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1

FROM CRISIS TO CONVICTION

*God my Father, I have treated You like a paramedic. Never again. I messed up. Please forgive me. Revive my heart! I desperately need Your radical grace to transform and empower my heart, through Your Holy Spirit, to develop a fresh, loving disposition that will produce a permanent and intimate affection for You alone!
In Jesus' name, Amen!*

HOW CAN I TREAT GOD like a paramedic, calling out to Him only when there's an emergency?

That was the question that continually filled my thoughts in the weeks following Barbara's crash.

The paramedics and emergency responders who treated Barbara at the scene were amazing. They had provided wonderful care. And our lives were intensely linked to theirs in those initial hours after the crisis.

But since that terrible moment, those eleven dear life savers had become little more than a faded memory. Our "relationship," as it was, had ended.

So was that how I was now treating God? Calling upon Him during emergency situations, yet selfishly

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content to go my own way the rest of the time? Was my relationship with God built upon me or upon the blood-stained love of Jesus Christ?

Barbara's trauma became my wake-up call! In that terrible moment, God the Father began to methodically expose my spiritual hypocrisy and replace the joylessness that had filled my Christian walk with a greater love for the Savior and a boundless passion for prayer.

He used two experiences shortly after Barbara's crash to "surgically" cut away from my heart those parts that had turned to stone over time—mercifully giving me a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26).

The first came at a pastors' conference I typically attended every year. Since it had been only four months since the collision, I debated about leaving Barbara home alone since she was still in the midst of her therapies. But when she saw the theme was "The Powerful Prayer Life of a Praying Pastor," and knowing that I was wrestling with this issue, she told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to attend and promptly registered me for the event.

PASTORS WITHOUT PRAYER LIVES

About two thousand pastors and ministry leaders gathered together for three days. We sang wonderful songs, listened to eloquent speakers lecture about

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prayer, and heard stories of the prayer lives of those often considered giants of the faith. Yet not once were we ever called to pray! No time was scheduled for corporate prayer. No one encouraged us from the front to consider skipping a meal (which we were obtaining on our own, so there would have been no waste of meals) to pray individually or with others. Yes, we were told there was a prayer room open throughout the conference, as was the custom each year. But the few times I visited the room to pray, only one or two others were present.

During the conference, we were told that 80 percent of evangelical pastors in America do not have a personal, private prayer life. In other words, the people who are getting paid to pray do not pray! And as if to underscore this point, one of the well-known speakers was asked during a question-and-answer session if he prayed with his wife. He confessed he did not!

It was shortly thereafter that the almost prophetic words of two pastors from a previous generation came to mind.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a late-nineteenth-century British pastor, wrote:

Of course the preacher is above all others distinguished as a man of prayer. He prays as an ordinary Christian, else he were a hypocrite.

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He prays more than ordinary Christians else he were disqualified for the office he has undertaken. If you as ministers are not very prayerful you are to be pitied. If you become lax in sacred devotion, not only will you need to be pitied but your people also, and the day cometh in which you will be ashamed and confounded.¹

According to Spurgeon, I was disqualified for my ministry position and was to be pitied. I had become lax in my sacred devotion, so the people to whom I ministered were also to be pitied because I was not loving them because I was not interceding for them.

The prominent American author on prayer E. M. Bounds, who pastored about the same time as Spurgeon, agreed. He wrote,

The thing far above all other things in the equipment of the preacher is prayer. Before everything else, he must be a man who makes a specialty of prayer. A prayerless preacher is a misnomer. He has either missed his calling, or has grievously failed God who called him into the ministry. . . . Preaching the Word is essential; social qualities are not to be underesti-

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mated, and education is good; but under and above all else, prayer must be the main plank in the platform of the man who goes forth to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to a lost and hungry world. The one weak spot in our Church institutions lies just here. Prayer is not regarded as being the primary factor in church life and activity, and other things, good in their places, are made primary.²

Instead of returning from the conference refreshed and recharged, I came home deeply burdened not just for myself but for the church in America. I was acutely aware that other ministry leaders were wrestling with the same prayerlessness and joylessness that I was. According to Bounds, we were either men who had missed our callings or men who had grievously failed the one who had called us into ministry. I was certain I had not missed my calling. So that meant I was grievously failing the one who had called me.

FAILING WITH AN F MINUS

I decided to take a spiritual retreat, all by myself, at a friend's cabin. For those of you who know me well, you will understand how radical this decision was. I am often described as being a people person, one who

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needs to be around others. My family even teases me that I cannot go to another part of the house without taking someone with me! But I was desperate for a real, lasting change. I committed to God to spend several days with Him without the distraction of other people, the Internet, telephone, or television.

This retreat was my second surgical-like experience. In the quiet of that first hour on the first day, I asked God to evaluate my last twenty years of ministry. God saw fit to give me not just an **F** but an **F-**; and He targeted my dismal prayer life as the primary reason. I was convicted that my prayer life was putrid. Foul smelling. Stinky. Like the prophet Isaiah, I became totally “undone” before a holy God (Isa. 6:5).

In my prayerlessness, I had betrayed my wife, our children, and grandchildren. I failed the investors in the ministry as well as those men and women in prison and their families for whom I had been called to be a voice (Prov. 31:8–9). I had neglected the precious bride of Christ, the church, for whom I had been called to serve. I had blindly contented myself with what was a lukewarm ministry. The Holy Spirit revealed to me that my prayer patterns and purposes were focused on the *human* trinity—me, myself, and I—not on the Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

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Right then and there, after getting the real perspective and picture of the damage a prayerless life causes, I repented—with deep emotional pains—of my hypocrisy and nonexistent prayer life. I cried out to God my Father and adopted David's prayer of repentance from Psalm 51 as my own.

King David (who today would be labeled a rapist and murderer) had to be restored and experience God's forgiveness the same way I did through genuine, godly sorrow. We both needed God's sufficient grace, regardless of the level or severity of our sin. I prayed David's honest confession of sin and call for mercy, which reads, in part:

Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender
 mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I acknowledge my transgressions,
And my sin is always before me.
Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done this evil in Your sight—
That You may be found just when You speak,

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And blameless when You judge. . . .
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Make me hear joy and gladness,
That the bones You have broken may rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me. . . .
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.
(Psalm 51:1–4, 7–10, 12)

No sooner did I receive my failing grade than the Holy Spirit gave me not only fresh mercy but a fresh abundance of undeserved grace. After praying Psalm 51 as my own prayer of confession and repentance, I was reassured that although sin has major consequences, God is willing and able to forgive any repentant sinner, regardless of the sin and its gravity.

JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE OF JUDGMENT—AND HOPE

To give me an example of the serious consequences of prayerlessness and of God's great mercy, the Holy Spirit led me to read through Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah was called by God to pro-

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claim a very difficult and direct message: The southern kingdom of Judah would be devastated by the Babylonians as a result of God's divine judgment on them because of their idolatry. Nearly a century before, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians and the people had been scattered or taken into captivity, also as a result of God's divine judgment. The leaders of the southern kingdom thought that such destruction would never befall them. After all, they had the temple in Jerusalem, the very dwelling place of God!

God, however, saw things differently. In Jeremiah 10:18, He said He was going to throw the people of Judah out of their land and distress them. Why? Verse 21 gives one reason, "For the shepherds have become dull-hearted, and have not sought the Lord; therefore, they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered."

This verse reminded me of what I knew about myself and had heard and seen at the pastors' conference. We, the shepherds, were not seeking the Lord. We were not—I was not—praying.

But praise be to our great God; Jeremiah's message is not all about judgment. It is also about God's mercy that brings redemptive and reviving hope.

While Jeremiah is locked up in the king's prison

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(because King Zedekiah did not like what Jeremiah was prophesying), the Lord instructs him to purchase some land. This would have seemed like a crazy thing for Jeremiah to do. Why buy land in a place that is about to be overtaken by an enemy and from which you will soon be deported? Yet Jeremiah obeys. He does as God commanded without delay—buys the land and seals the purchase deeds in a safe place. The next thing he does is pray (Jer. 32:16). Unlike the priests—the so-called shepherds of Israel who had become dull-hearted and did not seek the Lord—Jeremiah turns to the Lord for understanding about what he had just done.

The Lord responds to Jeremiah with remarkable, loving devotion, giving him words of great hope that I took personally to heart for myself and for the people that God has called me to serve. He answers Jeremiah with a question (Jer. 32:26–27), which I felt like God was asking me that day: “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?” He tells Jeremiah that He will send the Babylonians to drive them out of the land, but one day He will bring them back. Jeremiah 32:38–41 says,

They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the

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good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul.

Although the present time was very grim, God reminded Jeremiah that He would do His people good. That good was to cause them to revere Him, to fear Him in the good sense of the word, so that they would not depart from Him. This was exactly what He was doing with me.

INTIMATE FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD MY FATHER

I savored the sweetness of an intimate fellowship with God my Father, through Jesus Christ, like never before. It was even greater than when Jesus first found me and confronted me in Caracas, Venezuela, where I had been hiding from the FBI and facing fifty-five years in prison—and then experienced His radical redemption. But now the Holy Spirit was energizing me with fresh power and giving me a renewed confidence in the finished redemptive work of Christ. God provided

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me with a fresh start in ministry by filling me with the hope of His glory revealed through the person of Jesus Christ. He gave me a new beginning, as He did with King David, the nation of Israel, and the apostle Peter (see John 21:15–19). The Holy Spirit reminded me that God the Father could have fired me at that very moment. There was justifiable cause for my termination. Yet He chose to give me abundant mercy instead. *¡Aleluya!*

Jeremiah 33:2–3 are two of the most oft-quoted verses on prayer. We are told that while Jeremiah was still in prison, God spoke to him a second time saying, “Thus says the Lord who made it, the Lord who formed it to establish it (the Lord is His name): ‘Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’”

Right then, I called out to God, thanked Him for His mercy in restoring me, and asked Him to show me great and mighty things that I did not know. Because of His great mercy, I now had a renewed personal relationship with Him. No longer would I call upon God as a paramedic, but rather I would call upon Him as my Father.

I genuinely sensed that God gave me an assurance that I would live to see a revival in the church in America

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and that the revival would begin in the most unlikely of places, America's prisons. He would use "the foolish things of this world [inmates and former inmates, such as me] to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1:27). As I prayed about such a revival, the proverbial words of William Carey, the man called "the father of modern missions" (and a man who was often at odds with church leadership), came to my mind. While appealing to a group of pastors to join him in missionary work, Carey said, "Expect great things; attempt great things."

That is what I purposed to do, and I knew the first step would be for God to revive me, to change me and my heart.

Later that day, I sat for several hours alongside the river that borders my friend's property. Although I am not typically the kind of person who enjoys spending much time outdoors, especially in February in Wisconsin, I felt drawn by the Holy Spirit to watch the waters flow by and observe the riverbanks. God spoke to me through this part of His creation, bringing to my mind the word "capacity." I cried out to God to give me a greater capacity for prayer, for communing with Him. I opened myself up to be filled with God's pattern for powerful, passionate, and personal prayer. As God created this very section of the earth to have a capacity

to hold these river waters—a depth, a width, and a length—so I needed God to give me the capacity to receive, retain, and then respond to His grace as I began a new journey in the discipline of radical, biblical prayer.