

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, June 24, 2020. Thank you so much for tuning in and taking this time out of your day to focus on and on your faith.

So yesterday, I was at church recording some things for worship, and the reader for this Sunday came across the word “Selah” in the midst of their psalm reading. They kinda powered through it, just adding “Selah” as it was written at the end of the sentence, which was great. I always encourage folks who are reading aloud to just power through the Hebrew and Greek words they’re not sure how to pronounce with confidence because really, who is going to know the difference? It’s your confidence that people will listen to.

But there is something unique about Selah. It’s only found in the Psalms and in the poetry in the book of Habakkuk (there’s your bible trivia fun fact for today!), which is one unique thing. But the big thing about Selah is that no one really has a super clear definition of what it means. We have some healthy and informed guesses on what it means, but it’s more about what that word does, the action and intent behind it, that has a lasting impact. And I think we could learn a lot from having our own moments of Selah.

So for today’s devotion, let’s ponder and learn about Selah. We will dive into this ancient Hebrew word and what it can mean for our own lives of faith, particularly in this chaotic season.

So please join me in a deep breath, and a word of prayer as we begin Selah:

Holy God, you are the Lord of our whole lives. In chaos and calm, in frenzy and rest, in all things Lord, you are with us. When we feel far away from you, help us to find our way back into prayer and song and scripture to be closer to you. When we aren’t sure what to do, when we are surrounded by unknowns, help us to find answers in your promises and your call to us. In the times when we make joyful noises and the times when we cry out in sorrow, grant us moments of your holy Selah. Let it be so, dear God. In your Son Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Selah is something I like to call a holy mystery. Our Christian faith is full of these holy mysteries - where we aren’t 1000% certain of how something works or what something means, but we do know that whatever it is or does is holy. There is something significant, beautiful, spirit-aligning and strengthening that comes from the holy thing.

Selah is most often found in the Psalms, which as we know from previous devotions, are songs and poems written by the Hebrew people, of their experiences of and with God over a long period of time. These songs and poems have formed the foundation of many aspects of worship and knowing and encountering God for thousands of generations of faithful people. So many people think Selah is an instruction for whoever is leading the song, music, or poem of a particular song. It’s often thought to mean something like “stop and listen.”

Stop and listen. But it’s a stopping and listening that keeps you in the moment. It’s perhaps a moment to take a breath, or like a hold over a long note as we know music now. What the

Selah, the stopping and listening makes the hearer do is contemplate what just came before the Selah occurred. It emphasizes the importance of what was said, and gives us space to hold the words in our minds and hearts and even breath. It's a moment to accept and take in the reality that exists around you.

These moments of pausing and listening and breathing are holy. We are so used to just keeping on going, marching, marching, humming the tune, powering through, moving, moving, words, words, driving, running, talking, podcast, noise, headphones, cell phones, Zoom calls, ringing, ringing, blaring, crying, honking, rolling, scribbling, writing, worrying, doing, that we never just. Selah. (breathe) Selah.

Selah comes in the middle of a thought to bring us back to what's being said. It's like an underline for a particular thought or phrase. In this way, it serves a calming purpose, a centering purpose. Like many of you, I've been rather anxious lately, so perhaps Selah for us can serve as a pause amidst the chaos in our heads. Just using this phrase Selah to interrupt the cycle of unhelpful thoughts and bring us to a center of prayer, to the calming peace of God which surpasses all understanding, especially our own. As the psalms are the prayers and experiences of so many people before us, and Selah brings pause to their pain and anguish, perhaps Selah can bring pause to our hurting too.

But here's the thing - Selah is not meant to be the end. Selah is simply to stop and listen in the midst of what is going on around you. Selah is a pause, a comma instead of a period. So Selah does not mean that we must ignore or depart from what is going around us. It's meant to give us a pausing place, to listen, perhaps regain our bearings and the meaning of what is around us, so then we can continue the journey, the song, the poem, the action.

When we hear the stories of Jesus' life in our world, of course we remember the huge and life-saving things, His ministry, His teaching, His healing, and above all else, His death and resurrection to give us the gift of new and eternal life, by the power of God and in the Holy Spirit. These are all world-changing and life-saving actions. But as Jesus, the human and divine person, journeyed and ministered throughout his time, we also hear lots of stories of His moments of rest. Of taking time away from his disciples and other people to go and pray. To pause in the middle of their journeys and ministry to pray and meditate on God. Jesus was resting and sleeping while at sea in the middle of the giant storms that his disciples surely thought were going to kill them, Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!", and the waves calmed, and he went back to rest. Even Jesus knew the importance of stopping to listen, to pray, to center himself on God His Father in the midst of chaos.

So, dear friends, for a spiritual practice this week, I encourage you to find moments of Selah in your life. Where are the times where you can stop, take a moment to listen and pray, before you continue on in your work and journey? As one body of Christ together, as we work to love our neighbors in these unprecedented times, to protect one another with physical distancing, and advocate for our sisters and brothers of color toward a more just and loving world, we need

these moments to pause and listen. We must take a breath amidst the work and notice and pay attention to what is going on around us. Though the work may be hard and will certainly continue, there are also holy moments of mystery and rest that will sustain us, no matter what storms may come.

I invite you to join me in such a moment of pause, listening, and rest, as we read a psalm that gives us great Selah. I've found this psalm particularly helpful lately as a way to help with anxiety, to know that we are not alone in our struggling, and that God will certainly be with us, no matter where we find ourselves.

Psalm 39 - A Prayer for Wisdom and Forgiveness

I said, "I will guard my ways

that I may not sin with my tongue;

I will keep a muzzle on my mouth

as long as the wicked are in my presence."

2 I was silent and still;

I held my peace to no avail;

my distress grew worse,

3 my heart became hot within me.

While I mused, the fire burned;

then I spoke with my tongue:

4 "Lord, let me know my end,

and what is the measure of my days;

let me know how fleeting my life is.

5 You have made my days a few handbreadths,

and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.

Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Selah

6 Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;

they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

7 "And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?

My hope is in you.

8 Deliver me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the scorn of the fool.

9 I am silent; I do not open my mouth,

for it is you who have done it.

10 Remove your stroke from me;

I am worn down by the hostility of your hand.

11 "You chastise mortals

in punishment for sin,

consuming like a moth what is dear to them;
surely everyone is a mere breath. Selah

12 "Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.

For I am your passing guest,
A wanderer, like all my forebears.

13 Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more."

The Word of the Lord.

And now let us take a moment to pray the words our Lord Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

Thank you again for taking this time out of your day to focus on God and strengthening your faith. I pray you may find moments of Selah in this coming week. Go in peace, dear friends. Amen.