situations or circumstances that cause us to ask the question, "why?"

Consider the phrase "I can't believe why God would allow this to happen." Let's unpack a bit of what's going on behind this statement. Something has happened that is not good. Perhaps it's a death, disaster, or diagnosis of some kind. One of our first responses to these types of scenarios is to try to figure out a reason why it is happening. Because we want someone or something to blame. Even if we follow that trail and find someone to blame, does that bring healing? Why or why not?

There are going to be circumstances that happen in your life that you can't understand. There's teachings from God that don't seem to quite add up as you try to reason it out. When we come up against those moments where God isn't acting the way we want Him to, or saying what makes sense to us, or seems to be silent when we desperately need a word, what do we do? Let's dive into God's Word to find an answer to these significant questions.

"This is a Hard Teaching"

In John chapter 6, Jesus is teaching a crowd of people who have followed him since he miraculously fed over 5,000 people by multiplying one boy's lunch. As He teaches them, He begins to teach that He Himself is the "bread that came down from heaven" (v41) and talks about eating His flesh and blood (v53-54). This simply did not compute with those who were listening. In verse 60, they responded, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

They are at a decision point here. Jesus has spoken, and they are wrestling with His teaching. They don't understand it, and what they think they understand, they are against. At this point they have three main options for how to respond:

1. They can accept the teaching, without understanding it.

2. They can try to find a way to make it make sense, even if that involves changing the message.
3. They can reject the message, and the One who gives it.

What are the difficulties with each of these options?

Read verse 66 of John chapter 6. Which option do many of the followers choose? How is this a "natural" even though tragic response?

How can our responses today mirror these former followers of Jesus from John 6?

Read John 6:67-69. How does Peter respond to this difficult teaching?

How can that be a guide for us as we deal with difficult questions, troubles, and situations in our lives?

God's Gift of Promise

Just like Peter in John 6, we are called to hold on to the clear promises of God in the midst of things that we do not or even cannot understand. The reality is that God rarely chooses to answer our "why" questions. But knowing that He is our heavenly Father, who loves us, we can trust that He has done so for our good. So instead of demanding answers that God has chosen not to give us, what if instead, we sought after those questions which He does answer? That's the key to our response.

In the midst of questions, where do we go? We turn to the clear promises of God, namely the words of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's look closely again at Peter's answer. He says, "To whom shall we go?" His response, what he holds onto is not a what or even a why, but a *Who*. What is the significance of that response?

No matter what the "why" question that we have, God ultimate has a "who" answer in Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the "question behind the question" of most of our "why" ponderings. The real question that everyone wants the answer to is, "Why doesn't someone do something about the pain, sin, and brokenness in the world and in my life?"

That's THE big question, when it comes down to it, and in Christ alone, we have an answer. The world cannot answer this question. But we as Christians can. Why doesn't someone do something? In Christ, God has done something. And in Christ, God will do something. That's our bold confession of hope and promise, and it's the only true answer that's out there.

Read the following verses. What do they say about what God *has* done for you:

Isaiah 53:5

John 3:16-17

Romans 4:24-5:1

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

What do these verses say about what God *will* do for you:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

Romans 14:8-9

Revelation 21:1-5

In the midst of difficult questions and trials, God does not leave you empty-handed. Instead, He gives you the sure promises of your risen Savior, Jesus. That's why we seek after His Word to find answers to our questions. When there are no answers, perhaps it is because we are asking the wrong questions. Instead of "why", we focus on "who": Jesus.

Conclusion

So how do we respond when things don't make sense? We ask the questions and wrestle with the answers that God gives, when He does give them. But ultimately, we hold in faith to the clear promises that God does give, namely the promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation that are yours now and forever in Christ Jesus. Whenever you feel like God isn't speaking to you, go to where you know for sure He speaks: His Word. But you don't have to do this in isolation. That's why God has put you in a family, into His Body. That's the gift that we'll talk more about next time.



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LESSON 3: PEOPLE

Introduction

"I'm the Only One" Activity

Being the only one can cause a sense of independence and pride, but it can also be tremendously isolating. When it comes to questions or struggles, what are the dangers of feeling like you're the "only one" who has dealt with a particular thing?

One of the lies that Satan wants you to believe is that you're the only person who has ever asked that question, had that struggle, experienced that trial, continually committed that sin, etc. The underlying accusation is, "If the people around you knew who you really were, what you really struggled with, if they really knew your story, they would run away." This is only compounded by the fact that many of us have experienced such rejection when we have opened up about our lives. Our fear of rejection magnifies our questions or struggles and minimizes the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. But God does not want us to walk through life alone. It's why He gives us the gift of His people.

God's Gift of People

"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" -CS Lewis, author

What are your reactions to this quote? What aspect of friendship does it highlight?

God does not leave you alone to struggle with the trials and questions of life alone, He has placed you into a family of faith. Not with just those who look like you, have the same favorite sports team as you, are the same age as you, or anything like that. God has placed you into a diverse body made of people with different gifts, but united in Christ. Read Ephesians 2:13-22. What is so important about each of these gifts that unite us as believers:

-Forgiveness

-Peace and reconciliation

-Fellow members of God's household

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-21. Why is the gift of unity in the body of Christ a blessing? Why is the gift of diversity among the members of the body also important?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:25-26. How are we to respond when one member of the body of Christ is suffering or struggling?

Part of being a part of this body of Christ is leaning into the body when you are struggling. Let's talk a bit about what that could look like for you. Who specifically are you going to lean on in this current season of life?

Activity- Who are My First 3?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Love in Action

Another aspect of this blessing of God's gift of people is that we have these opportunities to not just receive love and forgiveness, but to give it too. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Notice that the key in this passage is not that "you can answer every question" or that "you can perfectly identify with someone's struggles", but rather that you love.

In God's view, it's not about questions that need to be answered, it's about people that need to be loved. How does this change our perspective on those around us who are struggling?

Because we are a part of the body of Christ, we help one another. Even if you can't answer their question or personally identify with their struggle, there are still ways you can love one another individually, as a youth group, and as a congregation. For each of these groups, try to come up with a specific list of at least 3-4 ways that you can help those who are struggling:

-As an individual (What gifts do I have individually that can help others)

-As a youth group (What combined gifts does our group have collectively that can help others)

-As a congregation (What gifts does our congregation have wholistically that can help others)

Scenario 1: A friend of yours in your youth group is struggling with big questions of faith and if he believes or not. You're wondering if you should invite him to the next gathering, or if you should leave him alone to figure out his questions and hope he'll come back when he's ready. You don't want to bother him or make him upset.

How should you respond in this scenario? Even if you can't answer his questions, can you still help him?

Scenario 2: One of your friends is going through a really tough time. Her dad just died. You have not experienced death in your own family like that, so you're having trouble relating specifically with what she is going through. Is there a way you can still help her, even though you haven't walked that same path before?

Conclusion

Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." We are not meant to struggle in isolation. Ever. So whatever you're dealing with, bring it to some of your brothers and sisters in Christ. If it's sin, you'll hear about the promise of forgiveness. If it's grief, you'll be reminded of the hope of the resurrection. If it's a question, you'll be pointed to the ultimate answers that God gives us in Jesus. Regardless of what it is, you will be surrounded by people who will not give up on you, who love you, who are praying for you, who will receive God's gifts with you, and who will point you to your Savior who died, rose, and lives for you. You never have to walk alone!



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LESSON 4: PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Can you think of a time in your life where a change of perspective really helped you out? (looking at something from a different view, getting an extra set of eyes on a problem, taking a break from homework and starting back again later, etc.)

When we're in the middle of a struggle or we're wrestling with a difficult question, what we oftentimes need is a change of perspective, because when we're in the thick of it, we tend to magnify that problem so much that we lose sight of the truth. What God gives us is an eternal perspective that shrinks our questions and expands our view of who God is. This video message provides a visual illustration of what an eternal perspective is, and how this new perspective changes how we view our story:

Video: "An Eternal Perspective- Rope Illustration"

Notes:

God's Gift of Perspective

How can our questions, fears, and doubts cause us to zoom in on the "blue section" of our lives so much so that we lose sight of what really matters?

"Knowing the ending to the story changes the way you view the rest of the story." Let's talk about your story. What's the ending to your story? How do you know?

Revelation 7:9-17

Philippians 3:4-14

Knowing that this is the ending to your story changes the way you live the rest of the story. How does the ending give you a new perspective through these various questions and difficulties of life:

- Relationship issues

- Injuries and disappointments

- Death of a loved one

- Questions and doubts

The Last Word

The hope of the resurrection and the new creation, when God makes all things new, changes the way we go through trials, temptations, and questions. Because now we know what lasts, what really matters. A particular chapter in your life may be full of fear, doubt, confusion, and brokenness. But you are not alone in that chapter. God is with you always, and so are His people. His promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation are yours today and always in Christ Jesus. And that chapter is not the whole story. It's not even the last chapter. Death, doubt, disease, conflict, and pain do not get the last word. God does! And because you are in Christ, God's last word is a word of hope, restoration, forgiveness, and peace.

This last word is also a word of renewal for you each and every day. Read Lamentations 3:19-23. How is God's renewal not just a "eventually" word, but also a promise for you each day?

Conclusion

Life in this sinful, fallen world will continue to bring up all sorts of tough topics and issues. Hold on to the gifts that God gives you to carry you through. In the midst of questions, God gives you....

- Permission (God give me permission to ask questions)

- Presence (Instead of just giving me answers, God gives me Himself)

- Promises (God gives sure answers and promises and I can trust in those no matter what)

- People (God's people surround me so I never have to walk through life alone)

- Perspective (I can know that trials and suffering are not the end of the story)

We'll close with the last words of the last book of the Bible, Revelation 22:20-21: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."