

The Bible's prayers traffic in both daily life and the real God. I never started to write a book on prayer. I simply discovered that I'd learned how to pray. Life's unexpected turns had created a path in my heart to God; **God taught me to pray through suffering**. Instead of praying, we are often doing a confused mix of wondering and worrying. Our natural desire to pray comes from Creation. We are made in the image of God. Our inability to pray comes from the Fall.

When we aren't working, we are used to being entertained. TV, the Internet, video games, and cell phones make free time as busy as work. Because we can do life without God, praying seems nice but unnecessary. Money can do what prayer does and is quicker. Our trust in ourselves and our talents makes us structurally independent of God. Many of us struggle to learn how to pray because we are focusing on praying, not on God. Prayer is not the center of this book. Getting to know God is the center. **Learning to pray doesn't offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart**. Dependency is the heartbeat of prayer.

Except for Judas, the disciples are without pretense. We often try to be something we aren't. We begin by concentrating on God, but almost immediately our minds wander off in a dozen directions. We're trying to be spiritual, to get it right. We, like adults, try to fix ourselves up. In contrast, Jesus wants us to come to him like little children, just as we are. When we slow down to pray, we are confronted with how unspiritual we are, how difficult it is to concentrate on God. We don't know how bad we are until we try to be good. Nothing exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness like prayer. In contrast, little children never get frozen by their selfishness. Like the disciples, they come just as they are, totally self-absorbed. They seldom get it right. As parents or friends, we know all that. In fact, we are delighted (most of the time!) to find out what is on their little hearts.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Mt 11:28). The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. We know that to become a Christian we shouldn't try to fix ourselves up, but when it comes to praying we completely forget that. We are often so busy and overwhelmed that when we slow down to pray, we don't know where our hearts are. We don't know what troubles us. But the very things we try to get rid of—our weariness, our distractedness, our messiness—are what get us in the front door!

Ironically, many attempts to teach people to pray encourage the creation of a split personality. You're taught to "do it right." Instead of the real messy you meeting God, you try to re-create yourself by becoming spiritual. No wonder prayer is so unsatisfying. You can't add God's kingdom as an overlay to your own.

By coming like a little child to our Father we learn the heart of prayer. What do little children ask for? Everything and anything. How often do little children ask? Repeatedly. How do little children ask? Without guile. They just say what is on their minds. Jesus tells us to watch little children if we

want to learn how to ask in prayer. Children are supremely confident of their parents' love and power. Instinctively, they trust. If you learn to pray, you learn to dream again. I say "again" because every child naturally dreams and hopes. To learn how to pray is to enter the world of a child, where all things are possible. Little children can't imagine that their parents won't eventually say yes. They know if they keep pestering their parents, they'll eventually give in. Childlike faith drives this persistence.

Jesus encourages us to believe like little children—by telling stories about adults who acted like children: the parable of the persistent widow, who won't take no for an answer from an unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8). On the rare occasions when Jesus encounters an adult who believes like a child, he stands on a soapbox and practically yells, "Pay attention to this person. Look how he or she believes!" A centurion and a Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. The gospel also frees us to ask for what is on our hearts.

Learning to pray involves, learning to play again. How long does a one-year-old stay on task? It isn't long or particularly well organized. Why should our prayer time be any different? In Eph 3, Paul's praying is all over the map. He starts praying, interrupts himself, starts praying again, gets distracted, and then finally finishes his prayer. When your mind starts wandering in prayer, be like a little child. Don't worry about being organized or staying on task.

When Jesus talks about his relationship with his heavenly Father, he becomes childlike, very dependent—the most dependent human being who ever lived. Because he can't do life on his own, he prays and prays and prays. He is telling us to realize that, like him, we don't have the resources to do life. Adam and Eve began their quest for self-identity after the Fall. Because Jesus has no separate sense of self, he has no identity crises, no angst. He never experienced a moment when he wasn't in communion with his Father until Gethsemane. Jesus' anguish is our normal.

A one-person focus is how love works. We don't love in general; we love one person at a time. The fully human Jesus doesn't multitask well. He needs to be away from people in order to tune in to his heavenly Father. Efficiency, multitasking, and busyness all kill intimacy. In short, you can't get to know God on the fly.

If you are not praying, they you are quietly confident that time, money, and talent are all you need in life. I, for one, am allergic to helplessness. I don't like it. I want a plan, an idea, or maybe a friend to listen to my problem. This is how I instinctively approach everything because I am confident in my own abilities. Because I was not helpless, I could manage our church's prayer ministry on my own. I never said this or even thought it, but I lived it.

Prayer = helplessness. Mary's request to Jesus at the wedding at Cana—*They have no wine* (Jn 2:3)—is a perfect description of prayer. Prayer is bringing your helplessness to Jesus. Prayer is an expression of who we are. We are a living

incompleteness. Strong Christians pray more because they realize how weak they are. As we mature as Christians, we see more and more of our sinful natures, but we also see more and more of Jesus. Surprisingly, mature Christians feel less mature on the inside. You get holier while feeling less holy. The very thing you were trying to escape—your inability—opens the door to prayer and then grace.

I did my best parenting by prayer. I began to speak less to the kids and more to God. Our failure to pray will always feel like something else—a lack of discipline or too many obligations. That's why suffering is so important to the process of learning how to pray. It is God's gift to us to show us what life is really like. We don't need self-discipline to pray continuously; we just need to be poor in spirit. Instead of trying to suppress anxiety, we can turn it toward God. When we do that, we'll discover that we've slipped into continuous praying.

The connection between anxiety and continuous prayer goes back to Eden, where Adam and Eve were in unbroken fellowship with God and continuous prayer was normal. When they sought independence from God, they stopped walking with God in the cool of the day and their prayer link was broken. **Anxiety is an unused prayer link.** Jesus was the first person who didn't seek independence. We cling to our Father in the face of chaos by continuously praying. We become anxious when we take a godlike stance, occupying ourselves with things too great for us. Continuous praying is its own answer to prayer. As you pray Psalm 131 you become quiet. You rest, not because there is magic in the words but because your eyes are no longer raised too high. You shift from worrying to watching.

The opposite of a childlike spirit is a cynical spirit—my greatest struggle in prayer. If I get an answer to prayer, sometimes I'll think, *it would have happened anyway*. Cynicism is so pervasive that, at times, it feels like a presence, which it is—that of Satan. He cannot create, but he can corrupt. Most of us are not aware that cynicism is a problem, or that it is taking hold in our hearts. It creates a numbness toward life.

To be cynical is to be distant. A praying life is just the opposite. It engages evil and doesn't take no for an answer. The psalmist was in God's face, hoping, dreaming, asking. But cynicism merely critiques. It is passive, cocooning itself from the passions of the great cosmic battle we are engaged in. It is without hope. If you add an overlay of prayer to a cynical or even weary heart, it feels phony.

No culture is more optimistic than ours. In the 19th century that optimism shifted its foundation from the goodness of God to the goodness of humanity, which collapses when it confronts the dark side of life. The discovery of evil for most of us is highly personal. We encounter the cruelty of our friends in junior and senior high school. In college the princes turn out to be less than charming. If we have children, we learn they can be demanding and self-centered.

Shattered optimism sets us up for a fall into defeated weariness and, eventually, cynicism. We humans don't do neutral well. I make the jump from optimism to darkness so quickly because I am not grounded in a deep, abiding faith that God is in the matter, no matter what the matter is. I am looking for pleasant results, not deeper realities. In naïve optimism we don't need to pray because everything is under control, everything is possible. In cynicism we can't pray because everything is out of control, little is possible.

Our personal struggles with cynicism and defeated weariness are reinforced by the tendency toward perfectionism in American culture. Believing you have to have the perfect relationship, the perfect children, or a perfect body sets you up for a critical spirit, the breeding ground for cynicism. In the absence of perfection, we resort to spin--trying to make ourselves look good, unwittingly dividing ourselves into a public and private self. We cease to be real and become the subject of cynicism.

The media's constant Monday-morning quarterbacking shapes our responses to the world, and we find ourselves demanding a pain-free, problem-free life. Our can-do attitude turns into relentless self-centeredness. Cynicism is the air we breathe, and it is suffocating our hearts. Unless we become disciples of Jesus, this present evil age will first deaden and then destroy our prayer lives, not to mention our souls. Our only hope is to follow Jesus as he leads us out of cynicism.

The overwhelming temptation when faced with evil is to become a wolf, to become cynical and lose your sheep-like spirit. Jesus keeps in tension wariness about evil with a robust confidence in the goodness of his Father. He calls us to be wary, yet confident in our heavenly Father. The feel of a praying life is cautious optimism—caution because of the Fall, optimism because of redemption. He sees the whole story and is completely trustworthy to be at work on a grand scale, in the minutiae, and even in my own life. Audacious faith is one of the hallmarks of a Jesus' follower. Praying is the principle way we enter into this expansion of the rule of Christ. Jesus doesn't answer his mockers while hanging on the cross because his ear is tuned to his Father. Like a wise serpent, he says nothing. Like a harmless dove, he does nothing. Even as his Father turns his back on him, Jesus trusts. Faced with the storms of life, he tightens his grip on his Father.

Cynicism kills hope. When Jairus tells Jesus that his daughter is dead (Lk 8:50) and again before Jesus heals a crippled woman (Lk 13:12), Jesus brings hope before he heals. He is not a healing machine—he touches people's hearts, healing their souls before he heals their bodies. As you grasp what the Father's heart is like, how he loves to give, then prayer will begin to feel completely natural to you. We often breathe the cynical spirit of our age and miss the heart of God. *May the God of hope, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, fill you with all hope and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Rm 15:13, Heb 13:20). Behold I make all things new (Rev 21:5).*

In a cynical moment during prayer time, I realized I was hunting for something to doubt and for something to do. At bottom, I didn't like grace. I wanted to be a player in the way God answered my request. Both the cynic and the child walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The cynic focuses on the darkness; the child focuses on the Shepherd. Jesus sets me free to love by showing me the dark, self-serving agenda I cling to in my cynicism. Our attempt to unmask evil unwittingly enlarges evil. With the Good Shepherd gone, we are alone in a world of evil.

Bitterness is the stepchild of cynicism. Nothing undercuts cynicism more than a spirit of thankfulness. Thanklessness was the first sin to emerge from our ancient rebellion against God. *For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him (Rom 1:21)*. To become thankful is to be drawn into the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, into their enjoyment of one another, of life, and of people. God is not cynical in the face of evil. He loves.

In the dynamics in the Garden of Eden, Satan accuses God of cynical motivations, when in fact **Satan cynically twists God's commands to his own ends.** Cynicism was the seed for Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, and it **is the seed for our own rebellions.** While attempting to unmask evil, the cynic creates it. Like David, the pure in heart begin with seeing through themselves. Having confronted their own bears and lions in the valley of the shadow of death, they clearly see the abnormality of Goliath cursing the living God. Cynicism looks for the cracks in Christianity instead of looking for the presence of Jesus. The cure then is to develop an eye for Jesus. Humility makes us disappear, which is why we avoid it.

Western culture is the most publicly atheistic culture that has ever existed. Among the thousands of cultures in the history of humanity, ours is the only one not to have any regular public acknowledgment of a spiritual world. Kant divided the world into *feelings*, things that are true only for me, and *facts*, things that are true for everyone. He lumped prayer and religion together with other things we can't be certain of, such as love or right or wrong.

Ironically, modern science is possible because Christianity taught that God created a world separate from himself. Ancient cultures were unable to seriously investigate the world because their gods were inseparable from the world. The Enlightenment doesn't *say* that religion is not real. It *defines* it as not real. First prayer is defined as phony, and then it feels phony.

Power in prayer comes from being in touch with your weakness. **Learned desperation is at the heart of a praying life.** Little children are not daunted by the size of their parents. They come, regardless. When we stop being ourselves with God, we are no longer in real conversation with Him. If we separate our mundane needs (doing) from God's best gift, his loving presence (being), then we overspiritualize prayer. God found a parking spot, a specific place and time where his love would touch our world.

Deep down we just don't like grace. We don't want to risk our prayer not being answered. We prefer the safety of isolation to engaging the living God. Our dislike of asking is rooted in our desire for independence. What do I lose when I have a praying life: Control. Independence. What do I gain? Friendship with God. A quiet heart. Essentially, I lose my kingdom and get his. I move from being an independent player to a dependent lover. I move from being an orphan to a child of God.

Suffering is God's gift to make us aware of our contingent existence. Like an autistic child, we can only look sideways at how prayer works. **Many things in life can't be observed directly.** In quantum physics, you can't observe a particle's speed and mass at the same time. Sexual love in marriage is beautiful; sexual love observed is pornography. **The act of observing changes sexual intimacy. Some things just disappear when you try to capture or observe them.**

The closer something is to the character of God, the more it reflects him and the less it can be measured. Things such as **integrity, beauty, hope, and love are all in the same category as prayer. You can't define them because they are too close to God's image.** The most precious things in life can't be proven or observed directly, but we know them as surely as we know that the sun and moon exist. Prayer is strikingly intimate. As soon as you take a specific answer to prayer and try to figure out what caused it, you lose God. This isn't just true of prayer. All the best things in life have no visible connections. **If you turn God into an object, he has a way of disappearing.** We do the same thing when a spouse or a friend consistently treats us like an object.

Jesus isn't just the Savior of my soul. He's also the Savior of my prayers. My prayers are so imperfect that the Holy Spirit must transform my prayers. *The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:26)*. I find that the closer my prayers are to the heart of God, the more powerfully and quickly they are answered. When you are inside your prayers, you can clearly see the weaving of God, but it is often difficult to explain to an outsider. You have to be inside the story to see it. It must remain hidden for the Spirit to work. Abiding feels elusive.

In the church, most prayer requests are limited to sickness, joblessness, kids in crisis, and maybe the missionaries. Yet Jesus' prayer for daily bread was an invitation to bring all our needs to him. I suspect that your refrigerator or checking account has "tomorrow's bread" already there. Often our need for daily bread opens doors to deeper heart needs for real food. He wants our material needs to draw us into our soul needs. *Abiding* is a perfect way to describe a praying life. We want God to be a genie, not a person. When we pray *Your kingdom come*, we are saying "King Jesus, rule my life." The heart is one of God's biggest mission fields.

Modern secularism has taken the Shepherd out of Psalm 23, leaving just *me* to create my own dignity and worth.

We forget we are embodied spirits, designed to hear from God. I prefer the biblical term *wisdom* to our more common term *guidance*. **I don't just need help with my plans; I need help with my questions and my own heart.**

Usually, what bugs us the most about other people is true of us as well. We can't do battle with evil without letting God destroy the evil in us as well. Once you've learned that God loves you, you need to extend his love to others. Otherwise, the love of God sours. A thankful heart is constantly extending grace because it has received grace. Grace begets grace. Our pitiful little prayer taps into the power center of the universe.

Most of the time we just whine about things in our culture that we don't like. It never occurs to us to pray that culture will change. Secularism denies the existence of a spiritual world, but after 9/11 Americans began talking about evil again. I don't understand prayer. It is deeply personal and mysterious. Adults try to figure out causation. Little children don't. They just ask.

The great struggle of my life is not trying to discern God's will; it is trying to discern and disown my own. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) by telling you he is going to go through your life and close all the doors to human power (5:5). He tells you to empower your enemies. He closes the doors to revenge (5:23-24) and a secret life of sexual pleasure (5:27-30). He tells you to keep your prayer life hidden so you don't use it to make yourself look good (6:16-18). Don't use spirituality as a means for getting power and glory (6:1-4). He closes the door to getting your security from money or even worrying about money (6:10-24). Having closed all your doors, Jesus opens the door to prayer and tells you how he gets things done (7:7). Prayer is the positive side of the surrendered will. As you stop doing your own will and wait for God, you enter into his mind. Self-will and prayer are both ways of getting things done. At the center of self-will is me, carving a world in my image, but at the center of prayer is God carving me in his Son's image. When we see our own self-will, it opens the door to doing things through God.

Prayer doesn't exist in some rarified spiritual world; it is part of the warp and woof of our lives. Praying itself becomes a story. Many parents, including myself, are initially confident we can change our child. We don't surrender to our child's will (which is good), but we try to dominate the child with our own (which is bad). **Until we become convinced we can't change our child's heart, we will not take prayer seriously.** Pop psychology's tendency is to make descriptions of childhood stages into rules. "She's going through the terrible twos." We become trapped by these psychological descriptions.

When times were good, I ignored God, but when times were hard, I blamed God. Because we live in a fallen world, God has to use broken images of himself, such as fathers. In fact, all the images God gives us of himself in Scripture are flawed. Between reality and hope is the desert we live

in. We will do anything not to live in the desert: denial, determination, and despair. **God customizes deserts for each of us.** This theme is so strong in Scripture that Jesus reenacts it at the beginning of his ministry by fasting for 40 days in a desert while facing Satan's temptation. His desert is living with the hope of the resurrection yet facing the reality of his Father's face turned against him at the cross.

God takes everyone he loves through a desert. It is his cure for our wandering hearts. The first thing that happens is we slowly give up the fight. Desert life sanctifies you. You have no idea you are changing. You simply notice after you've been in the desert awhile that you are different. Things that used to be important no longer matter. The desert becomes a window to the heart of God. He finally gets your attention because he's the only game in town. You cry out to God so long and so often that a channel begins to open up between you and God. When driving, you turn off the radio just to be with God. At night you drift in and out of prayer when you are sleeping. Without realizing it, you have learned to pray continuously. The clear, fresh water of God's presence that you discover in the desert becomes a well inside your own heart. The best gift of the desert is God's presence.

A lament connects two "hot" wires--God's promise and the problem. When that happens, sparks fly. Laments might *seem* disrespectful, but they are filled with faith. Every child is a professional lamenter. "Mom, you said..." Why haven't you?" The child is bringing together promise and hope with reality. To love is to lament, to let your heart be broken by something. In Jer 2:5-8, God rebukes his people and his priests because *they did not say, 'Where is the Lord?'* A sure sign of their wandering hearts is that no one is in God's face. Lamenting shows you are engaged with God in a vibrant, living faith.

The church has lost its ability to lament. We lost some of our Jewish DNA and took on some Greek ways of thinking. The Greeks accepted the chaos. The Jews brought the chaos to God in their lamenting. The Greeks, like all pagans, assumed that chaos and evil were part of the original order of creation and called this ideal "Stoicism." A Stoic would consider a lament inappropriate: too emotional, too aggressive. A lament connects God's *past* with my *present* chaos, hoping for a better *future*.

Because Isaiah believes so deeply in God's sovereignty, he blames God (Is 63:17). In a lament we tell God, "Your word has not become flesh." A lament takes hold of God. In Isaiah 64:9-12 he begins the lament naked before God, pouring out his heart. Then he reinterprets those feelings in the reality of God. Isaiah's faith feeds off the character of God. His pilgrimage is different from the 5 stages of grief. Instead of withdrawing (denial), he boldly moves into God's presence, asking for help. Instead of lashing out at God (anger), he unashamedly holds God to his word. Instead of manipulating (bargaining), he tells God directly what he wants and why he wants it. Instead of getting lost in his sorrow (depression), he expresses it freely to God. And finally, instead of

resignation (acceptance), he tirelessly brings his request to God. The prophet never stops asking because he never stops believing. His asking changes tone, and his reasons change, but he doesn't let go of God. How did God respond to Isaiah's lament? Jesus.

What is so striking about biblical laments is that God almost never critiques them. He delights in hearing our messy hearts. The difference between complaint and lament: A lament is directed toward God. In Numbers 20, the Israelites complained not to God but to Moses. **A lament is faith. A complaint is rebellion.** A lament also submits and circles back to faith. There is almost always something to lament. Anxiety fuels good lamenting. As we finish lamenting, we are quiet.

Jesus' ambiguity with us creates the space not only for him to emerge but us as well. If the miracle comes too quickly, there is no room for discovery, for relationship. When we persist in a spiritual vacuum, when we hang in there during ambiguity, we get to know God. In fact, that is how intimacy grows in all close relationships.

The praying life is inseparable from obeying, loving, waiting, and suffering. Contrast the two approaches to a praying life: no story/story; bitter/waiting; angry/watching; aimless/wondering; cynical/praying; controlling/submitting; hopeless/hoping; thankless/thankful; blaming/repenting. Most of our prayers are answered in the context of the larger story that God is weaving. Tension and overwhelming obstacles make for a good story. To live in your Father's story, don't demand that the story go your way. Look for the storyteller. Look for his hand, and then pray in light of what you are seeing. Stay in the story. Don't shut down when it goes the wrong way. [God may be adding another chapter.]

Sometime when we say, "God is silent," what's really going on is that he hasn't told the story the way we wanted it told. But with his own stories, the ones we live in, he is seldom silent.

Nothing clears out self-righteousness better than serving someone who is critical of you. The story God weaves always involves bowing before his majesty with the pieces of our lives. **Twice Joseph loses his coat as he is being humbled;** each time the coat is used as evidence for a betrayal. Twice, as God elevates him, he is given a new coat. When his brothers arrive, Joseph gives each of them a coat and silver. **By giving his brothers coats, Joseph has become an artist. He has noticed God's use of themes in his life and extended it. He takes God's brush and finishes the painting. He has learned his heavenly Father's rhythms.**

Often when you think everything has gone wrong, it's just that you're in the middle of a story. If you watch the stories God is weaving in your life, you, like Joseph, will begin to see the patterns. You'll become a poet, sensitive to your Father's voice. **Judah's willingness to give up his freedom for the life of his brother was a gospel story that reversed the earlier betrayal.**

The ancient Greeks had 2 kinds of stories: comedy and tragedy. A comedy was fun but not real. A tragedy was real but not fun.

God teaches me humility in humble places. The secret of C. S. Lewis's storytelling, according to a friend of his: His whole life was oriented and motivated by an almost uniquely persisting child's sense of glory and of nightmare. I am enchanted by the stories that God weaves around me.

When you speak, no matter how hard you try, you are at the center. I wanted success; he wanted authenticity. The Father was taking me on the same downward journey he took his son (Phil 2:6-7). **The downward journey is the gospel story. Since Jesus' death, no one has been able to tell a better story.** If you want to tell a really good story, you have to tell a gospel story. **Gospel stories always have suffering in them.** But suffering doesn't mesh with our right to "the pursuit of happiness." So, we pray to escape a gospel story, when that is the best gift the Father can give us.

The Father wants to draw us into the story of his Son. He doesn't have a better story to tell, so he keeps retelling it in our lives. The taste of Christ is so good that the apostle Paul told the Philippians that he wanted to know *the fellowship of sharing in Jesus' suffering* (Phil 3:19). By simply staying in the story, continuing to show up for life, even if it seems pointless, the kingdom comes. Poverty of spirit is no longer a belief. We own it. It describes us. **If we stop fighting and embrace the gospel story God is weaving in our life, we discover joy. If we pursue joy directly, it slips from our grasp.** But if we begin with Jesus and learn to love, we end up with joy.

As we bring God's mind to our stories, we can see his hand crafting connections behind the scenes. This is my Father's world. Everything you do in Vegas is connected to the rest of your life. Everything you do affects those you love. All of life is covenant. We live in our Father's world, a world built for divine relationships between people where, because of the God News, tragedies become comedies and hope is born.

I am not naturally a people person, but when I regularly pray for people using some kind of written system, my heart tunes into them. I am bolder about asking them how things are going because they are already in my heart. We are disabled by the Fall and need written aides to communicate with God. Deep within the American psyche is the 1960's Romantic Idea that if something doesn't feel natural, it isn't real. But if you have a disability, nothing flows, especially in the beginning. Prayer journals and prayer cards are helpful tools. Systems can become rote, desensitizing us to God as a person, but none of us wants to be treated like robots—including God. All of us create systems for things that are important to us. **Big prayers focus on hope and little prayers focus on reality.** We need both.

When I begin praying Christ into someone's life, God often permits suffering in that person's life. If Satan's basic game plan is pride, seeking to draw us into his life of arrogance, then God's basic game plan is humility, drawing us

into the life of his Son. **The Father can't think of anything better to give us than his Son.** Notice a 3-step pattern: planting, waiting, and working at the harvest. Jesus' image of reaping is hard work.

Our intuition is being mastered by God. If we focus *exclusively* on God's written Word, we miss the unfolding story of his work. We need to develop a poet's eye that can see the patterns in the Father's creation. Like a good storyteller, I need to pick up the cadence and heartbeat of the Divine Storyteller. ***Watch and pray is Jesus's repeated refrain (Mk 14:38). Pray with your eyes open.***

The novel is a specifically Christian form of writing. It presupposes a world that is incomplete, yearning for salvation. And moving toward it. The discovery of self in relationship to God leads to a lifestyle of repentance. For example, we are seldom aware of our impatience. What we feel is everyone else's slowness. Because we are naturally the center of our own universes, we don't feel irritable. We just notice everyone getting in our way. My inability to wait on God comes from thinking salvation comes from me.

Prayer is where I do my best work as a husband, dad, worker, and friend. The Holy Spirit puts his finger on issues that only he can solve. I actually manage my life now through my daily prayer time. I'm shaping my heart, my work, my family—in fact, everything that is dear to me through prayer in fellowship with my heavenly Father. I'm doing that because I don't have control over my heart and life or the hearts and lives of those around me. But God does.

Too much media was subtly framing how I viewed the world. Learned helplessness lurks just underneath the surface of my prayer time. I simply can't do life on my own. **How do you love someone without prayer?**

God's activity takes the familiar shape of stories. We need time to be with our Father every day because every day our hearts and the hearts of those around us are overgrown with weeds. As we abide in him, he usually shows us what he is doing. But sometimes he doesn't. Job is the most famous example.

For 450 years after returning from Babylon, God was present but silent. Nevertheless, the children of Israel didn't stop hoping and praying. The opening scene in the Gospel of Luke is a prayer meeting. When Zechariah went into the temple to burn incense *the whole multitude of the people were praying outside* (1:10). **God used the destruction of the temple and the removal of the Israel to Babylon to create the synagogue structure, a precursor to the local church. They learned to worship God without a temple.** The dispersion of the Jewish people provided a base from which Paul and others could easily spread the gospel. Without the Babylonian captivity there would be no Israel, no cross, no Christianity, and no Western civilization. Living in unfinished stories draws us into God's final act, the return of Jesus.

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