

2008

## The Problem of Prayerlessness (Chapter 35 of Giving Ourselves to Prayer)

MaryKate Morse

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>

 Part of the Religion Commons

---

chapter

# 35

## THE PROBLEM OF PRAYERLESSNESS

MaryKate Morse

Prayer is probably the core spiritual practice of the Christian faith. Yet, despite the example of Jesus and the early church it is often an anemic part of our lives. A common response to this reality is to label prayerlessness—not taking time to pray—a sin problem. Jesus told us to pray, so we should pray. If we are not praying, the solution is to confess and repent, and then start praying. “Start praying” usually means attending prayer groups, keeping prayer notebooks, and interceding on behalf of others during one’s daily quiet time. However, in all my years of teaching prayer in seminary and in churches, I have found that prayerlessness truly grieves people. It is not easily resolved with a sin label. People usually feel shame that they are not as devoted to prayer as they believe they should be. So, if it is not sin, what might it be, and can anything be done about it?

The spiritual life is both a hardy and a fragile thing. It is hardy because

the God of the universe put in us a God-shaped hole that yearns for fellowship with our Maker. It is fragile because the God-shaped hole is in a dust-to-dust body. For that reason, prayerlessness is more often than not the result of a perception that one's spiritual life isn't going anywhere, that it is stagnant or meaningless. When people say they are too busy to pray, distractions are often a cover-up for this hidden fact: When they do pray, there is no sense of God's presence or of any response to their prayer. When that happens, people often get anxious and stop praying. Emotionally, prayerlessness comes out of fear and not out of hope. It happens when we are thinking: *What if God isn't really there? What if God isn't really there for me? What if instead of living water I only find a dry well? What then?*

### **Prayerlessness and the Dry Well**

Most believers try to have a meaningful connection with God through prayer. But something happens along the way, and the life of prayer often drifts into a dead zone of prayerlessness. I want to suggest that prayerlessness doesn't need to mean that we are stuck or that our spiritual lives are empty. Instead, prayerlessness can be a signal that it is time to begin an authentic adventure. And the journey begins with first naming one's reality: Prayer is dry and empty for me. Metaphorically, this is called the dry well experience. The well is there. The bucket. But when you come thirsty, the bucket comes up empty.

Naming the reality can be difficult because people believe they will be judged or lose status in their faith community, or look stupid. Prayerlessness is often perpetuated in churches because we create a culture of shame rather than spiritual adventure. Instead of seeing it as an opportunity for growth and being open about it, we treat it like a disease. As long as the problem is hidden, it cannot be resolved. The only way to move from prayerlessness to prayerfulness is to start where we know we are. Once we have been honest with ourselves, the next step is to understand why one might be in a prayerless state. The following are some possible reasons.

### **Exhaustion**

Exhaustion can be physical, mental, or emotional. Exhaustion brought on by stress caused by unending deadlines and life upheavals is a common Western problem. After finishing a marathon, many runners cross the finish line and

collapse to the ground heaving for air. They stretch out their arms and revel in non-movement. When the body has given its full capacity to some event, it is difficult to be in a prayerful frame. When my stepmother died, who had been the first real mother I ever knew, I was exhausted. The months of care because of her debilitating cancer, the emotional drain of serving her complex needs, standing by her death bed for hours, put me in an empty space for months. I was emotionally and physically exhausted. Elijah in 1 Kings 18 is an example of how even after spiritual and physical success one can feel depressed and empty. Exhaustion is the most common reason why people feel dry in their prayer life. They are dry in their life.

### **Narrow View of Prayer**

Prayer practices and types are as varied as an artist's color palette, but most people are only exposed to one or two ways. In 1 Samuel 3, young Samuel did not recognize the voice of God and three times he ran to Eli thinking Eli had called him. Whenever I teach prayer, I find that someone is profoundly impacted by a type of prayer they hadn't experienced before. This is why teaching prayer in churches is so important. Not just one type of prayer, but all types. Temperaments and personalities lead us toward certain forms of prayer that are more meaningful than others. Liturgical prayers are living water to some and muddy waters to others. Silence is profound for some and music feeds the souls of others. In all of Scripture and the history of the church there is not one "sacred" way to pray. The church carries the honor of teaching people how to pray.

### **Desert Experience/Dark Night**

In Luke 4 Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert for forty days of prayer and fasting. In the desert Satan sifted the underlying motivations for His sacrificial life. Desert experiences are traditionally those periods of time when God feels absent from our lives. Among the saints, the experience of God's absence is referred to as the dark night. If you experienced God for years in ecstatic worship, for instance, and then for week after week you feel nothing, experience nothing, it might be the dark night. The dark night comes when God is giving us an opportunity to stand in faith no matter what life brings.

The whole of creation tells the story of birth, growth, decline, and death. Our seasons, our need for sleep, the way all of nature has an “on” time and a “down” time is God’s design. The music of life has pauses in it. These are the negative spaces where we are still and nothing is gained, known, or felt. God commanded a period of rest in Genesis 2:2. That life of rest is both physical and spiritual. This is different from the dark night which is often a unique experience of deep shaping. The natural rhythm of rest is simply downtime. Sometimes a dry well is our fallow time.

### **Sin or Disorder in Your Life**

In a few instances the dry well is the result of sin in your life. John wrote in 1 John 1: 6 “If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” It is not possible to relate to a God of love, if in the heart there is gossip, bitterness, or self-indulgence. Despising others in our heart is walking in darkness. Believing that the self-indulgence of pornography, over-eating or excessive shopping is due us because of how hard we work for God is the ultimate of deceptions. If these behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are not kept in the light of Christ for His healing will on them, a dry well is the first outcome. Sincerity before God is the beginning of relationship with God.

### **Lack of Attention/Distractions**

In Jesus’ last conversation with His disciples He said in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” Abiding in Christ carries the core notion of connection and non-activity. A branch does no work except to receive from the vine the nutrients and pass them along. For Westerners one of our greatest failures as Christ followers is a lack of attentiveness to the vine. Our busy lives consume our energies, creativity, and time so there is little space to be with God. We make the mistake of equating God’s will with kingdom accomplishments rather than quiet attentiveness. Finding ways to be still allows for the Spirit to work naturally in our souls without expectation of gain. Sometimes a dry well is an invitation to simply sit quietly with God.

## From Dryness to Living Water

Prayerlessness is a normal experience. We are used to being entertained, getting instant feedback, and having our needs immediately met, so we forget how ordinary a dry well is in our faith journey. If we believe it is not ordinary, the dry well can be a confusing time. If we are not feeling something or doing something or accomplishing something, we can begin to fear that God is absent from us. And when we begin to fear God's absence, we become ashamed of the dry place. We think it is caused by our failure or spiritual weakness, rather than an ordinary part of the journey. The temptation is to drop one's practice of prayer when the experience becomes dry.

A way to avoid this temptation is to mentor and disciple followers so that when we find ourselves in a dry place we recognize it, consider the causes for it, and then take steps to stay connected to the vine rather than drift into continual prayerlessness. Following are some suggestions for moving through the dryness:

1. **Healthy Lifestyle**—Examine your lifestyle and reorder it so that you can experience rest again. Restore a Sabbath experience. Let the natural nourishments our bodies need be the beginning platform for new waters.
2. **Ritual of Space for God**—Find a time and place that allows you simply to be present with God. This might mean observing the offices (traditional times of prayer), painting or sculpting, walking in the woods or down a busy street. The goal is to be with God with no expectation of gain or the accomplishment of spiritual work.
3. **Breath Prayer**—Create a short prayer or use a Scripture verse as a companion during the dry well. A breath prayer is a prayer of 6-8 syllables usually consisting of a name for God and a request. The Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner," is used world-wide as a solace during hard times.
4. **God in the Everyday**—Accept the presence of God in the everyday, especially in nature, music, or art. Sitting in a park or at the beach, listening to a great piece of music, all can speak of God's grace. God in the everyday is a descent into the ordinary wonder of creation that can keep you during dryness.

5. God in Others—Allow God to come to you through others. I have spiritually directed people who have said, “God has never shown up in my life.” And then they would tell an extraordinary story of someone who sacrificially served them in a dark time. Spiritual friends or a spiritual director are often the face of God during dry times.

A dry well is a place where water was once drawn regularly. Prayerlessness, drifting away from attachment to God, does not need to be the final response. Instead, the dry well can be the desert before the Promised Land, the cross before the open cave, the crossroads to a new well.

### Questions for Further Thought or Discussion

1. Have you ever been in a state of prayerlessness? Tell the story of that time. How did it impact your thinking about God? What did you feel?
2. Which of the listed reasons for the dry well have you experienced? Tell the story of it. Would you add any others?
3. If you are at the dry well in your prayer life right now, which of the suggested ways through might help you?
4. If you have been in a dry well but then moved out, what other suggestions do you have for helping persons stuck at a dry well?

---

**The author:** Dr. MaryKate Morse is the Director of Masters Programs and Professor of Pastoral Studies and Spiritual Formation at the George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

### SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

- Cronk, Sandra. *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-patterning Toward a Life Centered in God*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991.
- Griffin, Emilie. *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer*. New York, NY: McCracken Press, 1994.
- Green, Thomas H. *When the Well Runs Dry: Prayer Beyond Beginnings*. South Bend, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1979.