

**RESPONSES TO SIX QUESTIONS
ABOUT PRAYER IN TIMES OF
SPIRITUAL DRYNESS
(Part One)**

The LORD, your God, will circumcise your hearts ...that you may love the LORD, your God, with all your heart and all your soul, and so may live. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

If a soul becomes more patient in suffering and readier to endure lack of consolations, this is a sign that it is making greater progress in virtue. (St. John of the Cross)

Sooner or later in our prayers, we experience what is called dryness—a time when we have no felt sense of God's presence. We may even think we have lost our Beloved or feel abandoned by God. In the school of prayer, few things are more important to understand than the nature and role of spiritual dryness.

There are *six significant questions* that should be asked about prayer during these desert experiences, as they are sometimes called. Three of these questions will be asked and answered in this article. The other three will be dealt with in the next article.

Question 1: What is it that praying people experience during the desert or dry periods of the spiritual journey?

The actual desert experience will vary depending on the person's level of faith and spiritual maturity. For the beginner in prayer, spiritual dryness frequently means not just the absence of a felt sense of the presence of God but also feelings of what St. Ignatius calls desolation, that is, a state of anxiety, sadness, or loss of peace flowing from the thought that "I have lost God" or "God has abandoned me."

On the other hand, for the person who is more mature in faith and advanced in the ways of prayer, spiritual dryness may not be an experience of desolation. It will be one which, though lacking a *felt sense* of God's presence, may be accompanied by the conviction that: "Even though I can't feel God's presence (at least on the external), I don't feel anxious, sad, or abandoned (the state of desolation). In fact, I feel peaceful." (For more information on this topic, see *Weeds Among the Wheat* and *When the Well Runs Dry* by Jesuit Thomas H. Green.)

To believe that God is present and active despite his apparent absence can be considered one of the greatest blessings of the spiritual life. For most of us,

particularly in the early years of prayer, spiritual dryness usually includes the experience of desolation ("I have lost God; God has abandoned me."). It is usually a time of spiritual suffering. We think we are getting the "silent treatment" from God. We call out to him all day long, but he never answers (see Psalm 22:3). Spiritual dryness is like journeying in the desert with no water in sight. Prayer is no longer exciting; rather, it is a wearying struggle. Spiritual exercises that once nourished us are now empty, and we have little or no desire to do them.

Another dimension of the desert experience may be the feeling of discouragement as we become keenly aware of our own sinfulness. (We may not yet know that one of the surest signs of growth in the interior life is a growing awareness of our own sinfulness.) We may begin to think we are regressing rather than progressing. We may begin to experience one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life, i.e., the closer we come to God, the farther we seem to be away from him. As we get closer to the all-piercing Light of God, the more our own darkness will show itself. Our lives will appear to be hollow and mediocre. The late Fr. John Dalrymple, in his book *Simple Prayer*, writes:

It is as if I were to bring the sleeve of my coat toward the window of the room, and as I move into the light, the dust and dandruff on the sleeve become more obvious. It is not that as I moved the coat got dirtier, but that the light got brighter.

What seems to scare and hurt us most is the thought that we have lost our Beloved and that he has abandoned us (see Song of Songs 3:1-11). This thought or feeling characterizes the experience of desolation described earlier.

To sum up, it can be said that while the actual experience of the desert will be different for different people, for all of us it will mean a *felt sense* of the absence of God. And for those of us whose faith in God is still fragile, it will frequently involve the experience of desolation (the "I have lost God" feeling).

This description of spiritual dryness may give the impression that it is something experienced only by monks, religious, and exceptional, lay persons. Yet spiritual directors maintain that this experience is quite common in the lives of many average, prayerful lay people who discover somewhere in the midst of their spiritual journeys that spiritual exercises, which once nourished them immensely, now do nothing for them.

Question 2: Why is an understanding of this dimension of prayer so important?

There are at least three reasons why some understanding of spiritual dryness is important.

First, if we do not understand the role of the desert in the spiritual life, we may quit praying in times of dryness. We may think that we have “lost God” and that our prior, positive feelings in prayer were not a gift from God but the product of our own imagination. This frequently happens. Many people experience genuine conversion and get all excited about prayer, but they quit when the well runs dry. This is sad because it is often in those moments that God wants to do his real work in such persons.

Second, lack of knowledge about the purpose of spiritual dryness may cause us to continue praying in a way that, at *this particular stage* in our spiritual journey, may be more of an obstacle rather than a help in our spiritual growth. Many people are unaware that at some stage in the spiritual journey, God may call them to become less active in prayer so that he can be more active in their spiritual transformation.

Third, the experience of spiritual dryness may either be caused by us or something permitted by God. When permitted by God, it is meant to purify us and bring us closer to him. Such dryness is a gift to be accepted and embraced. When spiritual dryness is of our doing, we will need to dig deep to see what is causing it and work at correcting the problem. Lack of knowledge about the nature and role of spiritual dryness may lead us to assign blame to God for our desert experience when in fact it is something brought on by our own infidelities.

Desert periods are critical times in the spiritual journey. How we respond to it will determine whether we move forward spiritually or make no progress whatsoever.

Question 3: Why does God permit us to experience desert periods in the spiritual journey?

*So I will allure her;
Will lead her into the desert
And speak to her heart.*
(Hosea 2:16)

God permits us to experience spiritual desert periods in order to purify us of those things that hinder our spiritual transformation and to teach us some important lessons about the spiritual life and how it works. Here are some of the ways God purifies us, and

the lessons he teaches us in the desert experience of prayer.

We have to undergo *purification*. In the desert God will want to purify us of any excessive attachment we may have to consolation in prayer. If God blesses us in prayer with a multitude of consolations (or “spiritual highs”), there is a danger that we may seek and love “the consolations of our God more than the God of our consolation” (St. Teresa of Avila). In time of spiritual consolation, it is easy to pray. The challenge is to remain faithful to prayer when we experience little or no felt sense of God’s presence or action in our lives. During such dry periods, God is asking us to love him for himself and not just for the spiritual highs or consolations he offers us in prayer. The Lord is asking us to show that we are not just fair-weather friends but all-weather friends. This kind of purification teaches us that God is to be found more deeply in the desert than in the garden of superficial delights.

God also wants to purify us of spiritual vanity. Fr. John Dalrymple explains spiritual vanity in this way:

Someone taking to religion in all zeal, becoming caught up in a campaign of prayer, fasting and spiritual reading, liturgical practice, and retreat weekends might be indulging unawares in one big ego-trip.... Conversion of the soul from a worldly life to a spiritual life is at first superficial only. The convert has been given new, spiritual goals; but the conversion is only external; in itself the soul is as full as it ever was of unregenerate tendencies to vanity, arrogance, acquisitiveness, the only difference being that after conversion these tendencies are now attached to spiritual instead of worldly objects.... The zeal [of such a person] is infectious, but it is, as yet, chiefly the expression of the person’s vanity or self-centeredness, dressed up in Christian clothes. (Simple Prayer)

For God to do his work of spiritual transformation in us, he must purify us of spiritual vanity. God often brings about this purification by bringing to naught our best efforts to change ourselves and everything and everyone around us. As we sit on the ruins of our self-made temples and projects, we are purified of spiritual vanity and arrogance, and we learn the meaning of spiritual poverty: our complete dependence and need for God to bring about any spiritual growth in others or in ourselves.

In the desert, God’s intention is not to punish us but to purify us. In the journey of life, we consciously or unconsciously become overly attached to persons or objects – so much so that they become idols, and thus

more important to us than God. This happened to the Israelites after they lived in the Promised Land for some time. They became so enamored with the blessings of the land that they forgot the One who gave them the land. To purify them of this idolatry, God led the Israelites into the desert for a second time where they would be rid of all their attachments and be free to listen anew to the Word of God (see Hosea 2:16-25).

There are also several *lessons* to be learned. When God takes away consolation in prayer, the *first lesson* we learn is that God can be encountered at a deeper level than the level of our emotions. God wants to teach us that we are no longer dependent on emotional returns to know we have encountered the Lord. As we grow in our relationship with God, the more we “learn to be at home in the dark because we are sure, in faith, that the potter is truly shaping the clay, even though the clay sees nothing of what is happening” (*When the Well Runs Dry*, by Thomas Green, S.J.).

The way we eat might help to clarify this point. There are times when we immensely enjoy a delicious meal and we savor every morsel of it. But on occasion, a comparably delightful meal just does not look that palatable to us, or we may not have the appetite at the time. Yet from the point of view of nutrition, both meals may be equally good. Our lack of enjoyment of the other meal in no way diminishes its nutritional value.

The same principle is at work in prayer life. Sometimes when we pray, we really feel and savor God’s presence and love. At other times, our prayer is empty and dull. Who, then, are we to say that the latter is of no benefit to our spiritual growth or is less pleasing in God’s sight?

The *second lesson* God teaches us in the desert is that spiritual consolation is God’s pure gift to us and not something we can earn by being good or by praying in a particular way. In prayer, God teaches this important lesson by “dropping in” on us when we least expect him and by “failing to show” when we very much want to experience his presence.

The *third lesson* that God wishes to teach us in the desert is that spiritual growth is totally dependent on God’s work in us and not on anything we do. Our task is simply to be flexible and cooperative with the movement of the Spirit. In the spiritual life, “working at it” often means “being still,” “just being there,” and exercising discipline over our doing and achieving self which so often wants to run the show. This is a difficult lesson for us because so much of our training for the journey of life has told us to be self-sufficient

and take-charge individuals. It is not easy for us to switch gears in the inner journey.

In the amphitheater of spiritual life, God is the Director and we are the individual, unique members of the human cast of billions. Mary, at the Annunciation, is our perfect model (see Luke 1:26-38). When God invites her to become the mother of Jesus, she doesn’t say, “Sure, Lord, I’ll do it!” but rather, “I am your maidservant; work in and through me as you want.” Mary’s response was: “Be it done unto me.” This attitude is one of active receptivity, and it is the secret of Christian spirituality and spiritual growth. *Active receptivity* is characterized by the effort to place our energy, will, and freedom at the disposal of God so that he can do with us and in us whatever he wills.

The *final lesson* that God teaches us when our prayer runs dry is that we must gradually learn to participate in the Cross of Christ. In times of dryness, we experience the thirst of Jesus on the Cross. If the Cross was Jesus’ way to the Father, then surely we, the disciples of Jesus, cannot expect to travel the scenic route free of all pain and hardship. When we experience darkness in prayer or in the marketplace, we are being invited to identify with Jesus in his suffering and in his experience of feeling abandoned by the Father. Also, in the desert we are being invited and challenged to trust that our God will not abandon us but will come to rescue us and redeem us (see Exodus 16).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What insight in the article spoke to you the most?
2. Have you experienced spiritual dryness in prayer? If so, what was this experience like for you?
3. Which of the three lessons mentioned speaks to you the most?
4. Did you disagree with or have trouble understanding any part of this article?
5. After doing the suggested prayer exercise that follows, describe your experience.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE

Reflect on some dry periods (or a dry period) in your life. Looking back, can you see any good that came from it? What seemed to be the dominant feeling you had during the dry period: anger, frustration, discouragement, confusion, or anxiety? Were you able to talk to the Lord about such feelings?