

Dear Discipleship Group Leaders and Hosts,

Thank you for taking the time to read this in preparation for your group meeting this week. Last year we used the following format for leading our group meetings and you might find it helpful as an overall approach to your discussion planning. Here it is:

Encounter Questions: Connecting with each other and directing our attention toward God's presence with us:

1. What are you thankful for this week? Has God "shown up"?
2. Were there any lessons from last week that you applied or shared with someone else?
3. How did you serve/bless someone this past week?

Engage Questions: Stay focused on the passage at hand.

1. What does the passage say? Repeat it in your own words.
2. What does the passage mean? What does it teach us about God (Father, Son, or Spirit), ourselves/humanity, or God's Kingdom?
3. What is your best response to what God is speaking?

Extend Questions: Consider the lives of those around you. How might you extend God's Kingdom to them? What do they need? How is God leading or prompting you?

1. For whom outside the group are you praying for?
2. With whom might you share what you are learning?
3. How might you/we serve/bless someone this week?

Before I launch into this week's message, let me share a short story of "extending" that I experienced yesterday. I went with Thea to pick up Miles and Silas from school. They wanted to play in the schoolyard before heading home so I sat down on a bench to wait for them. Another mom was doing the same thing and we began to talk. Her name was Ruth and wouldn't you know that I had just finished reading the book of Ruth in my devotional Bible reading! Seeing an opportunity I made the connection and asked her if she was familiar with the story of Ruth. She was raised Jewish and had a faint memory so I retold the story of Naomi going from empty to full through the selfless love of Ruth and Boaz and how the story ends with a genealogy of David which points to the nation of Israel also going from empty during the time of the story of Ruth (Judges) to full under the selfless kingship of David. I then explained how this is also the case with the Messiah, who takes an empty world and makes us full by reconciling us to God through his selfless sacrifice on the cross. It was a rare opportunity and I thank God for it and prayed for Ruth this morning. I had had another opportunity to speak of Jesus last Friday to someone whose father had recently died but I dropped the ball on that one but I thank God that I had another opportunity to bless someone by extending Jesus to them. This is an example of how the engage-encounter-extend framework can be a helpful reminder to us to "open our eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35).

By way of review we have been studying the theme of rest through God's rest on the seventh day of creation, through the fourth commandment to rest on the seventh day found in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and now through Psalm 95.

As always, many thanks to Pastor Shtem for preaching. He began with the second half of the Psalm and then circled back to the beginning. His refrain was "To harden my heart is to go astray, to liberate my heart is to obey." Amen. Pastor Shtem started by inviting us to imagine a restful life. What would it look like? He went on to explain that Israel was in the process of getting their dream life of rest in the promised land but the fact that there were difficulties along the way caused them to grumble against God. They had heard God's voice through Moses, backed up by the supernatural experiences of the Exodus, but still they disbelieved and disobeyed. Their hearts went astray when they were tested, not only at Meribah and Massah but also before and after. This disobedience cost them the rest they sought. They were called to experience God's rest today, not tomorrow, by trusting God on the journey not just for the destination. They were going from slavery to being landowners but that place of promised rest would only be experienced if their hearts were at rest through trusting God. Instead their hearts were hard because they failed to keep in mind what God had already done when facing new challenges and difficulties. So instead of looking to God in faithful expectation of his love and care, they complained and grumbled, essentially calling God a liar and bringing God's character into question. This is why grumbling can be grouped with idolatry, sexual immorality, and testing God (see 1 Corinthians 10:6-10). We think of grumbling and complaining as lesser sins when in fact they are character assassinations of God himself. Pastor Shtem highlighted that true rest is the condition of a heart that has been liberated to trust and obey God. That is what brings rest today on the way. "To harden our hearts is to go astray; to liberate our hearts is to obey."

So how do we liberate our hearts? First remember that hardships and difficulties are the very means God uses to liberate our hearts. They are opportunities for trust rather than complaining. "In this (salvation) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. these have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith, of greater worth than gold which perishes though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6,7). We too are heading to the promised land of rest but we don't need to wait till we get there to experience God's rest. It is available to us today as it was to the Israelites in the wilderness and at the time of the writing of Psalm 95. We need to see difficulties and obstacles to our destination of rest as the very means of securing that rest in God today as we trust in his care and guidance on the journey.

A second way to liberate our hearts is through worship, singing and thanksgiving. This is where Psalm 95 begins. We can praise him and give him thanks because he is the great God, the Creator of all things. Therefore we can bow before him and also submit our hearts to him (verses 6-11). I saw a Tedtalk once in which the speaker highlighted how our actions can change our hearts/minds. So she said "fake it till you make it." In other words if you really want to grumble, sing to God instead and see if that singing and giving thanks doesn't change your heart to God. It will. So then the real application is to always sing and give thanks for then your heart will remain liberated and at rest in God! "For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (v.7). "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"

(1 Peter 5:8). Finally take a moment and compare this singing and giving thanks to Paul's instructions on being filled with the Spirit in Ephesians 5:18ff.

Here are some questions for discussion that come to mind. You may think of others.

*Can you recall a time when you faced hardship or difficulty and you hardened your heart to God?

*Can you recall a time when God used difficulties to liberate your heart and give you rest?

*How do you hear God's voice? What do you do to tune in to God's voice?

*What is the state of your heart to God today? Liberated or astray?

*Are you in the habit of singing, shouting, and giving thanks to God (verses 1-2)? If not, how might you incorporate these spiritual practices into your life? *What can you give thanks for today?

I hope this recap helps. I am out of steam and out of time! "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..."

Blessings,
P Dan