

LESSON 8

When Growth Doesn't Feel Like Growth

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?"

— Psalm 42:1–3

Though the fig tree does not bud and there is no fruit on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though the flocks disappear from the pen and there are no herds in the stalls, yet I will celebrate in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!

— Habakkuk 3:17–18

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed.

— 2 Corinthians 4:8–9

Feeling is weather, and a flat season is no proof that God has stopped working. The people of God in Scripture kept hoping and kept praising with nothing to go on but who he is.

A Flat Sunday

WHAT DO WE DO WITH A SUNDAY WHEN WE SING EVERY VERSE AND FEEL NOTHING? Most of us know that Sunday: the songs are ones we have loved for years, and they go by like the hum of the furnace. Prayer that week feels like talking to the ceiling. The Bible reads like a phone book, accurate and unmoving. We keep the habits Lesson 7 discussed; we sit in our place as usual, and nothing seems to happen.

The first lesson of this quarter called that feeling *weather*, and it promised a whole week of the flat stretch that tends to come in the middle. This is that week, set here on purpose because so many Christians hit a dry season, decide that growth has stopped, and quietly conclude they must be doing something wrong. Some of them leave.

Scripture gives that season whole chapters, written by people who were standing in the middle of it.

A Thirsty Deer

Psalm 42 belongs to *the sons of Korah*, a family of Levites who sang and kept the doors at the house of God.⁴⁰ Worship was their work, and the man who wrote this psalm had led the crowds into the temple on the feast days: *I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts*, Psalm 42:4.

Now he is far from all of it, writing from *the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon*, Psalm 42:6, the far north of the country, a long way from Jerusalem.⁴¹ He is thirsty for God the way a deer is thirsty for water

in a dry season. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God*, Psalm 42:1. The people around him have noticed, and twice in the psalm they ask him the same thing: *Where is your God?*

Look at what he does with his memory. In verse 4 he remembers how it used to feel, the crowds and the shouting, and the remembering hurts. In verse 6 he remembers something else: *My God, I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember you*. The first memory is about his old feelings and the second is about God, and only one of them gives him anywhere to stand.

Verse 7 adds a strange second picture. *Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your billows have swept over me*, Psalm 42:7. The man who was dying of thirst in verse 1 is going under in verse 7. He is dry and drowning at once, which is about how a hard season feels. Yet he calls the waves *your breakers*. Even the flood belongs to God. Then verse 8: *The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night*. It is the only place in Psalm 42 where he uses God's covenant name, the LORD.⁴² At the lowest point of the song he reaches for the name God gave his people, and for the *faithful love* that name stands for.

Talking Back to Your Soul

Then comes the refrain. *Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God*, Psalm 42:5.

He is talking to himself: he asks his own soul a question, and before the soul can answer, he tells it what to do. Most of us let our feelings do the talking, and they usually say the same few things: God is far off, nothing is changing, it was never real. The psalmist hears all of that and answers back. *Put your hope in God. I will still praise him* means I will praise him again, after this, on the far side of a season I can't see the end of.

The refrain comes back in verse 11, word for word, and once more at the end of Psalm 43, which was most likely the second half of the same song.⁴³ Three times he says it, and his feelings never catch up. He is still in the far country when the song ends, asking God to *send your light and your truth; let them lead me*, Psalm 43:3. By the end of the song the dryness is still there, and so is the hope, held on purpose.

He talks to God about it too. *I will say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?"* Psalm 42:9. He says that sentence to God's face. Scripture puts honest complaint inside a life of faith, and the man who prays it still calls God *my rock*.

Some long, flat seasons have causes in the body as well as the soul, and a visit to a doctor can be part of how God takes care of us. The psalmist names his feeling plainly, and we can be just as plain with the people who can help.

Though the Fig Tree Does Not Bud

Habakkuk began his book with a complaint of his own: *How long, LORD, must I call for help and you do not listen*, Habakkuk 1:2. He closes it with one of the strongest statements of faith in the Old Testament.

Last week's reading asked us to count the things that fail in Habakkuk 3:17. There are six: the fig tree, the vines, the olive crop, the fields, the flocks, and the herds. Every source of food on an ancient farm is gone, and three of the six are pictures of fruit. Habakkuk is describing a year with nothing to show for it, the kind of year that makes a person wonder whether anything is growing at all.

Yet I will celebrate in the LORD; I will rejoice in the God of my salvation! Habakkuk 3:18. The *yet* turns the whole sentence.⁴⁴ What he celebrates is the LORD, with no harvest anywhere in sight. Habakkuk is not numb, either; two verses earlier he wrote, *I heard, and I trembled within; my lips quivered at the sound*, Habakkuk 3:16. He is trembling and rejoicing in the same chapter, and that is as honest a picture of faith in a dry year as Scripture gives.

Then the animal from Psalm 42 shows up again. *The LORD my Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like those of a deer and enables me to walk on mountain heights!* Habakkuk 3:19. In the psalm the deer is thirsty in a dry land. In Habakkuk the deer is sure-footed on the rocks, and it is the LORD who makes its feet.

Perplexed, but Not in Despair

Paul gives us the same truth from inside an apostle's life. He has just called the gospel a treasure kept *in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us*, 2 Corinthians 4:7. Then he describes what life in a clay jar is like, and he does it in four pairs. *We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair*, 2 Corinthians 4:8.

Perplexed but not in despair is a play on words in Greek, something like "at a loss, but not at a total loss."⁴⁵ Paul admits he is at a loss. What he denies is that the loss is total.

Paul knew the bottom. Earlier in the same letter he told the Corinthians, *We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life itself*, 2 Corinthians 1:8. It is the same word. Paul had been to the place he says he is not in now, and he tells us what he learned there: *so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead*, 2 Corinthians 1:9.

Paul even says why the jar has to be clay. *We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body*, 2 Corinthians 4:10. The weakness is where the life shows. A season that feels like nothing but weakness may be the very place someone else sees the life of Jesus in us, and we may be the last to notice.

The next line in chapter 4 says *persecuted but not abandoned*. That word, abandoned, is the question Lesson 9 takes up.

When It's Flat for You

So, what do you do with a flat season? You keep going to the place. The habits from last week matter most in exactly these weeks, because they carry us when feeling won't. You tell God the truth about it, the way the psalmist did, and you call him your rock while you're telling him. You answer your own soul with what Scripture says instead of letting it preach to you. And you stay among God's people. The psalmist's sharpest pain was being cut off from the crowd at the house of God, and many of us cut ourselves off on purpose the moment we feel dry.

Growth is often happening during the stretch when we feel it least. The fig tree in winter is still a living tree. How long has your flat season lasted, and what have you been telling yourself it means?

Jesus knew a troubled soul. A few days before the cross, he said so out loud. *Now my soul is troubled. What should I say—Father, save me from this hour? But that is why I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name*, John 12:27–28. His words echo Psalm 42 in the Greek Bible his first readers used.⁴⁶

A voice answered from heaven: *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again*. John records how the crowd took it. *The crowd standing there heard it and said it was thunder*, John 12:29. Jesus told them, *This voice*

came, not for me, but for you, John 12:30. His soul was troubled, and his will was settled, in the same hour and the same breath.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement. Answers in endnotes.⁴⁷

1. Psalm 42:1 says, as a _____ longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God.
2. Psalm 42:5 says, put your _____ in God, for I will still praise him.
3. Habakkuk 3:18 says, yet I will _____ in the LORD.
4. 2 Corinthians 4:8 says, we are perplexed but not in _____.
5. John 12:27 says, now my soul is _____.

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. What has helped you get through a long stretch of something dull: a long drive, a long winter, a job with no visible progress?
2. Has there been a season when church, prayer, or Bible reading felt flat to you? What did you think it meant at the time?

Core

3. Read Psalm 42. The psalmist remembers two different things in verses 4 and 6. What is the difference, and which kind of remembering do you tend to do?
4. Read Habakkuk 3:16–19. Habakkuk trembles and rejoices in the same chapter. How can both be true of a person at once?

Paul's answer starts with a surprising verb: *we also boast in our afflictions*, Romans 5:3. He wrote that to people who knew exactly what afflictions were.

Read Romans 5:1–11 and 1 Peter 1:3–9 before the next class. In Romans 5, count how many times Paul says *we boast*, and notice what each boast is in.

⁴⁰ The Korahites were Levites who served as gatekeepers and singers at the house of God, 1 Chronicles 9:19 and 2 Chronicles 20:19. Their ancestor Korah died in his rebellion against Moses, but Numbers 26:11 adds, *The sons of Korah, however, did not die*. Eleven psalms bear their name, beginning with this one.

⁴¹ Mount Hermon stands at the northern edge of the land, above the springs that feed the Jordan. Mount Mizar, "little mountain," has not been identified, but the setting is the far north, a long way from Jerusalem.

⁴² Psalm 42 uses the general word for God, *Elohim*, again and again. The covenant name *Yahweh*, rendered LORD, appears only in verse 8. Psalms 42–72 as a group favor *Elohim*, which makes the one use of the name stand out.

⁴³ Psalm 43 has no title of its own, which is unusual in this part of the Psalter, and it repeats the refrain of Psalm 42 in 43:5. Many Hebrew manuscripts join the two as a single psalm.

⁴⁴ *Yet I* renders *wa'ani*, "but as for me," with the pronoun set first for emphasis. Everything in verse 17 has failed; Habakkuk sets himself over against all of it.

⁴⁵ *Perplexed* is *aporoumenoi*, at a loss; *despair* is *exaporoumenoi*, the same verb with a prefix that intensifies it, utterly at a loss. Paul uses the intensified form in 2 Corinthians 1:8, *we even despaired of life itself*.

⁴⁶ *My soul is troubled* in John 12:27 uses the verb *tarassō*. The Greek translation of Psalm 42:6 (41:7 in its numbering) has the same verb, *my soul is troubled within me*.

⁴⁷ ANSWERS: 1. deer · 2. hope · 3. celebrate · 4. despair · 5. troubled