

WEEK 1

In 1 Samuel 4, Israel faces a devastating defeat by the Philistines. Rather than seeking God, the Israelites bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle, believing its presence will guarantee victory. They treat the ark as if it were a spiritual good-luck charm—as if they could carry God wherever they wanted Him and make Him do what they needed Him to do.

But the ark is captured, thousands die, and Israel discovers a hard truth: God cannot be reduced to an object, controlled by a ritual, or confined to a box.

Sometimes, we try to do the same thing. We put God in a box of our expectations, traditions, preferred answers, or religious practices. We assume that if we say the right prayer, attend the right service, or do the right thing, God must respond the way we want.

This study invites us to consider what it means to trust God—not because we can control His presence, but because we choose to seek Him even when we cannot understand His ways.

Monday — When God Doesn't Make Sense
Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:1–3 *"Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?" (NRSVUE, adapted from the verse)*

Israel goes into battle against the Philistines and loses. The Israelites are confused and hurt. They ask why God allowed their defeat, but instead of seeking God's direction, they immediately come up with a solution: bring the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh.

Their question is understandable. Why would God allow His people to suffer defeat? But notice the difference between asking God for understanding and assuming we already know what God needs to do next.

Sometimes, when life falls apart, we want an explanation before we are willing to trust. We want God to make sense of our circumstances. When He doesn't, we may try to find a quick fix that restores our sense of control. Faith does not mean we never ask

questions. It means we keep bringing our questions to God rather than deciding that we must solve everything ourselves.

When have you experienced a season when God seemed absent or uninterested in your circumstances? When things go wrong, is your first instinct to seek God's direction or to find a solution that makes you feel in control? What is the difference between honestly asking God, “Why?” and assuming you know what God should do? How can disappointment with God affect our willingness to trust Him?

Prayer Focus: Be honest with God about the places where you feel disappointed, confused, or abandoned. Ask for the courage to bring your questions into God's presence without demanding immediate answers.

Tuesday — Putting God in a Box
Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:3–5 *“Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the power of our enemies.” (NIV, adapted from the verse)*

The Israelites decide to bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle. The ark represented God's covenant presence among His people. It was sacred, a sign of God's relationship with Israel. But the Israelites begin treating the symbol as if it were the source of their power. They believe that if they bring the ark, victory will follow.

They are no longer simply trusting God; they are trying to control the circumstances by controlling the symbol of His presence. The ark was never a box big enough to contain God. It was a sign of a relationship with the God who cannot be controlled.

We do this, too. We may put God in a box labeled my plans, my politics, my traditions, my expectations, or my preferred answers to prayer. We may assume that because we have done the religious things we are supposed to do, God owes us the outcome we desire.

Church attendance, prayer, Scripture, and worship are meaningful practices. The problem comes when we use them to manipulate God instead of allowing them to shape our relationship with Him. God is not a vending machine. We cannot insert the right ritual and demand the desired result.

What are some ways people today try to put God in a box? Have you ever assumed that doing the right thing would guarantee a particular outcome from God? How can religious traditions become substitutes for a living relationship with God? What expectations do you have about how God should answer your prayers? What might it look like to trust God's character without trying to control God's actions?

Prayer Focus: Ask God to reveal the boxes you have built around Him. Pray for a faith that is rooted in relationship rather than formulas, and in trust rather than control.

Wednesday — Religious Excitement Isn't the Same as Faith
Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:5–9 *"The Philistines were afraid, for they said, 'God has come into the camp.'" (NRSVUE, adapted from the verse)*

When the ark arrives, Israel erupts in a great shout. The ground shakes with their celebration, and even the Philistines hear the commotion. At first, the Israelites' excitement seems understandable. They believe God's presence guarantees victory. But excitement is not the same thing as trust, and enthusiasm does not necessarily mean we understand what God is doing.

The Philistines are frightened because they have heard stories about Israel's God. Yet the battle is not decided by which side feels more confident, shouts louder, or possesses the most impressive religious symbol.

We can mistake emotional intensity for spiritual depth. A powerful worship service, a moving prayer, or an inspiring sermon can encourage us, but none of these gives us control over God. Genuine faith is not measured only by how loudly we celebrate when things are going well. It is also revealed in how we respond when the outcome is not what we expected.

Have you ever confused feeling close to God with knowing how to trust God? Why do we sometimes assume that a strong spiritual experience guarantees a successful outcome? How can worship prepare us to trust God during difficult seasons rather than simply make us feel better? What practices help you remain faithful when the emotion of faith is absent?

Prayer Focus: Pray for a faith that goes deeper than feelings. Ask God to help you remain grounded in His character through both joyful experiences and painful disappointments.

Thursday — When the Box Doesn't Work
Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:10–18 *"The ark of God was captured." (NIV)*

Israel suffers another devastating defeat. The ark is captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, die. When Eli hears the news, he falls backward from his seat and dies. Everything Israel thought would secure victory has failed. This is one of the most unsettling moments in the story. The ark was sacred, but carrying it into battle did not guarantee success. God's people could not use the ark to force God's hand.

The chapter also sits within a larger story of Israel's spiritual corruption. Earlier in 1 Samuel 2, we learn that Eli's sons were abusing their priestly positions and treating the Lord's offerings with contempt. Israel's problem was not simply a failed military strategy; it was part of a deeper spiritual crisis.

We should be careful not to conclude that every personal tragedy is punishment for someone's sin. The passage does, however, challenge us to consider whether we sometimes cling to religious appearances while neglecting the relationship and faithfulness God desires.

What happens when our formulas fail? When the prayer is not answered as we hoped, the treatment does not work, the relationship ends, or the door we desperately wanted to open remains closed?

We may be tempted to conclude that God has abandoned us. But the failure of our expectations is not proof of the failure of God. Sometimes faith begins again when we stop trying to force the outcome and learn to meet God honestly in the middle of our disappointment.

How do you respond when something you believed would work—especially something tied to your faith—fails? Have you ever interpreted an unanswered prayer as evidence that God had abandoned you? What is the difference between trusting God and expecting God to protect us from every painful outcome? How can we examine our own spiritual lives without assuming that suffering is always punishment? What might God be inviting you to release when your usual ways of finding security no longer work?

Prayer Focus: Bring your failed expectations and disappointments to God. Ask for the strength to grieve honestly without assuming that your circumstances tell the whole story of God's presence.

Friday — Is God Really Gone?
Scripture: 1 Samuel 4:19–22 *"She said, 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.'" (NRSVUE, adapted from the verse)*

Phinehas's wife gives birth during the tragedy and names her son Ichabod, a name associated with the departure of glory. In her grief, she sees the capture of the ark as a sign that God's glory has departed from Israel. Her sorrow is real. The loss is enormous. The chapter does not offer an easy resolution or a quick reassurance that everything will soon be fine.

This is what makes the story so important for anyone who has felt alone. Scripture does not pretend that God's people never experience seasons of devastating loss, confusion, or spiritual darkness.

Yet 1 Samuel 4 is not the end of the biblical story. The following chapter shows that the Philistines cannot control Israel's God any more than Israel could control Him. The God they thought they had captured demonstrates His power in their own territory.

The ark can be captured. The people can be defeated. Their expectations can collapse. But God is not imprisoned by Israel's circumstances, and He is not limited by the place where His people expect Him to act.

We may not always understand God's presence. We may not feel it. We may not receive the answer we want. But the absence of an immediate answer is not the same as proof that God is absent. The invitation of this series is to stop asking, “How can I get God to do what I need?” and begin asking, “How can I remain faithful when I cannot see what God is doing?”

Have you ever had an “Ichabod” moment—a season when it felt as if God's glory or presence had departed from your life? What helps you hold on to faith when you cannot feel God's presence? How does recognizing that God cannot be contained or controlled change the way you pray? What is the difference between believing God is present and feeling that God is present? What would trusting God look like for you this week if you did not receive the answer you are hoping for?

Prayer Focus: Pray for those experiencing grief, loneliness, disappointment, or spiritual dryness. Ask God for the grace to trust Him in the unknown and to recognize that a season of silence does not have to be the end of the story.

Closing Reflection — The God Who Won't Fit in a Box

The story of 1 Samuel 4 reminds us that we can possess the symbols of faith without truly surrendering to the God those symbols represent. We can go to church, know the right prayers, follow familiar traditions, and still struggle to trust God when life doesn't go according to plan.

The Israelites wanted a God they could carry into battle and use to guarantee victory. We may want a God who will guarantee our health, protect our relationships, secure our future, or make our plans succeed.

But God is not ours to manage. Faith is not a way to control God. It is a relationship in which we learn to trust God even when we cannot control the circumstances. When God seems absent, perhaps the invitation is not to find a bigger box, a better formula, or a more powerful ritual. Perhaps it is to let go of the box altogether.

A Final Prayer: God, You are bigger than my understanding, greater than my expectations, and more mysterious than I sometimes want You to be. Forgive me for the times I have tried to contain You in my plans, my preferences, or my assumptions. When You seem absent, help me keep seeking You. When I am disappointed, help me remain honest. When I feel alone, remind me that my feelings do not tell the whole

story. Teach me to trust You—not because I can control what happens next, but because I am learning to place my life in Your hands. Amen.

Week 2

Primary Scriptures: Job 2:11–13; Job 3; Psalm 13; Psalm 46:10; Deuteronomy 8:2
When God seems absent, we don't have to pretend everything is okay. We can complain, lean on others, hush long enough to listen, and remember what God has done and said.

In Week 1, we explored how Israel tried to put God in a box by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into battle, believing they could secure God's presence and guarantee a victory. But God cannot be controlled, and faith does not guarantee the outcomes we want.

So what do we do when our boxes fail? What do we do when our prayers seem to go unanswered, our circumstances don't improve, and God seems nowhere to be found?

Monday — Complain: God Can Take It
Scripture: Job 3:1–26; Psalm 13:1–6 *"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* — Psalm 13:1 (NRSVUE)

Sometimes the only thing you can do when God seems absent is complain. Not every prayer is a celebration. Not every conversation with God ends with peace. Sometimes prayer sounds like frustration, grief, anger, or a question that has no answer.

After Job's friends sit with him for seven days, Job finally speaks. And what comes out is not a polished prayer of thanksgiving. Job curses the day he was born. He is devastated, confused, and unable to understand why he is suffering.

The Bible does not hide this from us. It gives us Job's words, the psalmists' cries, and even Jesus' anguished prayer from the cross: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). There is something deeply freeing about realizing that God does not need us to pretend.

If you are angry, tell God. If you are disappointed, tell God. If you feel forgotten, say so. If you cannot understand why a loving God would allow something painful to happen, bring that question into prayer.

Complaining to God is not the same as walking away from God. Sometimes, it is evidence that you are still trying to talk to Him.

Think about it: Job directs his anguish toward God. The psalmist asks how long God will seem absent. Their words are raw, but they remain in conversation with the One they are struggling to understand.

GOD IS BIG ENOUGH FOR YOUR HONESTY. You don't have to clean up your emotions before you bring them to Him. Faith is not pretending that everything is okay. Faith sometimes means bringing God the very things that are not okay.

Have you ever felt that you needed to hide your true feelings from God because they seemed too angry, doubtful, or unfaithful? What is the difference between complaining about God and complaining to God? Why do you think Scripture gives us so many examples of people expressing frustration and grief to God? What is something you need to say honestly to God right now? How might your prayer life change if you believed God could handle your disappointment?

Prayer Focus: Practice an honest prayer today. Don't begin with what you think you should feel. Begin with what you actually feel.

Tuesday — Lean: You Were Not Meant to Do This Alone
Scripture: Job 2:11–13; Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:15 *"Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."* — Galatians 6:2 (NRSVUE)

One of the most important details in Job's story happens before Job ever speaks. His friends hear about his suffering and come to visit him. They meet together, travel to see him, weep with him, and sit beside him. For seven days and seven nights, they share his grief in silence. They don't fix Job's problems. They don't restore his possessions. They don't bring his children back. They cannot explain why this has happened.

But they show up.

Sometimes, when God seems absent, the most tangible expression of love we experience is the presence of another person. We often think faith means being strong enough to handle our problems independently. We may be reluctant to ask for help because we don't want to burden others, appear weak, or admit that we are struggling.

But Scripture describes a community in which people carry one another's burdens. We are not always called to have the right answer. Sometimes we are called to be the person who sits beside someone who has run out of words.

There is a caution in Job's story, too. His friends begin well, but later they make matters worse by trying to explain his suffering and defend their assumptions about God. Their initial silence is more helpful than many of their later speeches.

You don't have to solve someone's pain to help them endure it. And you don't have to carry your own pain alone to prove that you have faith.

Leaning on others is not a substitute for trusting God. It can be one of the ways we experience care when God seems distant.

When you are hurting, do you tend to reach out to others or withdraw from them? Why? Who has sat with you in a difficult season without trying to fix everything? What makes it difficult to admit that you need help? How can we become better at being present with someone who is suffering without offering quick answers or explanations? Is there someone in your life who needs you to show up, listen, and simply be there?

Prayer Focus: Ask God to help you receive support without shame and offer support without trying to control someone else's healing.

Wednesday — Hush: Stop Talking Long Enough to Listen
Scripture: Job 2:13; Psalm 46:10; 1 Kings 19:11–13 *"Be still, and know that I am God!"* — Psalm 46:10 (NRSVUE)

Job's friends sit with him for seven days and seven nights, and no one says a word. In a world where we feel compelled to explain everything, their silence is remarkable. They recognize the magnitude of Job's grief, and for a time, they allow the grief to speak for itself.

We often approach God with a running list of requests, questions, complaints, and explanations. There is nothing wrong with any of those things. But if we spend all our time talking, we may never make room to listen.

To hush is not to suppress our questions or pretend that pain doesn't exist. Day 1 gave us permission to complain. Today invites us to recognize that there is also a time to become quiet. We cannot force God to speak. Silence is not a technique for getting a message from heaven, and every quiet moment will not produce an answer. Sometimes, we simply sit in God's presence without knowing what else to do.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah encounters wind, an earthquake, and fire, but the story draws attention to the quiet voice that follows. The passage reminds us that God's presence and guidance may not arrive in the dramatic form we expect.

Perhaps we are so busy demanding that God speak in a particular way that we miss the quieter invitations to patience, wisdom, courage, or trust.

And perhaps the most important thing we hear in silence is not a new answer but a renewed awareness that we are not the center of the universe and do not have to solve everything today.

Sometimes the faithful response is not to say more, but to become still enough to notice what we have been missing.

A Simple Practice for Today: Set aside five minutes.
1. Sit somewhere quiet and put away distractions.
2. Begin with a simple prayer: “God, I am here.”
3. Let your thoughts settle without judging yourself for having them.
4. Read Psalm 46:10 slowly.
5. Sit quietly. Don't force a message or an answer.
6. End by asking, “God, what might I need to notice, receive, or release today?”

What makes silence uncomfortable for you? When you pray, do you leave room to listen, or do you feel compelled to fill every moment with words? How can you distinguish between listening for God's guidance and simply hearing what you already want to hear? What distractions make it difficult for you to be still? What might change if you allowed yourself to sit with God without requiring an immediate answer?

Prayer Focus: Practice stillness without demanding a result. Ask God to help you become attentive to His presence and open to wisdom, even when clarity does not come.

Thursday — Remember: Don't Let Today's Pain Erase Yesterday's Faithfulness
Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalm 77:1–14; Lamentations 3:19–24 *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:”* — Lamentations 3:21 (NRSVUE)

When God seems absent, our present circumstances can become the only thing we can see. The pain is real. The unanswered prayer is real. The uncertainty is real. And because those things are so immediate, we can begin to believe that they tell the whole story. That is why remembering matters.

Throughout Scripture, God's people are told to remember what God has done. Israel remembers the Exodus. The psalmists recall God's past faithfulness. Lamentations speaks of hope in the middle of devastation by deliberately calling God's steadfast love to mind.

Remembering does not mean pretending the present is good. Lamentations was written in the shadow of profound suffering. Its hope does not come from denying the pain but from recalling that pain is not the only truth about God.

When we remember, we return to the stories that have shaped our faith: the ways we have experienced provision, the people who have shown up, the Scriptures that have sustained us, and the promises of God that remain true even when our feelings fluctuate.

This is not a formula for making God repeat a past miracle. God is not a box, and we cannot use yesterday's blessing to demand tomorrow's outcome. Instead, remembering gives us a larger perspective. It reminds us that our present confusion is not the entirety of our relationship with God. When you cannot see what God is doing today, remember what God has done and what God has said.

Remember God's character. Remember the promises of His presence. Remember the story of Jesus, whose suffering did not have the final word. Remember that hope can exist alongside grief.

When you are hurting, do you tend to remember God's past faithfulness, or does today's pain overshadow everything else? What is one moment in your life when you experienced unexpected help, strength, provision, or comfort? What biblical story or promise has sustained you during a difficult season? How can remembering God's past faithfulness give you hope without creating the expectation that He must repeat the same outcome? What truth about God's character do you need to remember today?

Prayer Focus: Make a list of three things you remember about God's faithfulness. They may be personal experiences, people who have helped you, or truths found in Scripture. Give thanks for them, even if your current circumstances remain difficult.

Friday — Keep Going: Practice Faith in the Silence
Scripture: Job 2:11–13; Psalm 13:1–6; Hebrews 10:23–25 *"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." —* Hebrews 10:23 (NRSVUE)

What do you do when you have complained and still have no answer? What if your friends have shown up, but the pain remains? What if you have sat in silence and heard nothing? What if you have remembered God's past faithfulness, yet the present still feels unbearable?
You keep practicing faith. Not because these practices guarantee a breakthrough, but because they keep you open to a relationship with God in the middle of uncertainty.

The story of Job reminds us that suffering is not always resolved quickly. His friends initially offer the gift of presence, but the book continues through long conversations, difficult questions, and a struggle to understand God's justice.

The psalmist offers a similar picture. Psalm 13 begins with the anguished question, "How long?" Yet it ends with a declaration of trust and a song of praise. The change in the psalm does not mean every problem has been solved. It shows that lament and trust can exist in the same prayer.

This is an important lesson for anyone who feels alone: you don't have to choose between being honest about your pain and holding on to hope.

YOU CAN COMPLAIN AND STILL BELIEVE. You can need other people and still have faith. You can sit in silence without an answer and still be open to God. You can remember yesterday's faithfulness while admitting that today is difficult. And you can take the next small step without knowing what the next ten steps will look like.

Faith sometimes looks less like a triumphant declaration and more like getting out of bed, calling a friend, praying one honest sentence, reading one psalm, or deciding not to give up today. You do not have to feel God's presence every moment to keep seeking Him. You do not have to understand the story to remain part of it.

Four Practices to Carry Forward
COMPLAIN: Tell God the truth. Bring your grief, anger, questions, and disappointment into prayer.
LEAN: Reach out. Let someone sit with you. You don't have to carry every burden by yourself.
HUSH: Make room for quiet. Listen without demanding an immediate answer.
REMEMBER: Recall what God has done and said. Let the larger story of God's faithfulness speak into today's struggle.

Which of these four practices comes most naturally to you? Which is hardest? What is one small act of faith you can practice this week, even if your circumstances do not change? How can you allow lament and hope to coexist in your life? What would you say to a friend who believes that feeling distant from God means they have failed spiritually? How might your experience of feeling alone help you become more compassionate toward others who are struggling?

Prayer Focus: Ask God to help you build a sustainable faith for the long haul—not a faith that depends on constant reassurance, but one that can endure uncertainty with honesty, community, stillness, and remembrance.

Closing Reflection — Faith When the Silence Continues
In Week 1, we learned that we cannot put God in a box. We cannot control God's presence or guarantee the outcomes we desire.
In Week 2, we have explored what to do when that truth becomes personal—when God seems absent not just in a Bible story but in our own lives.

The answer is not to pretend. It is not to manufacture spiritual excitement or blame ourselves for not having enough faith. It is not to offer easy explanations for someone else's suffering. Instead, we can practice a faith that makes room for the whole human experience.

We can complain because God can take it.
We can lean on others because we were never meant to carry every burden alone.
We can hush because we don't always need another explanation.
And we can remember because today's pain, however real, is not the only truth we know about God.

The friends who gathered around Job remind us that sometimes ministry begins with showing up and saying nothing. The psalmists remind us that lament belongs in our prayers. The story of Israel reminds us that God cannot be controlled. And the larger story of Scripture reminds us that we can continue seeking God even when we cannot see what He is doing.

The goal is not to make God stop seeming absent. The goal is to learn how to remain in relationship with God when we cannot feel His presence.

A Closing Prayer for the Series
God, when You seem absent, teach me how to remain. Give me the courage to tell You the truth, the humility to lean on others, the patience to sit in silence, and the hope to remember Your faithfulness. Keep me from trying to control You or reduce You to my expectations. Help me trust You in the unanswered questions, the unfinished stories, and the ordinary days when faith feels difficult. And when someone else feels alone, help me be the kind of friend who shows up, sits down, and stays. Amen.