



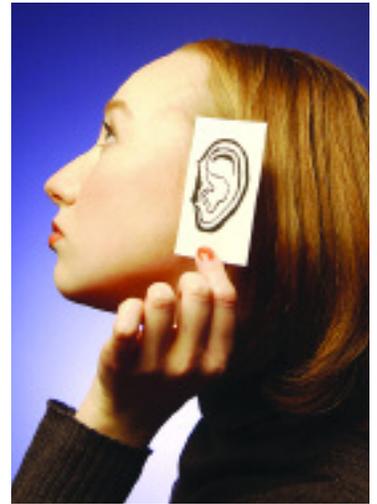
Walking God's Way

*Biblical Encouragement
for Walking with Christ*

BIBLE STUDY

Longing to Hear God's Voice

What to do when life is dark and heaven is quiet.



Longing to Hear God's Voice

What to do when life is dark and heaven is quiet.

Sometimes no matter what trials we face, we hold onto God's promise that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Other times we wobble a bit but reach out and take the Father's hand when things become shaky. The times of greatest struggle come after we've prayed, pleaded, and pursued God with all our strength and we hear nothing.

Are there times in our lives when God does leave us? Is God's silence evidence of his inactivity? What should we do when it seems God is silent? This study will attempt to answer some of these questions.

Scripture:

Genesis 37, 50:20; Numbers 23:19; Psalm 42:8, 46:10; Isaiah 43:2; Acts 16:25; Hebrews 13:5; 1 John 3:2

Based on:

"When God Seems Silent," by Verla Gillmor,
TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, March/April 2003, Vol. 25, No. 2, Page 44

Walking
God's
Way



LEADER'S GUIDE

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note: Prior to the class, provide for each person a copy of the article "When God Seems Silent" from TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine (included at the end of this study).

In our day-to-day living we encounter people who are going through difficulties. We may be one of those people. And yet, with our Bibles open on our end tables and Christian radio stations at our fingertips, encouragement is near. One day we look back and marvel at how far we've come by God's grace, until there comes a dark period in our lives when we send up prayers that seem to ricochet off the walls. We pray and pray, hearing no response, and inevitably start questioning if God really cares.

With each passing day our seeds of discouragement can grow into resentment, triggered by comparisons of what looks like worry-free Christians to the right and left of us. We painstakingly listen to answers God has given *them*, as we quietly hurt inside with feelings of abandonment and unanswered questions. If only we could believe what God promises in Scripture, that he will never leave us nor forsake us. And yet, we feel alone.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What are some examples of unanswered prayers in your life? What particulars did you pray about? Were they for you or for someone else?
- [Q] Think of some dark time in your life. What did you find most helpful?
- [Q] What was the longest period of time you experienced God's silence? Share some of the advice you received from others and your response to it.
- [Q] Describe how your relationship with God changed when you were going through a dark time in your life.

Walking
God's
Way



PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We are never alone.

Sandra P. Aldrich, in her book *Will I Ever Be Whole Again?*, talks about the death of her husband and feeling spiritually abandoned. She demanded to know why God wasn't talking to her. She recalled holding her children when they were injured. She didn't speak but merely held them against her heart, surrounding their hurt with her love. As she cried out in her own pain, she realized that was what the Lord was now doing for her.

Read Hebrews 13:5. God promises he will never leave us nor forsake us. We have to hold onto the promises of God when we see nothing. He cannot go back on his promises, or he no longer is God.

Read Genesis 37. In the story of Joseph, when his brothers devised a plan to throw him in a pit and get rid of him because of their jealousy, God remained with Joseph. Again and again Scripture tells us the Lord was with Joseph. God doesn't back away when things get rough for his children. God is not a fair-weather friend.

Read Isaiah 43:2. God explains that no matter what happens to us, he will keep us safe. It is comforting to know that no matter what is on the road ahead of us, we do not walk alone. He promised.

- [Q] At the beginning of her article, Verla Gillmor said, "When I thought nothing was happening, God in fact had me in training." What are some of the experiences in your life God used for your training grounds? Did you know you were in training at the time? If not, what did you think was happening?
- [Q] "God is faithful." Share some situations where you struggled with that truth in the midst of your trials. What turned the struggle around for you? Is there a trial you currently face that is challenging your faith? Talk about it.
- [Q] Although Scripture tells us we are never alone, describe a time when you felt alone. What gave you comfort at that time?
- [Q] Gillmor makes reference to how King David felt abandoned by God but nonetheless knew he was never out of God's sight. Mention a time when you felt out of God's sight. Were you? How do you know?
- [Q] Gillmor also talks about solitude and how silence shifts the emphasis of a relationship away from words and transactions to intimacy where no words are necessary. What would it take to have that kind of relationship?

Walking
God's
Way



Teaching point two: God can be trusted.

Read Numbers 23:19. God will do whatever he says he'll do. We can count on the fact that he will always be with us. And when we can't hear him, we are given the opportunity to trust him.

Read Psalm 42:8. David's relationship with the Lord was one of trust. Though he experienced times when the Lord felt distant, David knew God kept his Word. We are to remember in the night what God has told us in the day. David knew how to do that. He was constantly meditating on who God was.

Floyd McClung Jr. explains in *The Father Heart of God* that if we want to learn to trust God and know him as our father, as David did, we need to humble ourselves before him. When things go wrong, we can either look for God's reasons or become hard and proud.

The apostle Paul also knew how to trust God. Read Acts 16:25. Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. That is not surprising until we realize *where* they were singing their praises. How could Paul and Silas sing in prison? They could because the Lord was worthy of praise. He is always worthy of praise; it has nothing to do with what is going on in our lives.

- [Q]** Does your trust level reflect a mature relationship, one that is in process, or one that needs work? What is preventing you from moving to the next level?
- [Q]** If you were in Paul and Silas's situation, what would the prisoners be hearing from you? Share a time when you were joyous in your trials.
- [Q]** Describe some ways God has built up your trust muscles. Share specifics.
- [Q]** If you're a parent, share an example of when one of your children learned to trust you.

Teaching point three: The dark is necessary.

Read Genesis 50:20. When Joseph was in prison, he was told two different times that others would speak on his behalf to get him out of there. They forgot, so he continued to sit in prison for a crime he never committed. Theodore Epp in *Joseph: 'God Planned It for Good,'* states how easy it would have been for Joseph to have thought God had forgotten him. But there is no indication that Joseph felt sorry for himself. He patiently waited to be released from prison in God's time. He was learning many spiritual lessons by the things he was suffering.

Joseph decided against bitterness. It's easy to let the circumstances in our lives determine what kind of people we will become. Some people have gone through horrendous situations and yet you could never tell by looking at them. Instead of lines of bitterness etched on their faces, there are laugh lines. Somewhere along the way they decided to trust God, causing them to grow. Joseph was that kind of person. He said to his brothers, who had purposed to get rid of him, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Joseph saw God and his purposes as bigger than anything that crossed his path. Joseph saw God as sovereign.

Walking
God's
Way



Since God is producing fruit in our lives, we merely need to submit to his gardening methods. We wish it could be like the magical story *Jack and the Beanstalk*, planting seeds and getting instant results, but it's not like that with the fruit of the Spirit. As God teaches us patience, he does it with trials; as he teaches us joy, it is in the midst of sadness. He grows love in us by surrounding us with the unlovely. And yet, when his purposes are complete, we will look like his wonderful Son.

Read 1 John 3:2. Day after day we go through different experiences, but God uses each one to conform us to the image of his Son. Every experience is a tool in the Master's hands; not one is wasted. If we trust in God when it is dark, we will grow.

- [Q] Gillmor said in her article that while she was waiting on God, her prayers became less about getting answers and more about connecting with God himself. Where are you in your prayer life? Do you think God wants to hear our petitions? Why or why not?
- [Q] What has attributed to your biggest growth spurts?
- [Q] How would Joseph's life have looked different if he chose not to forgive his brothers? How does our unwillingness to forgive affect our growth?
- [Q] What valuable lessons have you learned from your dark times? What would you like to see God teach you through such times?

Teaching point four: Silence is not always golden.

Read Psalm 46:10. There are times we are to sit quietly. There are other times when the silence we are experiencing is our doing. One reason it can seem God is silent is because he's not saying what we want to hear. When a child has asked to go to a friend's house and the answer is no, the child can block out everything but the desired response. Maybe we are the ones giving the silent treatment.

David was a man who loved God and was honest with him. We can do the same. God's shoulders are large. We can come before him and tell him exactly how we feel. Disappointments don't have to grow to the point we distance ourselves from our Maker. We can turn to God's Word for encouragement, instruction, and enlightenment. The more we learn his Word, the clearer we see, and the better we hear. Our inability to hear him may be the direct result of our closed heart. Saturating ourselves with the truth can bring to light any wayward thoughts we possess.

- [Q] Share a time when you were angry with God. Was yours a silent anger, or did you tell him how you felt? What was helpful to you at that time?
- [Q] Share reasons why it may be difficult to read God's Word when he seems distant.
- [Q] Who else in Scripture became angry with God? How did they resolve their anger?
- [Q] Mention other things we do when we are unable to express our anger to God.
- [Q] Share a time when someone was angry with you for a period of time. How did the situation get resolved?



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Whether the silence is real or imagined, there are times in our lives when it seems God is silent. To live the abundant life Jesus talks about in Scripture, we need to keep our communication open with the Lord. Relationships are two-sided. We need to read God's Word, where we will learn about him and his attributes; we need to spend time with his people, which will further reinforce what we know about him; and we need to be open with him, actively pursuing him. In answering the question of why some find God in a way that others do not, A. W. Tozer tells us the will of God is the same for all. He has no favorites in his household. What he has ever done for any of his children, he will do for all of his children. The difference lies with us. (*The Pursuit of God*, Christian Publications, 1993).

- [Q] What is standing in the way of God being the biggest thing in your life?
- [Q] What would it look like to actively seek God? Where are you on a scale of 1–10?
- [Q] What are some obstacles to your being still before God? How does the world work against this?
- [Q] Who can you think of right now that may be going through a dark time in their walk with God? What could you share with them about the value of our trials?

—Study by Anne Peterson, a published poet, speaker, and ongoing student of God's Word.

Additional Resources

-  *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent*, Ben Patterson (InterVarsity Press, 1991)
-  *Waiting for Morning: Hearing God's Voice in the Darkness*, Cindy Crosby (Baker, 2001)
-  *When God Is Silent*, Barbara Brown Taylor (Cowley Publications, 1998)
-  *When God Is Silent*, Charles Swindoll (Thomas Nelson, 2005)
-  *When God Sees Me Through*, Anita Corrine Donihue (Barbour, 2000)
-  *When Prayers Are Not Answered: Finding Peace When God Seems Silent*, Elizabeth Rockwood (Henrickson Publishers, 2003)
-  ChristianBibleStudies.com
 - Where Is God in this Mess?
 - When God Says No
 - The Elijah Chronicles





When God Seems Silent

by Verla Gillmor

Not too long ago, it seemed as though God had packed up, moved far away, and left me no forwarding address. I was unable to sense his promptings and overall presence as I searched for him during trying times. I felt abandoned, confused, and terribly alone.

The year actually had started out on an opposite note. In January, I'd realized a lifelong dream: the publication of my first book. The spring months were jammed with talk show interviews and a stepped-up speaking schedule. Blessings were everywhere. In the midst of it all, God gave me a vision to start a new ministry for Christians in the workplace. I was on a roll.

With great excitement, I raced through all the open doors. My quiet times were rich, God's directions were clear, and all the lights were green. As long as God kept guiding, directing, leading, and blessing, I felt I could handle all the pressure and change.

Then, a recession in the summer of 2001 slowed my small consulting business. I was worried because I now had the added expenses of launching a new ministry. I hoped that by fall, everything would be back to normal. Little did I know the events of September 11 were right around the corner.

After 9-11, "bad-to-worse" took on a whole new meaning. The economy reeled. Clients stopped paying their bills and called off future projects. Speaking engagements were canceled. The stress caused my fibromyalgia to flare and a relentless cycle of pain, fatigue, and depression followed. To top it all off, my health insurance provider filed for bankruptcy.

Daily I approached God with growing concern. "Okay, God, I'm sure you've got a plan. Show me what I'm supposed to do here. I need you now more than ever. I'm a middle-aged woman on my own. I'm physically hurting, emotionally spent. How should I deal with this?"

Walking
God's
Way



The silence was deafening.

My prayers became more strident: "God, this is not the time to play hide-and-seek. I'm facing some serious anxiety here. Now would be an especially good time to hear from you!"

When I thought nothing was happening, God, in fact, had me in training.

For more than two decades, the Holy Spirit had filled my head and heart with comfort, encouragement, leadings, inklings, instructions—even in the rockiest of times. But for the next six months, God was totally mute.

What's going on when God's silence seems palpable? What on earth is he up to? The hard reality is, some things are best learned in the dark. Here's what God taught me through that tough time of his silence.

Silence Is Not Absence

I come from a long line of talkers. When I was growing up, our house was quiet only when no one was home. I recall one time chattering to God about my endless litany of needs and wants, ending with, "Are you listening, God?" As clearly as if he were sitting next to me in the flesh, I heard him say in my spirit, *Yes, child, I'm listening. Would you like to listen for a while?*

I got the message. Over the years, I practiced listening more to God's voice. But nothing prepared me for his silence!

On more than one occasion, in the Old Testament, King David felt abandoned by God. But he knew that despite his feelings, he was never out of God's sight: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ... If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you" (Psalm 139:7, 9-12).

David reassures us that we are not alone. God is relentlessly faithful. So how do we convince our frightened hearts when life crumbles around us and God becomes silent? We enter into the silence with him.

The spiritual opportunity: SOLITUDE. You have to feel totally accepted and comfortable with someone to sit with a person in silence. It can be intimidating. Silence shifts the emphasis of a relationship away from words and transactions to intimacy where no words are necessary. Are you that comfortable with God? Would you like to be?

Since I felt my many words were fruitless, I sat in my favorite chair, read a brief portion of Scripture, or listened to a worship tape to calm my heart. Then I'd



simply say, “Lord, I’m here and I’m scared. Please let me feel your presence.” And I would sit in silence. Sometimes I cried. Eventually my spirit calibrated to God’s and peace settled over me—enough peace to get me through another day.

When all the racket of life stops and God’s presence fills every molecule of space around us, our hearts grow calm and strong. Fear seems pointless. Circumstances lose their power over us. The silence becomes an opportunity to fall in love with the person of Christ, rather than the things he says or does for us.

Silence Checks Our Trust Level

There’s not much trust required if someone stands beside us coaching us every inch of the way. It’s like a parent running alongside a child who’s learning to ride a bicycle. We want to know the parent is there because we have no confidence we can ride the bike alone. But we’d look pretty silly if we were forty and mom or dad were still running alongside our bike.

At some point in our journey with him, God may decide to take his hand off the bike, so to speak, to see if we remember what we’ve learned. It’s preparation for the road ahead, which may be bumpy or difficult. It’s God taking us to the next level, building our commitment and perseverance. It’s also a way to reveal those things we’re trusting in more than him.

For years my friend Esther prayed for a spouse, and God seemed to ignore her. “My heart’s desire always has been to marry a preacher and to minister together,” she says. “But when I hit thirty and there was no husband on the horizon, I kept asking God, ‘Why am I not married? Is there something wrong with me?’ There was no response. It hurt.”

Then one day Esther had an “aha!” moment. “I realized I was trusting marriage and a husband to give my life meaning more than I was trusting God to do it. I had made marriage a litmus test of God’s love for me.”

The spiritual opportunity: SURRENDER. Esther surrendered her marriage agenda to God and gave him permission to do whatever he wanted with her life. Suddenly a whole world of opportunity opened for her. Today she travels the globe training pastors and children’s ministry leaders.

“I’m doing exciting things now that I couldn’t be doing if I were married. And I learned I didn’t have to marry to do ministry. I haven’t permanently said good-bye to marriage. God didn’t tell me I’d never marry. But I had to learn God’s plan for my life involved more than just marriage.” Esther’s breakthrough came as a result of God’s silence.

Jesus understood this principle. The most significant events in his life took place in the dark when all he saw was God’s back. Yet his instructions to his disciples were

Walking
God's
Way



unwavering: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me” (John 14:1).

Every day God calls us to keep trusting—to get out of bed and spend another twenty-four hours washing dishes, doing laundry, loving our family, believing he has everything under control—even when he seems silent.

Silence Doesn't Mean Nothing's Happening

Ever try to watch a seed grow? The problem is, you can't. It remains hidden under the dark garden soil until the seedling is ready to break the surface and appear. Sometimes things buried in us need to surface, but they'll only do so after we sit still long enough to let them break through. Perhaps they're deep issues that have undermined our lives for years. Silence forces them to emerge.

One of the old issues that surfaced for me was a fear of financial meltdown. When I was a child, my father had more financial ups-and-downs than a roller-coaster ride. So my precarious circumstances triggered my preoccupation with feeling financially insecure. I was looking for quick answers to calm my fears, but God wanted me to wrestle with a much bigger issue: who, exactly, was my provider? Was it my clients or God? Of course God expected me to work hard and do my part. But if I was doing the best I could, what could I expect in return?

The spiritual opportunity: SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION. God's silence and my situation drove me deeper into his Word to search for what I could expect of God in circumstances such as my own. In spiritual desperation, I had to break a sweat and dig. I selected comforting promises, recorded them on three-by-five cards, and taped them everywhere—on my bathroom mirror, on my dashboard, over the kitchen sink. And I prayed the promises back to God: “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken nor their children begging bread” (Psalm 37:25); and “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. ... Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:25, 26).

When I thought nothing was happening, God, in fact, had me in training. You pay more attention when you're lost in a wilderness. I'd only been interested in quick fixes. But God was building my character and making me more effective for the kingdom. He can do the same for you.

Silence Forces Us to Get Real with God

My friend Mikki had been married thirteen years when she sensed a growing chasm between her husband and her. “It was as though someone put a glass wall between us,” she says. “I could see my husband and hear him, but I couldn't feel him.” Her husband denied there was a problem.

Walking
God's
Way



For eight years Mikki asked God to reveal what was going on and to make her the wife her husband needed. While God related to her deeply and intimately about every other thing in her life, he was totally silent about her marriage.

“It was a torturous time,” Mikki says. “But it brought me to a place of brokenness before the Lord. I couldn’t make God tell me what was happening to my marriage. I couldn’t make him fix it. I believe he was teaching me to give up control and submit to his timing and plans.”

Eventually her husband’s eight-year-long affair came to light, and he filed for divorce. When the truth was revealed, Mikki snapped in anger at God. “I thought if I was faithful, surely God would restore my marriage,” she says. “I remember throwing my Bible on the shelf and saying, ‘I’m done with you, God. Stay out of my life!’ Sometimes you have to get raw and real with God. If something hard has happened, it’s okay to be honest with him.”

The spiritual opportunity: AUTHENTICITY AND COMMUNITY. To my friend Mikki’s surprise, getting real with God brought her closer to him. Almost right away Mikki was able to confess to God that she was sorry for blaming him. After all, he was the only one who had ever loved Mikki unconditionally. Christian friends then came alongside to see her through the hard part of rebuilding her life. They reminded her repeatedly of what was true and false about her and about God. But mostly they loved her, listened to her, and gave her the gift of their presence.

“I remember sitting on the floor crying at a friend’s house. I said, ‘I’m trusting you to trust the Lord for me for now—to have hope until I get mine back.’ The verse I clung to was Psalm 119:50: ‘My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life.’”

When God falls silent, how long will the silence last? It takes as long as it takes—and it will seem dark and lonely the whole time. But in the same way dawn always follows night, so, too, your darkness will end.

For me, the silence ended as unexpectedly as it began. While waiting to hear from God, I noticed my prayers became less about getting answers than about connecting with God himself. I remember when I first realized I was receiving a fresh word from God—the first word I’d heard in a long time. One day as I was journaling, I felt the Holy Spirit gently ask whether scaring myself about all the “what ifs” had done any good other than to scare me. He reminded me I’ll have everything I need to live the life he’s called me to live. If a need isn’t met, then maybe it wasn’t a real need, or something I wasn’t supposed to be doing in the first place.

The message was a precious sign God had been at work, shaping me even when he seemed far away. And so the two of us began again the daily conversations that would see me into the future he had planned for me.



Longing to Hear God's Voice

When God Seems Silent

13

If you let God's silence do its work, you will come out the other side knowing that you're not alone, that God longs for deeper intimacy with you, that he's worth trusting for the journey, and that you're stronger than ever.

—“*When God Seems Silent*,” by Verla Gillmor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, March/April 2003. Verla is a writer, speaker, business consultant, and author of *Reality Check: A Survival Manual for Christians in the Workplace* (Horizon Books). Contact her through her website, www.lifechasers.org.

Walking
God's
Way

