

The Folly of Prayer

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE
AND ABSENCE OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

REIMAGINING PRAYER

I prayed my first real prayer when I was nine years old. The Minnesota Vikings needed a little help to get into the playoffs, but the prospects weren't looking good. Down by one point toward the end of a critical regular-season game, the Vikings offense drove to their opponents' twenty-yard line. With a few seconds left, our field-goal kicker, Fred Cox, could chip it in and win the game. Freddie was the last of the straight-on toe kickers, so within forty yards he was unusually accurate. But still I couldn't watch. So I sat on the living room steps and prayed. Up to this point in my life, I hadn't asked God for anything. We hardly ever spoke to each other. But now I needed a big favor, so I fervently prayed, *God, just put it right down the middle*. And as I prayed, I listened to the television announcer give the details of that final play: "The kick is up, it's sailing . . . oh no, it's hooking wide right. Freddie Cox just missed the game-winning field goal. The Vikings have lost the game."

Freddie's career crashed, and my tender faith shattered. I didn't speak to God for another four years. When I finally did start talking with God again, I was a surly, unhappy, hotheaded teenager. I didn't

enjoy life, and I resented God's existence. How could I trust a God who seemed bent on working against my happiness? So whenever anything negative occurred in my life, I would turn to God in "prayer"—that is, a string of God-directed expletives. One sunny July afternoon, while casually playing basketball in the driveway of our suburban home, my ball kept rolling under my parents' car, getting wedged against the muffler. After the fifth incident I looked up at the sky, shook my fist at God and screamed, "This was no accident you *bleep-bleep-bleep* God. I hate you! Why don't you just leave me alone?" I meant it. God didn't deserve my love or respect.

Since then, I've changed my mind about God. I don't believe in a God who jams basketballs under mufflers just to make me miserable. And I don't feel a need to curse at God. Now I believe in the God who is the source of true and lasting happiness. Obviously, this has changed my practice of prayer. A few years after my prayer-as-profanity exhibition, I knelt beside my bed and asked Jesus Christ to be my Lord and Savior. A year later someone gave me a handy pattern for prayer called ACTS. It outlined the four basic categories for prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. It was a tidy summary that helped me broaden my prayer life. I could move beyond demanding field goals and expressing rage. For many years I stuck with this basic ACTS pattern of prayer.

Eventually, however, I started to notice that the Bible offers a much broader perspective on prayer. I still like the basic fourfold pattern, but I've also found other patterns for prayer right in the pages of the Bible. There is prayer as guttural groaning, when we come into God's presence and just ache and hurt. There is prayer as hearing God's heartbeat, as we simply rest in God's deep love for us. There is prayer as a long, slow journey, as we learn to wait on God's timetable for our lives.

In all, this book explores eleven paths or ways to pray, which have five things in common. First, each of these paths to prayer is deeply rooted in the Bible. The Bible is a sprawling book that appeals to our reason and our imagination. For key issues in theology or spirituality (such as sin or redemption or the character of God), it never presents

just one image or picture. So it makes sense that the Bible would provide a rich array of colors and images and pictures for our prayer life. And that's exactly what we find. Every image flows from the deep and beautiful stream of the Bible's view of prayer.

Second, the prayer paths in this book engage us on an intellectual, emotional and relational level. God will crack our hearts wide open. We can't "groan" our prayers to God without accessing the grief and longings in our gut. We can't listen to God's heartbeat without feeling loved. We can't have an argument with God without getting angry. And we can't pray sacramentally without touching God's creation, the stuff of life—skin, trees, blood, bread and wine. These prayers require our entire being—our senses, our emotions and our brain—to show up and be present to God.

Third, the ways of praying presented in this book have sometimes been marginalized by contemporary Christ-followers. I'm not suggesting there's been a massive cover-up; sometimes we just don't know how to pray. Most of us have never been taught to pray by groaning in a Godward direction or by confronting God with a good argument or by paying attention to God's presence. We're unfamiliar with these ways of praying; we may not even consider them prayers at all. The chapters that follow intentionally explore these quiet, hidden, marginalized ways to know God more intimately.

Fourth, most of these paths to prayer will open our hearts to God and to other people. They will help us grow deep with God and then move us to display compassion for others. These marginal ways of praying will compel us to engage with marginal people—the desperate, the groaning, the victimized and the ignored. As we start to pray in a more full-bodied biblical way, God will open our eyes not only to his glory but also to the pain of the world around us.

And finally, there is a certain "folly" to prayer. Prayer isn't necessarily efficient or even comprehensible. Sometimes we feel and know the palpable presence of God, and we cry out, "Thank you!" At other times we experience more of God's haunting, mysterious, unpredictable absence, and we scream, "Where are you?" And we usually can't

predict God's next move. In this sense, praying to our untamed God can be frustrating, perplexing and even agonizing. God will bathe us in ecstatic light and then seemingly abandon us in the dark. To be blunt, sometimes real prayer with the real God can drive us nuts!

But that's real life. Reality itself—from quarks and human cells to redwood forests and blue whales—is quirky and unpredictable, riddled with sharp edges and surprises and setbacks and strange events. So if God is real (and he is!), God will be characterized by the same things. After all, would we really want a completely predictable, unsurprising, smooth-edged God? I have a hunch we'd quickly fall asleep on God.

So the folly of prayer is sometimes painful and exasperating. But it's an encounter between the real God and the real us. I don't enjoy pain, confusion, failure and suffering. I've spent an enormous amount of energy trying to suppress the dark side of life. Unfortunately, if I try to shut down the neural pathways of pain, I will also shut down the pathways of deepest delight. The result: a numbed life. I've been there, but I'm not staying there. I want to face life head-on, with all its jagged edges of mystery, joy, longing and agony. This book is my journey to come alive and be present in one critical facet of my life: my prayer life.

My prayer is that my journey will help you come alive to God and to others like never before.