

Why Pray? Series. Read Psalm 42.

A number of years ago Garth Brooks had a hit song called "Unanswered Prayers." It seems that he wanted this girl so he begged God every night that she would become his wife. He went so far as to say to God, *if you'll grant me this, I'll never ask you for anything again.* God did not answer his prayer in the affirmative.

Do you have a stack of unanswered prayers?

Do you sometimes feel that God has not heard you? Can you relate to the Psalmist who says, "My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Ps 42:3).

This is not about clinical depression, which has various causes. It has to do with spiritual depression. Ancient people called this "the dark night of the soul."

Years later Garth Brooks discovered that "even though left unanswered, it did not mean that God didn't care." God simply had a different, and better, answer.

But perhaps your prayer remains unanswered at this point and that creates tension for you. You find yourself living in a tension of faith which causes you to ask, *where is God?* Your view of God becomes clouded.

Once, Martin Luther was going through a period of depression. He had a melancholy personality anyway, and while he had a great sense of humor, he would fall back into discouragement from the burdens of ministry. His wife, Katharine, a former nun, always tried to cheer him but her words made no impact. So one day he came home to find her dressed all in black.

Luther said, "Who died? I have not heard of anyone dying." She said, "Doctor, have not you heard that God is dead? My husband, Martin Luther, would never be in such a state of mind if he had a living God to trust in." Her therapy worked. His depression was broken. History tells he went to his desk and carved on the top the words "He lives."

That would have gotten him in trouble with me. But from then on, when he was tempted to discouragement, he looked that word and was reminded to have faith.

While Luther's wife helped him through his "dark night of the soul," the Psalmist seems to be talking to himself. When I was a child and had a discouraging attitude my mother used to say, "You need to go sit in your room for a while and give yourself a good talking to."

The writer felt abandoned and alone:

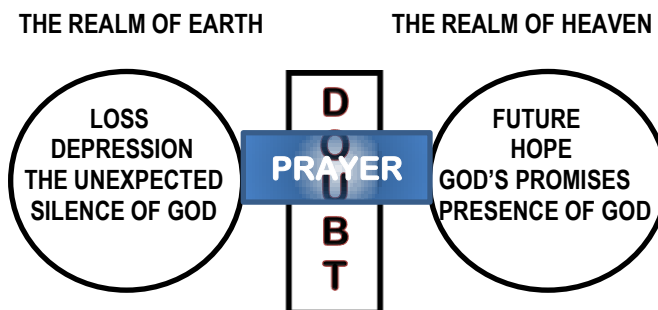
- He has this intense thirst for God but it is not satisfied.
- Even though he is actively seeking God, he remains unsatisfied.
- He is depressed in his soul.
- He's crying day and night.
- His depression is driving him on a profound quest for God.
- But God seems absent.
- He knows God is the answer but he has not gotten there yet.

Trust in God is extremely tentative.

If we are honest, we all probably find ourselves in that spot. It's like the little devil sitting on one shoulder and an angel on the other. One whispers, "He's not here. He's not going to help. Feel bad, feel really bad."

The other says, "Seek God with all your heart and mind and strength. Look up at the hills. Be encouraged. Remember going to church and singing praises?" God is good!

This struggle reflects a class between the realm of earth and realm of heaven.



Experiences of loss, unexpected circumstances, depression, or not getting a positive answer to our prayers creates the atmosphere of questioning, "Where are you God?" Doubt is like a wall that keeps us from seeing the good things of God in those difficult times of life. God seems silent. Prayer covers doubt and opens the realm of heaven.

Thus, doubts create the deepest search for God and prayer opens the time when passion for God can grow. When you lament in prayer, you experience both a profound sense of God's absence and a fleeting sense of God's presence.

Have you had a really bad day of worry or anxiety or things just go wrong and you just don't feel God understands at all. Even if you tell him for days how you feel, God is silent. Lamenting is the freedom to be honest with God. Do you tell God how you really feel?

When I went to seminary it had not been that long since I had been through breast cancer. So I felt a lump on my eyebrow, and my eyebrow seemed really close to my brain, so I woke up in the night just sure that I would die of brain cancer. God seemed silent.

That weekend I went to a retreat with the elders and pastors where I was interning. I was put in a small group with a man named Mr. Fisher. We were to share our life stories with each other during the weekend—nothing deep; just a little about our lives. I told him about my training in ballet at my high school. Later that weekend out of the blue, he said to me, "You know, ballet dancers are really healthy. Because you were a dancer, you'll probably live to 94."

I laughed—how dare I think God does not know my anxieties and is not willing to help! Now, every time the devil tempts me about my health, I tell myself "I'm going to live to 94!"

So this Psalm encourages us to capitalize on the pursuit of God even when we are lamenting. The Psalmist gives us the freedom to lament and complain in prayer.

You do not have to feel guilty before God about how you feel. Just don't give up on God. Don't stay in the complaint. Instead, let those feelings drive you deeper and closer to God.

C. S. Lewis married for the first time in his fifties. His wife had cancer but she went into remission. He was thrilled and looked forward to a long and happy marriage with her. But then the cancer returned with a vengeance and she died. Though he loved God, he was extremely angry and he vented his anger in a book called *A Grief Observed*, telling God that he felt like "God had slammed the door of heaven shut and locked it from the inside." But later his lament became the peace that passes all understanding and he believed even more so that God knew what God was doing.

We don't stay in the lament. We have to push through that wall of doubt and despair to God through prayer.

So how do you do it? The Psalmist says by remembering. Remember singing – coming to church worship praising God in song. When Martin Luther got down, he sang hymns out loud because Satan cannot stand hymns. It was his way of warding off Satan's attacks.

Remember the beauty of the world around you. Take a walk outside and enjoy nature.

Remember Scripture's promises – take its promises to heart, rather than that voice in your head that says God has forgotten you. Here's one:

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil. Then you will have healing for your body and strength for your bones." (Proverbs 3:5-8)

Remember a friend's positive words as from God. I still remember Mr. Fisher's words.

Then your waves of despair will become streams of living water and your faith will grow despite the trials of life.

When we turn to God we turn to someone who has unlimited resources so no matter how bad it is, God has unlimited resources. He finds a way out. Our job is to trust in him and then we will be amazed at what God does.

Let's read Psalm 42 once more, this time from Eugene Peterson's ***The Message***:

A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek; I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I'm thirsty for God-alive. I wonder, "Will I ever make it—arrive and drink in God's presence?" I'm on a diet of tears—tears for breakfast, tears for supper. All day long people knock at my door, pestering, "Where is this God of yours?" These are the things I go over and over, emptying out the pockets of my life. I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd, right out in front, leading them all, eager to arrive and worship, shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—celebrating, all of us, God's feast! Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God—soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He's my God. When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse everything I know of you, from Jordan depths to Hermon heights, including Mount Mizar. Chaos calls to chaos, to the tune of whitewater rapids. Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers crash and crush me. Then God promises to love me all day, sing songs all through the night! My life is God's prayer. Sometimes I ask God, my rock-solid God, "Why did you let me down? Why am I walking around in tears, harassed by enemies?" They're out for the kill, these tormentors with their obscenities, taunting day after day, "Where is this God of yours?" Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God—soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He's my God.

There's one thing wrong with my title. Have you guessed it? "Silent God" is really not silent at all. Silent God becomes my Rock Solid God.

AMEN