

why

ISN'T GOD ANSWERING MY PRAYER?

a 5-day devotional by lisa terkeurst

DAY 1 • WHEN GOD ISN'T ANSWERING OUR PRAYERS

“From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” Psalm 61:2 NIV

When God doesn't seem to be answering our prayers, it can be hard. Sometimes, downright awful. Heartbreaking. Soul-shaking.

One minute I'm determined to trust God.

In the next, I feel myself slipping. The “why” questions tumble in so hard. My heart hurts. My eyes leak.

I suspect you understand that ache.

I don't want to oversimplify what to do when it doesn't seem like God is anywhere to be found in the midst of difficult times. I know from my own deep hurts and prayer requests I've received over the years, many of us are facing really tough issues. Situations where the answers aren't easy or clear cut.

That's why I'm so thankful we'll be able to process this together over the next few days.

But today, I want to get started by sharing three things I've discovered that help me when it feels as though God isn't answering my prayers...

PRESS INTO GOD WHEN YOU WANT TO PULL AWAY.

When I really want to hear from God but He doesn't seem to be answering me, I sometimes find I want to disengage from my normal spiritual activities. Skip church. Put my Bible on my shelf. And let more and more time lapse between prayers.

But our key verse, Psalm 61:2, reminds us that the best thing we can do when our hearts are growing faint is to call out to God, not pull away from Him: “From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”

The Bible also promises we will find God if we seek Him with all our heart. Jeremiah 29:13 says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” All my heart includes the parts that are broken. Bring it all to God.

He can handle your honesty and will respond. But we have to position ourselves to go where truth is. Go to church. Listen to praise music. Read verses. Memorize verses. And keep talking to God.



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PRAISE GOD OUT LOUD WHEN YOU WANT TO GET LOST IN COMPLAINTS.

In the midst of what you're facing, find simple things for which to praise God. I don't mean thank Him for the hard stuff. I mean thank Him for the other simple, good things still in the midst. A child's laugh. A bush that blooms. The warmth of a blanket. The gift of this breath and then the next.

Psalm 40:3 reminds me God will give me a new song when I make praise the habit of my heart and mouth: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him."

PUT YOURSELF IN THE COMPANY OF TRUTH.

That friend who speaks truth? Listen to her. Stay connected to her. Let her speak truth into your life, even when you're tired of hearing it. Stand on the strength of her faith when you feel your own faith is weak. Let her lead you back to God time and time again. Proverbs 12:26a reminds us: "One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor ..." (ESV).

It's okay to feel hurt and confused. Our God is big enough to handle our honest feelings. But don't let your feelings lead you away from God or away from His truth. Press into Him. Praise Him. And put yourself in the company of truth.

As you stay with God in these ways, you'll become ready to receive His answer when it comes.

Dear Lord, thank You for hearing every "why" my heart sends up to You. Forgive me when I retreat from You and Your Word. I want to trust You more. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



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“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.” Psalm 40:1 NIV

I understand how hard it is when deep disappointments linger on and on. What it’s like to pray the same prayers over and over with little to no change. Over the last few years, I’ve walked through some of the most heartbreaking seasons in my family, marriage and health.

And although the circumstances of your life may be different, you probably have middle-of-the-night moments of wrestling through your own tears.

The glaring disappointment of negative pregnancy tests month after month while your closest friends are decorating their soon-to-be-filled nurseries.

The emptiness in your heart because that person you love doesn’t seek to really understand you, rarely cheers you on, and doesn’t seem to want to connect intimately with you.

The draining frustration of never being the one chosen for the job or ministry opportunity you’ve dreamed about for a long, long time.

The excruciating fear of watching your kids make poor choices no matter how hard you pray for them.

The heartbreak of that friendship that fell apart despite your best efforts to hold it together.

The painful symptoms of a chronic illness that leave you feeling weak, frustrated and misunderstood.

The weight of living with so much financial debt that you can’t enjoy your life or the people in it.

And in your most private moments you want to scream words you don’t use around your Bible friends at the unfairness of it all. You, too, have memories that still hurt. Realities that make you swallow back tears. Heartache that pumps sorrow through your veins. Sufferings that seem forever long. And you’re disappointed that today you aren’t living the promises of God you’ve begged to come to pass. You’re tired of this disappointment lingering a little too long and being a bit too hard.

But then there are more hopeful moments ... where you want to turn up the praise music, lift up honest prayers, and declare that God is good even when the situation doesn’t seem good.

That’s what it is like to be so very human — hurting but still hoping.

Hoping doesn’t mean we put ourselves in harm’s way. It doesn’t mean we ignore reality. No, hoping means we acknowledge reality in the very same breath that we acknowledge God’s sovereignty.

Our hope can’t be tied to whether or not a circumstance or another person changes. Our hope must be tied to the unchanging promise of God. We hope for the good we know God



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will ultimately bring from our situation, whether the good turns out to match our desires or not. And sometimes that takes a while. The process will most likely require us to be persevering. Patient. Maybe even longsuffering.

Honestly, I know that can feel a little overwhelming. Right now, I'm desperate to see a promise fulfilled and a prayer answered in my life.

I want the promised blessing of Psalm 40:4: "Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord." I forget that this kind of trusting in God is often forged in the crucible of longsuffering. God isn't picking on me. God is picking me to personally live out one of His promises.

It's a high honor. But it doesn't always feel that way. I've got to walk through the low places of the process before I'm perfectly equipped to live the promise.

We read about some of the low places of the process in verses 1-3 of Psalm 40:

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.

I want the solid rock on which to stand, but first I have to wait patiently for the Lord to lift me out of the slime and mud and set my feet. That word set in the original Hebrew is qum, which means to arise or take a stand. God has to take me through the process of getting unstuck from what's been holding me captive before I can take a stand.

I also want that new song promised here. Did you notice, though, what comes before the psalm's promise of a new song? It's the many cries to the Lord for help. The most powerful praise songs don't start out as beautiful melodies; rather, they start as guttural cries of pain. But soon the process of pain turns into the promise of a praise like no other.

Oh, sweet friend ... I know this is hard. But let me be the one to lean in and whisper to you, "God is working things out. He's not far away. He is right here with us. We need to cling to this hope. Believe this hope. Live out this hope. Right here and right now. Even if our prayers aren't answered in the way and the timing that we want. Even when this process feels messy. We will trust that God is good."

Tomorrow, we'll talk about changing our perspective when God feels distant. But for now, let's end today's devotion by praying this prayer together...

Lord God, we know You often work in ways we don't understand. Help us feel close to You in the middle of the process You're taking us through. Help us trust You are at work even when You seem silent and far off. Help us believe You are good in every way — every day. Thank You for Your loving and watchful care of us, Your children. We're thankful today and always. In Jesus' precious Name we pray, Amen.



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“The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”

Psalm 145:18 NIV

I woke up on what I thought would be an ordinary Monday two summers ago. But nothing was normal.

I felt as if knives were mercilessly carving their way through my insides. Waves of nausea left me convulsing and desperate for relief. I tried to step out of bed, but I collapsed. I screamed.

My family rushed me to the emergency room where we all hoped I could find some relief and help. It would be five excruciatingly horrible and exhausting days before I'd find either. I never knew how impossible it could feel to live another hour, much less another day. I never knew how painful even sixty seconds could be. I never desperately desired death before as my only option for relief.

At first, my mind couldn't think rationally at all. I was just panicked, trying to figure out how to get immediate relief from my pain. I was in the urgency of the moment. But as the panic started to give way to desperation, I cried out for God to help me. “Take the pain away! Please, dear God, take this pain away!”

But He didn't. Not that moment. Not the next. Not even the next day.

His silence stunned me.

I kept picturing Him standing beside my bed seeing my anguish, watching my body writhing in pain, hearing my cries but making the choice to do nothing. And I couldn't reconcile that.

How could God do that? How could He say I'm His daughter who He deeply loves but let me lie there in excruciating pain? How could He not show up during a time of my greatest need?

These are the thoughts and questions that tumbled around my brain during a time of such pain and distress. But we all have questions like this, no matter what our situation is.

Where are You, God? Do You see me? Do You care?

After five of the longest and most excruciating days of my life, a new doctor came to my hospital room. He'd run one last test. And, finally, we had some answers.

The right side of my colon had ripped away from the abdominal wall and twisted around the left side. The blood flow was completely cut off. My colon had distended from the normal 4 centimeters in diameter to more than 14 centimeters.

It had been in danger of rupturing when it was around 10 centimeters, at which point I would have felt relief from the intense pain. And it's at that exact time when many others suffering with this medical situation feel that relief and go to sleep. Their bodies turn septic, and they die.



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The surgeon explained that he needed to rush me into emergency surgery and he'd be removing most of my colon. He was hoping to save enough that my body would eventually be able to function properly, but he wasn't sure.

He wasn't even sure I'd make it through the surgery.

And with that daunting news, I hugged my family, prayed with my pastor, and was wheeled into the surgical unit. Thankfully, the surgery went well, and weeks later, while I was home recovering, the surgeon called me. He'd gotten the report back from the mass that was removed, and there was no further treatment needed. However, there was an alarming part of the report he couldn't reconcile, even with his years of practicing medicine.

He said, *"Lysa, I don't really like how people throw around the term miracle. But honestly, it's the only word I know to use in your case. The cells in your colon were already in a state of autolysis. This is where your brain has signaled your body to start self-digesting. It's decomposition. It's what happens when you die. Lysa, you can't get any closer to death than that. How you survived this, I can't explain."*

I hung up the phone, stunned. And I suddenly thought of those days before the surgery when I was begging God to take away the pain. I had questioned God because of the pain. I had wondered how God could let me be in so much pain. And I had cried, because I thought God somehow didn't care about my pain.

But in the end, it was the pain that God used to save my life. The pain was what kept me in the hospital. The pain was what kept me demanding the doctors run more tests. The pain was what forced me to address what desperately needed to be attended to within my body. The pain was what made me allow a surgeon to cut my belly wide open. The pain was what helped save me. Had God taken away the pain, I would have gone home, my colon would have ruptured, my body would have turned septic, and I would have died.

I now have a completely different picture of God standing beside my hospital bed while I was hurting and begging Him to help me. He wasn't ignoring me. No, I believe it took every bit of holy restraint within Him to not step in and remove my pain. He loved me too much to do the very thing I was begging Him to do.

He knew things I didn't know. He saw a bigger picture I couldn't see. His mercy was too great. His love was too deep. Indeed, He is a good, good Father.

He was not far off like I'd imagined as I lay writhing in pain. He was near. So very near. Just like Psalm 145:18 tells us, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."

He was loving me through the pain. It was necessary pain — life-saving pain I can look back on now with new eyes. It's given me a whole new outlook on the times when God seems silent.

His silence was part of the rescue.

Father, You know the heartache and pain we are facing. Help us trust and believe You are not far off, but are very close, holding us — comforting us. We know You are good. We know You have good plans and are able to take our shattered pieces and make them whole again. We love You and trust You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



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“So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son.” 1 Samuel 1:20a (NIV)

Over the next two days, I want us to look at a woman in the Bible whose heart ached to see her own prayer come to pass: Hannah. Her desire? To have a child.

We find her in 1 Samuel 1:11b feeling provoked and irritated in her situation. Her anguish was so intense that she wept and would not eat. Before the Lord, she cried out in bitterness of soul, “Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant ... then I will ...” (NIV).

These words describe and articulate the deep distress of a woman from thousands of years ago, and yet here I sit in modern times relating so completely.

Hannah’s tears over her empty womb were made even more painful by her husband’s other wife, Peninnah. She had many sons and daughters and made sure to rub this fact in Hannah’s face every chance she got.

There’s a common thread that weaves through Hannah’s story, and yours and mine. We can all be found desperately wanting something we see the Lord giving to other women. We see Him blessing them in the very areas He’s withholding from us. We look at them and feel set aside.

Why them? Why not me?

We’ve done all we know to do. We’ve prayed all we know to pray. We’ve stood on countless promises with a brave face. And still nothing.

So what do we do when we feel set aside? What do we do when our heart is struggling to make peace between God’s ability to change hard things and His apparent decision not to change them for us?

We do what Hannah did. Just like we talked about on Day 1, we need to keep pressing in.

Instead of taking matters into her own hands, Hannah took her requests to God. Instead of pulling away from Him in suspicion, she pressed in ever closer, filling the space of her wait with prayer.

Oh, how I love her unflinching faith. Where barrenness and mistreatment by Peninnah could have caused Hannah to completely lose heart, she refused to be deterred from trusting in God. She possessed a faith that was not contingent upon her circumstances, but based on what she knew to be true about her good and faithful God. A faith that led her to pray with so much passion and boldness in the tabernacle that Eli, the high priest, accused her of being drunk! (1 Samuel 1:13-14)



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And in a matter of four verses (17-20), her cries of anguish gave way to the cries of her newborn son. Of course, 1 Samuel 1:20a uses very clear words to let us know Hannah's answer didn't come right away: "So *in the course of time* Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son ..." (emphasis added).

Samuel was born in God's perfect timing. And the timing of his birth was imperative because Samuel was destined to play an integral role in the transition from the time of the judges to the eventual establishment of kingship for the Israelites.

God hadn't made Hannah wait to punish her. He hadn't been calloused or indifferent to her cries. And He's not ignoring those of us waiting either.

God simply loves us too much to answer our prayers at any other time than the right time and in any other way than the right way.

Lord, thank You so much for reminding me today that You are not ignoring me. You hear every cry of my heart. Will You please help me in the waiting? Help me trust Your timing and Your ways. In Jesus' Name, Amen.



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“Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.’”
1 Samuel 2:1 (NIV)

Today, let’s continue our time with Hannah. 1 Samuel 2 starts with her lifting up a beautiful, heartfelt song of praise.

She is the woman we just saw crying out to God in 1 Samuel 1 over the matter of her empty womb. The woman whose cries of anguish gave way to the cries of a newborn son.

And it would be easy for us to dismiss Hannah’s prayer of praise today. Especially if we are in a painful place of waiting for God to answer the desperate cry of our heart. Of course, Hannah’s praising Him. God answered her prayer. I could praise Him like that, too, if only He would hear me and move on my behalf.

But as much as it pierces my soul to think about it, I wonder sometimes if I want the answer to the cry of my heart more than I want God Himself.

That’s why I want us to take a closer look at Hannah’s story.

One of the first things we can note is the timing of Hannah’s prayer.

If we turn back to 1 Samuel 1, we see that Hannah isn’t lifting these praises up immediately after the miraculous birth of her son, Samuel. Her words actually come after she follows through on her promise to give Samuel back to God in 1 Samuel 1:11. Bible scholars say Samuel was probably around 2 or 3 years old when he was weaned and Hannah took him to Eli, the high priest, so Samuel could serve in the house of the Lord.

Can you even imagine? This was her son. The one she had passionately prayed for.

Yet Hannah willingly and fully surrendered him back to the Lord. And then she joyfully opened her mouth with powerful praise. Which leads us to the next thing I want us to look at — Hannah’s prayer itself.

Hannah’s prayer gives us a rare glimpse into the life of a woman of profound faith. Throughout the entire prayer, there is poetic brilliance as we see her compare and contrast those that are for God and against Him. At the core of her prayer is the realization that God raises up the broken and battered and uses them to accomplish His purposes.

In Hannah’s words we see the raw and true emotion of a woman who had endured affliction and pain while also experiencing the blessing of a faithful God. But the blessing of God wasn’t the focus of her prayer.

From the very first verse we can see where Hannah’s hope and delight were found: “My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance” (1 Samuel 2:1). And Hannah goes on to make mention of the Lord’s name a total of 18 times in her prayer. Eighteen.



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The object of Hannah's affection was the Lord Himself. He was the source of her hope. He was the source of her deep, soul satisfaction. Her devotion to Him was never tied to whether or not God answered her prayer.

Her devotion was securely attached to who she knew God to be.

Oh, friend. This is where I believe we need to stop and do some personal heart examination. Where does our affection lie? To what is our devotion truly tied?

We need to consider these questions carefully. Because that thing we've been so desperate to see come to pass? That unanswered prayer? That unrelenting ache?

Those answers and the easing of that ache aren't the source of us finally becoming fully satisfied. They aren't. And believing this lie is a scheme of Satan to keep us in an unsatisfied place. Not to mention that connecting our faith to whether or not God answers our prayers when and how we want is shaky ground.

If we want settled and secure hearts, we must tie our hope to the Lord Himself. We must set our affection fully and firmly on Him — delighting ourselves in who He is instead of what we long for Him to do. Because the depth of our affection for God directly affects the level of our devotion to God. And I want to live this life devoted to Him, no matter how or when He answers my prayers.

Father God, help me have a heart more like Hannah's. A heart that remains tender toward You in all circumstances. A heart that finds its sole delight in You. I am choosing to praise You today, simply for who You are. The God who loves me. The God who will never leave me or forsake me. The God who knows what is best and is always working for my good. Today, I am choosing to set my affection on You and rejoice over the gift it is to be Yours. In Jesus' name, Amen.



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