

In a dry season

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue



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Sometimes—and I know I am not unusual in this—I just don't feel or sense God's presence. My spiritual life seems empty or numb. I pray, but feel as if my prayers go no further than the edges of my lips. I worship, but as if only going through the motions. God's love simply doesn't feel real or alive.

Such times can leave me anxious, tempt me to jadedness or leave me bored. At their worst, such times can threaten faith to its core.

So how are we to respond to such dry periods?

First of all, we shouldn't be surprised that such times come. Spiritual masters have long commented on sterile patches in the life of faith. St. John of the Cross called them, in their most severe form, dark nights of the soul. And contemporary spiritual leaders such as Henri Nouwen and Mother Teresa confess to enduring such periods.

So what's happening to us is not unique, nor is it a sign that something is wrong with us or with our faith. Such stretches of emptiness and unfeeling are not unusual, after all, in other parts of our lives. For a while in a marriage we may know that our spouse loves us but not feel particularly loved or lovable. It may be a matter of familiarity, or overfamiliarity. We get so used to a spouse's presence and care that it no longer registers.

Similarly, we can lose fire for our work. We do it for so long that we begin to rely on habit and just go through the motions. This doesn't mean we're done with our vocation or will never again feel excitement for our work. It just means we are human—and vulnerable to the sometimes numbing rhythms of time and repetition.

A second response is to trust momentum. If we've been practicing a life of faith, prayer will still come as second nature. We'll continue at worship and service. These habits will carry us through the dry time and often even provide glimpses of God's presence, until a lively, stable sense of God's presence returns.

A third response is to review the past. The Israelites faced times that tried their faith by remembering that God had led them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. The same God who was real to us in the past is alive today. Recalling this God's presence in the past can carry us through dry times and, sometimes, return us to a current sense of God's reality.

A fourth response, especially if a dry period is long lasting, is to concentrate on eschatological or ultimate hopes. Eventually and finally, Christ will consummate the work he has begun and God will be all in all. In the meantime we may endure sterility and doubt, but this is in the last analysis only for a time. It can only seem like forever, and will be swallowed up eventually by the real forever.

A fifth response is to lean on the objectivity of others. Participating in worship and church activities keeps us around people who do feel God's presence. We can trust that their feelings of presence are just as real as our feelings of absence. The ongoing witness of the church offers assurance of God's continuing reality and faithfulness to God's people. It is a reminder that, first and foremost, God holds us in God's hands, whatever our perception or misperception of that central reality.

I've learned that through these and other ways, the sense of God's absence can be endured. None of this explains why God sends us or lets us suffer such periods. But it is clear that dry periods remind us that God is to be followed because God is God

and not because of any benefits we may expect from following God. The story of faith is bigger and more all-encompassing than our individual or even our corporate stories.

Ultimately we learn about the bigness of faith—and the comprehensiveness of God—by sticking with our journey of faith through the dry periods. It is grace and our stubborn trust that keeps us going, keeps us in faith, during periods of unfeelingness. We trust and stay committed to the greater good of faith. And our dedication over time, through dry spots, makes our faith lasting, enduring, bigger than our feelings about faith.