

# HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRACTIONS IN PRAYER

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## 1. Introduction

Considering that we have discussed the [Jesus Prayer](#), [Lectio Divina](#), the [Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic](#), and [Prayer of the Heart and Contemplation](#), we feel that it is worthwhile also to discuss how to deal with trials and distractions in prayer. For, no discussion on prayer is complete without such a comment.

Since the aim of prayer is to deepen one's relationship with the transcendent and the immanent God, the creature in seeking the creator must necessarily move beyond himself. God can only be known through revelation, and this revelation of God takes many different forms. The Dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) explicates the various ways in which God reveals Himself:

- i. In creation
- ii. In other religions
- iii. In the history of peoples
- iv. In the OT
- v. In His only beloved Son Jesus Christ

## 2. Distancing Oneself from 'Feelings'

Because God is transcendent and exists beyond the dimensions of time and space as known to man, God can also appear absent. The transcendent nature of God is such that He cannot be perceived by the senses, the creature must transcend the sense perceptions too, in seeking God. At the same time, because the transcendent God is also immanent (i.e. perceivable within created reality), in order to experience God who is also present within, the creature must be liberated from captivity or enslavement to 'feelings.' Faith and self control or self renunciation is complementary in that it facilitates the search for God. Faith is God's gift to the believer. Renunciation of self is the creature's response to God's gift of faith.

Trails and distractions in prayer spring forth from the fact that man is a sensory being who is embodied in flesh. Therefore, lack of comfort and consolation in prayer

may be perceived as either an obstacle or a distraction. Growth in prayer involves a weaning from a reliance on feelings as a criteria for prayer. The experience of prayer is in the words of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is that of ‘a blind feeling unto God.’

Prayer demands that we begin by distancing ourselves from emotional influence of external factors, and allow ourselves to be moved into a state of surrender and receptivity. Prayer is a spiritual work and has its own reward without the evidence of feelings. For instance, you may be feeling badly and yet God may be active in you; you may be feeling nothing in particular, and yet God may be very active in you; you may be feeling wonderful, and yet, that may have nothing to do with what God is doing in your life. In prayer, feelings become irrelevant; only knowing and loving God has relevance. ‘The perfect apprentice asks neither to be spared pain, nor to be generously rewarded, nor asks indeed anything, but God himself. He neither regards whether he is in pain, nor in bliss, but only that the will of him whom one loves is fulfilled’ (*Cloud of Unknowing*).

### **3. Accepting Dryness and Spiritual Aridity as Part of Prayer**

Dryness is a living part of prayer. Spiritual dryness does not take away the power to pray or to persist in prayer. It only deprives one of the comfort and consolation one may have relied on in prayer. Aridity is part of the narrow way of one’s spiritual journey.

In spiritual dryness we find that the soul is no longer able to receive comfort. It is an experience external to one’s will. Thoughts, images, and feelings may reveal the condition of the soul, but they are not the soul nor do they represent it. Only our free will reveals and represents the soul. Therefore, spiritual aridity is an experience external to one’s will and one’s soul. The relationship between the soul and prayer remains unchanged inspite of spiritual aridity, for dryness has nothing to do with the will. Neither is the soul responsible for the dryness. One of the major lessons of dryness is to teach us that prayer can continue without reliance on consolation and emotional incentives.

### **4. Learning to Deal with Distractions**

Both apprentice and master commonly experience distractions. Such distractions spring forth from the inward multiplicity, disintegration and fragmentation experienced within the human person. It is the result of the lack of ‘internal harmony or wholeness’ within the human person preventing him from concentrating on the present moment. Distractions are an obstacle to the profound awareness of connectivity between oneself and all of creation and the creator Himself. Distractions impede one’s ability to relate to oneself, to the other, and also to God.

Thoughts move restlessly through the mind like the buzzing of flies (Bishop Theophan) or the leaping of monkeys or the ‘fool in the house’ (St. Theresa of Avila). This lack of concentration is a consequence of the Fall. Monastic tradition suggests turning one’s attention away from such distractions by looking elsewhere. John of Gaza says, ‘Do not contradict the thoughts suggested by your enemies, for that is exactly what they want and they will not desist. But turn to the lord for help against them, laying before him your helplessness, for he is able to expel them to nothing.’ *The Cloud of Unknowing* makes a similar suggestion: ‘When you feel you are completely powerless to put these thoughts away, cover down before them like some cringing captive overcome in battle, and reckon that it is ridiculous to fight against them any longer. In this way you surrender yourself to God while you are in the hand of your enemies ... And this humility causes God himself to come down in his might, and avenge you of your enemies and take you up, and fondly dry your spiritual eyes just as a father would act towards his child.’

We cannot halt the inward flow of images and thoughts by exertion of will power. What we can do is to simplify and unify its activity by repeating a short formula as proposed in the Jesus Prayer or based on a reading of the *Lectio Divina*. The repeated invocation of a scripture text or the Jesus Prayer will help us to ‘let go’ of the thought presented to us by our conscious or subconscious self.

*If you insist on not praying until you are freed from distractions, you will never pray; for distracting thoughts decline and disappear when we persist in prayer itself. He who seeks perfection before action and labour will achieve nothing ... God does not demand of man not to have thoughts at all passing through his mind while praying. Rather he demands that man pays no attention to them nor relish them.*

(Isaac the Syrian)

