Waiting On God

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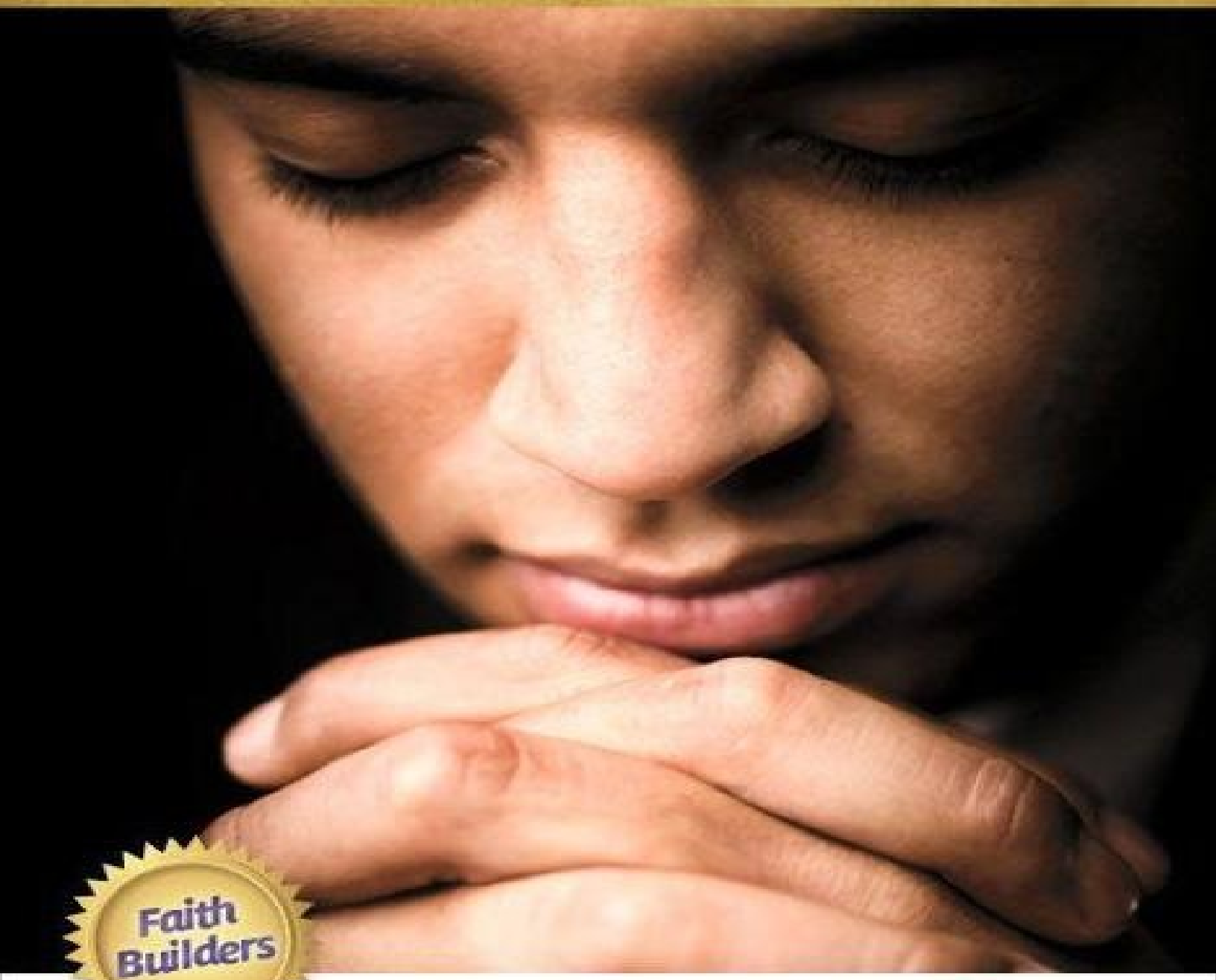

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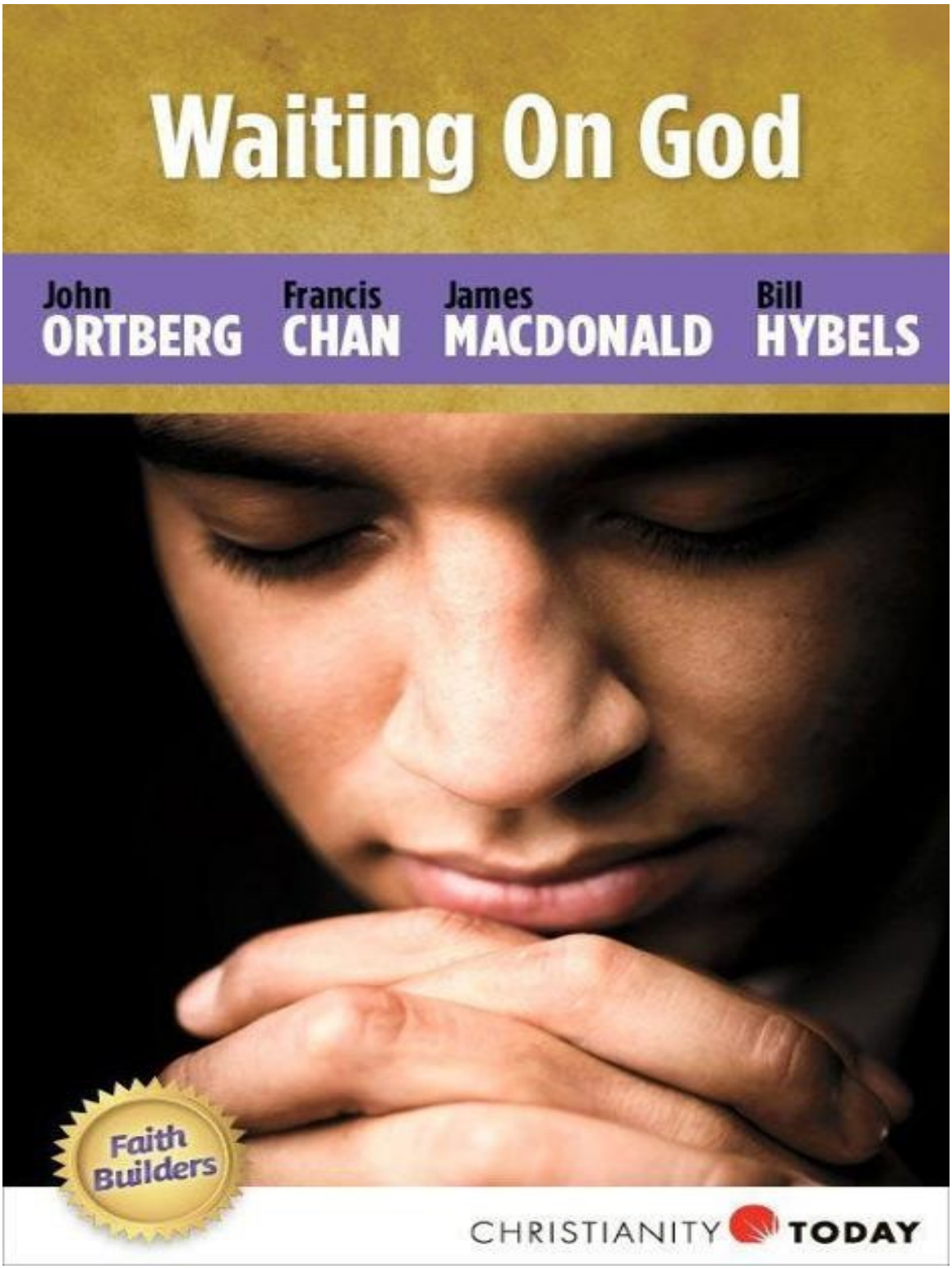

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Table of Contents

Introduction
Paul Pastor

Waiting on God
John Ortberg

When God Doesn't Listen
Francis Chan

Submission through Prayer
James MacDonald

Why We Shouldn't Give Up On Prayer
Bill Hybels

More Faith Builders!

Introduction

In his classic picture book *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel) describes an inevitable waypoint on everyone's life journey: The Waiting Place.

As the name implies, this is a place "for people just waiting."

> Waiting for a train to go
> or a bus to come, or a plane to go
> or the mail to come, or the rain to go
> or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
> or waiting around for a Yes or a No
> or waiting for their hair to grow.
> Everyone is just waiting.
>
> Waiting for the fish to bite
> or waiting for wind to fly a kite
> or waiting around for Friday night
> or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake
> or a pot to boil, or a Better Break
> or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
> or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.
> Everyone is just waiting.

Everyone is just . . . waiting. There are few seasons more difficult than the ones that make us wait. We feel out of touch, maybe even out of control, regarding events that affect us personally, intimately. Time seems to slow, to blur into a slow motion film reel of stock scenes edited poorly. We feel stuck. We may even feel abandoned or alone.

In these times, prayer is often difficult, as we wait for a response from a God who often seems silent. Does he even hear us? When our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, how can we keep from becoming discouraged?

In this outstanding sermon collection, four of today's top preachers (John Ortberg, Francis Chan, James MacDonald, and Bill Hybels) join you in the waiting place. Their words will encourage you that God is present. Persistent prayer can be hard work, but there is purpose when we wait on God.

These four gifted preachers each provide a unique perspective on prayerful waiting. As you take their messages to heart, it's my prayer that you will be moved to further contemplation, and a commitment to wait well in prayer.

You'll find that this is more than a state of patience, more than simply an in-between place on our spiritual journey. Rather, waiting in prayer is a posture to which God invites us, a posture of trust, designed to bring us deep peace. This posture can be one of the most difficult experiences of the spiritual life. It can be full of unanswered questions, or even answers we don't want to hear. In spite (or perhaps because of) the difficulty, such times can be powerful seasons of growth.

We cannot control God. We will often find ourselves waiting on him. We need to embrace that waiting, to learn to wait prayerfully and well.

So, whether you're

Waiting for your wounds to heal

or deliverance, or a decent meal,
or your heart to change, or a better deal,
or your friends to join you as you kneel,
or the strength to pray, or the words to say,
or the wish to live another day
or the house to sell, or the pain to go
or the rain to come, and the drought to go,
or a change of scene, or a breath of air,
or that special someone, or just to *dare*,

may these words encourage you that the path you walk is a well worn one, on

which you can see the footprints of Jesus himself. When we wait, we wait with him.

In his name,

Paul Pastor, editor

Waiting on God

John Ortberg

Waiting is our destiny

How do you feel about waiting? Do you enjoy a nice, long wait? I don't like to wait. I don't like it when I have to stand in line at the bank or the post office. I don't like being at a stoplight sitting behind an accelerator-challenged driver when the light turns green. I don't like it when I pull into a gas station and all the pumps are occupied, and I have to wait for somebody to pull away. How good are you at waiting? I thought I'd give us a pop quiz. I'm going to walk you through a few scenarios and ask you to think through how you would respond.

Here's the first one: You are at a tollbooth. The driver of the car in front of you is having an extended conversation with the tollbooth operator. Think for a moment about how you would respond. I'll walk you through a few possible responses:

> A: You are happy. You observe they are doing the tollbooth in community. You think about forming a small group—with you and the other driver and the tollbooth operator.
>
> B: You think of things that you'd like to say to the tollbooth operator. Invite him to the Christmas Eve service perhaps.
>
> Or, C: You attempt to drive your vehicle between the other person's car and the tollbooth.

Second scenario: You've been sitting in the waiting room of your doctor's office for an hour. How do you respond?

A: You're grateful for the chance to catch up on the 1993 Reader's Digest.

B: You tell the other patients you have a very highly contagious and fatal disease in an attempt to empty the waiting room. Or if you have little more flair for the dramatic,

C: You force yourself to hyperventilate to get immediate attention.

Now, these are fairly casual kinds of waiting, but we put up with them. However, there are other, more serious and difficult kinds of waiting. There's the waiting of a single person to see if God has marriage in store for him or her. There's the waiting of a childless couple who desperately wants to start a family but day after day, week after week, their prayer goes unanswered. There's the waiting of someone who longs to have work that's meaningful and significant and seems to matter, but it doesn't happen. There's the waiting of a spouse that's trapped in a hurting marriage that seems unable to change.

Lewis Smedes puts it like this: "Waiting is our destiny. As creatures who cannot by themselves bring about what they hope for, we wait in the darkness for a flame we cannot light. We wait in fear for a happy ending that we cannot write. We wait for a 'not yet' that feels like a 'not ever.'"

Waiting on the Lord is an act of obedience

Waiting is the hardest work of hope. When we turn to the Bible, God himself—God who's all-powerful, all wise, and all loving—assures us over and over to wait. Psalm 37:7: "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." Wait for the Lord, the Psalmist goes on, keep to his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land.

God comes to Abraham. Abraham is 75 years old and God says, "Abraham, you're going to become a father. You'll be the ancestor of a great nation." But it won't happen today, it won't happen tomorrow. You know how long it was before that promise came true? Twenty-four years. Think about being 75 years old and being told you're about to become a parent—and then waiting 24 years. That's how long Abraham had to wait. God told Israel, his people, that they'd be a nation, able to leave the slavery of Egypt and be independent, but they had to wait 400 years. And then God told Moses he would lead the people to the Promised Land, but they had to go to the wilderness and wait 40 years. Then came the great promise that the Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer from God,

would come. God's people waited. They waited generation after generation, century after century, when God seemed silent. Then, strangest of all, when the Messiah came, he was only recognized by a few. He wasn't at all what they thought they were waiting for. In fact, he was only recognized by those who were waiting for him.

Luke 2 tells us about two people who recognized the Messiah because they were waiting on God. The first is a man named Simeon. Luke 2:25: "Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout," and then verse 25 says he was, "waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him." Waiting can be translated either "waiting for" or "looking forward to."

> It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him into his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.' (Luke 2:26–29)

I've been waiting my whole life; now my wait's over, God.

> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of 84. Year after year, decade after decade, this amazing woman, a prophet of God, never left the temple, but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were waiting for (or "looking for," again, it is the same word that's used earlier and can be translated either way) the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

So the Messiah came, Jesus lived and taught, and his disciples kept waiting for him to bring in the kingdom the way they expected, to right all the wrongs. But he was crucified.

He's getting ready to ascend, and so they ask again, "Are you going to restore the kingdom? Is our waiting over now?"

Jesus had one more command, in Acts 1. He says, “Don’t leave Jerusalem, but wait.” So they did. They waited in the upper room, and the Holy Spirit came.

But that didn’t mean the time of waiting was over for the human race. Paul writes in Romans 8, “We ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience.”

We wait and we wait. Forty-three times in the Old Testament the people are commanded, “Wait on the Lord.”

This runs all the way through the Bible to the very last words. In the last chapter of Revelation, John closes by saying, “The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Behold, I am coming soon.’” It may not seem like it, but in light of eternity, it’s soon. Hang on. And then John writes, “Amen, even so. Come Lord Jesus.” All right. We’ll hang on. But come. We’re waiting for you.

Obvious question: why? Why does God make us wait? If he can do anything and if he’s all-loving, why doesn’t he bring us relief and answers now?

I certainly don’t understand all of this, but I believe at least in part, to paraphrase Ben Patterson, what’s going on is this: What God does in us while we wait is as important as what it is we’re waiting for.

Paul says while we’re waiting for God to set everything right, we suffer. But suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. God is producing these qualities in us while we wait. What that means is that biblically, waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be.

But what does it mean to “wait on the Lord”? First, I want to say one word about what biblical waiting is *not*.

Biblical waiting is not passive waiting around for something or someone to come along that will allow you to escape from your trouble. People sometimes say “I’m just waiting on the Lord” as an excuse not to face up to reality, take appropriate action, or own up to their responsibility. That is not what waiting on the Lord is.

I’ve heard of people with horrible financial habits—impulsive spending or refusal to save money—get into a huge money mess and say, “We’re waiting on the Lord to provide.” That’s not biblical waiting. Waiting on the Lord in this case does not mean sitting around hoping you will get a letter from Nordstrom’s saying, “Bank error in your favor, collect $200.” That falls under the general theological category of “don’t be stupid.”

Waiting on the Lord in this case probably means dragging yourself to a good-

sense seminar and learning about biblical principles for a life of stewardship. Biblical waiting is not passive; it's not a way to evade unpleasant reality.

Waiting on the Lord is a confident, disciplined, expectant, active, sometimes painful clinging to God. Waiting on the Lord is the continual, daily decision to say, "God, I will trust you and I will obey you even though the circumstances of my life are not turning out the way I want them to, and they may never turn out the way I want them to. I'm betting everything on you, God, and there is no Plan B." That's waiting on the Lord. It's the hardest work of hoping.

Waiting on the Lord requires a trusting heart

There are three requirements to waiting on the Lord.

The first is this: waiting on the Lord requires patient trust. Will I trust that God has good reasons for telling me to wait? I don't know what they are. But will I trust that God knows what he's doing? Will I remember that things look different to God because he views things from eternity?

This is what Peter writes about (2 Peter 3:8-9): "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some think of slowness but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance."

God has a different perspective. An economist read this passage and was quite amazed by it and talked to God about it:

> "Lord, is it true that a thousand years for us is just like one minute to you?"
>
> The Lord said, "Yes."
>
> The economist said, "Well then, a million dollars to us must be like one penny to you."
>
> The Lord said, "Well, yes."
>
> The economist said, "Well, Lord, will you give me one of those pennies?"
>
> The Lord said, "All right, I will. Wait here a minute."

Often we want God's resources, but we don't want his timing. We want the penny but not the minute. We want his hand, but we don't want his calendar. We forget his work in us while we wait, which is as important as what it is you're waiting for. Waiting means I must trust that God knows what he's doing.

Maybe you're single. We live in a society where often the assumption is that marriage is normal and singleness is not. You feel the pain of that stigma. Maybe

you feel a legitimate longing for intimacy. Waiting is so hard, and maybe there's a relationship at your fingertips that promises to take that loneliness away. But you know that relationship is not honoring to God. Maybe you know in your heart that this is not the right person. Maybe this person does not share your ultimate commitment to God. Maybe this person is putting pressure on you to be involved sexually even though you're not married. But because of the pain, you're tempted to think, *I've been waiting long enough. I'm going to reach out for whatever satisfaction I can get in this life and worry about the consequences later.*

So I'm asking you, if you're in that situation, will you wait on the Lord? Will you courageously say, "OK, God. I will take you at your word. I will not get hooked up with a relationship that I know would dishonor you and bring damage to the souls of those involved. I will seek to build the best life I can right here where I am. Not knowing what tomorrow holds and even though I sometimes feel like nobody in the world understands how painful it is, I'll trust you. I will wait."

Will you do that? Maybe you have a dream about certain things that you'd love to accomplish, a mark you'd like to make, something about your work or your ministry, and for reasons you don't understand, what you always hope for is not happening. You don't know why; you just know it hurts. And you are tempted to try to force things to happen, to manipulate, or to use people. Or maybe you're tempted to give up ever trying to realize the potential God has given you and just drift along. Will you have the patience neither to try to force it nor to quit, but wait patiently on God?

Continue to learn about your giftedness. Humbly and openly receive feedback and coaching from others. Grow in the truth one step at a time and trust God's plan for you rather than what it is you think you need.

This last week I read one of the most beautiful pictures of waiting on God that I've ever seen. Many of you know of Henri Nouwen, who died in 1996. Not long before his death, he wrote a book called *Sabbatical Journeys*. He writes about some friends of his who were trapeze artists. They were with the circus, and their lives had an effect on him. They were called *The Flying Roudellas*. One thing they told Henri Nouwen is that there's a very special relationship between the flyer and the catcher on the trapeze. The flyer is the one that lets go, and the catcher is the one that catches. As you might imagine, this relationship is important—especially to the flyer. When the flyer is swinging high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. He arcs out into the air, and his job is to remain as still as possible and to wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air. This trapeze artist told Nouwen,

“The flyer must never try to catch the catcher.” The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him. But he must wait.

Some of you are in a vulnerable moment right now. You have let go of what it is God has called you to let go of, but you can’t feel God’s hand catching you yet. And you want to start flailing around. Will you wait in absolute trust? Will you be patient? Waiting requires patient trust. That’s the first thing waiting on God requires. The second one is this: Waiting on the Lord requires confident humility. Isaiah wrote these words: “the fruit of righteousness will be peace.” The effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. The result of righteousness, the prophet says, will be these two character qualities: confidence—the conviction that God is able, and a fearless orientation towards the future—and, oddly, quietness. This is the opposite of arrogance and boasting. It’s the humble recognition of my limits.

Waiting is something by its nature that only the humble can do—or at least only the humble can do with grace. To wait for something is to recognize that I am not in control. I’m not calling the shots; the timing is not up to me. In our society, there’s a direct correlation between status and waiting. The higher your status, the less you have to wait. Waiting reminds me I’m not in charge. I’m the creature. But, we’re not just waiting around; we’re waiting on God. And God is doing something in us.

Therefore we can trust his wisdom and his timing, and we can wait with confidence. Therefore the single most important activity for people waiting on God is prayer. Prayer is the primary form that waiting on God takes.

It’s prayer that allows creatures, humbled human beings, to wait without worry. Recently, I had a night where I could not sleep and was troubled by all kinds of thoughts—“what-if” kinds of thoughts. *What if I don’t get what I think I so desperately need? What if some things don’t turn out the way that I desperately want them to turn out?* These were frantic voices inside me, and there was a semblance of truth in what they said—bad things can happen, but those words didn’t lead to life.

The next morning I was reading in Mark 4 where Jesus and his friends are in the boat during a storm. They become frantic, and panic. Remember what Jesus is doing in the boat? He’s sleeping. The disciples wake him up, and he says to them, “Pipe down,” and he says to the storm, “Pipe down,” and everything becomes calm. This story struck me as an example of one aspect of life that God does not experience. Jesus experienced nearly every human emotion, including sorrow, joy, pain, tiredness, anger and hope. But there’s one aspect of our lives that God never experiences: God’s never frantic. God never panics. God is never in a hurry. That gets irritating to those of us who are in a hurry. But God never is.

Lastly, it is important for us to learn how to recognize God's voice. How do you learn to recognize anybody's voice? You pick up the phone, and if you know somebody well you know their voice. It's by experience. You've listened to it many times, and it has a certain tone. One thing you need to know about God is God's voice is never frantic. When you hear desperate thoughts, or panicky thoughts, that's not God's voice. God's voice will never lead you into panicky desperation. When you find yourself being led into panicky desperation, you can know that you are not listening to the voice of God. "My sheep know my voice," Jesus said. It's the voice of the shepherd who cares for his sheep. Always. We wait with confident humility. We can be confident because God's leading us. We express humility because we are not in charge; we have to wait.

Waiting on the Lord requires inextinguishable hope. For in hope we were saved. Hope that is seen, Paul wrote, is not hope, for who hopes for what is seen? In other words, if I already had it I wouldn't have to hope for it. But if we hope for what we do not see, what we cry out for and hunger and thirst for but don't yet experience, we do so with patience. In the Bible we find a most wonderful promise attached to waiting on the Lord.

What we wait for is not more important than what happens to us while we're waiting. The one we wait for will be worth the wait. He will.

Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted. There is a limit to the strength of the strongest human being. "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not grow weary. They shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:30-31).

Bio: *John Ortberg is Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California. He is the author of numerous books, and Editor at Large of Leadership Journal.*

When God Doesn't Listen

Francis Chan

The pew in Pit Row

I did something I thought I would never do in my life: I went to a NASCAR race. I know some of you are big NASCAR fans, but I'm just not into it. Several

of the racers were reading my book and doing a Bible study, so they invited me out to the race and said I could sit in the pits—right where they change the tires and all that stuff. I thought, *If I'm going to experience a race, that's the way to do it*. So I went, and I sat in Pit Row, and I watched the guys taking tires off and pouring gas in. It was fun. I have to admit, it was a good time. The sound, the rush, trying to understand it all. It was a good time.

Now, I won't ever go back—unless I get to sit in the pit again. That was pretty cool. In fact, next time I go, I want to help somehow. Maybe I can be the guy that slaps the car. You know? Wouldn't that be fun? Right after the pit stop, the guy always runs up and smacks the car as it's driving away. I can do that. Let me do that. But if one of you invites me and says, “Hey, you want to go to the NASCAR race and sit in the grandstand with everyone else?” The answer will be “no.” I'm not that into it. So would you call me a NASCAR fan? No. I'll go if everything's just right, the way I like it, but I'm not going to sacrifice or keep up. I don't know who won today or yesterday or even if they raced. I don't care.

I say all that because, when I look at the church in America, there are so many people who will only participate if everything's just right. You have to have the right speaker, the right music, the right people. You have to have the right programs, the right time of day. It can't be too long. There better be something good going on for the kids. You'd better have something at the church where I can find people exactly like me, and whose personalities I enjoy. I'll fellowship with *them*. Everything has to be just right.

But when I look at the scriptures, I think *Man, these guys would do anything*—these followers of Jesus, these fans of Jesus. And you have to wonder: Are we just playing a game here? Is this the real thing? Sometimes when you see the real thing when it comes to following God—we've got people around the world that are really suffering, and many of them are suffering for the sake of Christ and for his namesake—you see that say: *Wow, that person is intense. They would give up anything for Jesus.*

And then you think: *I don't know if I'm the real thing. I don't know if I get it.*

Prayer is serious business

I think back to how I was raised in the church. People would tell me to pray: “Just start talking. Just say whatever you want to say.” But when I read the Scriptures, I don't see that. Ecclesiastes tells us *to guard* ourselves as we approach God. Don't be quick. Don't be hasty. Don’t say just anything.

And definitely don't start making vows before God. “God, I promise I'll never. . .” because God is going to hold you to that. It's serious. You don't just start opening your mouth and saying careless words before God. When you pray,

there should be thought behind it. You think about who you're speaking to and what you want to say to him. I understand that prayer comes from a relationship with God, but is that an excuse for sloppiness?

Another thing: some of you could pray all week and God would not hear a word you say. Do you realize that? No one ever told me that. They said to just start talking. But they never told me that sometimes God doesn't listen to you, and so you're wasting your time. You're wasting a whole day. You're wasting a whole week, a month. Some of you guys have wasted hours and hours and hours praying in such a way that God is actually disgusted by some of your prayers. At least, that's what the Bible teaches.

I knew a guy once who said: “My wife and I haven't been getting along. Things just aren't right, and I've got this job opportunity somewhere else, and so I'm going to leave my wife and my family. Would you pray for me that I would have a great new start?”

I replied, “You've got to be kidding me right now. I'm not praying for you. God's not going to listen to that. Look at what 1 Peter 3:7 says: ‘Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way. Show honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.’”

Not too long ago another person came up and asked me to pray for healing. And that's great. I'm glad you have the faith. James 5 says, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you can be healed.” And I said, “So, do you have anything you need to confess?” And he goes, “Ah, there's a little business thing, but I think I got that fixed. And there's a little thing here, but I got that fixed. No, I'm good. I've confessed everything.” And right before we start the prayer he says, “Well, I'm living with this girl.”

That's a little problem.

I said, “You claim to be a Christian, and she claims to be a Christian, and you guys are sleeping around?” Then I said: “Let me ask you something. If you were sleeping with one of my daughters out of wedlock, would you have the nerve to come up to me, face me, and ask for a favor?” He said he'd never thought of it that way. I said: “You're with a daughter of God, and now you're going to approach him and ask for a favor—and you want me to come with you?!” No, you repent. God is a forgiving God. He's an awesome Father. He'll forgive you, but there's no way I can pray for that. God's not going to listen to that. Why pray?

James 4:3 says, “You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your own passions.” *On your passions*. You see what this verse says? God is telling you why you don't you get any answers—why don't you receive

what you pray for. Because you ask in the wrong way. If you don't ask the right way, you're not going to get answered. In this case, you're praying for something so you can spend on your own passion. You're not concerned about the things of God. It's all about you.

In James 1:6 he says this: “But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all of his ways.” If you're going to pray and you're going to doubt the whole time—you doubt that anyone's listening up there—don't waste your time. Don't suppose that you're going to receive anything from the Lord.

Answered prayer is a tremendous blessing

Before I go on, let me make something clear here: I don't think there's anything I enjoy more than answered prayer. You know what I mean? When you ask for something specific and then it's answered, and it's answered supernaturally, and you know there's no way that was coincidence—isn't that an awesome feeling? It's knowing that I just spoke to God, he heard me, and he did what I asked for. That's insane. I just spoke to God, and *God heard me*. I know he heard me, because that could not have been a coincidence. There's nothing like that feeling.

Sometimes people say, “I got to meet this person?” Oh, whoopee. I talked to *God*. Like, the *Creator*. You’re breathing right now because of him. He made the world. I said something to him, and then he said: *Francis, I heard you . . . watch what I do now*.

There’s nothing like that. I want you all to experience it. Prayer isn't about, “Oh, we have to do this. As Christians we're supposed to pray.” I'm telling you: there's *nothing* like knowing that God hears me.

Answered prayer is conditional on our obedience

In Isaiah 58, we see these people who were praying. They were even fasting, so they weren't eating because they were praying. They come before God and some of them are even stripping themselves of their normal clothes and wearing sackcloth and ashes and throwing dust over their heads—they were really suffering as they cried out to God. And here's what God said to them:

> Is that what I wanted? Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble themselves? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

> Is not this the fast that I choose—to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
>
> Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up speedily, your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry and he will say, “Here I am.”
>
> If you take away the yoke from your midst and the pointing of the finger and the speaking of wickedness. If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noon day.

God says: “What, you think you're going to bow before me and go, ‘Oh, look at how humble I am,’ and I'm going to listen to your prayers? Is that what I ask for? What I ask for is to go out and find the people in need and take care of them. Share your home with other people. Share your stuff with other people. You do that, and then when you cry out to me, I'll be there.”

I love that. But it's conditional. That's why I don't want to have a week of fasting and prayer if all we're going to do is fast and pray. I want you to be the people that God has called you to be. I want you to be givers. And I believe that's why God's hand has been on this church—because we're trying to care for the people who are in need. And that's why I've seen the hand of God in some of your lives. Why? Because you live for those people.

So it's not about praying more. Sometimes it's just about praying. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, because an unrighteous person can pray all day and hear nothing, but a person who pours himself out for the hungry, for the afflicted, the moment they say, “God, can you help me with this?” He'll say: Yes, here I am.

Answered prayer is influenced by our community

Joshua 7 is an interesting passage as well. This is one I was really wrestling with. It caused me to wonder, *Am I as serious about God's commands and purity as he is?* And the answer is “definitely not.”

Joshua 7:1 says: “The people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan, the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things, and the anger of the Lord burned against

the people of Israel."

Okay, what's he talking about? There were certain areas where God said to just destroy the place—destroy everything in there. Take the items you find and give them to the Lord. Don't touch them. Don't mess with them. But Achan saw some things in Jericho that he liked, and he took some. He took some of the spoils from this defeat, and he hid them for himself. And the text says, "The anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel."

Wait. God got mad at everyone because of one guy? Yes. And when you read on, the Israelites were about to go to war. No one knew about Achan and what he stole and what he hid. And then in verse 4 they're about to go to war against a city called Ai. And about 3,000 men went up there from the people of Israel, but they fled before the men of Ai. The men of Ai killed about 36 of the Israelites and chased the rest before the gate as far as Shebarim. And the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

Here's what the text says:

> Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell face down to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?"
>
> The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction."
>
> "Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it.'"

So Joshua is crying. He's praying. He's fasting. The elders are fasting and praying. They're saying, “God, what in the world happened? How did we lose? We never lose. You're our God, and now you turned your back on us.” And God says: Get up, Joshua. You know why I turned my back on you? It's because someone sinned. Someone took some of those things that I told you guys not to take.

Wait. Someone? One person and you're going to punish all of Israel? Did you notice that? God says: You're going to be destroyed because you didn't listen to me. You better find that guy and deal with it. Get him out of your midst, so I can bless you again.

So what did they do? They found this guy, Achan, and they stoned him to death. They burned him up. They covered him up and said, “God, are we good now?” And God says: Yes. I'll be with you in battle now.

Now some of you hear that story, and I know what you're thinking: *That's not fair*. Right? I mean, 36 people died because of the sin of some other guy. Face it: that doesn't seem fair to you, does it? So tell him that.

This is just one of the passages that I look at and go: “I'm not as serious about this as you are, God.” You wanted purity amongst your people so much that when this one guy sinned, because the people weren't on top of it and trying to figure this out, they were all punished for it. And yet the moment you got that sin out of the camp, you put your blessing right back on those people again. How serious are we about the purity of the church?

In the New Testament, remember Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira? They came before the apostles after they sold some property, and they laid the money at the apostles' feet. They brought the money to the church and said, “Hey, here's the money.” And the apostles go, “Is it all the money?” And they say, “Yeah.” But they were lying. They had kept back a little bit. And both of them are struck dead by the Lord. Then, the Bible says, “And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of it.”

God is still serious about removing the evil from his church

And I know this bothers some of you. You're thinking, *Wait, he can't have such a high standard*. And that's why you have a problem with hell. That's why you have a problem with any of his punishments. You have a problem with him flooding the earth. But he says: No, you don't understand. I asked you to live a certain way. I gave you my Spirit to empower you to live a certain way, and yet you refuse. It's serious stuff.

Take a look at 1 Corinthians 5:9–13:

> I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked man from among you.’

Okay, this is something that we were taught wrong, a lot of us: the idea that we are not supposed to judge. What does the text say? Aren't you supposed to judge? Yes, we are supposed to judge those that are inside the church. We are not supposed to judge those who don't call themselves Christians. And for too long the church has got it backwards. We keep judging the evil world out there. And God says: “Stop that. I didn't ask you to judge them. I asked you to look in your midst and get serious about the purity of the church and get those people out of there, the people who call themselves brothers or sisters. I don't want someone taking the name of Christ and living that way, and you shouldn't want that either. Purge that person. Get that person out of there.”

I know this is not a popular doctrine. I know there are many people listening to this who say: “Well, I don't agree with what he did in the Book of Joshua. And I don't see why you would ever disassociate with someone and not even eat with them.” I understand this, too. But again, we're talking about people who call themselves Christians.

If you call yourself Christian, if you call yourself a brother, and yet you're holding on to sin that you refuse to let go of, we need to get you out of the church. It's for your good, too, but also for our good. Because it's not just about you. You hurt us. You affect the body. And your sin could impact our prayers.

Do you understand that this prayer thing is not just about you and God? A lot of you guys know the Lord's Prayer. What is the first word of the Lord's Prayer? “Our.” Even the Lord's Prayer is something that was meant for us as a group of people to come before God and pray together. Jesus said: Here's how you pray: “*Our* Father.”

It's *us*. It's about *us*. It's always been about *us*. Do you understand that? When you got baptized, you became a part of *us*. In the Old Testament it wasn't about just Achan's sin. “*Oh, Achan, that idiot.”* No, Achan was a part of Israel. And so God took his hand off of Israel as a whole because of the sin of this individual, because he was a part of a bigger entity. It's the same in the New Testament.

Jesus we start our prayer by saying “Our Father.”

So let the world see something, because unity is weird. Unity is something that the world doesn't see. They see everyone ditch each other. But unity, no, that's a different thing. And it's unity of purpose. So let's show them something different and together let's pray. But we can't do that if we're all living double lives, if we're holding stuff back. I want us to have powerful experiences of prayer, but that won’t happen until we repent and realize that our sin affects more than us; it affects the whole camp, it affects the whole church.

Logs and lies

Now, what I don't want you to do is get so wrapped up in that one issue that you don't take the log out of your own eye. This message is about you. It's about me. It's about us, and wanting the hand of God to bless us—wanting to be like the nation of Israel so that we purge the sin and God's blessings fall upon us again. Otherwise, why would God even listen to us? It's when we humble ourselves, turn from our wicked ways, and seek his face—that's when he's going to listen to us.

And I don't think any of us are fooled. The lie you live affects you, it kills you, but it's also killing us. And yet haven't you had those times when you finally just got it out and you finally just fell on your face, bawling your eyes out—times when you say: “I know this is wrong before God; I've tried to defend it, I've tried to rationalize it, but I just know it's wrong. God, I'm sorry and I'm ready to give it up.” What a great thing. That's what we need to embrace.

Maybe you are thinking, *I'm not ready for that*. Then let me beg you not to call yourself a Christian. If you're going to keep holding on to your sin and you're not a believer, that's fine—you’re welcome in my church anytime. But if you're going to call yourself a Christian, please, either just confess the sin and get it out of your life. Because you're killing us.

This in no way is about us being perfect and never screwing up. I screw up. I screw up every day. I sin every day. But afterwards, I confess. “Oh, that was wrong, I've got to walk away from that.” That's part of life. That's part of the sanctification process. I'm talking about the person that's holding on, saying, “No, I'm not giving this up yet.” I say to you, either give up Christ or give up your sin. You can't have both.

I'm not here to judge in the sense of condemning anyone, but I am here to judge the church. I have to. I'm called to do that. But it's for your good, and that's what you signed up for—that's what you wanted. And the greatest thing is when we can just do it on our own, come before God and come clean. We don't have a bunch of spies checking out your life. That's not what this is about. It's about you

just coming clean and saying: “Here it is, God. I'm hurting this church, I'm hurting myself, I'm hurting your reputation, and I need to change.”

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Submission through Prayer

James MacDonald

God is at work in our world. Do you believe that?

It says in Hosea 6 that God's going forth in this world is as certain as the dawn. If the sun comes up, then with the sun comes almighty God, into your life and mine. And he's trying to get stuff accomplished. He's trying to work in you and through you. God is at work in our world. Either you're for him or you're against him. Either you're working with him, or you're holding back what he wants to do.

Jesus said there are two categories of people—the ones that are for him and the ones that are against him. In fact, in Revelation 3, Jesus talks about those who think they're in the middle. He calls them lukewarm. He says: You are lukewarm, so I'm going to spit you out of my mouth. I don't have any lukewarm people. I don't have any part-timers. Either you're for me, either you're submitted to me, either you want what I want in this world or you're resisting me and fighting me and hindering me.

Here's the third thing: If you're against him, you're going to lose. Is that a news flash for you? God doesn't ever lose. He's never lost. He's a zillion and 0. God has never, never, never, *never* lost. He always wins. And if you're going to go against him, you're going to lose.

But here's the great news. If you submit to God, you can win. You can experience his incredible grace and forgiveness. You can receive comfort and strength and wisdom and understanding. He will provide for your every need and fill your heart with a happiness that is incomparable in this world. You can win at things that matter if you submit to God. A lot of things don't matter. But

you can win at the big stuff if you submit to God. You can win in personal character. You can win in your family. You can win with your kids. You can win in your mind. You can win in your heart and in your soul. You can win for all eternity.

If you're against him, you're going to lose. By lose, I mean you're going to get hurt. You're going to suffer the consequences. You're going to see your house crash. You're going to end up in hell if you persist in resisting God. But if you submit to him, you can win. All in favor of submitting to God? I'm going to go forward then, and talk about how to do that.

The Bible teaches that Jesus was 100 percent God. At the same time, he was 100 percent man. That's the mystery of the incarnation. Sometimes when you're reading through the Gospels, you see stuff like when he stood up on the boat in the middle of the storm and said, “Be still.” And the whole storm died down. If you had been there, you would have said, “He's God.” And if you were watching when he fed those 5,000 people and when he went up on the mountain of transfiguration and showed his glory to the disciples, you would have said, “He's God.”

But sometimes in the Gospels you see his humanity, like when his friend Lazarus died. Jesus cried. In Matthew 26, we see his humanity as he begins to turn his attention to the cross. He has already done the triumphal entry, when he came into the city and they laid palm branches at his feet and worshiped him. He has gone into the upper room with the disciples. And now he is turning his attention to the cross. He is going out of the city with the disciples toward the Mount of Olives. Three roads converge together there at the Garden of Gethsemane.

You're going to see here four ways that he begins and finishes the process of submitting to God, because Jesus in his humanity did not want to suffer all that he would suffer.

Submit to God in honest prayer

The first thing is *honest prayer*—saying to God, “I can't do this.” That's what Jesus prayed. Matthew 26:36 says, “Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, ‘Sit here while I go and pray over there.’ And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.” It is as if he opens his heart to all the pain ahead.

The pain Jesus endured in the Garden was excelled only by his separation from the Father. It was more than the mocking and the laughter, more than the curses and the spit, more than the whipping and the crown of thorns. Verse 38,

“Then he said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me.’” One commentator writes this: “A storm of agitation broke his calm and forced from his lips the unutterably pathetic cry, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow.’”

If you had been standing there that day, you would have said, “What's wrong, Jesus? You've handled everything so well up to this point. Why is your soul overwhelmed with sorrow?" The inner self of our Lord was overwhelmed. In his humanity, he was feeling, *I can't do this.*

He prays in verse 39, “Oh my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” He was saying, “I can't do this.” In his humanity, Jesus had to *will* to go to the cross. He always knew the cross was coming, but he had to will to go to it. It's as if you got some negative test results from the doctor, and you have to have surgery to correct the problem. The surgery is scheduled, and you know it's coming, and the day finally arrives. You know it has to happen. You're committed to it. But you have to *will* yourself to get in the car and go to the hospital. Jesus had to *will* himself to go to the cross. He had to make that choice in his humanity. And as he wrestled with all that meant, he prayed first this honest prayer: I can't do this.

Do you ever feel that way yourself? Do you ever think, *Lord, I can't do this. I can't face another day of this. I can't go through this again?* Don't despair. You need to do what the Lord did and go to honest prayer.

I love the first part of verse 39. It says, “He went a little farther.” On Palm Sunday he was with the throngs. In the upper room he was with 12 and then 11. In the Garden he was with 11 and then with 3. Now he's alone. He “went a little farther,” all by himself, and fell on his face and prayed. That's a scene of desperation. That's a scene of earnest, serious prayer.

Are you ever desperate? Are you ever at a place where you absolutely need to hear from God? Take a model from Jesus here, because this is phenomenal. He gets by himself, and he actually—the Son of God—physically lay down on his face before God.

I think of when I was at Promise Keepers, and I saw thousands of men on their faces before God. I remember the speaker saying, “Men, get as low as you can. Get as low as you can.”

I've been wrestling with some things recently. At one point, things got so difficult that I went into my backyard and I got on my face. I haven't done that a lot of times in my life, but I've been studying this and I started thinking about it. I humbled myself before God, and I lay there before him. It was a phenomenal thing to get in a posture of complete humility before God and to pour out my heart to him.

The key word here is *honesty.* God knows what's in your heart anyway. There are no big secrets there. You need to acknowledge that he knows by getting before him and pouring your heart out to him. We're on the path here to submission to God. Step one is honest prayer.

Practice submissive prayer

But Jesus isn't done yet. The second thing is *submissive prayer*. As the Lord began to wrestle with the Father, he was asking essentially this: Is there another way? Notice verse 40: “Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘What! Could you not watch with me one hour?’”

We don't have the whole prayer here. Jesus had been praying for a whole hour. All we have is a brief, three-line summary of the prayer. While Jesus was praying, the disciples were sleeping. I don't think he's angry with them. He says: You know what? Your hearts might be willing, but your bodies are weak. Then he goes back to prayer again.

I want you to see this submissive prayer: Is there another way? He says, “O my Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, your will be done.” This is a symbol of a great, painful ordeal. He's not talking about the cup itself. He's talking about what's in the cup. What do you think was in the cup? What is Jesus asking the Father to take away?

First of all, I don’t think it was the *fact* of death. I don’t think Jesus was afraid to die. In fact, we know that others not close to Jesus' equal have faced death with courage.

Secondly, it was not the *shame* of death. It was not the mocking and the beating and the crown of thorns. It was not the spitting and the insults that went into the precious pure ears of God's only son. It was not that at all, because we know the greatest shame for Jesus was becoming a man, as it says in Philippians 2. Hebrews 12 tells us he endured the cross despising the shame.

It also wasn't the *pain* of his death. His death was very painful physically, but Jesus in his humanity was not saying, “God, I cannot take that physical pain.” Christians for the last 2,000 years have endured torturous, painful deaths for the name of Jesus Christ, and they are enduring torturous deaths and persecution even today without shrinking back.

Let me tell you what's in the cup. Jesus saw himself being made sin, and he felt repulsion. He was the spotless, pure Lamb of God, and he had never known sin. And to have almighty God place upon him all the sin of the world was more than he could bear. He was pure and precious and entirely righteous, and as he looked into that cup, he saw himself being made sin. He saw himself as the object of God's wrath—Jesus, who had a pure and righteous, unified relationship

with his Father beyond what we can comprehend, who had never known a moment of disagreement or conflict in the Trinity. Jesus saw in the cup separation from his Father—being made the object of his Father's wrath—and he felt rejection.

Often people say, “Where's the justice of God? Have you read the newspaper lately? Why doesn't he do something?” God did do something. God put all his anger and hatred and revulsion for all the sins of human history—the sins we've experienced, the things we've witnessed, every senseless murder, every child used and abused, every act of cruelty and perversion, every awful thing that has ever happened in human history and ever will happen—it was all in the cup.

One poet wrote of Jesus Christ: “On him almighty judgment fell that would have sunk the world to hell.” And when he saw that in a cup, he shrunk back and said, “God, there has to be another way.” He was struggling in his humanity to come to a place of complete submission. We, on much lesser things, struggle to come to a place of submission to God. Jesus shows us how: honest prayer, and submissive prayer.

The second is the same in essence but different in emphasis. The main clause of the sentence is not “let this cup pass,” but “your will be done.” Those are some words of victory: Your will be done. Not my will, God, but your will. That's the essence of submission right there, and that's where the victory begins to be won. From the great prayers of the Bible, like Job 13:15, where Job prays, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him,” through to the great stories of church and human history, people have known the incredible joy of complete submission to God. Do you know it? You can know it, and God wants you to know it.

Wilbur Chapman was an evangelist in our country 100 years ago. One time he was in England, and he was visiting William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. William Booth was renowned for his incredible spiritual life and power, and Wilbur Chapman said to him, “I want to know the secret of your spiritual life. What is it?” And he writes this:

> Mr. Booth hesitated for a second. I saw tears come into his eyes and run down his cheeks. Then he said this: “I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me. There have been men with greater brains. There have been men with greater opportunities. But from the day I got the poor of London on my heart in a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with the poor of London, I made up my mind that God could have all of William Booth there was. And if there is anything of power in the Salvation Army today, it is because God has had all the adoration of my heart, all the power of my

will, and all the influence of my life."

Be persistent in prayer

Here's the third thing: persistent prayer. Because it doesn't happen immediately. It doesn't happen in five or ten minutes. It doesn't happen in a quick bow of your head. It starts there, but it doesn't finish there. True submission to God is not immediate. It takes persistent prayer, and that's what we see in verses 43 and 44: "He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. So he left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words."

If I had been standing there not knowing any better, I'd have thought, *Jesus, you're repeating yourself. You already said that prayer*. I was brought up thinking repetition in prayer is the worst thing you can do. In Matthew Jesus said: Don't pray like the heathen do, with vain repetition. Let's make a clear distinction here. Vain repetition—praying the same thing over and over, what we're not supposed to do—is different from persisting in the same prayer until it gets from our head to our hearts. When Jesus said, "O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will," he prayed and prayed and prayed until he got it from his head to his heart. And when he was done praying, the victory had been won.

Sometimes we need to say, "God, I know I said this, but I'm saying it again to you. I had it this morning, but I lost it this afternoon, so here I am tonight praying the same thing again. Lord, I want your will and not mine. I don't just want to say it. I want to get it out of my head and into my heart." As humans with needs, we tend to focus on prayer changing our circumstances. But more and more, I see how prayer changes us. The greatest answer to prayer is when God has changed you through prayer; when you prayed and prayed and prayed, and God changed you.

A family in our church that we love very much experienced a difficult thing. Greg and Patty Schwarzkopf have been coming to our church for a long time. I remember the day so clearly when they said, "We're going to have twins!" It was so exciting. Nine months went by, and the twins were born—a boy and a girl. They called the boy Will and the girl Kristen. And things were great for a week. All of a sudden, Kristen got viral encephalitis. It was a number of days before we recognized how serious it was, and before the difficulty settled down, we found out Kristen had an undetermined amount of brain damage. I remember how hard that was for them. That rocked their world. It shook their faith down to ground zero.

I have seen over the last three years this matter of submitting to God, and they

continue to walk through it. It was almost a year before they could even sit down and talk to me about it. They went through feelings of anger and wondering how God could do this. And people in our church began to come around them and love them. But still we were praying, “God, heal her. God, heal her.” “God, heal her somewhat,” we began to pray. God was changing us. I remember the first time they finally said to my wife and me, “Could we talk to you?” Over a period of months, we talked and read together and prayed together.

I want to read you a prayer they wrote last winter. They're not there yet, but God has done some incredible things in their lives in this matter of submission to God. Here's what they wrote about their daughter, Kristen:

> Because Kristen may never change, I choose to love and accept her unconditionally. Because Kristen may never change, I choose not to insist that Kristen recover 100 percent. I choose instead to set goals one day at a time. Because Kristen may never change, I choose to commit everything connected to her illness, including her future, to God's love and care. Because Kristen may never change, I choose to honor God and to trust that God will reveal himself through her. Because Kristen may never change, I choose to use Kristen to teach our boys [by this time they had a second boy] about unconditional love and tenderness. I choose to ask for God's direction and strength to deal with her disabilities. I choose not to worry, because God is in control, and he will sustain us.

That's not a prayer you get from your head to your heart in 15 minutes. They had to pray this day after day after day. They had to post it on their mirror at home. They carried it around with their Bibles. And every time their hearts got down and they wrestled with what they wanted and what God wanted, they'd come back to this prayer again. Some of you need a prayer like that. You need to work through this process of honesty, submission, and persistence in prayer, until you come to that place of genuine, glad surrender before God.

The dangers of our failure to persist

But I have to give you a word of warning. When you fail to persist in prayer to the point of true submission, five things happen:

First, you remain at odds with God. If you are at odds with God, you do not like this message. You have some specific things in your life that you don't want, and you're saying, “God, change this. Get me in a different spot. Do a different thing. Fix this now.” And he's not fixing it, and you're angry about it.

When you're at odds with God, you fail to see God's purpose. God has a purpose in that difficult thing. Even when it is not what you would have chosen, if you submit to him, God will bring a good thing out of it. But if you're not submissive to him, you're not going to see it. You're going to be walking around upset and angry, because you're not in submission to God. He's not doing the thing you want, and you're at odds with him. And the most irritating thing is when other people are saying, “Can't you see what God's doing?” You want to plug them one, because you can't see it. The reason you can't see it is because you're not in submission to God. When you're not seeing what God is doing, your view of God becomes skewed.

Greg and Patty, this couple I told you about, came up to me after I first shared their story with joy on their faces: “Thank you for sharing our story.” Do you know why they have joy? It's because they can see God clearly. Even in this painful trial, they understand God's heart for them and how he loves them. What they thought was an awful thing has brought blessings to them. They're beginning to get a vision of God's wisdom in allowing this trial into their lives.

But if you don't submit to God, your view of God is blocked. That's how people get messed up ideas about God. You won't understand what God is like if you're fighting against him instead of submitting to him. Then, your fellowship with is God hindered. If you don't know what God is like, you won't want to spend time with him. Some of you think, *I probably should have a quiet time*. But you don't. I'm going to next week. But you never do. You know why you never do? Because your fellowship with God is hindered because your view of God is blocked because you're at odds with God and you won't submit to him in regard to a specific situation in your life.

And here's the final fallout. Our access to God's grace is hindered. Hebrews 12:15 talks about people going through trials, and because they don't submit to Cod in them, they fall short of the grace of God. The grace of Cod is all the cool stuff he wants to give you in the midst of your difficult situation. He wants to help you. He wants to give you strength. If you're fighting him and resisting him, he can't give you the good stuff he wants to. And the result is bitterness. There are people all over the place who are angry and bitter, because they're not living in submission to God.

You can know victory through prayer

But I'm going to get to the good news: You can know victory through prayer. That's when you come to the place where you can say genuinely, from your heart, there is no other way. Have you come to that place of total submission to God? It's a great place.

I want to show you one of the coolest verses in the New Testament. Jesus gets up from the time of prayer. The disciples are still sleeping. He says: Come on, guys. Let's go. And as he gets up to go, the soldiers are coming toward him. What does Peter do? He pulls out his sword and cuts the dude's ear off. Jesus is totally surrendered to the Father, because he was praying. Peter is totally in the flesh, because he was snoozing. Jesus heals the guy's ear, and then he turns to Peter and says these phenomenal words in John 18:11, “The cup which my Father has given to me, shall I not drink it?”

Isn't that great? Four hours ago he was thinking, *I can't do this*.

Now he knows there's no other way.

The Father is good. I can trust him. His ways are best. He's been guiding my life. I can submit to him. I can bow to him. He has good things for me. I can trust him.

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Why We Shouldn’t Give Up On Prayer

Bill Hybels

One day, Jesus’ followers noticed he had left the group to pray. When he finished and rejoined the group, only one disciple had the courage to say what the rest of them were thinking: “Master, would you teach us to pray?”

Pray like what? What had they seen that prompted them to want to emulate how he was praying? Was it the language he used? Do you think he was using complicated theological terms? Do you think he was being dramatic and doing things with his arms or legs, and they wanted to be like that? Were there any special effects that prompted their curiosity?

I don’t think so. I think they could sense the depth of spiritual community Jesus was experiencing with the heavenly Father. They saw a kind of fellowship as Jesus knelt to pray. They said, “I want that.”

Once, I took five guys on a week-long sailing trip. Near the end, we had dinner ashore. At the restaurant, at a table nearby, there was a woman and a man holding hands across the table, talking quietly, gazing into each other’s eyes;

they were obviously in love. One by one our guys noticed what was going on at that table. And one by one, they said, “Excuse me. I have to go call my wife.” I’ll never forget thinking about what was motivating the phone calls home. It was a picture of a deep, satisfying, love-filled relating patter. It made the guys think, *That’s what I want to participate in with my wife. I want to talk to her. I want to call home.*

Jesus’ followers saw something in the way Jesus related to his Father, and they were humble enough to say, “Teach us to pray like that.”

Many Christians find their prayer life diminishing over the years

Some months ago, I started noticing that quite a few Christ-followers were confiding in me that, to their shame, they don’t pray like they had prayed earlier in their lives.

One guy described it this way: “When I was a new believer, the thought of talking with the God of the universe, the thought of him listening to me, responding to my cares and concerns, was so overwhelming I could barely take it in. I prayed all the time when I first discovered I could. I prayed when I got up. I prayed on my way to work. I prayed when I sat at my desk. I prayed at lunch. I prayed with my kids at dinner. I prayed with my kids when I put them to bed. I was a praying monster. It brought me such joy. God was answering my prayers. My life was changing, and I could see others’ lives changing.

“Then, I don’t know what happened. The whole deal just cooled off. I don’t pray much anymore.”

He’s still a Christian and active in the church, but he has given up on prayer. I said to him, “Almost every follower of Jesus Christ experiences exactly what you’ve described. I have.”

When I look back over the course of my spiritual life, I see reasons in which I prayed eagerly and often, filled with joy and anticipation. Supernatural things happened in and around my life and the lives of those people for whom I prayed. Then for some unknown reason, my prayer life would begin a mysterious descent, until I almost gave up on praying. I’d still pray at meals and at church functions, but not a lot more than that.

Then something would happen that would catalyze my prayer life, the activity of God would flood into my life again, and I would pray like crazy for a time. Then the fade would begin again.

Can any of you relate to the rhythm of prayer I’m talking about? Why do people stop praying?

Lack of consistent prayer patterns contribute to this diminishing

First, I think people stop praying or at least start to fade when the seas of life calm. It's human nature. When the storms are raging, and the waves are breaking over the deck, everyone on board is praying like crazy. When the phone call comes in the middle of the night, when the boss warns you that your job is up for grabs, when the doctor says it doesn't look good, when your spouse says someone else is starting to look good, we pray. Almost all of us pray, fervently, repeatedly, hopefully, if not desperately.

Then when the storm passes and the seas settle down and God proves himself faithful one more time, a big part of our motivation for fervent prayer subsides. And the great prayer fade begins.

Understandably, this affects the heart of God. He is not beyond the kind of feelings that a parent experiences, like, for example, when the only time the kid calls from college is when he or she runs out of money. God's not beyond feeling used by his children.

In the Old Testament, God traces his kindness to the children of Israel. He says, "Every time you got in a jam and you prayed for divine intervention, every time you needed protection and guidance and you pleaded for eleventh-hour rescues, I came through. Then after the storm passed, *you remembered me no more*. You don't talk to me much once the storms pass."

How do we keep this thing from happening in our lives? Most of us don't want it to happen that way. The only way I know to keep a big fade from happening is by establishing a regular pattern of praying that is not contingent upon the ups and downs of my life.

Jesus said in Matthew 6, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to the Father, who is unseen. . .Then your Father. . .will reward you. Avoid vain repetitions."

When Jesus was teaching on this way of praying, he was making some points for us to ponder. First, he was saying establish a time of praying. He says *when* you pray, not *if* you pray. He's asking us who claim to be his followers to arrive at a daily rhythm for a sequestered time of prayer. Be it early morning, midday, late at night, late afternoon, it doesn't matter. It might change over the course of your life.

Jesus exhorts us to establish a place. Choose a spot that can become a refuge or a sanctuary for your prayer time, a place that affords you sufficient comfort and privacy, a place that over time you begin to think of as a holy place for your prayers.

One guy I know prays on the Northwestern commuter train five days a week. He prays from the time he gets on the train until he arrives downtown. He says the seat of the Northwestern commuter train is like a holy place for him.

Jesus tells us to avoid vain repetitions. The third piece of advice if you're trying to establish this consistency in prayer is to pour your heart out. Don't just go through mechanical motions. Don't get in a formula that can become repetitive and autopilot-like.

Jesus says if you're struggling with something, tell God. If you're being tempted, don't hide it. Tell him. If you're defeated, tell him. If you're feeling shallow and distracted, tell him. If you're feeling lonely and discouraged, tell him.

Some of us do this verbally. We whisper our prayers to God in those private places. Some write out prayers to God because it helps to stay in focus. Some of us use lists. Some of us read psalms of praise to God from our Bibles. Some of us put on worship tapes and sing along with them.

The main thing is that you integrate into your daily life, just like you would eat or sleep or exercise, a time and a place and a genuine style of praying, so that when you're done and you go about your day, you can say, "I just met with God. I talked with him. I listened to him, and we connected on a soul level."

If you do that on a consistent basis, you're likely to take the big swings out of your prayer life.

Clinging to sin also tears us away from God

There's a second cause for that slide from relating to God that is usually caused by guilt or shame.

Sometimes when I'm trying to help someone understand why they don't pray any more, I say, "Let's backtrack. Do you know where the train left the tracks?" Some folks will say something like, "It was about the time I started partying heavily. I started running around a lot and letting my life get out of control."

Someone else will say, "It was when things got really busy at work and greed got its hooks in me, and making money started to be the driving force in my life. Then I started to drift." Or, "It's when I started getting counseling, and it was helping me at first, but then instead of facing my problems I got absorbed in myself. Before I knew it, I became the center of the universe, and I pushed God off to the side."

Old-fashioned sin is strong enough to create an ever-widening gap in your relationship with God. The wider the gap, the less likely it is that you'll pray consistently.

Once when I was coloring outside the lines, I was sinning in a particular area of my life. Then I was wondering why my prayer times seemed cold and mechanical. I had the time and the place down. But when I got to the "be real" part, when I was trying to pour out my heart to God, a big part of the

conversation with God I wanted to avoid.

Then I read Malachi 1:9, where God confronts his people for sinning: “After you blatantly sin against me, you have the gall to entreat me for favors? You pray and you expect me to come through like I usually do? You rebel against me. You shake your fist at me, and then you expect me not to be affected by your disobedience and waywardness?” God says, “Excuse me, I *am* affected by it. It breaks my heart. I feel betrayed when one of my precious children says, ‘I’m going my way, not your way.’”

Galatians 6:7 says, “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked.” If we don’t live in submission to him, then we lose the warmth and closeness that accompanies a yielded relationship with God.

Sometimes I’m assigned to call our dog in from the backyard late at night. So I’ll call, “Buster, come on in.” He’ll look at me, and he’ll tilt his head back and forth, as if he’s deciding. I say, “Come on. Get in here.” He keeps looking at me like, *Maybe I will, maybe I won’t.* So I say, “I’ll give you a treat if you come in.” Most of the time that gets him. So he’ll come cruising in.

I put him in the house, and he stands by the laundry room door where the treats are. I give him a treat, then he walks away.

Occasionally I’ll say, “Buster, come on in,” and for some reason, he’ll express a little canine carnality. *You want me? Come and get me.* And he takes off.

So I have to chase him down. When I finally grab hold of him and take him into the house, he’ll cruise over to the laundry room door. He’ll stop, look at the door, look up at me, and go, *I’ll bet there’s not a chance in heaven I’m going to get a treat, is there?* I’ll say, “What are you thinking? Get away from that door.” *Yeah, I think I’m going to dive under a couch or something. I don’t think I’m going to get a treat for the way I acted.* Even a dog knows you don’t defy the powers that be and expect business as usual.

I’ll never forget early in my Christian life reading a Christian leader who wrote, “There is no deep ongoing fellowship with a superior being without total obedience to him.”

You know why some of us don’t pray? Because we have an inner spirit of conflict. There’s part of us that wants to be in close fellowship with God. We want to pray and have it be like it used to be, but we know the barrier we’ve created by our sin. We know we’re going to have to get squared away before we can be in that completely yielded, warm, and loving fellowship with God again.

The Scriptures tell us that God we’ve sinned against stands with an extended arm and invites us to come back. In Isaiah 1:18, God says, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

He says, “Admit your waywardness. Tell me you fouled up. Come back and we’ll relate closely again.”

Disillusionment with God distances our relationship with him

There’s another reason why people drift away from God and give up on prayer. It might be the most obvious of the three—discouragement, despair, disillusionment. Sometimes people hear overzealous Christian teachers oversell the biblical promises associated with praying and the Bible. They prayed fervently that Dad would survive the surgery, but he didn’t. They prayed that their son and daughter-in-law would reconcile their marriage, but they wouldn’t. Or that their business would withstand the new competition, but it couldn’t. So they gave up on prayer because it didn’t work.

For some, it’s a hard, cold, practical reason why they don’t pray any more. Why waste your breath? If heaven doesn’t listen, if God doesn’t care, if he lacks the power to change things, why pray? Let’s all stop kidding each other about this stuff. It just doesn’t work.

I would bet every honest Christ-follower who has had a crushing disappointment that prayer didn’t fix has felt this way. When you feel like that, you’ve got to regroup and say, "What do I believe about this thing called prayer?" I would point you to Jesus in Luke 18, where he spoke to some people whose shoulders were sagging about the prayer thing. Jesus said, “I plead with you. Don’t lose heart in praying. Keep on praying.” The Father does listen to every prayer we pray. The Father does care deeply about every situation that’s brought to his attention. He does have unlimited power to bring to bear on whatever is causing your concern.

It’s true Jesus would say the Father doesn’t answer every prayer the way we fallible humans wish he would, for reasons we will understand only in heaven. But Jesus said to weak and weary pray-ers, “Keep on praying. Don’t lose heart.”

You have no idea how much your conversations mean to God. I know this as a parent who has two kids on the West Coast. There’s no call that comes my way that fills my heart more than when my phone rings and it’s one of my kids. My son, Todd, called me this afternoon. I heard his voice, and I said, “Todd, whatever you need to talk to me about, I just want to tell you this. It’s great to hear your voice.” Every time we pray it’s the same thing. God says, “Before you go any further, it’s great just to hear your voice.”

Every time you pray that’s the way God feels. You have no idea how carefully God listens to *every* one of your concerns. You have no idea how thoroughly he enjoys you spending time with him. You have no idea how earnestly he engages in the concerns you bring his way and how eager he is to do that which is best

for you – not always exactly what you want.

I want to tell you about a baptism that we had some years ago. I bumped into a woman in the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, "No, I'm struggling."

She said:

> My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I'm crying is because I came *this close* to giving up on her. At the 5-year mark I said, "Who needs this? God isn't listening." At the 10-year mark I said, "Why am I wasting my breath?" At the 15-year mark I said, "This is absurd." At the 19-year mark I said, "I'm just a fool." I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith I kept praying. Then she gave her life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of prayer again.

What about you? I know some of you have had some prayers that have gone unanswered, and you've almost bailed out on prayer because of that. I would tell you again on behalf of Jesus Christ, don't lose heart.

Bio: *Bill Hybels is founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. He is the author of numerous books, including* Holy Discontent, *and* Too Busy Not to Pray.

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