


Learning how to
talk to God
from the great prayers of the Bible

Jeremiah's Prayer of Disappointment

Lamentations 3

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If you've prayed for the healing of a loved one and healing did not come, you've asked, "Why?" If you've prayed for God to salvage your marriage and it ended in divorce, you've asked, "Why?" If a medical test came back with a dreaded diagnosis, you've asked, "Why?"

The question "Why?" is not theory. It's personal. We ask "Why?" when life hurts, when life is scary, and when life is overwhelming. We also we ask "Why?" when God is silent when we need Him most.

I've collected dozens of books on prayer during my life as a pastor, each one encouraging and uplifting. But my collection also includes books with titles like these.

*When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer*¹

*When God Doesn't Make Sense?*²

*When Life Is Hard*³

*When the Darkness Will Not Lift*⁴

*The Problem of Pain*⁵

*The Cry of the Soul*⁶

*Disappointment with God*⁷

*Angry with God*⁸

*Walking Away from Faith*⁹

And one book simply entitled *Why?*¹⁰

God promises to hear our prayers and to respond to our prayers. Yet sometimes, there is silence. And that silence is confusing. Some say there is no such thing as unanswered prayer. That God always answers – either yes, no, or wait. I believe that too, yet it is undeniable that sometimes, many times, God is silent.

The prophet Jeremiah asked that dreaded question, "Oh Lord, why?" You may be asking that question too. You may be wondering, like Jeremiah, can we really count on God to show up when we need Him most? Lamentations 3 is how Jeremiah wrestled with that question and may help you wrestle with it as well. As he experienced tragedy and misery, faith and hope drained from his life, leaving him confused and disappointed in God. So much so, that he was brutally honest and complained to God. So, this is going to be a brutally honest message. I'm not going to quote a Bible verse and tell you to have a nice day. I'm going to talk about hope when our prayers have yet to be answered, when our circumstances have yet to improve, when our pain is unbearable, and when it's hard to have faith.

Jeremiah felt all of that, and yet, he was able to say, ***"I still have hope, because the Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness"*** (Lamentations 3:21-23, NAS).

This spring and summer, we're in a series on prayer, *learning how to talk to God from the great prayers of the Bible*. And one of the great prayers is Jeremiah's prayer of disappointment. It is a prayer of complaint.¹¹ And yes, complaint is a form of prayer. And yes, it is appropriate to cry out to God when we're confused, angry, and hurting. So, if faith and hope have drained from your heart, as it had from Jeremiah's heart, I hope the rest of his story will help.

JEREMIAH'S QUESTIONS AND OURS

Year after year, the Lord told Jeremiah to urge the people to repent of their idolatrous ways, but their hearts were hard, and they would not. So the Lord tore the nation in two. The northern tribes of Israel were conquered by the Assyrians, and the southern tribes of Judah were conquered by the Babylonians. And it was all God's doing, pouring out His judgment on His people because they would not repent.

In 586 BC, Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians. Much like the days of the Third Reich, thousands of Jews were deported, and Jerusalem was left smoldering. How bad was it? Priests were assassinated in the temple, the streets were littered with dead bodies, and starving mothers were driven to cannibalize their children.¹² The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, not only destroyed Jerusalem, he destroyed their faith and hope as well.¹³

It was at that tragic moment in history that Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations. He is called the "weeping prophet" because of the great misery he witnessed.¹⁴

Early on, Jeremiah was a man of faith. He obeyed God and boldly proclaimed all God told him to say. Yet for his obedience, Jeremiah was ridiculed, beaten, and left for dead in the bottom of a well. Jeremiah preached faithfully for 40 years, and no one listened. When he preached, a bunch of guys beat him up.

So Jeremiah felt betrayed by God. "O Lord, You have deceived me," he said (Jeremiah 20:7, NAS). The word "deceived" is the same Hebrew word for seduction. Jeremiah accused God of seducing him to trust Him only to abandon him.¹⁵ Jeremiah "staked his life on God, and (felt like) God had let him down."¹⁶

Lamentations 3 is a prayer. It's also Jeremiah's complaint to God. Like many chapters in the Old Testament, it is an acrostic poem, with each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁷ Lamentations 3 is even more dramatic. Every three verses in the chapter begin with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This was meticulous writing. Careful thought went into every phrase. Jeremiah had three complaints against God for every letter of the alphabet!

Lamentations 3 is Jeremiah's crisis of faith. It's hard to read because it comes from the heart of a man who is disappointed and disillusioned with God.

- 3:1 – "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath."¹⁸ God may have been punishing the nation, but Jeremiah took it personally. He was miserable and he blamed God for it.

- 3:2 – “He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light.” Jeremiah felt like God had turned the lights out on his life.
- 3:3 – “He has turned his hand against me again and again.”¹⁹ Jeremiah felt like God had slapped him in the face.
- 3:4 – “He has broken my bones.” Jeremiah felt beaten up ... by God!
- 3:5 – “He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.” Jeremiah felt like God had been bitter and harsh to him.
- 3:6 – “He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.” Jeremiah felt like a corpse sealed inside a tomb.
- 3:7 – “He has walled me in so that I cannot escape, he has weighed me down with chains.” Jeremiah felt like God had thrown him in a dungeon and forgotten him.
- 3:8 – “Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.” Jeremiah felt like God had hung up the phone.
- 3:9 – “He barred my way with blocks of stone.” Jeremiah felt like God had put every obstacle in his way.
- 3:10 – “He is to me like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in secret places” (NAS). Jeremiah felt ambushed by God, like a bear or lion pouncing on its prey.
- 3:11 – “(He has) torn me to pieces” (NAS). Jeremiah felt mangled by God.
- 3:12 – “He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows ... and pierced my heart.” Jeremiah felt like he was on God’s hit list.
- 3:14 – “I became the laughingstock of all my people, they mock me in song all day long.” People were laughing at Jeremiah, singing songs to mock him, and God did nothing to defend him.
- 3:15 – “He has filled me with bitter herbs.” Jeremiah felt like God had crammed bitterness down his throat.
- 3:16 – “He has broken my teeth with gravel.” Jeremiah felt like God had punched him in the mouth.
- 3:17 – “I have been deprived of peace” (NIV). “I have forgotten what happiness is” (ESV). Jeremiah felt like following God had only led to misery.
- 3:18 – “***My strength has perished, and so has my hope***” (NAS). His strength was exhausted, and his hope had died.

This is the prayer of man who is utterly broken, confused, angry, and exhausted. What surprises me most is that God allowed this chapter to be included in the Bible. God did not censor Jeremiah. That means He won’t censor us. That means we can pour out our hearts to God – and cry and complain and question – and He will patiently and lovingly listen.

If you’ve ever asked God “Why?” or experienced unanswered prayer or struggled to understand God’s silence, then you’re not alone. So did Jeremiah.

There are different kinds of psalms in the book of Psalms. There are psalms of comfort like Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Psalms of majesty like Psalm 8, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name.” Psalms of worship like Psalm 98, “Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done wonderful things.” And there are psalms of lament.

Many of the psalms are cries of pain. Cries of the heart with questions, doubts, and complaints. In his mammoth book on prayer, theologian J. I. Packer devotes an entire chapter to complaining. Another author writes, “Half the Psalms contain complaints, usually directed toward God. The psalmist does not hesitate to wrestle with God, cry out to God, weep before God, even blame God for misery and suffering.”²⁰

Psalm 69 is one of those psalms.²¹ It’s David pouring his heart out to God. It’s raw and honest. Holding nothing back, David cried out to God with questions, doubts, and complaints. He’s hurting and he’s confused by God’s silence.

“Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck. Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire, I can’t find a foothold. I am in deep water, and the floods overwhelm me. I am exhausted from crying for help, my throat is parched. My eyes are swollen with weeping, waiting for my God to help me” (Psalm 69:1-3, NLT). Do you hear that? “My throat is parched.” David is saying, “Lord, I’m hoarse from praying. I can’t even speak anymore. Where are You?”

“But I keep praying to you, Lord, hoping this time you will show me favor ... Rescue me from the mud, don’t let me sink any deeper! ... Don’t let the floods overwhelm me, or the deep waters swallow me, or the pit of death devour me” (Psalm 69:13-15, NLT). “Answer me quickly, for I am in deep trouble! Please come and rescue me” (Psalm 69:17, NLT).

In several psalms, David cried out to God.²² “O Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide when I am in trouble?” (Psalm 10:1, NLT). “O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way?” (Psalm 13:1, NLT). David was not pointing his finger in God’s face, but rather looking up into his father’s eyes like a little boy.

Another psalmist, Asaph, asked a similar question. “Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment” (Psalm 74:11, NIV). Do you hear his confusion? “God, why are You standing there with Your hands in Your pockets?”

I cite David and Asaph and Jeremiah so you’ll know that you’re not alone in this, so that you will know it’s okay to pour out your heart to God, especially when you’re confused and hurting. It’s okay to be honest with God, to ask questions of God, and even complain to God. The Bible is filled with the questions, doubts, complaints, and cries of God’s people.

THE SHOCK OF GOD’S SILENCE

Nothing is more shocking than God’s silence. Why shocking? Because we expect Him to answer. Because He promises to answer. That’s why His silence is so shocking. And that’s why unanswered prayer is the reason so many people give up on God. Some say there is no such thing as unanswered prayer. That God always answers – either yes, no, or wait. I believe that too, yet it

is undeniable that sometimes, many times, God is silent, and we have to address it or we're not being honest.

Dr. Jerry Sittser is a professor at a Christian college and a modern-day Jeremiah, having experienced his own season of confusion and disappointment in God. He says unanswered prayer is not *a* question Christians struggle with, it is *the* question Christians struggle with.²³ He writes, "We turn to God at our most vulnerable moments, when all seems lost ... Why does God remain distant, silent, and hard when we call on Him? If God doesn't respond when we need him most, then why pray at all?"²⁴ Jerry Sittser has the right to ask, after losing his wife, his mother, and his four-year-old daughter in one tragic car accident. Just like us, the one thing he prayed for more than anything else was the protection of his family, and that was the prayer God chose not to answer. "If God doesn't respond when we need him most, then why pray at all?"²⁵

There is nothing more encouraging and faith-building than answered prayer.²⁶ And there is nothing more discouraging and faith-depleting than unanswered prayer. That's been true in my life. Times when God was silent have been the hardest times of my life. I've felt like the words of Richard Foster were written about me, and maybe you can relate.

"Have you ever tried to pray and felt nothing, saw nothing, sensed nothing? Has it ever seemed like your prayers did no more than bounce off the ceiling and ricochet around an empty room? Have there been times when you desperately needed some word of assurance, some demonstration of divine presence, and you got nothing? Sometimes it just seems like God is hidden from us. We do everything we know. We pray. We serve. We worship. We live as faithfully as we can. And still there is *nothing!*"²⁷

I've felt that way. Perhaps you have too. *And nothing is more confusing than when God does not come through like we hope.*

James Dobson describes what you may be going through. "A thousand unanswered questions have been recycling in your mind – most of them beginning with 'Why?' You want desperately to trust the Father and believe in his grace and goodness. But deep inside, you're held captive by a sense of betrayal and abandonment."²⁸

Gordon MacDonald validates our state of confusion. "Rather than feel blessed, (we) feel let down, disappointed, and deflated."²⁹

Larry Crabb dares to say aloud what many are thinking. "When we need (God) the most, when we scream the loudest for Him to reveal Himself, He seems to pull away. When we most long to sense His presence, we instead feel His absence."³⁰

Asking "Why?" reveals our heartache. Asking "Why?" also has the tone of accusation. It reveals our confusion and our disappointment in God.

JEREMIAH'S HOPE AND OURS

After protesting to God and having three complaints for every letter in the alphabet, the chapter takes a dramatic twist. As hopeless as he felt, as betrayed as he felt, as disillusioned as he felt, there was one thought that kept coming to his mind. There was one truth Jeremiah could not deny.

“This I recall to my mind,” he said. “I still have hope, because the Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:21-23, NAS).

At some point in life, all of us are going to experience a crisis of faith. And just like Jeremiah, we must decide if we’re going to trust God or not. When the grief is unbearable. When the pain is relentless. When we don’t understand why God is allowing it or why He won’t do anything to relieve it. At that moment, we must make up our mind. *Will we say “Great is Your faithfulness” or not?* Which phrase will define your life? “Oh Lord, why?” or “Great is Your faithfulness”?

As the Hebrews suffered in slavery, Moses blamed God. “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people?” (Exodus 5:22, ESV). Do you hear what Moses was saying? He’s saying the same thing many of us have been tempted to say. Not just “Lord, why have You ignored me?” Not just “Lord, why have you let me down?” But “Lord, why have you done evil to me?” The word “evil” means to harm, to bruise, to break into pieces. Moses accused God of abusing His own children! Again, nothing is more confusing than when God doesn’t act like we think He ought to act.

Moses wrestled with God, and you’re going to wrestle with God. And in the end, nothing is more crucial than the decision to trust Him. To make up your mind, to resolve in your heart, to choose to trust God when you cannot see and when you do not understand.

Job was rich, with a large family and many flocks. But in one day, his entire family was killed and his fortune was stolen. But Job had learned to trust God and he “fell to the ground and worshiped,” and said, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Through all it, Job did not sin and he did not blame God (Job 1:20-22). With such faith he would later say, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15, NAS). “Even if God kills me,” Job said, “I’m still going to trust Him.”

And Jesus was willing to do His Father’s will even though it meant crucifixion. Upon a cross, He cried out in pain and confusion, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46, NAS). When Jesus took our sin upon Himself, His Father turned away and refused to look at Him. Even Jesus knew what it felt like to be ignored by His Father. Even Jesus experienced the silence of God. Yet, He was able to say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46, NIV). That’s trust. Being able to say, “My life is in Your hands.”

David, Asaph, Moses, Job, Jeremiah, and Jesus *chose to trust God* in their pain and confusion, and so must we. Because nothing is more crucial than the decision to trust God.

So what do we do when we're spiritually confused? ***We stand on what we know to be true about God.*** That's what Jeremiah did. "I still have hope, because the Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:21-23, NAS).

Jeremiah's prayer of disappointment – a prayer filled with confusion, anger, and exhaustion – turned into a prayer of hope.³¹ How? Because he remembered the faithfulness of God.³²

But faithful to do what? He has not promised us a problem-free life, so what has He actually promised us? He has promised to be with us in this life and to get us to the next life.³³

Because God is faithful, we can count on Him to love us. "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail" (Lamentations 3:22). In the midst of your greatest pain, in the midst of your greatest confusion, you can know that God loves you and that He cares about you. You can count on Him to love you.

And, because God is faithful, we can count on Him to show up. His love and compassion "are new every morning."³⁴ Every morning you wake up God is committed to walking with you through your day. That's especially true when you're hurting. The Bible says, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and rescues those whose are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18, NLT). He promises to show up when we need Him most.³⁵

One of the most beloved verses in the Bible is Proverbs 3:5-6. It is the deepest definition of faith in the Bible. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." In other words, ***trust WHO when you do not understand WHY.*** God does not always answer my prayers the way I want. He does not always respond the way I hope. But what I know and believe about God, and what I have experienced of Him, allows me to trust Him with the parts I do not understand. Trust WHO when you do not understand WHY.

Jeremiah had a choice, and so do we. As you choose to trust in God, trusting in His love and His faithfulness, looking to Him and waiting on Him, may your prayers of desperation and feelings of disappointment be replaced with hope. May we join Jeremiah in saying, ***"I still have hope, because the Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness."***³⁶

NOTES

- ¹ By Jerry Sittser.
- ² By James Dobson.
- ³ By James MacDonald.
- ⁴ By John Piper.
- ⁵ By C. S. Lewis.
- ⁶ By Dan Allender and Tremper Longman.
- ⁷ By Philip Yancey.
- ⁸ By Michele Novotni and Randy Petersen.
- ⁹ By Ruth Tucker.
- ¹⁰ By Anne Graham Lotz.
- ¹¹ J. I. Packer writes, “We constantly find in the Bible that when bad things happen to good people, so that they feel totally at the end of their tether, they complain with great freedom and at considerable length to their God” [J. I. Packer & Carolyn Nystrom, *Praying – Finding Our Way Through Duty to Delight* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), page 181.]
- ¹² See Lamentations 2:20-21. Jeremiah said there was “terror on every side” (Lamentations 2:22).
- ¹³ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972, 1981), page 348.
- ¹⁴ Jeremiah described his anguish. “I weep, my eyes run down with water, because far from me is a comforter ... See, O Lord, I am in distress. My spirit is greatly troubled, my heart is overwhelmed within me” (Lamentations 1:16, 20).
- ¹⁵ “God, You seduced me into trusting You, and then left me hanging!” F. B. Huey, Jr., *Yesterday’s Prophets for Today’s World* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980), page 122.
- ¹⁶ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), page 34. Yancey writes this of another person, yet his statement sums up how Jeremiah must have felt.
- ¹⁷ Examples, Psalm 139 and Proverbs 31.
- ¹⁸ Citing the New International Version for these verses, unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁹ Another translation reads, “He’s given me the back of his hand” (MSG).
- ²⁰ Jerry Sittser, *When God Doesn’t Answer Your Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), page 53.
- ²¹ Many of the psalms are prayers of complaint. They are raw and honest. David is an example, when he cried out, “I pour out my complaints before him and tell him all my troubles” (Psalm 142:2, NLT). See also Psalm 55:2, 16-17.
- ²² See also Psalm 6:6, 55:1-2.
- ²³ Sittser, page 11.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid., page 22. Speaking for Old Testament characters who experienced unanswered prayers, Sittser writes, “God did not answer our prayers. Heaven was strangely silent, cold, distant, as if made of brass. It felt as if we knocked and pounded on the door of heaven until our knuckles were raw and blessing, and still there was only silence. Why pray when all you get is silence?”
- ²⁶ Rosalind Goforth writes, “The most blessed element in this asking and getting from God lies in the strengthening of faith which comes when a definite request has been granted. What is more helpful and inspiring than a ringing testimony of what God has done?” [Rosalind Goforth, *How I Know God Answers Prayer* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House), page 8.] George Mueller writes, “The joy which answers to prayer give, cannot be described, and the impetus which they afford to the spiritual life is exceedingly great.” [George Mueller, *Answers to Prayer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), page 79.]
- ²⁷ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992), page 17.
- ²⁸ James Dobson, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), page 232.
- ²⁹ Gordon MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), page xiv.
- ³⁰ Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Pathway to Joy* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), page 99.
- ³¹ Sittser writes of David in Psalm 22, “In the end he confesses his faith in the same God he accuses” (page 62).
- ³² God is faithful. “He is faithful in all He does” (Psalm 33:4, NIV). “Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the skies” (Psalm 36:5, NIV). “If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13, NLT). “Let us hold to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23, NIV).
- ³³ See Isaiah 41:10 and John 14:1-3.
- ³⁴ TWOT, #613, the Hebrew word for “new” is *hadash*; meaning to repair, rebuild, or renew.
- ³⁵ Jeremiah went on to say, “The Lord is my portion (inheritance), therefore I wait for him. The Lord is good to those who hope in him” (Lamentations 3:24-25, NIV).
- ³⁶ God promises to hear our prayers, and He promises to respond to our prayers. Yet sometimes, many times, there is silence. And that silence is shocking and confusing. As questions, doubts, and complaints overwhelmed him, in the end David chose to trust God. This is David’s prayer in Psalm 13. “O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?” Four times, David cried out, “How long, Lord?” He begged God, “Turn and answer me, O Lord my God!” His psalm, his prayer, is filled with questions, doubts, and complaints. Yet, this is how David ended his prayer. “But ... I will trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the Lord because he is good to me” (Psalm 13, NLT). “I will trust ... I will rejoice ... I will sing.”