

Week 3: Religion or Relationship?

SHARE: Share your GO experience from week 1 or 2.

KNOW: Is my journey of faith a matter of religion or of relationship?

GROW: Have a volunteer read the following and a second volunteer read Psalm 51:1-12

Refugees have endured almost unimaginable suffering. One family I know had children around the country in boarding schools when the Rwandan genocide broke loose. When they were reunited later in refugee camps, one of the daughters told the parents that the nuns had hidden her by tossing her in with the dead bodies of her classmates and she pretended to be dead. Such stories are terrible to hear, and almost beyond imagining to live. Such experiences lead to brokenness and wounds. Yet, remarkably, many of these refugees, such as at the Dayton Compassion Church, though scarred and wounded, absolutely exude joy and love.

Read Psalm 51:1-12

David was broken. He was wracked with guilt. He knew that under the Law there was no sacrifice that would atone for intentional murder. But he also knew that healing of his soul was possible because of the mercy and steadfast love of God. He knew that joy was possible again.

We too find ourselves broken and wounded and in need of healing and restoration. Our hurts can occur at our own hands, or at the hands of others. But healing and restoration is possible in either situation. This does not mean that David had no consequences for his actions. God forgave him, but he still paid a tremendous penalty. His own son, Absalom, tried to rebel and take his kingdom, his family was a mess at many times, ultimately he was deemed not the right person to build a glorious temple. But God restored fellowship and his mercy was extended. David knew that though he would face problems because of his actions, he could trust that God had not abandoned him and he could rejoice in the healing and salvation that God alone could bring.

➤ Where are you deeply hurt and broken and need God's merciful restoration?

➤ Where do you struggle with being loyal to God's ways and need a loyal heart?

➤ What would the joy of God's salvation look like in your life?

➤ How have you experienced God's mercy and unfailing love recently?

Have a volunteer read the following and a second volunteer read Psalm 71:1-14.

Refugees travel such a difficult path to safety. The initial flight from their country is often chaotic and desperate. Once they arrive in a bordering country, they find themselves in an overwhelming situation. Refugee catastrophes are usually large scale events, with hundreds of thousands, and often millions of people suddenly crashing into a neighboring country seeking safety. The local economies, of course, have no means to accommodate this and so the UNHCR tries to fill the gap by providing temporary shelter and provision. Shell shocked and traumatized, those who have fled try to pick up the pieces and regain a future.

There are over 21 million refugees worldwide, and less than 1% will ever be resettled into a third country. The remaining 99% are stuck for years or even a lifetime in the border country hoping someday to return to their homeland. For the 1%, they face many hurdles to qualify for such resettlement.

Few people realize how extensive our vetting process is for refugee resettlement. In a nutshell, our process is as follows. First, refugees do not pick the country they get resettled to, although the United States takes about 2/3rds of all resettled refugees. The U.S. has a tiered system of priority with three levels of priority: those who have suffered compelling persecution or have no durable solution, certain groups of special concern, and finally, close relatives of refugees already here. These people are then screened, interviewed, and put through security checks. Each one must qualify and prove that they meet the definition of having been persecuted or face persecution. Each person must also prove that they do not have any disqualifying history. These disqualifications are taken very seriously- people have been rejected for giving food to people we view as bad actors. People's stories are checked and there are of ten multiple interviews and re interviews. Eventually, if they pass to this point, they are conditionally accepted and the private agencies are contacted to arrange for placement. The refugee must still pass a physical, and must pass more security checks. Every federal government agency we have that deals with terrorism and crime participates in these checks. Before getting on the plane to come to the U.S., they sign a promissory note to repay the United States for their travel costs. We expect refugees to be self sustaining within six months of arrival, and the interest free travel loan must be paid back starting at that time.

Read Psalm 71:1-14

Many Americans are demanding even more extensive vetting of refugees. The reality is that the refugees we resettle are the most extensively vetted of anyone we ever allow into our country. Yet, it seems that more and more we want even higher hurdles be placed on people who are already complying with the most difficult process already in place.

It is easy to fall into that trap in our view of God. We act as if somehow God can never be satisfied. We think that if we are just more religious we will be ok. If we just do more good, well then, that will make God happy. And we too often hear people in the church community speak this way. It becomes a requirement that somehow we expect people to get their act together and clean themselves up before they will be accepted into the community of faith.

But such an attitude shows a faulty understanding of grace. God's favor is never earned. And God does not have ever changing standards that are always just eluding us for his favor. Rather, God extends his grace to all. Jesus came to save all. And there are no moving hurdles to overcome. Rather, the Holy Spirit moves in our lives and we are able to receive God's gift of grace. This receiving is done through faith, that is, it is accepting as true what Jesus did for you and trusting in him to keep the promises of God for you.

Grace received then becomes continuing grace as we are transformed and molded into the image and character of Christ. As the Psalmist declares, we hope and praise God for all of our life. We can be confident that God will not leave us the way he found us. Yes, we will be cleaned up, but not because of our efforts, but rather through our obedience with the help and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This process of

becoming like Christ is based on love and relationship, not rules. Grace has no room for any rule besides this, love God and love others. As we do so with his grace and power, we become transformed and we can rest on his promise that he will indeed finish the good work he has begun in us.

- Have you truly received God's grace, or are you still trying to earn God's favor?
-

- What does extending grace to those in your life look like?
-

- Where in your life currently is God calling you to obedience through his transforming grace and power?
-

Optional Bible Reading: Benedictine Lectio Divina

Read a scripture of your choice or one of the following using the Benedictine practice of reading scripture.

Psalm 71:19-24

Lectio Divina literally means "reading of God".

Lectio Divina is the search for God in his written Word.

This form of lectio divina works best in a group of between 4-8 people.

A group leader co-ordinates the process and facilitates sharing.

Golden Rules:

- (i) members of the group always speak in the first person singular;
- (ii) others listen; discussion or comment is not useful for this format of prayer & meditation;
- (iii) anyone may "pass" at any time, and prefer to pray silently rather than share.

Three readings of the same text from the Scriptures are read aloud by different people, each time followed by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of his or her lectio.

PREPARATION

The group settles comfortably and prepares for prayer in whatever way works best - focus on breathing/a candle/prayer setting/listening to music/singing.

The leader, or the group together, invokes the Holy Spirit to open everyone's heart to God's Word.

FIRST READING (actually twice)

An unhurried reading, the second time more slowly, to allow people to listen for the word or phrase that beckons, stirs or unnerves, touches the heart. Gently repeat and ponder the word or phrase silently to yourself in the silence (1-2 minutes) that follows.

Each person in turn speaks the word/phrase that has touched him or her.

SECOND READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 mins) each person ponders the word/phrase, attending to the feelings or images that arise, noting how they are seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text.

Each person in turn briefly states what he or she has "heard" or "seen".

THIRD READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 minutes) each person reflects on where and how God is connecting to him or her; what God is calling them to be or to do. It may be through memories, or events of their lives that God is now present. Allow your response to be in whatever way is most natural and spontaneous.

Each person in turn shares the results of his or her reflection.

GO: faith takes action steps.

- Write a prayer expressing your reflections.
-

Close in Prayer