

Session 6: Thank God for Closed Doors

Opening:

Once everyone has gathered, set a timer for 1 minute of silence.

After 1 minute, read this verse out loud, slowly and clearly.

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

(Matthew 26:38-39)

Enjoy one more minute of silence.

Ask the group to listen to the verse again, and choose one word or phrase that resonates with them, no explanation necessary. Then read the verse again:

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

(Matthew 26:38-39)

Invite the group members to say their word or verse (can go around in a circle).

Read this prayer:

Our Father, Jesus cried out to you asking for this cup to be taken from him. You said no. He was obedient to the point of death. Then you exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Thank you, Father, for saying no to Jesus so that you could say yes to us. Thank you, Jesus, for your obedience. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for reminding us that God’s no’s are not meant to hurt us, but to help us in holiness. Grant us patience, triune God, when doors are closed and prayers aren’t answered. Help us to trust the slow work of God. Amen.

Read and discuss:

Everyone has experienced closed doors. Rejections from colleges. “No thank you” from job applications. “I don’t want to see you anymore” from someone we’re dating. Adoptions that fall through. Pregnancies that never happen. Vibrant lives that are ended too soon.

Everyone you know carries grief from a longed-for dream that did not come true. Everyone you know looks back on their life and wonders why something they prayed for never happened. Everyone hurts. As 19th century British pastor Joseph Parker wrote, “preach to the suffering and you will never lack a congregation. There is a broken heart in every pew.”¹

What closed doors have happened to people in your group? List some here.

There are closed doors we are willing to name in the presence of others, and closed doors that we keep to ourselves because they are too painful even to say aloud.

¹ Berkley, James D., ed. *Preach to Convince*. Waco: Word, 1986. p. 41.

John Ortberg writes “I got a letter from the father of an eight-year-old daughter who has been diagnosed with a disease that is life-threatening and debilitating. He wrote, “Every day I pray for her healing. Every day I pray to understand. Every day I ask God, ‘God, would you make me sick instead of my little girl? Let me suffer.’ I’m so mad at God. I’m trying to hang on, but I’m so mad. Why is heaven silent on the one prayer I most want answered?”

You have been there, too, or someplace like it. Or you will be sometime. I cannot point you to an explanation that has all the answers because nobody has all the answers. I can only point you to a Person. I can only tell you that at the heart of the gospel is an unanswered prayer. Jesus, kneeling in the garden, prayed, ‘Father, if it is possible, may this cup, this suffering, this death, be taken from me. Yet not my will, but yours, be done.’

This is the most desperate prayer ever prayed from the most discerning spirit that ever lived, from the purest heart that ever beat, for deliverance from the most unjust suffering ever known. And all it got was silence.” (p. 225)

And all it got was silence. Many of us can feel that heartache from the inside out.

I don’t know why some prayers get yeses and some prayers get nos. I know the anguish of a no when you want a yes more than you want anything in the world. But I don’t know why. I only know that in the cross, God’s no to his only Son was turned into God’s yes to every human being who ever lived. (p. 226)

The challenge with every closed door is trust. Can I, can we, trust that God is up to something good even when he says no?

One of the key parts of Christian community is testimony: telling the story of God’s work in your life. Speaking your testimony aloud not only encourages others who are looking for God’s fingerprints in their own stories, it also reminds you of what God has already done, and that can give you hope that he is working even now, even in this place of the “no,” even when the door closes.

Take time now to listen to the testimonies of others in your group and be bold enough to share part of your own. Invite your group to offer part of their story as a testimony to God’s careful work in their lives.

When you have heard testimonies, close with this prayer:

Thank you, God, for open doors that invite us into possibilities that are more than we ask or imagine.
Thank you, God, for closed doors that push us into deeper trust in you and greater reliance on others.
As we go out from here, Lord God, help us to listen for and obey the promptings of your Spirit today.
To you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, forever and ever. Amen.