

Praying through a Spiritual Desert

By Dave Earley

Is prayer ever a struggle for you? Does it feel more like a duty than a delight?

Have you attempted to pray and felt nothing, nothing at all? Are you doing your best to be close to God, yet it is as though He is a million miles away? Have you tried desperately to enter God's presence, only to sense that He is hiding from you?

You are not the first.

David's Desert

Near the end of his life, David was chased off his throne, out of his city, and into the wilderness. His son Absalom had launched the vicious political and military overthrow and was chasing David with an army (2 Samuel 15–18). So, David again found himself away from the temple, in the wilderness, running for his life, and struggling through deeply difficult days of spiritual dryness.

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water (Psalm 63:1).

David decided to continue passionately pursuing God anyway, even in a place of deep distress and spiritual dryness. By faith, he remembered God's powerful presence and glorious goodness in the past—and praised the Lord.

“I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips

will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands” (Psalm 63:2–4).

As David desperately hung on to God, he realized that God was hanging on to him and would help him through it all.

Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

“I cling to you; your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:7–8).

When you are in a spiritual desert, the answer you receive is an awareness that you are not forgotten or forsaken. God is there, even though you don’t see Him, hear Him, or feel Him. He is helping you and holding you. So a big key is to keep praying. Pursue God by faith and pray your way through your spiritual desert.

My Desert

As a young Christian, I was knocked off stride the first time I went through a season of “Soul Sahara.” When I surrendered my life to God, one of my greatest delights was enjoying a distinct sense of His presence. But one day it was gone.

For days I trudged through a spiritual desert. Each day my soul became dustier and my heart emptier. God was gone, and I felt like I was going it alone.

Scared that I had crossed a line, I racked my brain trying to remember some serious sin that I had committed or some devastating lie I had believed. But I got nothing. Confused, I was certain I was only person to ever go through such a spiritually lonely season.

One of my mature Christian friends asked me what was wrong. When I told him, he responded, “Oh, that happens to all of us. When you are a new Christian, God’s presence is all around and it seems like He answers every prayer, ‘Yes!’ But one day, He withdraws the sense of His presence so that you learn to walk

by faith, not feelings. He has not left you, even though it feels like it. He is just helping you grow up.”

Then he looked directly at me: “The issue is what you do now. You can press on or fall back. If you hang in there, eventually your awareness of God’s presence will return.”

I felt better and tried to press on in pursuing God by reading the Bible and praying. But I still felt like I was praying into a big, black hole of nothingness. Not long after that, I was reading Hebrews and a verse caught my attention.

“You can never please God without faith, without depending on him. Anyone who wants to come to God must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely look for him” (Hebrews 11:6, tlb).

The first and the last phrase caught my attention: “You can never please God without faith . . . he rewards those who sincerely look for him.” So, I decided to pursue God by faith, trusting that He would eventually reward me by letting me “find” Him.

I went into the closet in my bedroom and closed the door. It was dark. I could not see anything. I could not hear anything. I did not feel anything. Alone in the dark, I prayed what felt like a very bold prayer.

OK, God. I can’t see You. I can’t hear You. I can’t touch You.

I can’t smell You. I can’t taste You. I can’t feel You. I get it. You are hiding from me.

I am going to pray anyway.

I am praying by faith, not by feelings. I feel nothing. I am numb and dry inside. My soul is dark and barren. But You are worthy of my prayer. You are worthy of this time. So, I am praying.

You promise to hear and answer prayer. You promise never to leave us or forsake us. You said that You reward those who diligently seek You. So here I am, by faith, diligently seeking You.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Seeing nothing, I plunged on ahead.

By faith, I bring You prayers of thanksgiving, adoration, confession, and supplication—whether I feel You here today or not.

I am going to pray totally by faith. So here goes. God, I thank You because. . . .

And before I could get the next words of praise out of my mouth, I felt it. It was the refreshing splash of a drop of God's presence on my barren, dry soul. As I continued to pray, the presence of God increased drop after drop until it was as though that closet was flooded. By the time I was done, that spiritual cloud burst had drenched my soul. I was submerged in the replenishing water of the presence of God Himself. He had visited my closet, and I knew it.

I wish I could say it has always been that way when I tried to pray my way out of a dry time. Often, I pray by faith and feel just as dry and parched as I did before I started. But I have learned that eventually our heavenly Father will say, "Enough." He will keep His promise and reward us with the treasure of Himself. He will show us that He was there all the time.

Your Spiritual Desert

When I refer to your spiritual desert, I mean a season of spiritual dryness and soul darkness. God seems distant and silent. You pray and worship and serve, yet you feel nothing, absolutely nothing. You feel alone, abandoned, and forsaken. Theologians refer to Deus Absconditus—the God who is hidden.

It has been called a “dark night of the soul” or a “Sahara of the heart.”

A spiritual desert may come on for no apparent reason. One day you wake up and God seems a million miles away. Yesterday, you felt God’s presence when you prayed or worshiped. Your prayers were answered right and left. You could tell God was with you as you served Him. But today, not so much. The feelings are gone. The answers have stopped.

A spiritual desert can be triggered by deep disappointment. Maybe you confidently prayed for something, certain that God had promised it to you. Yet, it did not come. Maybe you had a dream that has not been fulfilled. Maybe someone hurt you deeply.

It can be brought on by a devastating event. Your husband died unexpectedly. Your adult child broke off communication with you. You thought you were going to be promoted at your job, and instead they fired you.

Ron Dunn was a popular author and Bible teacher. Dunn preached Bible conferences all over the United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, Central America, South Africa, and the Caribbean Islands. Dunn understood the challenges of a spiritual desert. His beloved son Ronnie took his own life at the age of 18, plunging Dunn into depression and darkness. He described his journey through the desert in a book called *When Heaven Is Silent*. In it, he says that when suffering hits, we cry out, “Why? Why me?”

He describes his battle with grief, suffering and receiving nothing but silence from God. He talks about dealing with difficulties, disappointment, and again experiencing distance from God.

I found several of his comments especially memorable.

Our toughest battles are with God. You can rebuke the devil,

plead the blood, station angels, and wear garlic around your neck, but nothing moves the darkness.

It's okay to tell God how you feel. After all, He already knows.

When God says no, it is not to deprive us of a blessing but to drive us to a better one.

In these seasons, we are called to walk in a deeper level of faith. God is looking for our faith as we continue to pray, serve, and worship. He looks for the faith that continues to trust and love God even though He seems to have left the building. It is a deeper level of faith that does the right thing even when you feel nothing.

I've been there. That's when I learned to pray—when I felt nothing. That's when I learned to pray my way through the spiritual desert.

Longing for Streams in the Desert

David was clearly in a spiritual desert when he wrote Psalm 42. He likened his spiritual thirst to the thirst of a deer who has run through a desert.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Psalm 42:1–3).

His way out of the dark desert? He chose to pursue and praise God anyway. “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:5).

“Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

No one else has ever experienced the level of spiritual darkness that Jesus walked through. That night in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus ran to God. Recognizing the overwhelming amount of torture and anguish He was about to endure, sweating drops of blood as He agonized in prayer, He begged His Father to come up with another way to rescue the world.

Yet, He received no reply.

Hours later, hanging on the cross, Jesus' physical suffering hit its zenith. To make matters worse, the full measure of our sins was placed upon Him. Jesus and the Father had lived in constant community through eternity. But that afternoon, as darkness covered Golgotha, the Father had to turn His back on His suffering Son. Jesus experienced soul darkness, spiritual distance, and silence from the Father for the first time. Horrified, He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Yet, heaven was silent. No help came. Jesus suffered and died alone, separated from His Father.

When I am in the spiritual desert it helps me to remember that I am not alone. I am in good company. I recall the sad words of Job as he sat in the dust, scrapping his wounds and counting his losses. I think of young Joseph chained in a cage on his way to Egypt. I picture him years later as a forgotten man in an Egyptian prison.

I consider Elijah, alone by the Brook Cherith and later all alone in the wilderness, wishing he was dead. I remember Paul in jail in Rome, all alone and far from home, awaiting his execution.

I see Mary, the mother of Jesus, crying out to the Father to save Him—and hearing nothing in return. And of course, I remember Jesus, hanging on the cross crying out, “My God . . .

why have you forsaken me?"

Suggestion:

There is only one good way through a spiritual desert—keep going until you come out on the other side. Persist in faith, expectation, praise, and prayer until the Sahara season is over and spiritual refreshment floods your soul again.

—**Dave Earley** is a pastor, professor and author of numerous books including *The 21 Most Effective Prayers in the Bible* and *21 Keys to Answered Prayer*, from which this article was adapted. He also is the founder of The 21 Days Global Prayer Event, held each January.