

Making Prayer Your Second Language

“What To Do When God Seems So Far Away”

Psalm 63

We're in the middle of a series of sermons which I've entitled: **Making Prayer Your Second Language**. Here's my hope...that something I say in the midst of these sermons will spark a desire deep in your heart to make prayer a more important part of your life.

Just as some people from other nations have become very proficient in learning how to speak English as a second language, I long for you to become proficient in the language of prayer, in communicating with God, in conversing with and listening to the Almighty.

A lot of people in our area take **ESL** classes—*English as a Second Language*. Well I want this Lenten Season to be a time when you are taking **PSL** classes—*Prayer as a Second Language*.

Jesus said one time, *“My house will be called a house of prayer”* (Matthew 21:13 NIV). Now when He spoke those words He was standing in the middle of the temple in Jerusalem and obviously He was talking about the place of worship for Jewish believers.

But we're living in the days of the New Covenant. We're Christians! And the apostle **Paul** writes in the book of **1st Corinthians**, *“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you...God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple”* (1st Corinthians 3:16-17 NIV).

So when you hear these words from Jesus, *“My house will be called a house of prayer,”* don't just think about the church, this building, what goes on within these four walls, but think about yourself, your life, your own individual habits and lifestyle and behavior.

If you belong to Jesus, if He is your Savior and Lord, then He wants you to be and calls you to be a *“house of prayer.”* *Is that how someone would describe you? “Oh, yeah, I know him. He is a house of prayer. I know her. She is a house of prayer.”*

-2-

Earlier in this series of sermons, I talked about the four fundamental elements of prayer—**Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving** and **Supplication**. Now in these last few sermons I want to talk about some of the difficulties we experience in the midst of prayer.

Last Sunday I talked about the problem of **Unanswered Prayer**. *What do you do when God says “No” to your request? When you pray and pray and pray and nothing happens!* Do you remember what you are supposed to do? Three things! I shared them last Sunday.

Number One – Keep on praying as long as you can. Unless God gives you a reason to stop praying for that request, keep on praying, keep on knocking, keep on asking, keep on seeking. Stay in touch with God.

Number Two – Give God the right to say “No” to you. Now He has that right already. But if you will understand in your heart and accept in your mind that just as a parent has to at times say “No” to their child and thus God has to at times say “No” to us, it will save you from a lot of unnecessary worry, anger, bitterness, despair and frustration.

Number Three – Keep on doing what you know is right. You'll not always understand why God does what He does. Some of His works are just humanly unexplainable. But if you'll just keep on serving God, keep on praying, keep on believing, keep on reading God's Word, keep on obeying, keep on following the Lord...then you'll stay on course in the darkness and the light will come and you will be glad that you did not turn away from Him in the moment of disappointment.

Now today I want to talk about **Spiritual Dryness**. *What do you do when God just seems so far, far away? What do you do when the brook runs dry, when that Living Water ceases to flow in your life? What do you do when God just seems distant, unreachable and unresponsive?*

You may remember from Scripture that the prophet **Elijah** went through an experience like this at one point in his life. In the book of **1st Kings**, the **17th chapter**, we read of how there was a famine in the land. No rain, poor crops, little food, people starving and dying! But God had His hand upon Elijah. He supernaturally provided for Elijah's needs.

Look at what God did – **verse 2, 1st Kings 17**. *“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: ‘Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there’”* (1st Kings 17:2-4 NIV).

While others are starving and dying, God miraculously nourishes and protects His servant. The ravens bring him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening and he has plenty of water to drink from the babbling brook. It’s not paradise, but it’s not bad—especially when you take into account that others are starving and suffering and dying.

But one morning Elijah gets up, goes to the brook to quench his thirst, and, low and behold, the brook is dry. No water! No source of nourishment! Nothing to quench his thirst! Nothing to sustain his life! The Bible doesn’t tell us, but I wonder what thoughts must have raced through his mind?

“God, what’s happening here? You promised to provide for me! You promised to supply my needs! You lead me to this place but there’s nothing here. That water is gone. The brook has run dry. I’m going to die!”

There was a time when the water flowed and bubbled with life, but now it was gone. The brook had run dry. *Have you ever had one of those experiences in your life?* I’m not talking about physical water. I’m talking about that inner well, that life-sustaining stream that nourishes your spirit.

I’m talking about what **Jesus** was referring to when He said to the woman at the well, *“Everyone who drinks this water* (the physical water, water from the well) *will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (John 4:13-14 NIV).

Have you ever had one of those experiences in your life when it seems that this well of living water has just dried up in your life? Maybe you’re going through an experience like that right now. You’re just dry, spiritually dry. This eternal life that used to just flow through

veins has somehow dried up.

You come into a worship service like this and people are singing and people are smiling and people are raising their hands and people are getting blessed and you just don’t feel a thing. The song in your heart is gone. You pray...and don’t feel a thing. It’s like God is a million miles away from you. You listen for His voice...and you don’t hear a thing.

What used to be so clear to you is now fuzzy and dark. There’s no joy. There’s no passion. There’s no evidence of life. The brook has run dry.

If that’s where you are this morning, I have some comforting words for you. You are not alone. Some of God’s greatest saints have had to do battle with spiritual dryness or what the great Roman Catholic mystic, **Saint John of the Cross**, referred to as the *“dark night of the soul.”*

Not long after she died, one of **Mother Teresa’s** closest friends published a book which is primarily a collection of her writings—very personal and private letters to several of her spiritual directors in life. I don’t know of anyone in the 20th Century who has been more revered and respected than Mother Teresa.

And, yet, if you read this book you will learn that she suffered through a *“dark night of the soul”* that lasted almost without break for the last 50 years of her life. She writes in one place to her spiritual director:

They say people in hell suffer eternal pain because of the loss of God...In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing (Jesus, please forgive my blasphemy—I have been told to write everything). That darkness that surrounds me on all sides—I can’t lift my soul to God—no light or inspiration enters my soul...In my heart there is no faith—no love—no trust—there is so much pain...I want God with all the powers of my soul—and yet there between us—there is terrible separation.

Those are the words, the feelings, the experience of Mother Teresa. All saints (let me repeat that, **ALL** saints!) go through periods of spiritual

dryness. **Saint Teresa of Avila**, who lived back in the 16th Century, had such a close and vibrant relationship with the Lord that she often had visions of Him and saw Him, so to speak, with her earthly eyes.

She had such a powerful and intimate relationship with Jesus that one of the sisters in her community said to her once, ***“The next time you see the Lord, look and see what color His eyes are.”*** But, listen. Before the second phase of her life she went through a period of spiritual darkness that lasted nearly 20 years.

Here’s my point. I don’t care how close you are to the Lord there will come those periods in your life when you are just spiritually dry. You will encounter a *“dark night of the soul.”* The brook will run dry.

So what do you do when God seems far away? Before we jump straight towards the answer to that question, the response, the solution, the “what-should-I-do,” let’s first of all ask, ***“Why does God do this?”*** *Why does God allow spiritual dryness to enter our lives? Why does He allow us to experience these “dark nights of the soul?”*

Isn’t He supposed to be available to us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Why would He ever allow the brook to run dry, for the living water to cease to flow, at least for a while, in our lives?

Let me give you 3 possible reasons why.

First, the simplest and yet most practical answer is that God wants to see what you will do. *How will you respond if suddenly the brook runs dry? Will you still trust Him? Will you still obey Him? Will you still follow Him? Or is your Christian experience based solely upon feelings, physical sight, visible evidence?*

The Bible says, ***“The righteous will live by faith”*** (Romans 1:17 NIV). Not by sight (what you can see with your eyes), not by feelings (what you sense inside), not by reason (what you can figure out, understand and explain with your mind), but by faith.

The Bible defines faith like this: ***“Faith is being sure of what we***

hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). And it goes on to say that ***“without faith it is impossible*** (not just difficult or hard or challenging, but IMPOSSIBLE!), ***to please God”*** (Hebrews 11:6 NIV).

When our children were small and just trying to learn to walk, we would take their little hands and lift them up and help them walk. Now they weren’t really walking. We were doing all of the work of holding them up. But they would kick out their little legs one after another and they would think they were walking.

But their legs were so weak and wobbly that if we would have let go they would have just crumbled in a heap on the floor. But, oh, they loved that sensation of standing up and “walking.” It was a whole new world and they weren’t very satisfied just crawling around on the floor. They wanted to stand and walk.

As their legs got a little stronger, we would hold them around the waist and help them walk, help them gain their sense of balance, and occasionally, for just a moment, we would kind of let go and let them take a step or two on their own.

Finally there came the time when we just had to let go of them. We knew they would stumble. We knew they would fall. We knew they would kind of stagger around. But we also knew that if we never let go of them they would never ever learn to walk on their own.

So we withdrew our hands. We stepped back away from them. We let them stagger and stumble a bit on their own that they might learn to truly walk. I believe that is one of the things God is doing in these times of spiritual dryness. He is seeing how we will respond. He is testing the strength of our faith.

He withdraws from us that we might learn that we can trust Him even when we can’t see Him or even feel Him. He is testing and refining and clarifying our sense of obedience. *Will we do what He says even when it makes no earthly sense to us? Will we continue to pray and seek to connect with Him even when we don’t feel a thing deep in our hearts? Will we serve Him and worship Him and have faith in Him even when we feel spiritually dry and down and forsaken?*

Listen to the words of **George MacDonald** in his book *Unspoken Sermons*. *“That man is perfect in faith who can come to God in the utter dearth of his feelings and desires, without a glow or an aspiration, with the weight of low thoughts, failures, neglects, and wandering forgetfulness, and say to Him, ‘Thou art my refuge.’”*

Now here’s a second possible reason why God allows us to go through these dry brook experiences in life – that we might be awakened and stirred from spiritual lethargy.

Listen to the words of one of the greatest devotional writers who ever lived, a French woman by the name of **Jeanne-Marie Guyon**, who is commonly referred to as simply **Madame Guyon**. She spent much of her life writing and teaching about prayer and had a great influence on John Wesley and Hudson Taylor. She writes:

Dear reader, you must realize that God has only one desire. Certainly you can never understand a dry spell unless you understand what His desire is. His desire is to give Himself to the soul that really loves Him and to that soul which eagerly seeks Him.

And yet it is true that this God who desires to give Himself to you will often conceal Himself from you—from you, the very one who seeks Him! Now why would God do that? Dear saint of God, you must the way of your Lord.

Yours is a God who often hides Himself. He hides Himself for a purpose. Why? His purpose is to rouse you from spiritual laziness. His purpose in removing Himself from you is to cause you to pursue Him.

The Lord Jesus is looking about everywhere for that Christian who will remain faithful and loving even when He has withdrawn Himself. If the Lord finds such a faithful soul, when He does return, He rewards the faithfulness of His child. He pours out upon that faithful one abundant goodness and tender caresses of love.

Listen, you won’t find any promises in the Bible for the half-hearted.

In fact, do you remember what Jesus said He would do to those who are just lukewarm? He said, *“I will spit you out of my mouth”* (Revelation 3:16 NLT). Apathy makes Christ sick!

But here is what God does promise – **Jeremiah 29:13**. *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”* (NIV). I believe one of the reasons why God sometimes hides His face from us is so that we will be awaked from our spiritual laziness and lethargy, and desperately seek and pursue Him with all of our heart, soul and strength.

Now let me suggest one other possible reason why God allows us to go through these dry brook experiences – that we might truly learn how to wait upon the Lord.

God says to us in **Isaiah 40:31**, *“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint”* (NKJV). Spiritual dryness is often a time of preparation.

Before **Jesus** ever began His public ministry, He was led by the Spirit into the desert where He was severely tempted by Satan for 40 days. Before **Moses** ever led His people, the Israelites, out of slavery and bondage in Egypt, he spent 40 years in the desert...and it was there in the middle of the wilderness that God prepped him and prepared him for his mission.

Being in a place where we are dry—waiting, wanting, praying, searching, reflecting, examining—is often the proving ground where we’re strengthened, prepped and primed for a greater work, a larger mission, a deeper purpose.

And, so, if you’re in the midst of a dry spell right now, it doesn’t mean that God has abandoned you. He has promised, *“I will never leave you or forsake you”* (Joshua 1:5 NIV). God doesn’t abandon His children.

So what should you do when God seems so far away? I want to suggest 4 things and they all begin with the letter “P”.

First, Continue to Pray. Keep in touch with God. And remember what

we said earlier in this series of sermons about prayer. **Prayer is not so much submitting our needs to God as it is submitting ourselves to God.**

Ask the Lord to reveal any unconfessed sins of which you haven't repented. If He reveals something to you then confess it as sin and repent of it—ask God to help you turn from it and overcome it—even if it is a sin which you've committed again and again and again.

When the brook runs dry, the enemy will tempt you to just quit praying, to give up, to let loose, to quit trying. But here's what God says to us, *“Men ought always to pray, and not...faint”* or give up (Luke 18:1 KJV).

Second, Persevere. Persevere in prayer, yes! But you also need to persevere in worship and persevere in reading your Bible and persevere in staying connected with God's people. You may not feel a thing...but persevere. God gave us His Word to guide us so that if we go astray or if we feel lost, His Word will be that compass to guide us back to Him.

Job never gave up on God...even though all kinds of horrible things were happening in his life. He couldn't even find God. He writes in the 23rd chapter of the book that bears his name, *“I go to the east, he is not there...I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him, when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested, I will come forth as gold”* (Job 23:8-10 NIV).

“I'm not giving up on Him,” Job says. *“Even though I can't see Him or feel Him or even hear Him, I know He's there and that He sees me. So I'm going to hold steady and when I get through all of this I'll be thankful that I did.”*

Third, Be Patient. Don't try to force the Lord's hand. Don't put Him to the test. Don't demand signs. Don't put out a fleece. Remember the words and the experience of **King David** who wrote, *“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry...He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our*

God” (Psalm 40:1, 3 NIV).

Fourth, Even in the Midst of the Spiritual Dryness, Don't Neglect to Praise Him. Praise decentralizes self and elevates God to His rightful place in our lives. Praise is one of those special keys that unlocks the door to the very presence of God.

Here's my prayer. If you're going through a spiritually dry time right now, I pray that you will do what **King David** did in **Psalm 63**. I want to close with his example. This was a psalm that David wrote when he was in the desert of **Judah**. He said,

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

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.

My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.

Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I stay close to you; your right hand upholds me. They who seek my life will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth.

They will be given over to the sword and become food for the jackals. But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God's name will praise him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.