

The background of the cover is a complex geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and diamonds in various shades of teal and dark blue. The pattern is overlaid with a high-angle photograph of ocean waves, showing white foam and deep blue water. The overall aesthetic is modern and serene.

BEGINNING A PRAYING LIFE

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NavPress 

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Beginning a Praying Life

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“WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO?”

I WAS CAMPING FOR THE WEEKEND in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania with five of our six kids. My wife, Jill, was home with our eight-year-old daughter, Kim. After a disastrous camping experience the summer before, Jill was happy to stay home. She said she was giving up camping for Lent.

I was walking down from our campsite to our Dodge Caravan when I noticed our fourteen-year-old daughter, Ashley, standing in front of the van, tense and upset. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, “I lost my contact lens. It’s gone.” I looked down with her at the forest floor,

covered with leaves and twigs. There were a million little crevices for the lens to fall into and disappear.

I said, “Ashley, don’t move. Let’s pray.” But before I could pray, she burst into tears. “What good does it do? I’ve prayed for Kim to speak, and she isn’t speaking.”

Kim struggles with autism and developmental delay. Because of her weak fine motor skills and problems with motor planning, she is also mute. One day after five years of speech therapy, Kim crawled out of the speech therapist’s office, crying from frustration. Jill said, “No more,” and we stopped speech therapy.

Prayer was no mere formality for Ashley. She had taken God at his word and asked that he would let Kim speak. But nothing happened. Kim’s muteness was testimony to a silent God. Prayer, it seemed, doesn’t work.

Few of us have Ashley’s courage to articulate the quiet cynicism or spiritual weariness that develops in us when heartfelt prayer goes

unanswered. We keep our doubts hidden even from ourselves because we don't want to sound like bad Christians. No reason to add shame to our cynicism. So our hearts shut down.

The glib way people talk about prayer often reinforces our cynicism. We end our conversations with "I'll keep you in my prayers." We have a vocabulary of "prayer speak," including "I'll *lift you up* in prayer" and "I'll *remember* you in prayer." Many who use these phrases, including us, never get around to praying. Why? Because we don't think prayer makes much difference.

Cynicism and glibness are just part of the problem. The most common frustration is the activity of praying itself. We last for about fifteen seconds, and then out of nowhere the day's to-do list pops up and our minds are off on a tangent. We catch ourselves and, by sheer force of the will, go back to praying. Before we know it, it has happened again. Instead of praying, we are doing a confused mix of wandering and worrying. Then the guilt sets in. *Something must be wrong with*

me. Other Christians don't seem to have this trouble praying. After five minutes, we give up, saying, "I am no good at this. I might as well get some work done."

Something *is* wrong with us. Our natural desire to pray comes from Creation. We are made in the image of God. Our inability to pray comes from the Fall. Evil has marred the image. We want to talk to God but can't. The friction of our desire to pray, combined with our badly damaged prayer antennae, leads to constant frustration. It's as if we've had a stroke.

Complicating this is the enormous confusion about what makes for good prayer. We vaguely sense that we should begin by focusing on God, not on ourselves. So when we start to pray, we try to worship. That works for a minute, but it feels contrived; then guilt sets in again. We wonder, *Did I worship enough? Did I really mean it?*

In a burst of spiritual enthusiasm, we put together a prayer list, but praying through the list gets dull, and nothing seems to happen. The list

gets long and cumbersome; we lose touch with many of the needs. Praying feels like whistling in the wind. When someone is healed or helped, we wonder if it would have happened anyway. Then we misplace the list.

Praying exposes how self-preoccupied we are and uncovers our doubts. It was easier on our faith *not* to pray. After only a few minutes, our prayer is in shambles. Barely out of the starting gate, we collapse on the sidelines—cynical, guilty, and hopeless.

The Hardest Place in the World to Pray

American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone in our bodies screams, “Get to work.”

When we aren't working, we are used to being entertained. Television, the Internet, video