

Prayer in the Desert

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[0 : 00] Hey, good morning, everybody. So good to be with you today. What a great way to start, right? God's led us in worship.

So good to be with Him. We're going to gather around His Word now. My name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here. It's so good to be with you here this morning. We've been spending most of the beginning of this year kind of winding through our way in a series where we've been talking about what it means to be a people and a church of prayer.

And the last several weeks, we've been talking about very specific types of prayer. And now we're going to kind of make the turn towards home here. We're going to look to wrap up this series next week. But this week, I'm particularly excited about because this week, we're going to touch on one of the really big questions of prayer.

And in fact, it might be the question that some of you have really been waiting for us to get to. And it's simply this. Elliot, why is God not answering my prayers?

There are few things... Y'all ready to go. Let's edit.

[1 : 19] All right. You know, there are few things that will discourage us. Few things that will sap your energy for a prayer life more than feeling like nobody's listening.

Like nothing's ever going to happen. Let me just start today by saying if you feel that now or you've ever felt that, you are certainly not alone. We're going to look at today how over the centuries, many people who have sought God have wrestled with this reality that sometimes it seems like I'm faithfully offering up prayers to my Father in Heaven, but nothing is happening.

Silence. And if you've ever felt like that, I'm going to make a guess here that there are probably two sort of specific flavors of that, both equally frustrating, but maybe a little bit different.

I think sometimes when we ask the question or if your question is, Elliot, why doesn't God answer prayers? What you really mean is, why have I personally never seen God do it?

Why is it that I don't have any experiences or things I would point to that I would say God is answering a prayer? Maybe that's you're there because you're a skeptic, you're not a follower of Jesus, but you're kind of interested as an outside observer and you would just honestly say, I'm trying to access this and come close and it just doesn't seem to be anything to me.

[2 : 51] Nothing ever seems to happen. Or possibly you're someone who's been reaching out to God. Like you really want to believe this, but when you reach out, you've just never experienced anything that you would say, yeah, I could point to that and say, that's God answering a prayer.

That's definitely a common place you could be and we're going to speak into that today. I think the other way that question sort of manifests and it's no less frustrating is, for you being a follower of Jesus who might say to me, look, you don't have to convince me that prayer is real.

Like I have stories and testimonies in my life. I know that prayer is real. I have seen God do things. I've seen him rescue me. Like I know he answers prayer, but it seems like that well has gone dry.

Like I can point back to a place in my life where it seemed God was present and close and flourishing. A lot of the times this is like right after you meet Jesus and it seems like it's this flourishing garden and I ask and he answers and I pray God, please let there be a blue cup on that table and there's a blue cup on that table and it just seems like he's close and now for whatever reason, it doesn't seem to work like that anymore.

I can remember it, but I don't know why it doesn't feel like that now. It feels more like a spiritual desert where answered prayers and words from the Lord seem few and far between.

[4 : 23] And if either of those is you today, I'm excited to tell you that God does have something to say about all that and that prayers from the desert are actually a very meaningful part of life with God.

So we're gonna do two things today. One is we're gonna start by talking about a little bit of the why. Why might God not be answering a prayer?

Like what is a reason? Does the Bible have anything to say about why God might be silent in a particular situation or not answering a prayer? And then the other thing we're gonna do is talk about what?

If you find yourself in a place where it feels like you're in a dry season, it feels like you're in a desert, is there anything we can do? Like how would we approach that?

What would God have us do? But kind of first things first, I think before we get to either of those, there is something we can kind of put on the table to start.

[5 : 23] And I'll be honest, this is a humbling truth. And so I don't mean it in an assaulting way. I think it's really important if you're asked, like if your question is, why doesn't God answer prayers?

That is a really important question and God doesn't get mad at you asking it. But I also think it is really important for you to know this. You simply aren't in a great position to judge what God is doing or not doing.

In the field of Christian apologetics, which is really just this discipline of the Christian faith that looks to make rational and reasonable arguments for why God does exist and why the Bible is who he says he is, kind of one of the elementary, entry-level propositions in that is kind of the thought experiment and the proposition that atheism is basically intellectually untenable position.

And what I mean by that is the reasoning goes like this. If you're going to definitively declare 100% I know that there is no God, you basically have to have all knowledge in the universe to pull that off. Or to put it another way, like you might say, look, in all the evidence I see in science, in math, in physics, in everything I have been exposed to, I see no evidence that God is there.

[6 : 53] I see no evidence that God is doing anything. I believe there are satisfactory, naturalistic answers to most of the questions in life and we are filling in the gaps every day.

And that would be understandable. But then, of course, if someone asked you, so let's talk about that knowledge for a minute, right? Like if we thought about all of the knowledge that was possible to have, not just what you have, I'm talking about if you were to know everything, past, present, future, you could show up in Jerusalem at the crucifixion and see what happened.

You knew everything about quantum physics and life and everything, literally everything. You knew what somebody had for lunch yesterday. You could look in it, like if you had all of that knowledge, what percentage of all of that do you personally possess?

And I mean, even if you're the smartest person alive, if you're honest, I think you would say, there's no way you have more than 1% of all the knowledge that's ever existed. That's a way overestimate. You're not even close to that. But even if we granted you 1%, the argument would go someone like, well, I mean, is it not possible in the 99% of things you've never seen and never experienced, there might be something that could convince you that God exists?

[8 : 12] And then from there, you know, again, people have their arguments. You can, you know, it's not the end of the debate and that's kind of not the point. But what you find out really quickly is, again, if you're going to be an honest person, really you have to fall back into this position of what's practical agnosticism, meaning, okay, I don't know.

Like, yes, I don't know. I haven't seen everything. But based on what I've seen, I don't think, I don't believe there's a God and I think I can extrapolate that into the other percentages and then you go into other discussions, right?

And my point here is not to say, this is some intellectual gotcha. See, you can't be an atheist. Like, that's not what I'm trying to do. We've established, it's important to say, I just don't see any evidence for God.

I don't see any evidence for prayer. But as we engage God's word today, what I would humbly submit to, if you're in that place where you feel like, I just don't think God ever does anything, I would ask you, hey, beyond your own experience, if you had a moment to question every person in this audience right now, and you could scour all the pages of history, all the people who follow Jesus, is it least possible that you might find something in there that would make you say, there might be something more to this prayer thing?

I mean, if God really is real, and he's what the Bible says he is, he's omniscient, and omnipresent, and omnipotent, the truth is, you wouldn't expect you to be in a good place to figure out what he's doing.

[9 : 51] You're simply too limited to render judgment. Again, I know that, that might not be the place you want to start, but I would offer, if we can start in that place of humility, just entertain the idea that maybe my view, what I've experienced, what I've felt, is not all there is, then the good news is, the Bible does offer us some thoughts on why God might not be answering your prayers.

And so we're gonna look at a few of those to start, and I think the first one is just a very simple, but very profound idea. One of the reasons God might not be answering your prayers is because God isn't going to answer a prayer that hurts His children.

In Romans chapter 8, it tells us this about interceding to the Father. It says, Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Sometimes, it is God's good pleasure to answer not the prayer you're praying, but the prayer you should be praying. And now notice that that verse from Romans doesn't tell us stop praying until you figure it out.

[11 : 28] I mean, what have we said throughout this series? Pray what you got. Like, start where you're at. The verse is not there to scold you for your lack of knowledge of all the deep things of God.

It is encouraged you. It is there to say, as you fumble your way through this, you're right. You don't always know what you should be praying for, but the Spirit does.

And he is calling out to God for you. In fact, part of the Spirit's job, part of his forming you is to get you to the place where you're praying the thing that God wants to answer.

God is fully resolved to get you to that place where you pray in accordance with his good will the prayer that he is eager to answer.

So sometimes God won't answer the prayer because he's got to get you praying for the right thing. I think another reason we see in Scripture that God doesn't always answer prayer is that God wants to grow and mature you.

[12 : 35] It's our favorite one. In the book of Job, chapter 13, right in the middle of the worst of the suffering that Job is doing, right in the middle of his unanswered prayers, Job holds nothing back about his feelings, his desire to plead his case to God, his anger at his friends for telling him it's his fault.

He says, it's not my fault. Like, I want to talk to God. He is a very real human responding in a very real way to devastating circumstances in his life and yet, right in the middle of it, he makes this declaration that just gives us a little glimpse of the maturity that God knew was in Job before God boasted before the host of heaven who is like Job.

Because in the middle of all that, in the middle of his anger and his frustration and the silence of God in Job 13, 15, he says, though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.

The truth is, a lot of the times the thing we want most in prayer, the thing we're praying for most is for the hardship to pass.

We want the circumstance to change. But, when you look in Scripture, oftentimes the thing God wants you to pray for is not for the circumstance to change, but for the character that needs to form in you to come out of it.

[14 : 18] You see people praying prayers like, not that the circumstance will change, but that God will build in you his kingdom. God will build amongst you faith.

There's a verse in 2 Corinthians where Paul says, hey, we're afflicted, but we're not crushed. We're perplexed, but we're not in despair. We're pressured, but we're not forsaken.

We're struck down, but we're not destroyed. And oftentimes, what we want is to pray, God, may I not be afflicted, may I not be perplexed, may I not be pressured.

But what he's saying there is, no, we are afflicted, but we are not crushed. God, when we are perplexed, may we not be in despair.

When we are struck down, may we never be destroyed, Father. It's the kind of heart that God wants to draw out of you. Like, what would that look like when it's perfected?

[15 : 21] It would look like walking into the very hardest things of your life and in a very human way saying, God, I don't want to do this. God, if it is possible, can this moment pass from me?

Yet, not what I will, but what you would will, Father. Sometimes God isn't going to answer a prayer because he just wants to make you more like Jesus.

And then, if we're honest, sometimes the why God is not moving is simply this. Years ago, Garth Brooks wrote this very popular song titled, Unanswered Prayers.

And in that song, he recounts a very common story of how someone prays for a particular love in their life. There's someone they're in love with and they're infatuated with and that is the only person, the only thing I've ever wanted.

God, if you can just give me that, I will never ask for anything again only to later in life look at the things that God did after he didn't answer that prayer and to say, God, I'm so grateful for the family I do have.

[16:45] I'm so grateful that you had a better plan. And certainly, there is some truth to that. I would think many of us in here can definitely reflect back on things we've prayed for and with the gift of hindsight, we're kind of like, whew, thank you Jesus that you did not answer that prayer.

Maybe you have come to a place that though something was really hard at the time, you can now look back and say, man, I can see what you were doing, God. There was a better plan.

But not every unanswered prayer is going to fit that mold. Garth's song doesn't work for famine or disease.

Garth's song doesn't work when you've lost a loved one too soon and you're never going to get them back. And the truth is, while there are certainly things we can look and see God's plan, there are many other things in life that are just perplexing, you cannot yet understand why God let that happen.

It is still a question mark in your life. And I think oftentimes when we get into those situations as a follower of Jesus, our first inclination is to try to immediately give God an out.

[18:07] Like we don't want to move into the hard place so we come up with whatever explanation we can do in our mind that fills in the gap. Maybe it's something like, well, I guess it just wasn't God's will.

I mean, it's something hard and it's brutal but I guess God's just got a better plan. And there's certainly a place for that but the truth is sometimes what God wants you to do is trust Him in the unresolved.

To not try to desperately scramble to find an explanation that you can live with because you're afraid your faith is going to fall apart.

God is not always going to erase that question mark. Sometimes not even this side of heaven. God wants your real emotions, your real disappointment and longing because God wants you to keep seeking Him when you are in the desert.

but take heart because the God that will lead you into the desert has made provision for you while you are in the desert.

[19:21] So what do we do? What do I do if I find myself in the desert place? Now some of that I think we've covered in the rest of this series.

Like there are things if you've never tried before in prayer that might be helpful in moving you towards God. You could be still and listen. Maybe you're not hearing God because there's just too much clutter.

There's too much noise in your life. You can ask God to search your heart and see if there's anything separating from you. If you are openly rebelling, openly sinning, God's probably not going to move on if that's the thing He showed you.

You can pray as Jesus taught us. Like maybe you don't know what else to pray. And Jesus will lead you into our Father in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. You can pray like Jesus prayed.

And maybe God will meet you in those things. But sometimes even if you do those things, even if as best you know your heart you're seeking God and you're not rebelling, you will still find yourself in a place where you just don't feel God.

[20:28] You don't feel Him moving. You don't see Him answering prayers. And the truth is oftentimes that season is much longer than you want it to be.

You know as another song says it's like you're in a storm and you close your eyes to pray God let this storm pass and you open your eyes and it is still raining yet again.

What do I do when I'm in the desert? I think the first thing I would offer to you from scripture is when you are in the desert you drink from the streams that you can.

You know we've already talked about how oftentimes you simply aren't in a good position to judge the whole picture of God what God is doing but that doesn't mean you can't know anything. And thankfully if what you say is God I just I don't see anything in my own life that seems like God is moving he never intended you to face this life by yourself.

[21 : 35] And so if you can just kind of lift up your eyes beyond your own horizon for a minute you might actually find faith building reminders of God's presence and God's goodness even when you don't see it in your own life.

What I mean is even if you're not seeing answers to prayers if you're around the people of God you will find a myriad of stories that present you with evidence that God has not left.

I know for a fact if I invited every person in this room to come up and testify to have you ever seen God answer prayer I promise you there would be people that come up and say not only did God answer a prayer but when they told you what it was it would sound miraculous.

it would sound like something only God can do and it would probably surprise you you'd be like Bob like I didn't know you just told me God did a miracle oh yeah does that really happen sure like there are people in here who can bring you their prayer journal and say let me take you through the last five years and show you some things that I had to write down because I didn't want to forget them just a few weeks ago Kirk stood right here and gave you a very specific story of a time that he had forgotten to pray for somebody and God laid it on his heart oh no pray for that person to get a home but pray this very specific prayer for this very specific home that they got no chance at getting and God did it I can testify to you that on more than one occasion there is someone come up after a service and said hey can we pray healing over something in my life and they will say to you to this day I'd gone to doctors

I'd been praying for that and that moment Jesus took it away is that always the story no but when you faithfully pray in the things you'll see him do some stuff and of course in any group yet will there be people who exaggerate sure will there be even people that might lie for attention of course but when you start to interface with God's people I think what you're going to find is over and over you're going to run into people that you know are not fanatic they are truthful they are steady they are honest they are not given to fanaticism or exaggeration but they will tell you a story or stories of what God has done in their life and you have to wrangle with it it gives you hope or if you want to broaden your horizon a little further read some stories from the mission field again I guess you could say everybody there is a liar but you don't have to read too much about what

[24 : 38] God does when his people go out to realize that the book of Acts is still happening I mean I'm talking about prayers where people are seeking God in closed countries and God through a dream reveals to them to go to a place they've never been and that's where the missionary is or a provision to show up in a way you wouldn't expect or a healing that brings a whole village to Jesus just like you see on the pages of scripture or maybe if that's too word of mouth anecdotal for you luckily it's not like this wasn't written down over history as well not just in the scriptures if you look across the pages of history that don't make it into the books of great kings and great armies God's saints have been faithful to document this over the years George Mueller was a Christian evangelist and a director of a group of orphanages in Bristol

England throughout the 1800s and one of the things that Mueller was most famous for and was very well documented is that he had made sort of a promise just like a like an oath with God that he was never going to openly ask for financial support he was never going to let the need be known because he wanted to simply pray and trust that God would answer it and throughout the course of that it was very well known that he never verbalized needs and yet somehow millions and millions of dollars flowed into those orphanages over the years and this is one of those lives and it's certainly not restricted to him that I would encourage you to just go google it George Mueller if you haven't and read some of the stories that were written down about his orphanages over the years and see if it doesn't encourage your faith and I'll give you just two

I mean literally you could fill up an entire sermon with this but two of the more famous ones is one time he was with the children and they were you know constantly you know you need food you need to be able to feed them and they'd reached this point where there just wasn't anything in the cupboard like there was nothing to feed anybody and they were sitting there at the table for breakfast and this guy has the audacity to say he's not scrambling around what are we going to do he says let's pray for the food that God's about to give us he's got no answer and they pray that prayer and no sooner had they finished that literally a baker knocks on the door and he says hey

got no explanation for this but God woke me up in the middle of the night and said bake some bread and so I baked some bread and I figured why not bring it here to the orphanage can you use it and they were like well yes we can at the same time as he's doing that a milk cart breaks down like a wheel comes off or something right outside the orphanage and the guy's like oh man he walks in he says hey look

I'm not going to be able to deliver this it's just going to spoil could you do anything with it why yes we could there was another kind of well documented time when he was crossing the Atlantic on this ship to get to a preaching engagement he had in Quebec and as they were getting closer they really had to slow the ship down because this deep fog had set in and the captain was slowing him up and so Mueller like a lot of people who are crazy for Jesus do shows up and says hey why are we slowing down I gotta go preach this thing for Jesus and the captain's like dude there is fog everywhere I can't keep this ship going and so Mueller says well that's never gonna do I've gotta make this preaching engagement and so he convinced him to let him go down to the chart room and pray over the fog so he kind of goes down there and as recorded he prays this just really he looks at the map the chart and he just prays this really simple prayer God this fog needs to go away and as the story goes the captain who's not a believer just kind of well I'll throw something up too starts to pray and Mueller stops him and says look

I don't mean any offense here but you don't need to do that because and this is actually what he says to him he says captain I have known the Lord for more than 50 years and there is not one instance that I have failed to have an audience with the king there's no need to pray anymore the fog is gone and they go upstairs!

[29 : 29] and the fog is gone fog don't do that that guy became a Christian on the spot and he was like okay incidentally like when we talk about being praying church not to scare you but man what if we were church like that what if our first impulse when there was something we needed or something our city needed or something hard our very first impulse was to just say God can you just give it to us so when you don't see the answers that you were looking for in your life I would encourage you drink from the streams that you can and it won't fix everything you're still going to want to drink from the river that matters to your own life but God's given you those streams in the desert to build your faith and keep you going another thing you can do is when you're in the desert you trust that God is near even if you don't think he is you know if you feel like God is silent you are certainly not alone the Bible is full of what or what we might say the apparent silences of God and some of them feel pretty brutal for years the people of God cry out from slavery in Egypt

God free us and for 400 years that prayer goes unanswered think about that that means generations of people lived prayed and died and they did not see that prayer get answered but when the deliverance came boy did it come and it came in a way where you couldn't just go well of course if you wait 400 years I mean nations rise and fall surely now the way God brought them out that was that whole let my people go thing there were people who prayed and never saw the fulfillment but it doesn't mean God didn't answer we've already talked about Job and that whole book is about a man who doesn't understand what God is doing and what he is allowing and why he won't answer him and what is beautiful about that book is even after God shows up and talks to Job he never tells

Job why Job finds out it's enough to just know God is there but I think that's a device God uses in that book again to let you know God is not always going to tell you the reason for the unanswered prayer but when God shows up what you're going to find is it doesn't really matter as much as you thought it did the Psalms and the songs in the Old Testament and the cries of the prophets throughout the books of the prophets are filled with the phrase how long oh Lord will you not do something it is not a lack of faith nor does God despise his children crying out to him to do something move heal answer us God but the message throughout all of scripture and those silences is also even when you don't think God is there he is he's always listening and the beauty of the scripture is you get to read it as someone who gets to see the part of the play that the people living in it don't you get to look in and see the faithfulness of God moving even when the people living out the story can't and God does that he gives you those pages in the Bible so that when you are the one in the story and you can't see it you will remember he was near for them and he will be near for me now I'll also take you back to the place we discussed earlier where you trust you know somehow that even this silence is growing me it's somehow making me more a citizen of heaven you know God's getting me to the place where if he turns off the fields if it

seems like his voice is scarce the waters are scarce I'm still going to follow Jesus because I've seen enough to know I should finally when you're in the desert you should let that longing draw you to Jesus and to other people you know

I think what we've seen today is that when God withholds some of his hand to get you to a place where you reach out for more of him where you long for more of his touch that's not always a bad thing and make no mistake God is God is not a man like us and what I mean is we try to equate God to all of our human relationships and if that were a person doing that like if that was a person cutting you off to make you want them more that would be manipulative and cruel but God is not like that God is not full of ego he does not need to be needed the reason he's got to get you wanting more of him because he knows he made you and he knows that the thing you need most is more of him it is not bound of his it is not born of his need that he does that it is not some cruel trick it is you will be best when we are one the more our hearts pursue

[35 : 47] Jesus above all the more your desires the more your actions the more your life is going to look like the father above but also I think that longing that it brings out in you can actually stir up your sympathy and your passion for others because the sting of God's apparent absence doesn't have to be a faith breaker I think indeed sometimes if you let it what it will remind you of is you know I wish I was feeling more of God now but that just reminds me how much better my life is now than it was when I didn't have him the reason it stings is because I've seen what it looks like and what it feels like when the father is moving and I long for that if you let it that can also stir in you a desire to share that hope with others you remember what it was like to have no hope to feel far from

God and it spurs you as we say shine the light of the gospel wouldn't it be an interesting thing that the desert place would be the thing that makes you want to testify more to people not something where you're going oh my faith is shrinking where you go want everybody to know that thing I had the desert is not a pleasant place there's a reason people often don't live there they're not highly populated it's dry it's hot it's hard and wanting to see more of God wanting to see answered prayers is good if you're still in the place I mean this is just a sermon but again it doesn't fix say I want to see God move it is okay to wrestle with that it is okay to say God I need to see more of you show me your glory but it doesn't have to draw you away

God has purpose in everything he does I know even with my own kids and I'm sure yours as well as I work to build them towards maturity there are simply times when I have to take a step away and take my hands off the bike for a moment because they're never going to become fully formed adults if I always do all of it and so yes sometimes I'm going to step away while you're doing this on the bike yes sometimes my answer is going to be no you can go down the dark hall and cut on the light without me and their initial inclination is always going to be dad why aren't you helping me right now why aren't you right here beside me and that's understandable but I know what's on the other side I know how you're going to feel when you can ride that bike for yourself and the truth is in those moments in those moments when they're scared or they feel like

I'm not that close daddy's not that far away they have no idea how safe they are and I love them just as much as I ever have as a matter of fact you know as a parent sometimes even if you know it's got to happen it pierces your heart more than does theirs when they're crying out why aren't you doing something such it is with our heavenly father and so it can actually be true that sometimes unanswered prayers are a thing we can praise him for and be grateful for God give us the grace to be there as the band comes up today a couple of ways we can respond if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus I would just invite you as I did at the beginning I understand I've had objections to in my life and I don't think God is mad about that

I would just invite you to consider the testimony of the people of God if you want to know prayer is real I would invite you to ask some people in here ask some people in a community group ask some people after church they would be glad to share maybe maybe there's something more to this Jesus thing than you've seen and if any part of you feels like you want it and you want to see more of God Jesus says the one who seeks finds forgiveness finds a new hope a new life if that's you there'll be a prayer on the screen that's maybe a way you can express that to God if you want to pray!

[40 : 44] it with somebody we'll be down if you are a follower of Jesus when you're in the desert God seems silent you don't have to panic you are still so very safe God has not left you keep doing the things he has shown you to do until he reveals what to do next you know Henry Blackaby actually said God got him to a place in his life where when God seemed to be silent he actually

started to get excited because what he found was that probably means God is getting ready to show me something he's never shown me before I can give you that testimony I can tell you that at least in one of one of the places in my life that was darkest and I didn't think my faith was going to survive it the period after that was one of the greatest periods of growth and turns out

I didn't know about as much about the world as I thought I did and I didn't know much about what God has and will do as I thought I did he may very well be pulling you closer you can rejoice in that we're going to!

and then we're going to take communion again it's another thing we do every week that is a reminder that the God who pours out his very body and his very blood is not going to forget you you don't say here is my body and here is my blood shed for you and then disappear and so if you're in that desert place I encourage you when you take the communion take it back to your seat today maybe just with as much grace as God gives you say Jesus I'm taking this as a testament that never will you leave me and never will you forsake me and can can you show me can you show me the other side of this desert God we give this moment to you holy moments before you for your spirit to do whatever you will God I pray if there is someone that needs a stream in the desert you will provide it today

God I pray if there is healing that is needed you will provide it today God I pray if someone needs to see something that lets them know there is more to prayer than they have presumed you will provide it if that is intellectual if it is emotional if it is miraculous God whatever is needed I ask you would give us the grace to seek it and in your good pleasure you would give it this moment is yours! Jesus name