

Keeping a Soft Heart When Prayers Aren't Answered

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not **harden** your **hearts**, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work" (Ps. 95:7-9, ESV).

A friend and I were talking last night about **suffering**, particularly about the point in suffering when you start to **struggle** daily with numbness. A numb heart and a hard heart are two sides of the same coin. It comes in **suffering** at different times for different people. And it can come at multiple points during long seasons of suffering.

It can stem from long-term, unanswered **prayer**. Why continue to **pray**, one wonders. Prayer feels like an exercise in **futility**. We want God to *move*. Why won't He do something? Anything?

Why continue to remind yourself of the character of your wise, loving, and **sovereign Father** in **heaven**? At some point in long-term suffering, those character affirmations stop offering the comfort they once offered. Numbness takes over. You can't feel the bad, thankfully. Yet you no longer feel the good either.

After my conversations with my friend last night, I was intrigued to read from Psalm 95 this morning what felt like a strong word of warning from God to me. Don't harden your heart! But the temptation is strong.

While numbness isn't great, the pain of unanswered prayer feels much worse. So I invite numbness, which seems like the lesser of two evils. I stop looking for things that make me hope for change. I don't want to engage with others in my suffering.

I'd rather read *People* magazine or a shallow novel. I have perfected the pursuit of amusement. *A-muse* is Latin for "without thought." And I'm not that interested in thinking

right now. I'm not interested in figuring out solutions to my suffering or engaging with any aspect of my suffering. I just want to be distracted from it.

Now, sometimes amusing things are a gift. I've had many moments of pouring myself out to God in prayer, after which I was able to get up and move forward, resting from any work to solve my problems myself and enjoying amusement without guilt.

But that is different than moving toward numbing amusement not *after* laying my burdens at God's feet but *instead* of engaging with God. Then amusement serves as a distraction from laying my burdens at God's feet, which in that moment feels futile. That's a numbness that leads to a hard heart. And God says, "Don't do that!"

The previous two verses in Psalm 95 are informative: "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (vv. 6-7).

He's our Lord. He's our Maker. He's our *God*! We are His people in His pasture, and He is our Shepherd. Then He says, "Don't harden yourselves to these truths. Don't numb yourself to this One who oversees your soul." So I fight the numbness. It's better to hurt than become hardened.

Yes, I still believe in amusement. But I have to go through the correct process—crying out to God in lament, clearly laying my burden at His feet, after which I can get up, believing in faith that He is my God, my Maker, and my Shepherd. Then I can rest and maybe read a shallow novel—but not in attempt to numb myself from a pain I think He won't answer.

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;

Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear.

To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh,

Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books, including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*