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Excerpts
FROM THE
Upcoming
Book

Openness Unhindered

Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert
on Sexual Identity *and* Union with Christ

A book excerpt from
Openness Unhindered

Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert
about Sexual Identity and Union with Christ

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The following is an excerpt from *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert about Sexual Identity and Union with Christ*.

The excerpt is from the preface and one of the later chapters called “Community: Representing Christ to the World.” Chapters of the full book include:

Conversion: the Spark of a New Identity

Identity: the Flame of Our Union in Christ

Repentance: the Threshold to God and the Answer to Shame,
Temptation, and Sin

Sexual Orientation: Freud’s 19th Century Category Mistake

Self-Representation: What Does It Mean to Be “gay”?

Conflict: When Sisters Disagree

Community: Representing Christ to the World

Order *Openness Unhindered* at www.crownandcovenant.com.

The Book of Acts is a majestic tour de force when read in one sitting. It is one of my favorite books to gobble down all at once. By the time I finish the last two verses, I sigh with undaunted love for my Lord, dependence on the Holy Spirit for all insight and comfort, a renewed sense of God's righteousness, and a deeper yearning to understand my Bible, this book that unfolds the character of God and the unsearchable depths of his wisdom.

These are the lines that crown the Book of Acts: "And [Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all *openness, unhindered*" (Acts 28:30–31).

Beaten, shipwrecked, maligned, betrayed, the Apostle Paul arrived at an intense place of union with Christ where he was open and unhindered in all aspects of his life: struggles, identity, purity, evangelism, and hospitality. He was open and unhindered, even as he was hurt, misunderstood, abused, and lonely. In Paul's words, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). In spite of the "but nots" the matter still stands: committing your life to Christ is dangerous business. The unbearable trials did not thwart him because, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul applied faith to his pain. By so doing, he drew close to the Lord, who knows our pain better than we do.

The book you hold in your hands, *Openness Unhindered*, takes its impetus from the last two words of the Book of Acts. The

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Lord has used those two words in my life (and the vast world of the Bible the God-won creation and redemption it unpacks) to redeem struggles, renew hope, remake purity, re-plot purpose, and recreate community. I have come to understand openness, unhindered as tidings that, in their biblical context, outline Christ's posture for the forgiveness of sexual sin and the renewal that he gives to the body and the mind. My prayer is that this book will serve as a bridge to Christ for those of us whose sin (sexual and otherwise) has clobbered us more times than we can count, and for our churches and Christian friends who want to help but don't know where to begin or what to say.

Openness implies that we hold nothing back from the God who made us and will take care of us. We give him our heart, our desires, our hopes, our dreams, our struggles, our doubts, our fears, and our identity. We are open to God. Wide open. This kind of intimacy and trust is unsettling to us in our natural or unconverted self, especially as post-Freudian thinkers who have become both jaded and seduced by the authorizing discourses of personal experience, believing, as we all tend to do, that our feelings (especially the fixed ones) are themselves vestiges of truth.

Unhindered means that we are unencumbered by our failures; that is, we do not keep record of the countless times that we have failed God in sin, failed our friends in carelessness, and failed our own conscience by willfully disobeying the God who loves us. Instead of record-keeping, we pray for the gift to repent of our sin at its foundation. We pray for the gift of God that redeems our mind, allowing us to see not through eyes of flesh, but rather through eyes remade by the Holy Spirit. Instead of remembering our already- and often-repent-ed sin, we remember God's covenant with us in Christ, and Christ's faithfulness.

If we are in Christ, then Christ lives in our place. He took our place on the cross and he fulfills our place today. He breathes life, purity, and redemption into our relationships, our communities, and our futures. Less of me. More of him. In Christ, I am no longer a slave to self, sin, and selfishness. In Christ, I am no longer alone. This does not, however, mean that I call sin by any

other name. The law of God is my tutor, because it shows me God's will, prohibits sin, exposes my failings, and enlists me in the school of Christ.

"To redeem" is a verb of empowerment. It comes from the Latin *redimo* and means to obtain, purchase, ransom, liberate, rescue from captivity, pay the penalty of, and to perform what has been promised. Think about how much depth and grace is packed into this little word! Roll these promises over in your heart. This is the sweet gift of Christ to his redeemed people, to those who have been both rescued from captivity and to whom the promise is performed. Christ alone does this. We violate those we love when we try to supplant Christ by trying to fill his role, or by removing ourselves from this lavish outpouring of love by refusing to take God's point of view on the matter of sin—its nature, origin, and consequences. Christ loves his people best. We cannot love as he did. We cannot suffer as he did. We cannot redeem our lives, our worlds, or our relationships.

This implies some important things. First, God's story as captured in the Bible is not a myth. It is an organizing, true narrative of who God is, what he has done, and what he will accomplish. God's story is about God. God's story precedes me. It came before me. Because it precedes my consciousness, it explains me. Because Christ redeemed me, I can apply faith in Christ to the facts of my life without violating the integrity of the one or the other. In Christ, faith does not erase facts, but it does illuminate them. In Christ, God's story helps me to tell you where I hurt. God's story is our ontology: it explains our nature, our essence, our beginnings and our endings, our qualities, our attributes. When we daily read our Bibles, in large chunks of whole books at a time, we daily learn that our own story began globally and ontologically. God has known us longer than anyone else. The Bible declares that he knew us from before the foundations of the world. One of my favorite writers, William Gurnall, says that God carried us "long into the womb of His eternal purpose." So God carries us, yes. But God also calls us to act and to serve.

Why is sexual sin so hard to deal with? Because often sexual

sin becomes a sin of identity. One goal of this book is to help you face your sin in Christ, know your status in Christ if you have committed your life to him, and reject any identity that Christ has not prepared for you.

While this book is not exclusively about sexual sin, because sexual sin has been for me a snare whose consequences I bear, I offer many examples in the pages that follow. Sin and sexuality are not unrelated. Sam Allberry put it best: “We need to be clear, not just that we are all sinners, but that we are all sexual sinners.” Indeed, sin and sexuality go together like peanut butter and chocolate. They always have. But the growing disregard for and rejection of biblical norms for law and life have created a vortex of sexual sin.

As I have traveled to different churches and colleges to speak about biblical sexuality, I have met countless people for whom every vital relationship has been marred by sexual sin. I have met wives whose husbands have pornography addictions, whose teenage children engage in forwarding sexually explicit pictures on text messages, whose best friends frequent explicit cyber-sex sites and engage in cutting and mutilation. I have met husbands whose Bible-believing wives have left them for lesbian loves. I have met teenagers who are in sexual relationships with their biological cousins and who believe that they have GSA (genetic sexual attraction). I have met preteen girls, homeschooled and protected their whole lives, who found violent pornography on their Moms’ cell phones and who cannot go back to any place of safety and peace. I met one woman who had had seven abortions, who goes to church weekly, and who lives a double life. For each of these people, the sense of being out of control is overwhelming. For the parents and loved ones (the secondary victims), the shame, guilt, and secret-keeping is unbearable.

Where do we go with problems of this magnitude? Is the Bible relevant, or is it a quaint and archaic moral code only useful in yesterday’s world? How do we discern the brokenness of our sexuality, and how do we use the Bible to diagnose the problem and outline the solution? Do I accept the verdict of my sin at the cross? How can this be sin if it feels so good? What do I do when

I am trapped like prey by the predatory nature of my own sexual sin? These are many of the questions that I address here.

This book is meant to help you peer through the keyhole of faith to see what a glorious future God promises to those in Christ, and to see that it is never too late for you or anyone else. Christ redeems. Even our struggles, our failures, and our suffering are redemptive in Christ. But there is blood involved. There is a cutting off and a cutting away that redemption demands. Stepping into God's story means abandoning a deeply-held desire to make meaning of our own lives on our own terms based on the preciousness of our own feelings. We leave and we cleave. Or we never really understand what it means that Christ died in our place. We can only take this leap if Christ jumps for us. While we can beg him with a contrite heart, we cannot accomplish salvation, repentance, or sanctification at our will.

In addition to the people for whom every relationship has been hijacked by sexual sin, I also have spent a bulk of my time talking with people who are struggling with unwanted homosexual desire. It has been hard for my friends in this group to get their churches to recognize that they did not choose this desire. It has been hard for my friends to be torn between the church (itself confused and divided) and the world (similarly vexed).

There seem to be three lenses through which to examine today's sexual landscape. The first views gender and sexuality as cultural artifices, not ontological, God-ordained categories. Folks with this lens reject the idea that the Bible is an inerrant (without error) and inspired-by-God text, even though some claim a deep love for many parts of the Bible, and a self-identified high view of Scripture. It is not unusual to have a high but also flawed view of something. People can have a high view of something that they don't understand. I may have a high view of Shakespeare's sonnets, but if I cannot scan for iambic pentameter, I will only be able to appreciate them in a surface or "vulgar" way. Faithful readers of any text may have differing levels of literacy in discerning the meaning of those texts.

The same is true for Scripture. A high view does not guard

against low literacy. To unbelievers and to those who hold to a revisionist hermeneutic (a reading practice that questions and reconceives the Bible's plain meaning and the shared testimony of the church), this is the case. But the Bible unfolds its own hermeneutic, as God himself determines how we should approach him. Of course you can read the Bible through a lens other than that which God asks, but you will never know the God of Scripture through his written word if you do.

God's created order includes norms, boundaries, definitions, and limits for sexuality and gender, some of which may be difficult to embrace, especially if your personal experience puts you at odds with people you love and care about. Bible-believing Christians are gender and sexuality *essentialists*, believing that there is an essence to maleness and femaleness, and that God's created order mandates sexual union exclusively between one man and one woman in the covenant of biblical marriage. To the rest of the world, such essentialist understandings of sexuality, gender, and selfhood are reactionary, backward, and dangerous. To the rest of the world, the Bible-believing Christian's rejection of the wisdom of the world in favor for the fear of God and allegiance to the thousands-of-years-old Bible is foolish and hate-mongering. I completely understand how these folks feel and interpret this. And my shift from postmodern intellectual, unbelieving professor, and lesbian activist to repentant Bible-believing Christian has tagged me a dangerous idiot. I love the folks in the former group. This group holds my former family of choice, and the learning community they cherish and inhabit is the one I helped build. Unbelievers tend to be pragmatists about morality. If consenting adults are hurting no one and cherishing what they have together, they are deemed to have a good relationship. I believed this for many years and I understand where they are coming from.

The second lens through which to read sexuality is with an inerrant, inspired, and dependable Bible. But even when we use the right lens, we also use the eyes of flesh, so we won't get good results. In this group we find Christians who uphold what we call the inerrancy (without error and therefore completely true and

trustworthy) and inspiration (God-breathed, supernatural, holy) of Scripture, but have never struggled with homoerotic desires themselves, looked deeply enough into Scripture, or listened well enough to their friends who do struggle. These folks unbiblically believe that the struggle is the sin. They do not know how to approach their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) neighbors because deep down they truly believe that if gay people would just come to Jesus, they would all be straight.

Recently someone in my extended church community asked if the lesbian daughter of a mutual friend of ours was going to commit her life to Jesus and “go straight.” I reminded the churchy lady (I live in the South, so indulge me here) that the young woman she mentioned had made a profession of faith, and I had no more knowledge of whether she would develop heterosexual attractions than I did if she was going to buy a puppy at the state fair this year.

Homoerotic desire, these folks believe, is rooted in willful sin, bad choice-making, full-blown lust, and/or lack of knowledge of or real faith in Jesus. Without intending it, they endorse a prosperity gospel about sexuality, one that falsely believes that Christ died on a cross and rose again to make you happy and prosperous on earth. We all make choices along the path of our life journeys, but if sin is only about bad choice-making, we don’t need a savior. Sin is bigger and deeper and longer than bad choice-making. All sin is a vestige of the fall and a transgression against God, but that doesn’t mean that patterns of temptation are themselves proof that we are actively sinning. While it is true that in conversion we are new creatures in Christ, it is also true that on this side of the resurrection we will struggle with all manner of sin, including, if God permits, homoerotic desire. That is the kicker, and I hear this all of the time: “God would never make someone with a homosexual baseline.” Really? Original sin means that we are born in fallenness—both moral (which requires the sanctifying power of God through saving faith) and natural (which requires medical or supernatural healing, but not necessarily saving or sanctifying faith). Sexuality can straddle this line, as sometimes sexual dysfunction results from natural

fallenness (such as intersexuality, being born with reproductive or sexual anatomy of both sexes). So yes, we are all “born this way.” And even after we are born again, we will all struggle with sin until we die and enter Glory or Jesus returns.

Whether the pain you face now is the consequence of your sin or the sin of others, in God’s providence and in saving faith, Romans 8:28 still reigns: “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” It is not the absence of sin that makes you a believer. It is the presence of Christ in the midst of your struggle that commends the believer and sets her apart in the world. Real conversion gives you Christ’s company as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed, the fall made everything—including my deepest desires—fall. And this happened under God’s providential eye, not behind his back.

The third lens is used by those who believe they have Christ’s saving grace, but do not believe that God calls them to repent of all sin, in part because they use the wrong biblical lens. They believe that there are holes in biblical story, holes that can only be filled by the “moral logic” of personal experience or the culture in which we live. These people believe in Jesus, but extract him from the Word of God by suggesting that we have new and improved ways of understanding the human condition.

While the Bible is not a science book and will not tell me how to fix my computer or build a telescope, it is spot-on when it comes to the moral condition of humanity. When folks in this group claim Christ’s confidence, but uphold a hermeneutic that unwittingly but wholeheartedly erases Jesus’s brutal sacrifice for sin, they often do so on the grounds of new evidence about morality that changes what the Bible means. Every generation seems to arrive at new evidence to explain away a biblical truth. Part of loving your sister or brother involves holding the mirror of Scripture up to the reflection of personal testimony. If personal testimony does not reflect the Bible’s account of a life of faith and repentance, then for the sake of your friend and for the sake of Christ’s witness, bring the Word of life to bear upon the claim of conversion.

My hope is that *Openness Unhindered* may help in this humble quest. Jesus cannot be separated from the whole Bible; and the Old Testament is not dispensable, or with it the moral law of God. For my friends in this group, I want to say thank you for hanging in there with me. Being born in Adam means that we cannot escape original sin: we are born with a primary desire to do evil, and a primal propensity to enjoy in the flesh what God calls sin. Original sin makes us not just bad, but blind. This fact—that original sin distorts us at the deepest level—can be an overwhelming idea. But that is not its intent. Original sin is not meant to shame anyone. Rather, the doctrine of original sin is the most democratizing idea in all of human history. It means that we are all in the same boat. And if we are in Christ, no pattern or sin or brokenness defines us. Christ's virgin birth represents, in spite of all the hoopla around Christmas, his humiliation, not his exaltation.

We who are broken by sin cling to and identify with Christ's humiliation, a key Christian virtue and posture. But Christ is no longer humiliated. He sits at God's right hand, interceding for us as we run the race set before us. Repentance unto life means that we must repent of sin, even sins of identity. There is no shame in this. I know this sounds counterintuitive. As you enter into the section of *Openness Unhindered* that addresses identity, some of this material may be dense and foreign. Bear with me, please. You can take the professor out of the university classroom, but sometimes you can't take the university classroom out of the professor!

Take my hand and join me on this journey, please. If you are a Christian and you are struggling with sexual sin, this book is meant to equip and encourage you in your daily walk of faith with Jesus. If you are not yet a Christian, my hope is that I can reach through the pages of this book, take your hand, and put it in the hand of our Savior.

If you call yourself a Christian, but you do not believe that you need to repent of the sin that claims your identity, heart, and perhaps body, my prayer is that this book sounds a serious alarm to you. Your soul is at stake, and I will take the risk of offending

you to help. Salvation is a gift, offered to all who have a “broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). God promises tenderness to the brokenhearted: “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick,” but judgment for those who defend the right to their sin: “but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment” (Ezekiel 34:16). A humble and a broken heart is a gift from God. Pray for a heart that breaks on the rock of Christ. Pray for a tender conscience about sin, even your deepest, most primal sin.

Salvation is a gift, and it is a good gift to pray for! What do you do with a gift? You receive it, and then you act on all the bounty that it offers. If you are the parent or spouse of someone trapped in a sexual sin that seems to have stolen your loved one from you, my hope is that you find comfort and insight in the pages that follow. Read on, please.

From Chapter 7:

Hospitality in the Neighborhood

G. K. Chesterton once quipped, “We make our friends; we make our enemies, but God makes our next door neighbor.... We have to love our neighbor because he is there.” The nearness of our neighbor is providential, as God never gets the address wrong.

Last year, Kent preached a series of sermons on hospitality, a rare foray into topical preaching. It was that important, he said, that he got out of his comfort zone of expository explication through a whole Bible book and took the risk of shaking up the church.

After he preached this sermon series, he and I read the book, *The Art of Neighboring*, by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon. I liked it so much that I bought a few copies and gave them to Christian neighbors we hoped would partner with us in fulfilling what is on the surface a simple command: love your neighbor.

Summers in North Carolina are memorable for June bugs, humidity, and long night walks, when many neighbors are also out walking. That first summer in Durham, Kent and I would

look longingly at our front yard, wanting to fill it with neighbors. We were hungry to get to know people better and get serious about serving our neighbors. That's when Kent decided to apply one simple thing that we learned from *The Art of Neighboring*: put lawn chairs and tables in the front yard. So, he and our neighbor Ryan built a picnic table, and then positioned it in the front yard under our massive oak tree where everyone could see it. The kids and I painted it neon green (so that you could really see it). Soon, neighbors started gathering there. It became a nice spot to stop and talk, reapply bug spray, grab water, and talk. Eventually our pastor friend Micah hung a tire swing off of the sturdy oak. It is now a perfect gathering spot. Not by invitation only. Come as you are.

After the picnic table assumed its front yard spot, we wrote this email and distributed it to everyone we knew in the neighborhood. Here is what it said:

Dear Friends,

Please join with us at the green picnic table on the front lawn of the Butterfields on Thursday, August 15, 2013, at 7 p.m. for our inaugural and weekly prayer walk. We will pray with our eyes and our hearts open, seeking to bring glory to our Triune God and raise our neighborhood needs to the Throne of Grace. Those walking without kids, dogs, and strollers might also bring a pencil and paper to collect prayer and mercy requests and gather information about our neighbors' needs. We will meet back at the picnic table at 8 p.m. and close our evening with singing a psalm and creating an action plan to meet mercy needs. Please forward this email to anyone in the neighborhood who might like to join us.

Love in Christ,

Rosaria (for the Butterfields)

Thursday night arrived. Neighbors drew near from all directions. Some came because of the email. Others tied in because they wondered what kind of a party we were having. Kent gathered us together and we prayed for God to hear us.

Something transformative happens when we pray with our neighbors like this, which we commit to doing each Thursday

night. It has become, for us, the touchstone of our neighboring. Every Thursday night we host a neighborhood open house, and we launch it by taking back the streets in prayer.

When things become a tradition, they acquire a comfort and a predictability about them. But prayer is never predictable. If Jesus enters, even that which is rehearsed is never routine. Today, it is established that on Thursday night we will pray with our neighbors and gather together for fellowship. Thursday night neighborhood ministry is now like a tried and true friend. But our first night of prayer and fellowship happened as if in a dream.

This is how I remember that first Thursday night prayer walk.

We meet at the picnic table and introduce ourselves. There are many people here whose face I recognize but whose name I do not know. We break naturally into groups of two and three, unintentionally gender-segregating when the kids on wheels want to race down a big hill and the moms with strollers aren't hankering for broken bones. The men take the cross-country route, with the big kids, and the women, dogs, toddlers and strollers stay on the path. We pray aloud in unhurried, unrehearsed, unrestrained, and unworried tones. We stir prayers and interruptions like they all go together in the same pot of soup. We stop to talk to neighbors and ask them to tell us who they are and what they need. Life layers prayer. No such thing as an interruption. Children need sippy cups, dogs need cleaning up after, and prayer marches on. Sometimes neighbors join us for a block, just to hear what we are praying for.

Then it hits me: this prayer walk is itself a breed and species of Christian hospitality.

Extending arms wide, we draw others into our posture of ambulatory bended knee, eyes wide open. We go to God together for mercy, grace, increase. Hospitality starts with emptiness, and waits together for God to complete us. On a prayer walk, we seek to give that which we do not yet have, but by faith behold as inevitable: God's promise to keep his covenant, and the reality that he has already set apart great blessings he will only grant through prayer.

But a righteous and holy God only hears the prayers of his redeemed people, of those who, by grace, come to his throne in the alien robes of Christ's righteousness and blood. We all come with blood on our hands, but whose blood is it? And this prayer walk is risky business. "Even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered in blood," so declares God in Isaiah 1:15. That we cannot come to a holy God with our virtuous intentions and high-minded deeds simply does not fly with my unsaved neighbors. The exclusivity of Christ tramples on our American confidence and self-absorption. That raises the bar of responsibility on this prayer walk. Indeed, how will our unsaved neighbors come to the banquets of prayer without the intercession of God's people? In the Acts 17 world in which we live, how will our unsaved neighbors know that the deepest meaning of their pain is that their prayers do not (yet) resonate with God? When should we share and model the good news that only rings authentic because of the bad news that precedes us all? What if we are called to grieve with those who suffer because of sin and disobedience? When you stand with the suffering, you draw no lines. Neighbors stand close enough to touch.

This is messy business, this prayer walk. We don't bother with formalities like whose turn it is to pray. We jump in. The Holy Spirit does not play card dealer.

Sometimes we pause in front of a house that we know is struggling with something, so we pray like this:

"Lord, remember your covenant with your people. In Christ, there is meaning, and purpose and suffering in our pain. Please bring the Jones family to salvation, we pray, so that Bill and Jean can know your comfort in such a time as this. May this give you praise and glory. Thank you that we can pray, that we can walk, and that we can hear the laughter of our children as we do this. Thank you that we can pray with eyes open. Help us to move in close to our neighbors in their pain. Cause us to be good company for the suffering. Forgive us for the distance that we keep from others."

Sometimes our ignorance rebukes us. Why don't we know the names of the people who live in the house on the corner, the

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one with the screen door that is perpetually torn? Why do we know our neighbors best by polite and anonymous waves? We prayed that, as God may allow us to know real stories of real people, we would cherish this information as jewels and never gossip or betray them. We pray that God would forgive our sin of not noticing, not caring, and not initiating friendships. We repent. We do not love our neighbors like ourselves. As we walk and pray and stop and talk, we learn about the people who share our blocks. We pray for them by name, asking God to help us put away distractions and put on love.

Why do this? Why not just have the Christian neighbors over for a BBQ, or football, or board games? Why not just invite the people we know are Christians to join us in our living rooms and pray with the doors closed? Why not exclusively surround ourselves with people who are just like us?

We commit ourselves to praying with and for our neighbors every Thursday night in order to remember. We remember what it was like before the Holy Spirit chiseled our stony heart soft. We remember what it was like before the blood of Jesus pumped our hearts whole. We remember the night terrors and the mid-morning anxiety attacks, the unraveled good intentions of daily inventing ourselves and snowballing rules through which we hoped we could function. We remember what it was like to crack under the weight of this, and the loneliness of having no place to go but drugs, alcohol, sex, or lies. We remember our own predatory sin, and its legacy, and how for nothing that we could do or offer, God reached down and brought us to himself. We remember the Throne of Grace rising from the rubble, we remember that repentance is the threshold to God, and we want to invite others to come.

Before we started prayer walking we heard rumor of need.

One of our neighbors has Lou Gehrig's disease. He is 40 and his youngest child is 2. Another neighbor has an abdominal tumor the size of a 24-week-old fetus. Many neighbors have lost jobs, and the stress in their households rise high. Some neighbors are wearing telltale scarves and losing hair, but we don't know their names. We don't want to bring up the C word without

at least having a first name to go with it. Some neighbors have households hard to discern. Divorced? Widowed? Shut-in? Who knows? Who could know when we are too busy to care? There is a cul-de-sac at the end of the block called “widow’s corner” because almost every household in that circle is inhabited by a widow. But I don’t know the first name of even one of those souls, even though I walk my dogs through this circle every day. Because they are all “shut-ins,” I couldn’t recognize one of these women’s faces if my life depended on it. How did we get to this place where we are so estranged? Once we hear their story, will we follow through on what we know? Or will we duck and run? How do we gather our arms wide and hold fast? We need each other in this prayer walk, this Christian walk. All by ourselves, we will forget, lose heart, and start walking the dogs with our smart phones glued to our ears or thumbs.

After one mile of prayer, the creeping fall darkness corners us. When we return to the picnic table, the children start running barefoot in the grass while the men finish up a list of mercy needs. I go to the kitchen to assemble something to eat for our guests, and while I am walking in the dark, I am marveling over how many neighbors came to pray. Was it fifteen? Twenty-five when you count the kids? I ponder over what I have in the kitchen for all of these people. I flick on the switch and the harsh light blinds me for a minute. I shut it off and work in the dark. I bring out a half watermelon, a loaf of fresh bread, and some honey.

I move as if in a dream or underwater. My neighbors are still here, captivated by a mile high of prayer. Something has changed among us. Some barrier of intimacy has been shattered. How? In the heavens? On the streets? Both? I slice the watermelon and dollop big spoonfuls of honey on homemade bread. The children finally sprawl, munch, lick sticky fingers, and fold into laps and on hips and on the grass. The lush full moon suspends low tonight, as it does in North Carolina in August. It almost looks like the trees can brush against it. The stars come out, and so do the psalters. I recall Psalm 147:3-4, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He counts the number of stars. He gives names to all of them.” Does the God who numbers and

names the stars do the same with the broken hearts and promises of our neighbors? Is this prayer walking one way of gathering the fragments of pain, and giving all of the pieces to the God who made me and takes care of me?

As the children droop limp on shoulders, Kent passes out the psalters. We gravitate to the street light so that we can see. Only Kent and I have sung together before. We sing from the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want, He makes me down to lie, in pastures green, He leadeth me, the quiet waters by,

My soul He doth restore again and me to walk doth make, within the paths of righteousness, even for His own name's sake.

Singing *a cappella* on a hot summer night without preparation forges our intimacy and vulnerability. As we breathe together, I thank the God who gave us this breath. And as we break into parts, my heart sparkles with the sudden surprise that Donna's rich alto voice vibrates in perfect partnership with Kristin's soprano. I leap into the soprano descant, and we all breathe together. I'm getting goosebumps. We all could have been neighbors for 50 years and not have known this. Secrets and mysteries are unveiling all around us.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear no ill; for thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

A table thou hast furnished me, in presence of my foes; My head thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

As we sing together, I realize this: we pray with strangers in the hopes that they will not remain strangers, but rather be transformed into sisters and brothers with whom we will sing in full voice into eternity. Hospitality gives God glory by revealing him as the provider and the host. It does not steal glory from God by giving the appearance of self-sufficiency. God is the author of the banquet. We are—at best—one of the means. Who knew God had so much mercy and intimacy in store for us this night?

Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me, and in God's house forevermore, my dwelling place shall be.

Joggers stop to listen.

The predictable parade of rolling garbage cans pause enroute

to the weekly resting place at the curb. Ears bend. I look up at the stars, and I know I am small, a broken reed, a bent arrow. And yet, God chooses to use even the likes of me.

Our psalm ends, and only now do we hear the chorus of tree frogs and crickets.

I have never before experienced community prayer as an act of hospitality before this night. I finally get it. God has blessings designed for us, measured out, prearranged, that he will only dispense by prayer. Why? Because prayer changes us to receive what it shakes the gates of heaven to give. I shudder to think of the lost blessings, buried under the rubble of busy schedules and fear.

It is different now, two years later. Thursdays are still neighbor nights. During the spring and summer months, we walk and pray until 8 o'clock, meeting at the now-fading green picnic table under the shady oak tree in our front yard. Sometimes it is hard to get going. What will I say? What if I just repeat the same thing, over and over again?

One Thursday last September, I was feeling especially skittish about praying. Many of my usual praying neighbors were sick at home, and I was tired and getting ready for a trip the next day. It was much more practical for me to do laundry and pack than to head out the door to pray. When I walked to the green picnic table, I had no idea who would meet me there. My dear friend Kristin met me with the stroller, and we started off. The bigger kids ran ahead, and it was a sweet night, just me and Kristin, her toddler in the stroller, my dog on a leash. The husbands prayed and kept pace with the big kids.

Kristin and I did not walk and pray more than one block when the Lord sent a meteor of hope and purpose. As we approached different houses, neighbors started to come out of their front doors to stop us and ask us to pray about a family member's cancer, or the impending death of a favorite aunt. Not just one neighbor, but neighbors. Block after block. We gathered some in close and prayed together holding shoulders that were shaking in grief. It has never taken us that long to complete the

“prayer loop.” But the Lord sent so many hurting hearts who needed a hand on a shoulder and a heart for Jesus.

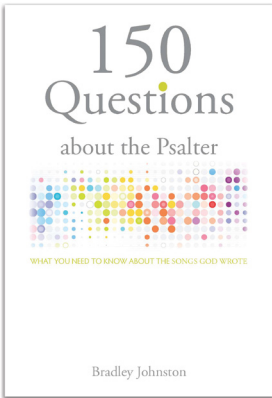
We returned home late. The older children had already started to watch *Pink Panther* on the computer and our husbands were talking in the kitchen and we could both feel it, that powerful reality that had we not shown up to pray, immeasurable blessings would have slipped through our fingers unnoticed. And perhaps even slipped through the heavens. That night we learned the art of showing up.

In the late fall and winter, we gather in different neighbors’ kitchens or living rooms. If the weather is good, we settle on the porch. If we meet at Ray’s house, he makes a strong pot of decaffeinated coffee. If we meet at Donna and Bob’s, the little kids settle in the most comfortable TV room you could imagine, wrap themselves in handmade quilts, and watch *Charlie Brown* while the adults pray. After years of this, we have noticed that our doors are more open, the rhythms of our days more transparent. This makes a good bridge to the asking of hard questions and the offer of a steady hand. Weekly, and by God’s grace, our lives and needs as neighbors unfold together and before the Throne of Grace.



The majestic hope for a world to which Jesus will return implies that the church is strong in love, doctrine, and community. Christian community in the home, neighborhood, and from within the covenant of church membership leaves believers wide open for love and friendship. Effective ecumenical love roots in God’s truth. And when this kind of love takes hold, the Bible gives us this word picture as encouragement of what is inevitable: Revelation 7:9-10: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”

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Question 66: What are the Songs of Ascent?

The Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134) are a group of fifteen songs sung by pilgrims as they traveled from their homes toward Jerusalem to worship God and celebrate Israel's annual feasts. They demonstrate a longing to be near to God's house and God's people. The names "Jerusalem" and "Zion" occur twelve times in these psalms.


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