


SPECIAL PREVIEW



Words
with
God

Trading Boring, Empty Prayer
For Real Connection

ADDISON D. BEVERE

Bestselling author of *The Holy Spirit: An Introduction*

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for Real Connection

ADDISON D. BEVERE



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“We all have times when we need to have words with God. Addison’s book takes us through our desires for prayer, our disappointments in prayer, and the profound deeper plan of God for our prayers. This is the book you’ll return to again and again.”

Mark Batterson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*, lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C.

“I want my friends who really pray to write books on prayer. That’s why I’m so glad Addison has written *Words with God*. This beautifully written book is honest, intelligent, mysterious, and hope-filled. It’s the kind of book about prayer that makes you want to pray.”

Annie F. Downs, *New York Times* bestselling author of *That Sounds Fun*

“If we could only learn how to pray, we just might see mountains move. Addison Beveré’s words have been a guide in my pursuit to pray clear, convicted, and confident prayers. If you are seeking a more intimate and powerful experience in your relationship with our heavenly Father, *Words with God* is a must-read.”

Gabe Lyons, president, Q Ideas and author of *Good Faith*

“This is the needed book on prayer. If you’ve ever struggled with wondering why God doesn’t answer your prayers, or even why you should pray at all, Addison’s words will become your trusted guide.”

Bianca Juarez Olthoff, Bible teacher, preacher, author, and church planter

“Understanding prayer is at the heart of the Christian life. Many feel confused and uncertain about how to truly connect with God through prayer. Addison takes us beyond clichés and into

the heart of God in a way that is biblical, personal, and deeply satisfying. This will stir fresh hunger for intimate conversations with God.”

Jon Tyson, author of *Beautiful Resistance*, pastor of Church of the City New York, www.church.nyc

“Many Christians want to be close to God but struggle to pray consistently. In his new book *Words with God*, Addison Bevere gives readers powerful and scripturally grounded encouragement that will build their faith and teach them how to pray with sincere passion, purpose, and power. With wisdom beyond his years, Addison takes readers on an honest, intimate journey through God’s Word that will help them know God more intimately.”

Craig Groeschel, pastor of Life.Church and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dangerous Prayers*

“*Words with God* frames holy conversations between the Most High and his children in some beautiful and unexpected ways. Rather than limiting them to duties to be performed or entreaties to be made, Addison challenges us to view prayer as ‘an exercise of freedom. It’s the only way to locate the liberty that our hearts crave.’ Prayer is not something we do for God. It is something we do *with* God, an intimate union with heaven while here on earth. I found myself personally challenged to see prayer through fresh eyes. If you are ready for more, you won’t be disappointed.”

Lisa Bevere, *New York Times* bestselling author

“As he so often does, God placed my friend Addison Bevere’s book *Words with God* in my inbox exactly when I needed it most. In a quiet and dry season in my prayer life, when God’s

voice feels drowned out by life's frenzied pace, Addison has equipped me to learn to hear again. My bookcase contains many treasured guides I've used to reconnect to God when prayer seems hard or ineffective, including my favorites by Philip Yancey and Richard Foster. But Addison has done more than just give us a book on prayer; he walks alongside those of us who are struggling, pastoring and mentoring us through our doubts and fears into real connection and conversation with God. I'll return to *Words with God* many times in the years to come, as it has already been so helpful to me. He asked for my endorsement as a favor to him, but Addison's book is a favor to us all."

W. Lee Warren, MD, neurosurgeon, Christian Book Award-winning author, host of *The Dr. Lee Warren Podcast*

"Addison Bevere is a trusted and faithful friend to me and the church in general, and his way with and love for the nuances of Scripture is a gift to us all. In *Words with God*, he pulls prayer from its mystical realm and moves it into the practical and experiential realm of everyday life. Prepare for your heart to be set ablaze and your mind to be captivated as you find your own words to share with God."

Brandon Cormier, lead pastor of Zeal Church

"God is the one who initiates the invitation to come near, so why is it so difficult to hear from Him? Addison has crafted a masterpiece that debunks the notion of the Father being distant and welcomes us into an engaging relationship with God. This is the sort of book that helps you connect with God and stay connected to Him. You'll be transformed."

John Bevere, author of *The Awe of God*, cofounder of Messenger International

Words
with
God

Also by Addison D. Bevere

Saints

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For Sophia Grace Bevere,
The Father loves hearing your words.

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**To read Chapter 3 through 14,
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PART ONE

The
Canyon

1

The Voice

When we are one with our life . . . no prayer can be denied.

George MacDonald, *What's Mine's Mine*

For God speaks again and again,
though people do not recognize it.

Job 33:14 NLT

Have you ever been alone in a great canyon? One of those caverns that traps sound waves, making them skip across surfaces and travel back to you? The reverberations are fun to manipulate, at least for a while, but eventually it gets old listening to yourself on repeat. Conversations, by definition, are supposed to involve two or more people, so it's only natural for us to want someone else to get involved.

For many of us, though, praying to God feels like yelling within a great canyon. Sometimes it may seem like someone's

joining the conversation, but how can we be sure that *other* voice isn't just an echo of our own thoughts, words, desires? How can we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we're not just having words with ourselves?

Ever since I can remember, I've wanted to hear God's voice: a loud, booming voice. Heavenly words that were clear and undeniable. Anytime I'd pray as a kid, I'd hope *that* voice would respond.

But it never did.

Another voice danced around inside of me, though.

I'd try to sort out where it came from . . . my head, my heart, my gut? If the voice came from my head, then surely it was my own thoughts, but if it came from my heart or somewhere deep in my gut, shouldn't that be God's space? We're told that Jesus lives in our hearts, so it'd make sense that that's where he speaks from . . . right?

But despite my best efforts, I had the hardest time sorting out where the voice came from.

The people who seem to know their way around prayer would tell me to pray with passion and listen more than I speak. For years, though, these instructions seemed incongruent. How can I passionately listen? If I hear something I'll pay attention to it, but if I don't, I don't. I can't listen to what's not there: either God speaks to me, or he doesn't. Just get on with telling me which one it is and how it works. This whole prayer thing feels important, so we need to get it right, right?

We often get God's words wrong, though. Even the Bible has been used to endorse behaviors and decisions that heaven knows aren't right. So how can we be sure God is talking . . . and what's the right way to talk back? Where do we go when we need to have words with God?

Scripture tells us that we knew the Voice intimately once, back in that Garden. There was no denying the voice of God; he walked with us in the cool of the day. But it would seem his voice wasn't enough. We wanted to go around the Voice, to whatever may be behind it: the knowledge of good and evil, the answers to self-sufficiency, a godlike independence. So we didn't listen to the Voice. We chose a different voice, the voice of the Accuser. This voice confirmed our suspicions. There was more to be had, and we wouldn't be happy until we had whatever "it" was. The Voice was holding out on us, keeping us from discovering our own voice.

We know how that story goes.

But what's fascinating to me is the Voice didn't stay in the Garden. It moved with us. Even after we sinned and spilled our brother's blood, the Voice showed up and kept on speaking to us. But over time fewer people heard the Voice. They were too busy building their own stuff, leveraging their newfound knowledge and skill. Largely, the Voice that unites us all was forgotten, and humankind listened to a restless voice that accused and vilified, setting the world in a violent frenzy. The Accuser had everyone's ear, and life became worse than death.

It's hard to hear the Voice when the Accuser is constantly speaking: Get more knowledge. Do something spectacular, for God's sake, make something of your life or throw yourself off a building. Our lives are bombarded by this voice. From the moment we're born, we're coaxed into "more." Our progress is never good enough. Our brains never smart enough. Our passion never big enough. This is the voice of our making, or I guess it would be our *un*making.

And the people around us mean well, but their words are often tainted by their own accusations: the strongholds of doubt, regret, and shame that shrink their lives into rigidity or chaos. We grow up believing that this voice is the only voice. This must be the way the universe communes with us, so we search for God within the Accuser's voice.

There are some of us who know the Accuser's voice isn't the great Voice. So we deny its supremacy and look for something else. While the Accuser is abrupt and persistent, the voice of God is subtle, wooing us into awe-filled delight. At first it sounds like a babbling brook or a tree dancing in the wind, but there's something in the sound that we didn't notice before, a resonance that quietly sings within us. Or is it actually outside of us? It's too hard to tell. In the words of the great theologian Karl Barth, "O, if we could actually hear, if we could but hear this voice that resounds so clearly within us as actually God's voice. If we could only believe. Then we could also speak."¹

Through patience, steadfastness, and faith, some of us realize that the Voice is not just something out there; it belongs to the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being. It is within us. We've got it all backward; we're not yelling across a canyon in the dark. Our voice is an echo of the Voice. It would seem that having words with God is about joining the conversation, not starting it. The Voice is speaking.

Can you hear it?

Will you answer?

There are moments when the Voice is loud and clear. Jesus had a few of these moments—three if I'm not mistaken. But he lived in tune with the Voice, and on one of these occasions he said, "That audible voice, the One you all heard, that wasn't for

me, I know the Voice. That was for you.”² Much good it did for them. Not long after that, they wanted to kill Jesus.

I guess they didn’t hear the Voice.

Jesus told us that his sheep hear his voice. He also told his disciples that he wished he could tell them things, but they wouldn’t understand the words. But the Spirit would come, the One who enjoins all of creation, and help them learn the Voice. Ah, so maybe that’s the Voice we can and should hear. The gentle Voice, the One whom the Father and Son are especially protective of, the One we’re not supposed to grieve by confusing or denying its existence. Is this because the Voice is an intimate part of us? Are we caught up in the Voice, even when we can’t hear it? Do the notes vibrate color and spill beauty into our world? Jesus did say some curious things about a marriage of dimensions; maybe we’re supposed to participate in that marriage now. We listened to the wrong voice and broke the earth.³ Do we help put things back together by listening to the still, small Voice? The One that woos and guides rather than demands and demeans?

When I think about it, the ones who seem to hear the Voice are the ones who are quiet yet articulate, tender but firm, enthused by what’s to come but immersed in what’s now. The kind of people who participate in a reality that is not yet real to most of us.

But we *can* experience this reality for ourselves if we relearn what it is to join the conversation, which means we must stop looking for just words and sentences and learn to pray with willing hearts and open eyes. Words are important, but there’s so much more to communication. Communion is what we’re truly chasing: a confluence of places, people, purposes. Paul did say that this communion is available to us all, so we mustn’t settle for

just communicating. Prayer—words with God—is our highest and best communion. Even when our prayers have no words.

When the prophet Isaiah heard from God, the man who just a chapter earlier had a word for everyone was at a loss for words in the presence of the One who has no beginning and no end. His response was to stop speaking: “Woe is me I must be silent.”⁴ And in that surrendered silence, for all of us, is the possibility to survey the interconnectedness of life. Such prayer opens us to what’s ultimately real.

God is God. We are not god. And so we pray.

The world is big. We are small. And so we pray.

Evil is real. But good wins the day. And so we pray.

Jesus prayed. And so we pray.

Every day we have a choice. We can let go of our tenuous grip on reality, an act that Scripture calls “dying to self,” or we can cling to a lie that *feels* less dangerous than the truth. One option comes with a vibrant prayer life that is energized by faith, hope, and love. The other option comes with fear, anxiety, and confusion because we’re clinging to the illusion of control and self-sufficiency. What we don’t die *to* we die *from*—that’s what Jesus and Paul are getting at in Luke 9 and 1 Corinthians 15, respectively.

But even beyond Luke 9 and 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel tells us the good news that we’ve largely gotten God (and prayer) wrong, and that’s why we should repent, stop listening to the Accuser, and return to the Voice. The Accuser has no right to dictate or deny our prayers. In fact, Scripture tells us that the Spirit and Son constantly intercede so that we, through our prayers, would know the surety and connectedness of God’s presence, a surety that takes us into and through the canyon. They intercede that we may know the Voice and follow it home.⁵

And the dangerous truth is that the canyon is the pathway home. Like a child sent into the wilderness for a rite of passage, so our journey takes us into and through the silence. It's in the canyon that we wrestle with God and discover who we are and what we're capable of. It's in the canyon where empty words are exchanged for a real connection. It's in the canyon that we face off with our ideas of God, prayer, and many other things, so we can surrender to the universal mind of Christ.⁶ It's in the canyon that we figure out that a "prayer life" is much more than a spiritual exercise; it's the higher consciousness that reorders and integrates life, reclaiming every bit of living (and us) as holy and necessary to God's purposes and design.

The canyon's silence helps us join our voice—our holy *amen*—with the Voice again.

For even in the canyon's echo, the Voice speaks.

2

Into Silence

Praise waits for you in silence. . . .

O you who hear prayer,
to you shall all flesh come.

Psalm 65:1–2

We do not know each other yet. We have not yet dared to be silent together.

Maurice Maeterlinck quoted by John D. Barry, *Reactions*

It was the first time I had ever surrendered to silence. My life was a frenzied mess. Years had passed since I'd last slept with any regularity; two years since I had felt any emotional connection with God; and I was frequently using the term *burnout* to describe my job, which just so happened to involve “doing God’s work”—leading an organization that offered translated discipleship resources to virtually every country.

But I was losing perspective. Everything about my life just felt hard, and even easy decisions started to jeopardize my peace. I

felt ashamed of how weak and pathetic I had become. I stopped dreaming; my only focus was surviving the day.

I was unwell but had no idea what to do about it.

My wife saw what I was somehow able to hide from everyone else. I'm the kind of person who doesn't want to let anyone down. Since I'm a typical firstborn, my approach to life is shut up and do whatever it takes. If something isn't working, the "thing" isn't the problem, you are. Grow. Learn. Adapt. Try harder. Become more.

And you know what, my life, by most standards, was a success. Juli and I loved each other deeply, my kids adored me, my team and friends respected and valued me, my role as chief operating officer continued to grow in scope and opportunity, the organization I led was thriving, and I was frequently asked to consult or speak into other organizations.

I was failing successfully as my interior life disintegrated.

Most of the time, I felt as if I were working with only a fraction of myself. There were days when I would put the kids down and just sit outside their door, trying to muster the strength to walk up the stairs and out of our basement. I would do whatever I could to give my kids the best of me, which required me to get crazy good at compartmentalizing my life. I honestly believed that if I just had the right answers or training or people, I could delegate and define my world into order.

There were extended moments when compartmentalization seemed to work, but the winds of life would eventually knock down my partitions, leaving me unprotected from the storms without and within, exposing my mastery as nothing more than a farce.

The nights were the worst. I knew the sleepiness that seemed to overtake me at 10:00 p.m. was only an illusion, and that the

moment I put my head on the pillow, my need for control would cause me to trade sleep for insomnia, my night hours spent in desperate attempts to bandage the fractures in my world.

After a few hours of restlessness and fruitless work, I would turn to prayer, which basically consisted of me pleading for sleep so I could function and survive whatever the next day would bring. One could say these nocturnal laments were aimed at arranging the world to my design. There were, of course, moments when I would cast my cares on God, but “casting my cares” looked a lot like me trusting God to give me what I wanted, rather than searching out what Jesus offered as an easy yoke and light burden.¹

I’m a bit stubborn, so this breaking probably took longer than it needed to. But finally, after an especially long series of sleepless nights, I realized I couldn’t do anything. Like anything . . . at all. My bodily systems were shutting down, and it scared me. As usual, I was captive to the belief that there was important work to be done, but my wife told me that the world would have to spin without my contribution. At that point, I couldn’t even argue with her. After a couple hours of taking inventory of how messed up I was, I agreed to surrender, knowing that I had no idea what “surrender” even meant. I promised Juli that I would, for the first time in my life, trade activity for an extended period of stillness and solitude.

Not long after that, I said goodbye to my family and boarded a plane for a quiet spot in Florida.

There are words that form only in silence.

It was my second morning alone . . . and living in silence. The first day was basically a detox, which consisted of me feeling

bad for being away from my wife, kids, and meaningful work. But after a few hours of somehow forgetting that my sanity was on the line, I came to my senses and had a breakthrough in the kitchen. Something shifted in me as an intimate and intense healing process began to do its work.

For the first time in a long time, Psalm 127 became real to me, and I went to bed in peace.

It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep. (v. 2)

During this season, I was taking stuff to help me sleep, sleep aids that were both natural and less than natural. When night came, my heart rate would quicken if I didn't know where my sleep aids were or if I didn't take them at the right time. Everything had to be perfect, from the time I drank my last glass of water to the minute when I turned off my phone for the night to how my pillows were arranged to how the curtains were drawn. Though based on my sleep patterns, my obsessive efforts weren't working.

With greater clarity than I'd had in a long time, I knew that God was offering a peaceful sleep that was not predicated on my ability to first work things out, or by "eating the bread of anxious toil." I was beginning to learn that peace is not found in having all the answers, it's found when we're in tune with the One who is the Answer.

So I just went to bed, like normal people do.

Early that night sleep found me, and she wrapped me in her arms until the sun chased her away. As I slowly emerged from

my intoxicating sleep, an invitation traveled from my spirit to my lips. Without realizing what was happening, I heard myself say, "Prayer will become the center of your life, and I want you to write what I give you . . . will you obey me?" I had never experienced such a waking. Grasped by the moment and something *other* within me that was certainly beyond my consciousness, I whispered, "Yes."

But as my mind realized what had just happened, I started to question my response. After all, I was no expert on prayer and clearly terrible at managing what God had already given me to do. Was this just another one of my plays of productivity, a sanctified grasping of sorts?

I come from a family of writers, so I could wrap my head around the writing bit, but I felt grossly unqualified to write on *prayer*, especially considering the state of my life. After school, I did a yearlong prayer intensive with a group of eighty or so students, but that hardly qualified me for writing a book on the subject, especially considering how my anxiety, insecurity, and self-centeredness had largely squeezed the life out of my prayers.

None of this made any sense to me. A barrage of doubts took shape in my mind, and I took each of them to the Father, quite confident that either I had made the whole moment up or the message had somehow been delivered to the wrong person. But as the minutes passed, I could find no release from the reality of the morning; there was a holy residue that wouldn't wash away.

I was staying just ten minutes or so from a beach, so I wandered into the arms of nature, hoping the expanse of water and sky would open my eyes and quiet my heart. As I walked along the vacant beach, I was reminded of how Gideon, when faced

with what felt like an impossible invitation, asked for multiple signs to allay his doubts. Gideon also had the gall to say, “Where the heck have you been, God? Where is the evidence of your faithfulness and deliverance? We’ve heard of your miracles, but all we’ve known is misery. Surely, you’ve forsaken us.”²

Several months before this moment in Florida, we’d had a few couples over to our house for a night of prayer and worship (my wife’s idea, not mine). Later that evening, once everyone’s defenses were mostly down, Juli suggested that we should each share a bit on what God was doing in our lives. She went first and probably expected me to follow. I didn’t. My defiant silence was palpable, and someone else graciously took my place, relieving the room of its discomfort. Eventually, everyone but me had shared. The night was getting late, and I wanted to just hide behind a prayer and send the group home. But I knew that wasn’t an option. The room was waiting for me to say something, and these are the kind of people who don’t let one get away with cowardly behavior.

Fine. I thought. I’ll share.

I told the group that I felt abandoned by God’s presence. That I felt used and passed over. That my spiritual life consisted of little more than empty motions. I remembered a time when I experienced the connectedness and trust that they had described as part of their own journeys with God and purpose, but my path felt like a grim march into a fog that would surely end in exhaustion and failure.

To their credit, they didn’t rationalize my pain or experience. They just prayed for me. During the time of prayer, one of them shared that he believed God would redeem this pain, and there would be promise and purpose that would be born in the season of disorientation. That sounded nice, and I certainly wanted

what he said to be true, but all I could do was nod and thank him. The numbness within me remained.

So there I was in Florida, carrying these moments and words with me. For the first time in years, I felt deeply connected to the Father, so somewhere in my heart, I asked for what I didn't know how to ask for. I mean, what kind of sign does one need to know that they should write a book on prayer? But the request, feeble as it was, had been made, and my heart felt lighter, almost as if the ball was back in God's court and the impossible responsibility off my shoulders.

Feeling a sense of relief, I began the walk home. As the day progressed, there were more people on the beach, and I knew I could only get away with nods as greetings for so long. Eventually someone would try to start up a conversation. This was, after all, the South, and considering my commitment to silence, that would just be awkward. I was nearly home when a kind voice with a southern drawl grabbed my attention.

“Good morning, young man.”

I looked around but didn't see anyone. *Maybe, like whatever happened earlier today, I'm just imagining stuff*, I thought . . . so I just kept on walking.

“I said good morning, young man.”

The voice was louder this time, and I knew it wasn't just in my head. Looking again in the direction of the voice, I could now see a kind, distinguished man on a front porch, sitting on a rocking chair. A group of trees had blocked my line of sight, but apparently he saw me. Now, this was the awkward moment that I had dreaded. A simple nod wouldn't do, especially since the gentleman already thought I had ignored him the first time. I quickly searched for the Spirit's leading, and it was clear that I was to break my silence.

“Good morning, sir,” I said. “Sorry, I couldn’t see you through those trees. How are you this morning?”

I expected the usual response, something along the lines of, “I’m doing well, how are you?” but this man intended to have a real conversation with me. He told me his name, Ivan, and invited me to come sit on the porch with him. I politely declined, mentioning that I needed to get back to the house before the sun took advantage of my fair complexion. He nodded and kept talking, his words forming a flood of questions that blocked my way home. Ivan wanted to know who I was, what I did, what my passions were, my favorite color, my shoe size, . . . you get the idea. An hour later, we were still talking, him sitting on the porch, me standing nearby, my feet furtively inching toward a quiet escape in the house I was staying at.

But around this time Ivan finally told me something about himself—he was battling terminal cancer, and the doctors said that he had six months.

Suddenly, getting into the house didn’t seem so important. It felt providential that my silence had guided me to this moment; it was now my turn to ask the questions.

As I gently probed, Ivan shared his story with me. Although he was an unassuming man, his was the kind of life most people dream of, one full of adventure, love, and success. As a high school principal, he had transformed one of the worst schools into a Blue Ribbon school, a nearly impossible turnaround. As a chaplain and missionary, he had traveled the world, helping others and positioning them to create legacies and forge pathways of their own. And he was, even then, surrounded by two generations of family, loved and respected by his own.

But age is just a number, and Ivan was still young at heart, living with a sense that there was more for him to do. An imminent

death didn't make sense to him, so Ivan's prayer was that God would give him at least ten more years. I asked him if he believed in miracles, and he said yes. We talked about the miracles we had seen and how God, in strange and beautiful ways, has a knack for making the impossible possible.

Knowing that God had invited me into a greater revelation of prayer, I offered to pray for him. By this point, he had left the porch and was now standing beside me. I laid hands on him and prayed what was in my heart. I contended for healing and wholeness with every bit of faith I could muster. If faith like a mustard seed could move mountains, then surely a molecular miracle was within the Spirit's scope of work. I had seen miracles happen, I knew that God's kingdom has a way of breaking the expected outcomes and moving into the brokenness of our lives, on every level of existence. Why shouldn't it happen in this moment?

After I prayed for Ivan, he wanted to pray for me. With tears in both of our eyes, we embraced as we offered up our amen. So be it, Father.

Three hours later, I finally made it back to the house. For me, this was the sign I needed. That morning, the Father had asked me to write on prayer, and then he led me to Ivan. Surely my new friend would be healed, and this testimony would be the anchor for what God was asking me to learn and write about.

I called my wife and told her the whole story. We decided to fast and pray for Ivan, that God would infuse him with the strength he would need to embrace the miracle. In a few days, Juli and the kids would join me in Florida for some family time, and I was thrilled that they would get to meet Ivan and his family.

The following day Ivan and I sat and talked for hours. And, yes, I actually sat on the porch this time. We talked a lot about

what it means to be sons and receive from our Father in heaven. I gave him a book that I had at the house, a message on being relentless and never giving up. He read the book in less than twenty-four hours, loving every bit of it. His son-in-law, Michael, and I made plans for the families to connect once Juli and the kids arrived. We spent a day at the beach together, followed by a wonderful dinner at the place they were staying. I'll never forget just sitting outside with Michael and Ivan . . . the sun had gone down, there was a slight chill in the air, but we were warmed by conversations on God's faithfulness and goodness.

The next day, their family left the house, and we parted ways, promising to stay in touch. We were all energized and encouraged by our time together, all of us hoping and praying that God would heal Ivan.

But three months later, Ivan was gone.

And none of this made any sense.

Really, God? A book on prayer?

How cruel.

We've all seen prayers go "unanswered." At least, that's the term we use when a prayer seems to have no resonance, no evidence of heaven touching earth. But for me this whole situation was more than an unanswered prayer—it felt like I had missed God, or he had betrayed me. And then there was Ivan's family . . . I didn't want to tell my family what had happened to Ivan, but his family didn't have that option. Their beloved father, grandfather, husband was gone.

I know prayer is so much more than getting what we ask for, but for most of us, even if it's only on the subconscious level, prayer is judged by its effectiveness, and the measurement of

effectiveness is usually based on what we can see and judge with our eyes.

And my eyes were telling me that I had missed it.

None of this seemed right.

I wanted to deny that God had led me to Ivan, but I couldn't do that, no matter how hard I tried. The Spirit of God, amid my pain, sorrow, and brokenness, continued to invite me into the mysterious truth of prayer, which looked a lot like me getting to know my doubts and being okay with them. Time passed, the seasons changed, and one day I finally offered another weak *Yes* to the Father's invitation to rediscover prayer. I largely stopped running from what God had asked me to do, knowing that, once again, I didn't know what surrender required of me.

I had heard that there was such a thing as holy doubt, but the idea of it felt messy and contradictory to me. I became more honest with my doubts, though. It was like I was giving them names and faces then placing them on a shelf so that both God and I could have a good look at them and work out what they're all about.

During this time, God showed me that even Abraham, the one whom Scripture refers to as the father of faith,³ doubted God. His doubt led to head-scratching behavior, such as him giving his wife to other men and having sex with a servant to birth an heir. Yet Paul writes that somehow Abraham never succumbed to unbelief. That led me to search out the difference between unbelief and doubt, because surely Abraham doubted.

To put it simply, unbelief is the rejection of God himself, whereas doubt is the rejection of our *idea* of God. Unbelief is to deny God's faithfulness. Doubt is to question when or how God will be faithful. Unbelief leads to apathy. Doubt often results in premature action.

I realized that it wasn't that I doubted God's ability to do whatever he wants to do, I just doubted myself, my worthiness, perception, skill, and acumen. The truth is, God's done a lot over the years with honest doubters. Doubt, when acknowledged, spoken, and surrendered to God, transforms into faith.

To put it squarely in the form of a question: Can we even know that God is faithful until life's given us reason to doubt his faithfulness?

There's a striking sequence of verses in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. The passage reads,

Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 6–11)

In true Pauline style, we find a weaving of themes that, at first glance, don't seem to mesh; but with time and consideration, they have this way of converging and forming different dimensions of truth. These verses even contain a rhythmic structure that is more typical of a poem than Paul's usual prose, a nuance that is, unfortunately, lost in the text's translation to English. But the gist of the poem is that the hierarchy of power, including the pangs of death, was redefined by the life and sacrifice

of God's beloved Son—the One whose name is above every other name—and the day will come when every knee bows to the revelation of who he is.

In most Bibles, you'll find a break between verses 11 and 12, but Paul's thought continues beyond the poem. In fact, he begins verse 12 with the Greek word *hōste* ("for this reason" or "therefore"), so he is clearly building on and continuing the thought: "Therefore, my beloved, . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."⁴

Let's look at the sequence of these two verses. First, Paul reminds us that we are the beloved, loved by God and safe in that love. This is the love, after all, that took on the likeness of humankind, even suffering death on a Cross, to reveal who we are and what we're called to become. This revelation of belovedness is our foundation, and it will embolden us to journey across the canyon to find the Voice. It will help us walk through the doubts that keep us from understanding God, ourselves, those around us, and what it all means. From this place of surety, we are told to do the difficult work of yielding every bit of ourselves in fear and trembling. In other words, this is hard and scary work: work that will bring us to the end of ourselves and call us beyond our small constructs, answers, and ideologies and into the *otherness* of God's ways and will. We are promised that God himself will do his work in us, and as we surrender, he will work with our will, transforming a tentative yes into a resounding "So be it!"

As I dove into the depths of prayer, this passage in Philipians became a lifeline for me. I would often pray, "Father, I don't know what to will, but I yield my will to you. As your beloved son, I trust you. Take me where I otherwise wouldn't

go.” We must remember that we rarely know the right answers to seek or even how to seek them, “for we do not know what to pray for as we ought.”⁵ But even in our silence and ignorance, God meets us with groanings that never fail to do their work.

Prayer, just as life, will always retain a form of mystery, and if anyone tells you otherwise, they’re reducing God to their own image, losing sight of what prayer’s purpose and design are all about. When we commune with the Eternal, there will be mystery. As Paul proclaims elsewhere, borrowing from the prophet Isaiah,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?” (Rom. 11:33–34)

“If Paul’s words are true,” you may ask, “then why even bother? Why attempt participation if God is unsearchable, and his ways are impossible to understand? How are our prayers to travel the pathways of his holy understanding?” The answer is both simple and mysterious: we were made for such pathways. Just because something is mysterious does not mean that it cannot and should not be searched out. As the ones with eternity written on our hearts, we were made to understand what is now shrouded in mystery.⁶ And it is only by participating, especially when we don’t fully comprehend, that we begin to understand what is currently beyond us.

The journey of understanding prayer is circular, seasonal, cyclical. Use whatever word you like, but the end of a thing has a way of taking us back to the beginning. Once we've mastered an idea, concept, or skill, we return to what feels like a novice state because the path ahead gets longer with learning. I guess it's true that the ones who know the most claim to know the least; the wisest among us listen to learn while the immature just listen for a chance to prove what they've learned.

I often complain about what feels like a return to a previous season, fighting battles of doubt, weakness, and insecurity that I thought were long gone. But the Spirit reminds me that my journey isn't linear, traveling from point A to point B. A meaningful life is much too steep for a straight line of discovery. That's where the switchbacks come in.

If you've ever been on a switchback, you know what I mean. These paths take you back and forth, in a horizontal fashion, to help you achieve the goal of ascending and descending a steep grade. The switchbacks can feel like slow going, and if you're impatient, you can start believing that the view isn't changing, and you're not getting anywhere. But the truth is you're seeing the view from a new vantage point, and, yes, this is true for even the slowest of climbers. Your present moment is both familiar and new, and that's how it must be. It may feel like you're revisiting the pain or struggle of the past, but do not believe the lie.

Our journey through the canyon of prayer is like this. It's never static, always dynamic. That's one of the reasons why we're told to pray consistently. Things are constantly changing, and our prayers make us aware of the change, keeping us from believing the lie that we're stuck in between, just yelling into the silence.

By your patience possess your souls. (Luke 21:19 NKJV)

One of our greatest challenges to understanding and participating in prayer is that our idea of it is infected by our pursuit of the immediate. Instant results. Fast-tracked success. Microwaved food. You get the idea. So if what we want doesn't soon follow our prayers, it's tempting to just give up altogether. But as we explore and become intimate with prayer's narrative as revealed in Scripture and human history, we realize that through prayer we escape the bounds of time and join a relational frequency that envelops and energizes all of God's children, those called to be stewards of his kingdom, the Saints who see the unseen.⁷

If my use of *Saints* and *kingdom* seems strange to you, hang tight for a bit. We'll explore these ideas more later. But for now, when you see *kingdom*, think of the demonstration or evidence of God's sovereign or perfect rule; an eternal form and function that empower and sustain human and cosmic flourishing.

When we begin to view prayer as our opportunity to participate in what is ultimately true about everything, it becomes so much more than what we've primarily known it to be—that is, the mechanism to bring our requests to God. And it's only within the largeness of this vision of prayer that we can discover an integrated life of purpose that offers meaning and significance instead of a small and frustrated existence.

Words with God

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