15th April 2026

Deserts

Prayer is the desert time when prayers are dry,
when in my agonies to you I cry.
Prayers are the folk who then will pray for me,
and pray my prayers when I weep silently.

Tom Gordon, *Prayer (2026)*

When I was on Sabbatical Leave with the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC in 1989, I was supposed to be staying in the residence for visiting students. However, not long after I arrived, I was approached by the Pastor who asked if I would lodge with a couple locally. He explained that John was terminally ill and being cared for at home by his wife, Sara. She needed breaks from time to time, so I would be able to offer support, as well as benefiting from the hospitality of their home and their love.

John was a teacher in the Servant Leadership School, a poet, artist and radical thinker. Whatever I did for him and Sara in the final weeks of his life, conversations with him had a lasting effect on me. We talked a lot about prayer. One evening, John was deeply distressed, and confessed to me, through tears, that he couldn't pray any more. The minister in me wanted to help him, to suggest that it was OK, that, despite his anxieties and fears, God would understand. But I had no words. Here's what he said.

I'm in a desert, and my prayers are dry. Try as I might, I can't pray. I can't reach God. I don't know if God has abandoned me, for I don't know where God is or why I can't find him, even to cry to God in pain. I'm in a barren desert.

I cried with John, for I had nothing to say. I felt unable to reach the depths of pain and anguish he was experiencing. But dialogue with John always helped me more than I could ever have helped him. Later in our conversation, he offered me this thought …

But this I know. While I have no prayers, there are people, right now, who are praying my prayers for me. Not praying for *me but praying* my prayers *for me. In this desert, my prayers are still being prayed – just not by me at the moment.*

I have no words, even now, that will enhance this profound truth that John left with me, other than to know that when I am in *my* desert place, others will be offering up the prayers which I can no longer express.

A prayer for today

When my prayers dry up in any barren desert in my life,
I thank God that my prayers are still offered by those who love me.

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