



Readers observe the moments in scripture when people cried out to God, but His answer was delayed or different than they'd expected. Together with Tyler, readers learn to name and lament their unanswered prayers, and they discover pathways to resilient hope, faithful contentment, and triumphant joy.

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Barren

HAVE YOU EVER PRAYED, AND heaven seems silent? And you begin wondering if God truly hears when you pray?

Have you gotten to the point where you're almost tired of praying about the same thing?

What happens to our minds, wills, and emotions when answers don't come when we think they will?

What happens if our "due season" of answered prayer doesn't come for an entire decade? How do we respond when our prayers aren't answered in ways we expected?

How do we navigate seeing someone else receive their answer while we're still waiting?

Often, in the pain of unanswered prayer, we ask, "Is God truly good? And if He is good, why do my prayers for good, God-glorifying things go unanswered?"

When we stop thinking God's plan and perfect will for our lives are good, we play into the age-old challenge that began in the garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequence of eating from that tree was death. But then the cunning serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1).

At that very moment, Eve began questioning God's goodness by disobeying His instructions. She took the fruit from the tree, shared it with Adam, who was right there with her, and they both ate. Dr. Tony Evans invites us to notice Satan's tactics in his Bible commentary. He "intentionally misrepresented God, implying that God had commanded, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden.' One of Satan's oldest lies, as alluring today as then, is this: *God is holding out on you.*"¹

Isn't that how we feel when prayers are unanswered? We wonder if God is holding out on us. Because we don't have all the answers, we question if it's our past sins that keep us from receiving God's blessings. We sometimes wish we could control the outcome and even get ahead of things. If we're honest, this waiting place can be frustrating and difficult when we're doing everything we possibly can—and yet nothing seems to be happening.



My reason for writing this book is simple. I want to give us space to be honest with God and ourselves. There is not one Christian on earth who hasn't experienced a not-yet-answered prayer and the waiting that comes with it. As we journey through Scripture together, our hope will remind us God is always there. One of His names is Immanuel, which means "God with us." He

is with us in moments of suffering and joy, traversing with us both in wilderness and in flourishing—all for His glory and our good.

Together, we'll unpack the discouragement that happens when it appears others' prayers are being answered while we're still waiting. We'll lament our not-yet-unanswered prayers with hope and assurance in the God who knows all and created all. And maybe the prayer has been answered, and we are left wrestling with the challenges of why it was answered in a particular way. This book doesn't resolve the "why" prayers that may go delayed or unanswered. Instead, we'll focus on what to do when this happens and how to view God in light of this.

This book is not about suppressing your feelings and emotions to appear content. It's about truly experiencing contentment amid the waiting that comes with unanswered prayer.

It's learning how biblical lament, grief, joy, and hope can all live together in harmony.

It's about seeing God in all the moments of our lives—even when His answer seems to be a resounding no—and trusting His sovereignty with peace.

We will be encouraged by the Scriptures restoring and strengthening our faith in the One who holds all things together.

And together, we will work to be anchored by hope even when it seems as if our dreams have fallen apart.

Are you ready to dismantle everything you may have thought about why your prayers aren't answered? Are you ready to explore what we can do when prayers aren't answered the way we thought and how we relate to Him even while we wait for answers?

If the answer is yes, remember this isn't a how-to book but more of a how-to-get-through book. Get in a comfortable place and grab a cup of coffee or tea. We will pray, exhale, laugh, lament, cry . . . and even experience some joy together.

Leaning in to “Barren”

At the start of 2022, I experienced one of my first trips to the desert to attend a writers’ retreat in Scottsdale, Arizona.

One of the first things I noticed was the retreat center’s lack of vegetation, other than a few flowers and cactus plants. This was generally the landscape of Arizona. Nonetheless, something about the barrenness, the rocks, and the majestic mountains made this landscape beautiful. Arizona isn’t the only spot with this type of terrain.

I think too of places like the Red Rock Canyons just outside Las Vegas. For miles and miles, not much is to be seen but red rocks with very little vegetation. Still, people from all over the globe come to visit to hike, climb, bike, and explore.

The Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah have a similar beauty. The state website says, “Imagine a place so flat you seem to see the curvature of the planet, so barren not even the simplest life forms can exist.”² This also is a destination that attracts life from all over the globe, enthusiastic visitors in awe of God’s barren creation.

Desolate, Lacking in Charm . . . and Beautiful?

The word *barren* can mean not productive, desolate, fruitless, devoid, lacking interest or charm, or lacking inspiration or ideas.³

This chapter is about that place during prayer where you feel like you are in a deserted, barren land with no relief, no water, no vegetation in sight. You are in the canyons and yet you can’t see the beauty in it, can’t see a way out, and in fact, you feel stifled.

You have prayed. You have even fasted. You have put the prayer on the altar and shared the prayer with people in your small group. You have talked and prayed about it with your spouse, your mentors, your friends.

Everyone in your immediate sphere of influence knows the prayer of your heart. And yet it seems like God is silent. Perhaps you are grappling with a reality or a direction you suddenly find yourself in that was not a part of your plan. The psalmist cries out that weeping may stay overnight, but joy comes in the morning (Ps. 30:5). You may still find yourself weeping for nights on end as you struggle to find your joy. As isolating as these moments may seem, you are not alone.

*If God is
all-powerful,
why would
He withhold
good things?*

What have you struggled with? What is your wasteland, that barren place, that’s “fruitless,” “devoid,” “lacking inspiration or ideas”? Maybe it’s something that has just lately come up. Maybe it’s something you’ve wrestled with and prayed about for years. Maybe you’re asking for complete healing from a hard diagnosis; maybe you seek to restore a friendship or see a child come to the Lord. For me, I had years of literal barrenness as I struggled through miscarriages and infertility.

Whatever it is for you, barrenness—a lack of fruitfulness in a particular area of life—is hard.

Perhaps well-meaning people have told you not to fret, that God is sovereign. Maybe you can relate with wrestling with the understanding that God is sovereign. This means God is ultimately the One in control and can do whatever He wants, however He wants. We still find ourselves asking, *If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, with all wisdom, why would He withhold good things?*

In 2021, my mother was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and now, at the time of this writing, is experiencing some complications. I did what most people would do when learning something like this. I prayed. Then I went to Google. Big mistake, going to Google.

I found myself going down a rabbit hole of reports and studies only to consistently see these words: “There is no known cure.” Over the years, radiation and chemotherapy treatments would yield little fruit, only keeping my mother “stable.” Our prayers remain steadfast; we know God can completely heal my mother. He is God and He has proven Himself throughout Scripture and in the lives of people all around us. Yet this place feels desolate, at times isolating, and hard. As we wait for God to answer, researching and trying treatment after treatment, it indeed feels as if we are in a barren land. When we think of the word *barrenness*, beauty is not what comes to mind.

✠✠ TAKE A MOMENT

What situation in your life are you thinking of when you hear the word “barren”? Can there be any beauty in barrenness?

Erin is a forty-one-year-old woman working to piece her life back together after spending the last decade caregiving. She assisted her mother with taking care of her father who came home on hospice after a nine-year battle with cancer. The same week, her mother was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia and Parkinson’s disease.

In just a few years, Erin was thrust into full-time caregiving of both parents and soon would have to face the loss of both. She often grieves what her life has not been, her unmet hopes and expectations.

Erin is a single woman who desires a family of her own. Yet she has found herself navigating an incredibly difficult journey that feels anything but beautiful.

Seeing the need for caregivers to have community, Erin birthed

Next Gen Caregivers. She provides resources to help caregivers with burnout but has also become a beacon of light and encouragement for others who find themselves in similar situations.

At times, without the presence of her parents, Erin has felt like an orphan. But her loss has pushed her into depending on the Lord like never before. The care of her heavenly Father reminds her of John 14:18: “I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you.” Through her work, Erin lifts the hands of other caregivers and reminds them of this truth. They are not alone.

Below the Surface

Perhaps, when we hear the word “barren,” we can begin to think of what’s possible—prayerfully using holy imagination—instead of remaining stuck on what only seems bleak. Maybe there are ways we can see God while in a barren, desolate state when it seems as though we are producing no fruit for the world to see and glorify God through our life. Could our barrenness be seasonal? Or if barrenness in a particular area of our lives is God’s will, how do we make peace with that to live fully? Typically, men and women who experience a season that feels barren do whatever it takes to move out of it.

But how do we cope—how do we continue to remain faithful—when days and months turn into years, and we see little evidence of God moving in our circumstances?

I have an orchid in my kitchen. This plant requires little water,

*Beneath the
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and loving us
while we wait.*

but most of the year it's dry, with not so much as a flower bud. It seems like it takes forever for a bud to finally appear, and then after a full year, we finally get to see it bloom. Then the orchid looks glorious—but the process to get there feels pretty boring, because it seems like nothing is happening.

But something is always happening beneath the surface. Beneath the surface of our lives, God is moving, preparing, sharpening, developing, stretching, and loving us while we wait.

How often do we seek to take things in our own hands when waiting on God becomes unbearable?

There are times when the Holy Spirit will lead us in what to do *while* we wait.

What have we done in desperation when waiting for an answer from God? In my own desperation from experiencing unexplained infertility, there were times I questioned if I married the right spouse. I have an amazing husband, but my mind would wander in these moments to wonder if I was in the right marriage.

While waiting for God to answer prayer, if we aren't careful, the enemy of this world can lead us into a rabbit hole of thoughts and ideas that do not come from God. When these thoughts come, we have a responsibility to take them captive, casting them down and replacing them with God's Word (see 2 Cor. 10:5). Seasons of barrenness—desolation or wasteland or disappointment—can often be filled with spiritual warfare of the mind. When we understand we have weapons of warfare through the armor of Christ, we are strengthened to walk through these hard times.

God Who Sees

Hagar was in a precarious situation. The slave of Abram's wife, Sarai, she had been given to Abram as his concubine and was now pregnant with his child. Even though the arrangement had been

Sarai's idea in the first place, Sarai's jealousy and anger caused her to mistreat Hagar so badly that the young woman ran away into the wilderness.

But she wasn't alone in that desolate place. In Genesis 16, we learn that an angel of the Lord spoke to her and assured her, "The LORD has heard your cry of affliction." Hagar was comforted and said, "You are El-Roi," which means "God sees me" (vv. 11, 13).

This is good news. This is the beauty of the gospel. He sees us, even when we are blind. He looks for us during the moments we hide and run. He lovingly calls us while we are in our most ungodly state, graciously inviting us to come to the realization that His Son, Jesus, died for our sins. God gives us an opportunity at life everlasting . . . displaying His grace to us over and over again until the day we meet Him.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (ROM. 5:6–8)

✠✠ TAKE A MOMENT

Have you been in a place, like Hagar, where the suffering you've experienced feels like too much? Has this thought ever crossed your mind: "Does God see me?"

If your answer to these questions is yes, you are in the right place and reading the right book. We all have been in situations we didn't ask for and have sought our own measure of refuge and peace in the midst of them. There are seasons of life where we find ourselves desperately seeking answers to our prayers. There

are also times where we are in cycles of suffering that are beyond our control.

I too have been the person who sees the prayers of others being answered around me, yet I was still waiting for God to move on my behalf. In many areas of my life, I am still in that place.

So what might God be inviting us to see and explore during these times of barrenness? Wherever we find ourselves, we must remember: God sees us and is with us. It's even one of His names:

*See, the virgin will become pregnant
and give birth to a son,
and they will name him Immanuel. (MATT. 1:23)*

If you are like me, you have heard these words repeatedly throughout your life, to the point that they may sound cliché and just roll past you. But “they will name him Immanuel” and “God with us” are anything but clichés. The name of the One who came to seek and save the lost is a declaration and a reminder that He is with us.

Yet the truth is, God being with us doesn't always come with a feeling. There will be times we cannot “feel” His presence.

“God with us” won't always come with the chills and goosebumps you may get during a powerful worship song, or when you are on the brink of tears from singing a hymn that hits your soul.

“God with us” isn't always the feeling that pricks your heart when hearing a sermon that resonates with you.

“God with us” isn't just in those déjà vu moments where the Spirit of God reminds you of a dream you had that you are now living in.

“God with us” isn't just reflected in the moments we receive encouraging words from someone that only God Himself could have known we needed.

Although God *is* with us during all of those moments.

He is with us when we get the diagnosis in the doctor's office that shakes us to our core. He is with us when we get the news that a close relative has passed away. He is with us when we are rejected for a role we really wanted. He is with us during the deepest grief we ever experienced.

He is with us when our dreams are falling apart.

We must know that He is also with us in the stillness. He is with us in the silence. He is with us in our solitude, and in the moments where we don't have answers. He is with us during the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. It's because of His steadfast love that He walks with us through every trial, every season, and every moment. We see a continual thread of that love as He walks with countless women and men throughout Scripture.

Do you believe this? Can you come to the place where you believe this? Can you say with Hagar, "He is the God who sees me"?

Setting Our Minds Above

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

(COL. 3:2)

One winter, we experienced a snow squall. A snow squall is a dangerous, sudden whiteout of snow that passes through an area. If you are driving when one hits, you'd want to pull over and wait it out because there is absolutely no visibility around you; all you see is the sudden snowstorm. What's interesting about these unique weather systems is they tend to clear up and move out quickly. Shortly after that day's snow squall passed, the sun came out.

Setting our minds on things above and not on earthly things requires us to know that just beyond whatever storm we are in, there is sun. There is light on the other side of darkness. This isn't just for weather systems but for our life here on earth. Our perspective must shift as we endeavor to see things that are just beyond. Just beyond what we see in front of us lies an eternal perspective that will sustain us if we grab hold of the truth of who God is.

We are going to walk through difficult, gut-wrenching things in this life. Things that we don't understand, that make us weep and boil with anger. And if you have lived at least twenty years or beyond, chances are you've already experienced heartbreak at some level.

As we walk together through the following chapters, we'll discover who God is in all of this while clinging to Him as our faith is tested.

He is not a Sovereign Spectator merely watching us go through all that we experience from His throne. Instead, He is a Sovereign Father, holding the hands of His children as we walk through valleys, shadows, wilderness, and barren lands.

These chapters are not filled with toxic positivity where you're motivated to just get over it, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and simply dream a new dream. There is space here for you to lament the fact that you are still waiting after many years. This is a safe space for you to acknowledge that your dream fell apart or that maybe you didn't like the answer you received to a heartfelt prayer. We may cry in this place, but we will also dry our tears and rejoice, knowing the goodness of God is present in barren places.

God sees you and has not forgotten. May our hearts be open to receive what He's doing even when we don't understand.

✠✠ TAKE A MOMENT

How have you seen the Lord work in moments of suffering?
What aspects of God's character have you experienced in
action? Let's take a moment to pray and thank the Lord for
His character.

Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, who redeems us from our sin. I thank You for never leaving or forsaking me. Lord, help me see You as I wait, pray, and continue to trust You to answer the prayers of my heart. Help me trust Your will and use my story for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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