

Sermon Title: Shalom, Feedback Loop, Week Five

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Sermon Questions:

1. Have you felt disconnected from God? What were the consequences and what do you think was the cause?
2. Have you felt disconnected from people? What were the consequences and what do you think was the cause?
3. The sermon walks through 7 bible stories revolving around our need for focused distraction free time with God. Which of these stories speaks to you the most and why? (God creates the sabbath for us to have time with him, Samuel doesn't know God is calling him because he is not listening for that, Elijah hears God in the gentle whisper, the Psalms frequently remind us to be still and know that he is God, Habakkuk sits in the tower waiting to hear God's voice, Mary chooses the best thing - to sit at Jesus' feet, and Jesus has a habit of withdrawing in solitude to listen to the Father).
4. How can you increase focused distraction free time with God in your life?
5. How do news apps, shopping apps, social media, YouTube, podcasts, tv, and screens in general rob you of spending focused distraction free time with God? How might you change this?

Transcript

So kind of fun inaugural sermon together. I am, I'm looking forward to it. It's very fun. It's going to be chaotic, I think, but so I want to give you a little behind the scenes tour of sermons actually backing up a week. So last week was Mother's Day and John and I preached.

And the way that works is we practice a few times during the week, but on Friday morning we preach to a team. So there's normally, you know, a dozen people or something like that here. And we'll. We preached to a team just to get feedback to try and improve before, before Sunday comes. And we came into Friday and preached the sermon.

And one of the first pieces of feedback came from a gal, super kind, super gentle, and she just shared her own circle. She said, I'm not sure exactly what it was. I just, my spirit isn't encouraged. And I processed that right away. I said to John, after I said, I like it was a good sermon.

It was a biblical sermon. There's no heresy in there. But I feel disconnected from God and disconnected from people in that moment is how I felt. It was better by Sunday. It was just a

busy week.

It was an unusually busy week with, with extra ministry things, a lot of things happening. And then on top of that. So for about 20 years I have invested in real estate things. It's a thing I inherited from my mom really. And so for five years we've had a house in California.

It's a rental. We don't pay any attention to it. It just sits there and does what it does. Until recently, about a year ago, the hill that it sits on decided to move. And it brought about chaos is what it brought about.

And so obviously no one lives there. And we're in the process of essentially lifting it up, stabilizing the hill and then putting it back down and pouring a new slab. And so it's a huge loss. It gets your mind wondering about things. And it involved last week us needing to take a road trip there, 24 hour quick road trip just to have feet on the ground to talk to engineers and subs and figure things out a little bit.

So Deborah and I drove, we slept on an air mattress. My wife moves way too much on an air mattress for that to be a pleasant experience. And we came back Thursday night, so got back Thursday night and then came into Friday morning preaching. And I'm not capable of that kind of busyness and shifting gears. It takes longer for me spiritually.

It's why so been in Tucson now 27 plus years I've been to one football game in all of those years. I love football. I don't go to football because they're almost all Saturday nights and I'm not capable of like, I don't go out on Saturday nights. Saturday night has to be calm spiritually for me to engage. We share this.

We're bringing this series on the feedback loop to a close today, and we're going to consider spiritual health. I would propose to you that spiritual health is being connected with God. There's a beautiful Hebrew word, shalom can be used on a simple level of saying hello and goodbye to people, but its meaning is much deeper than simply hello or goodbye. Shalom oftentimes in one word is translated peace. But shalom is really the good life that God designed to be whole and flourishing in relationship with God, others and yourself.

Shalom is the good life that God designed to be whole and flourishing in relationship with God, others and yourself. And I would propose to you that the heartbeat of that is to be connected with God. And that busyness makes that very difficult. In fact, we're going to say over and over this morning that we need focused, distraction, free time with God. So we're going to walk through seven biblical stories.

All that point us from beginning to end to have focus, distraction, free time with God. So our first story that we're going to dive into this morning is aptly at the beginning of the story,

Genesis chapter one and chapter two, we get this behind the scenes look into God's creation of all things. God invites us backstage to see how he has ordered all of creation to work and to operate. And I think as we read through the creation story, what we find are two really unique pieces of that story. The first is you and I, this imago dei, the image of God that human beings are created in.

There's nothing else in creation that is like you or that is like me, that God has created us uniquely in God, given us his image. The second unique piece of creation is this idea of Sabbath. We read this in Genesis 2, verses 1 through 3. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished His work that he had done.

And he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. We see here this unique piece. The only thing that is called holy in the whole creation narrative is Sabbath. There's nothing else that's given this title.

And it's important for us to remember that Sabbath isn't just one of the ten Commandments. We don't do it because it's this good principle for us to live a health. But instead, Sabbath is oriented around giving us rest because it is what is most healthy for us. It is woven into the very DNA, the fabric of our existence, the fabric of the universe itself is this idea of rest, this idea of not just resting, like taking a nap, but of being in God's presence. From the very beginning, this was woven into our world.

And we see this with Adam and Eve. We read a little bit later on that when God enters into the garden, that they know him because they recognize the sound of his footsteps. They recognize the sound of his footsteps. They'd been with him, they'd had time with him. They knew his voice, they knew his presence intimately and intentionally.

They knew God. And as we think about this idea of putting together focused, distraction free time with God, it's not just a now principle, it's a forever principle. This has always been a thing for God's people, that we need to focus and have distraction free time with Him. God knew that our lives are going to be busy. Adam and Eve worked for six days a week.

That's not a bad thing. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Work is actually a good thing. God has given us work as a means and as a tool of worship. But in the midst of that busyness, God knows that we, our hearts need focused, distraction free time with Him.

We'll move ahead to a second story Biblically, Samuel. Now, Samuel's name means that God hears. His whole life and ministry revolves around hearing God. His birth, Hannah was barren. And she cried out to God that she would be able to conceive and have a child.

And in time, God heard her prayer, answered that prayer, and she had a son. And so she named him. God hears God. God heard my prayer. So she names him that.

She made a vow that she would nurse him, and then when he was a toddler, would bring him to the tabernacle and he would grow up in service to God in the tabernacle under Eli, the priest. So she takes him to the tabernacle. He's maybe three or four years old. He grows up under Eli. And we regain the story when he's probably around 10 or 11, he's lying in bed.

Samuel, Samuel. Samuel jumps up, runs into Eli's room. Yeah. Eli said, I didn't call you. Go back to bed.

So he goes back to bed. Second Time, Samuel. Samuel gets up, runs into Eli's room. Yeah, I didn't call you. Go back to bed.

He goes back to bed. Third time, Samuel. Samuel gets up, runs into Eli's room. Yeah, I didn't call you. Eli figured out what was going on.

At this point, God was calling him. Now, the text says that Samuel was not attuned to God speaking. He didn't know the word of the Lord yet. And so he didn't know who was calling him. He couldn't discern it.

And Samuel says, or Eli says this to Samuel, 1 Samuel, chapter 3. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, go lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, speak, Lord, for your servant hears. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And sure enough, fourth time, Samuel, Samuel. Yes, Lord, Your servant hears.

And the word of the Lord came to Samuel. He heard him. Now, you don't hear if life is too busy. You don't hear if you're not attuned to listening. It takes focused distraction, free space to hear God's voice.

It's beyond prayer. Oftentimes we think of prayer as us talking to God. The goal in prayer is us talking with God and God talking with us. But that takes focused distraction, free time. A third story story of Elijah.

First Kings, chapter 18. We get this. You may be familiar with it, this iconic, intense standoff. If you guys have ever seen an old Western where there's the I can't whistle really well, so I would do it. But the, like, that kind of like, standoff vibe, that's what's happening in 1 Kings 18, as Elijah has this face off with these prophets, these false prophets of a false God.

And so they set up this competition whose God can light the altar on fire. And long story short,

obviously God wins. And he doesn't just light the altar on fire, he nukes the altar. He burns the stones around the altar to dust. There's this huge, emotional, incredible victory that Elijah experiences.

But just a couple of verses later, we find Elijah on the run for his life. He had insulted the queen, and she had put a price on his head. So he makes his way into the wilderness and up this mountain and into this desolate cave. And he's wanting to be alone. He's wanting to feel a little bit sorry for himself in this moment.

And God meets him there in the cave. And we see at the beginning of this kind of story of Elijah in the cave that there's this intense wind that rips past the mouth of the cave, and it's that it's ripping the very stones and rocks off the mountain itself. But we read that God isn't in the wind. After the wind, the very mountain itself begins to move and shake. Things begin to fall from the ceiling as an earthquake hits under Elijah's own feet.

But God wasn't in the earthquake. Third, we see this fire burning intensely right outside the mouth of the cave as light and warmth and heat pours in through the cave. But God wasn't in the fire. Then we read these verses in 1 Kings 19 and after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

And behold, there came a voice to him and said, what are you doing here, Elijah? God's presence here wasn't found in the explosive demonstrations of power. Now, there are times when God operates that way. But I think if we look at the story of scripture, what we will find most commonly is that God isn't speaking through the explosive demonstrations of power. Instead, he is speaking in this low, calm, quiet voice, this whisper.

I think I crave the explosive. I like the earthquake and the wind, not literal disasters, but I like the displays of God's power where I can clearly and obviously see him. I'm not a very smart individual. I need clear signs that God is working. I like that.

But God has to do this work in my heart to reorient me, to show me that, Andrew, this isn't how I speak most of the time. And if you're only looking for that, you're not going to hear what I'm teaching you. But instead I need focused, distraction, free time to hear that low, calm, quiet whisper, to hear the voice of God. And I think when we put ourselves in those spaces, when we put aside the explosive experiences, when we put aside all of the voices that this world has that we could. You could go on Google at any moment with any question and get 10,000 answers like that.

My wife is 39 weeks pregnant. Do you know how many questions a day we are googling? Like, what is life? What am I doing? How do I do this?

What is happening here? And we can get through thousands upon thousands of answers, all of which disagree with each other and all of which will tell us we are the only right way to do things. There are thousands, tens of thousands, millions of voices out there that want to guide us and direct us. And if we're not attuned to the voice of God like Samuel, if we're not sitting and listening to the low Quiet whisper of God's voice. Like Elijah, we are going to miss it.

But God is inviting us in to put away distractions. And when we do, I think we will see that he has been speaking the whole time. We just need to listen. It's not that busyness is bad. We hope you hear that throughout this message.

We're supposed to work, we're supposed to run errands, we're supposed to engage in life. But if you ever tried to have a prayer time, let's say at the parking lot of Costco, it's possible. But it's a very different experience than drawing apart into a space of solitude, of bowing down and listening to the voice of God.

And God, even back to Genesis, says, go work, work hard for my glory. Run errands, run errands for my glory. But let's have time for you and I set apart where you can sit at my feet and hear my voice. A fourth story going to turn to psalms now. In the book of Psalms, over and over, you hear the heartbeat of man and the heartbeat of God through all the experiences of life.

I'm so looking forward. The next series starting next week is in Psalms. Over and over and over, you hear this tune of listening to God's voice, earnestly waiting for the voice of God in the morning or. Or a psalm like thirsting after God like a deer pants for streams of water, of meditating on God and on his Word night and day. One of my favorite psalms, it will be familiar with many of you is Psalm 46, verse 10 of that Psalm simply says, be still and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. This psalm is beautiful poetry from beginning to end, and it paints a scene in which the mountains are quaking and being thrust into the sea. And the sea is roaring and flowing, foaming over the mountains as they are cast into the sea. It is filled with noise, it is filled with power.

And then it says, with utmost power, be still and know that I am God. Because we need focused distraction, free time with God for our own spiritual health. A fifth story, the story of Habakkuk. You guys may not be familiar with the story of Habakkuk. He's this small book kind of wedged at the end of the Old Testament.

He's this minor prophet. But Habakkuk is really unique. And most prophets would speak on behalf of God to the people, and Habakkuk kind of flips that formula around and instead he

speaks on behalf of the people, to God. God has just delivered this news to Habakkuk that his people, that the people of Israel are about to be overwhelmed and thrown into exile by the Babylonians. If you don't know who the Babylonians are, they're like the big bad guy of that era of history.

They are not a good people. This wasn't good news. In fact, this was terrifying news that they were going to be in exile under the Babylonians. And so Habakkuk, like any of us would, comes to God with questions. Are you serious?

Us, your people? You're going to let us be taken over by them, the Babylonians? You're sending us into exile. Are you going to continue to look at injustice in the world and be okay with that? I thought you were holy.

I know you are holy. Why won't you act? And he asks these questions that I think many of us in our hearts probably ask about events that we experience in our lives. But we're going to read here his response at the end of these questions, what he says before he waits for God in Habakkuk 2. One, he says this.

I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint. Look at the boldness of Habakkuk. This is the God who created the universe. And Habakkuk is like, no, I'm actually going to wait here for you to answer me. These questions are significant.

The job of a watchman was an incredibly important job in Habakkuk's day. They were charged with the defense and the safety of their cities. They would walk and look out the gates to make sure that there was no enemy, no danger, no messages coming towards the city. But you can imagine on a normal day, this isn't the most thrilling job. It's a lot of walking, standing, looking, walking, standing, looking.

That's about all you would do as a watchman. But in times of war, this was an incredibly tense job. You're having to keep a lookout because at any moment these Babylonians could come rushing over the hill. And your city needs to be prepared to defend themselves. It's a tense job.

Now, I'm sure all of you were much better behaved kids than myself or Greg were when we were younger. But I remember vividly this time. As a high school student, we went to this abandoned hospital. It was an abandoned mental hospital that had been abandoned for about 40 years in our town. And we thought it was a great idea to break in to this abandoned hospital.

If you're here and you know someone in the Georgia department of, like, police, please don't tell them that I did this, because I don't know what the statute of limitations is on breaking and

entering into a property like that. Anyways, we go to this hospital and we've done it a couple of times, but this time we were going into. There was a prison ward on campus, and we were going there, and I got the unfortunate job of lookout. I don't know if you've ever had the job of lookout. It's the worst job.

You don't get any of the fun. Like, I'm not breaking in and looking at cool stuff. Instead, I'm standing out, looking into the darkness in a place we for sure thought was haunted. And so I'm standing out here and I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. I can hear voices talking.

I can see things moving out in the shadows. Now, none of that stuff was actually happening, but I was looking with such an alertness, such a. Such a tension, that I was starting to imagine that there were things moving in the darkness. This is the kind of alertness that I think Habakkuk is telling us he has. I'm going to set myself up as lookout, and I'm going to be on watch for what God, you're going to say to my question.

My prayers are important and I'm gonna post up here and I'm gonna wait and look for your answers. I think God is encouraging us to have this type of mentality, this type of watchfulness, this type of alertness to hear what God is going to do. It's not just a being still, it's a being alert. These are building on each other. We need to still our hearts, and we need to.

And we need to watch. There may be some of you in here this morning who are feeling burdened with unanswered questions, with complaints, with frustrations, with prayers that you feel as if God has not heard. Let me encourage you this morning with this. Have an attitude like Habakkuk. It's interesting.

We're never told how long Habakkuk waits. We're just told that God answers. Could have been up there for months. We don't know. But God does answer.

Let me encourage you this morning that we need focused distraction, free time to be alert and watchful for the voice of God. One of the most beautiful and humbling truths is that the king of glory, the creator of the universe, the Almighty God, wants to spend time with you and with me. A sixth story. Jesus was really close with Martha and Mary and Lazarus. In the Gospel of John we're told that he loved them, good friends.

He stays with them, they live just outside of Jerusalem. He stays with them on four occasions at least within scripture that are mentioned. Beyond that, it's assumed he stayed with them more frequently. But the first time he ever stayed with them, he comes into town. This is Jesus, the teacher, the rabbi.

Martha and Mary were already believers. Martha wanted everything to be perfect. She went out, Jesus, would you like to stay at our house? And he came and she went back. She wanted.

She wanted the meal to be perfect. She wanted the drink to be perfect. She wanted the cleanliness to be perfect. She wanted everything. Jesus is coming into her house and let me just raise my hand.

I adore Marthas in the world. If I am going over to a house for dinner, I'm hopeful there's a Martha there taking care of things. It's a good thing. But she's there getting everything ready. And it says that Mary is just sitting at Jesus feet.

The teaching is ripe here with lots of meaning because it wouldn't have been appropriate even for a female to sit at the feet of a rabbi. But she's sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening. Martha's getting things ready and I wasn't there. I don't know exactly how it happened. I kind of think that there are numerous looks going on, you know what I mean?

Slipping into the kitchen, going, Mary's not catching it. Eventually Martha actually talks with Jesus, Jesus, don't you see that I'm getting everything done? And she's sitting there, tell her to help me.

And Jesus responds. He says these words out of Luke, chapter 10, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her. It's good to work, it's good to run errands. It's good to engage in business.

As we talk about the feedback loop, no one here is going to say phones are evil. No one's going to say get rid of all computers in your life, get rid of all televisions in your life. No one is saying those things.

But if they rob us of the time, we have to gain balance over them.

Jesus says, there's one thing that matters. Martha, Martha, you're busy and anxious about a lot of things, but there's one, there's one thing that matters.

And Mary's got it sitting at my feet, hearing my words we need focused, distraction free time to sit at Jesus feet. Seventh story. We're going to end with the life of Jesus himself. If you were to open the Gospels and read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, looking for what does spiritual health in the life of Christ look like? What do spiritual disciplines look like in the life of Jesus himself?

I think one of the biggest that you would see is that it was Jesus habit to withdraw from people, to get by himself and to pray. It was Jesus habit to get focused, distraction free time with the Father. Take a couple of examples from the Gospels. And rising very early in the

morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place. And there he prayed.

In these days, he went out to the mountain to pray. And all night he continued in prayer to God. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. And when evening came, he was there alone. Over and over and over again we see this example in the life of Christ that he withdraws to be by himself for focused, distraction, free time with God.

John opens his gospel with a really interesting verse. He's calling our attentions back to the book of Genesis. And he opens his gospel this way. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. That word word there is a really interesting Greek word.

Sorry, I'm going to use the word word a lot here in the next, like 30 seconds, so just buckle up. But the word there is Logos. Logos is the Greek word that we translate here with a capital W word. There's a lot of really cool things that we could say about that idea of Logos, but the one I want to focus in here for just a second is this. In Greek philosophy, they would use this word Logos to describe the force that ordered all of the universe.

The thing that gave shape to all of the universe they referred to as. And if we remember back to the beginning, we talked about how this idea of Sabbath was ordered into the universe itself, that it was woven into the DNA of creation, this idea of rest and distraction, free time with God. And here John is very purposefully using this Greek word Logos, to refer to Jesus as the thing that orders all of the universe. Why do I bring this up? Why is this important?

I think what we see in the life of Christ is the blueprint, the ordering principle for our lives. If Jesus needs to withdraw and be by himself to pray, man, do I have a spoiler for you. So do you. So do I. If Jesus himself sees it as a necessary part of spiritual health to get distraction free, focused time with the Father, then how much more so do you and I need that time?

The order of all things, the universe itself is built around this idea of shalom, the good life, a life of flourishing, a life of wholeness, a life where we can experience God's presence to its infinite degree in the person of Jesus. And he is calling us into focused time.

Throughout this series you may have felt like me at certain points where your to do list is just growing and growing and growing. That each week that we talk about screens, that we talk about phones, that we talk about screen time or habits, I can just internally feel my to do list getting one more, two more, ten more things. I got to keep my screen time down. I got to be in this digital fast. I got to be making sure that I'm setting things first and last principles and all of those things are really beautiful and good.

But you may be feeling burdened. I want to reframe this for you. We're not trying to heap burdens onto your shoulders. Instead we're trying to invite you in to the life that Christ has given for the rest that he has for us. Listen to his words from Matthew 11 come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. It is easy to come to church, to sit through series where we talk about things that we ought to be doing, what wise living looks like, and to feel burdens of all of the things that we need to do put onto our shoulders. But I want you to hear the message of Jesus. This isn't an invitation into more busyness or a longer to do list or pull yourself up by your bootstraps type of faith.

Instead, this is an invitation to the life of Christ Himself, that we get to experience his rest, that we get to experience his peace, that we get to experience his joy and his goodness. This burden as light and we are just looking for how can we get focused distraction free time with Him. Now a handful of things we hope you catch throughout this message. One is again, it's not that busyness is bad necessarily. That road trip to California needed to happen.

I would do it again. It had to happen. But there is a balance that we need in life. If we fill every space with noise, with podcasts, with audiobooks, with televisions, with screens, with alerts, with phones it absorbs all the margin for us to have time with God and we have to have some kind of balance on it. And again, we don't want this to be a list of do's and don'ts.

The grand invitation in all of this is the king of glory wants to talk with you and me. I mean, what that beats ice cream? Like, what's better than the voice of God speaking into us? We're hungry and thirsty for this. So how do we apply this?

How do we get focused, distraction free time with God? I want to go back through just a couple of the possible applications that we've talked about through this series about all the devices in our life. Number one, the first last principle. Perhaps it would be healthy that the first thing we look at in the morning and the last thing we look at at night would not be a screen, would not be a phone, would not be a device, but we could spend time listening to God, talking with God in the morning and at night. A second, we've talked about a bedroom that is free of devices.

It's not just phones. I will share with you and if you have one of these, I'm not trying to point a finger. I've been in homes with huge televisions in the bedroom. I'll just say like, hi, my name is Greg Levine and I am not mature enough to handle. I fall asleep when the TV's on on the couch.

I mean, I would fall asleep to it all the time in my bedroom. That's what I would do. It would

constantly be that noise in the background and rob intimacy of me and my bride and me and God.

Third takeaway, maybe an evening a week or evenings where whether from 6 to 9 or maybe 6 o'clock on, it's just device free. We talked about having dev free meals, time to connect and unwind with people and with God. We talked about fasting. Whether it's day, week, month, hours. It can look different for all kinds of different devices.

I'm not telling you what to do. I know for me there's times I'll unplug the television just for a month, just to disconnect from the thing. Sometimes you have to set the phone aside and just have time away from that. You have to put off the, you know, for me it's earbuds that I listen to, audio things and podcasts. You just have to, you just have to unplug for some kind of fast.

Finally, just not replacing God with some form of AI where we are asking questions and searching for information in an online format of Google, the extreme of which is somehow praying and talking to Google as if Google's God.

I would suggest that our spiritual health depends on having a balance in life where we can push those things aside, engage in busyness, engage in those things, but time, where those things are pushed aside on a regular basis, and you and I can simply connect with God.