

Severe Gifts from a Loving Father

by Gary Thomas, Director, Center for Evangelical Spirituality

“Did you hear about Mike?”
“No,” I said. “What happened?”

When I arrived on Western Washington University’s campus in 1980, Mike Dittman was one of the most dynamic Christians I had ever met. He was several years older than I was, and already a leader in the college ministry I attended. Mike had everything: a charismatic personality, great athletic ability, a walk of integrity, great skill as a worship leader, and wisdom beyond his age. I often sought him out at lunchtime to talk, and was later thrilled to end up being in a small group that he led.

Following his time at Western, Mike served as a campus pastor, and then enrolled in graduate studies to become a counselor. He worked with a church for a number of years, until finally an “intervention” of sorts took place. Men that Mike respected and loved confronted him and said, “Mike, you’re very competent, a dynamic leader, and you inspire admiration and respect, but you’re too blunt. You hurt people with your words. You lack compassion and empathy.”

Mike realized that every one of the positive traits mentioned by these men was a human characteristic, not a fruit of the spirit, and he found himself praying, “God, I wish I was a little less ‘dynamic’ and a little more compassionate.”

Be careful what you pray for. A couple years later, after a morning workout, Mike’s body dropped to the locker room floor. A brain hemorrhage almost took his life, but while doctors were able to keep Mike in this world, a very different Mike was wheeled out of the hospital than the one who had walked onto the basketball court.

His Hollywood-handsome appearance was gone. Half of Mike’s face now looks “fallen,” pulled over to one side, and one eye is sewn almost completely shut. He can’t sing or play his guitar, so there’s no more leading worship. For a while, his speech was slurred,



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so he couldn’t teach. He was humbled in just about every way that it’s possible for an ambitious man to be humbled.

Yet, in God’s way, the devastating effect on Mike’s body was paralleled by an equally powerful yet wonderful change in his spirit. Years later, Mike’s ministry has never been more productive. People fly in to Philadelphia from all over the country to meet with Mike. Whereas before his focus was on the masses, Mike now specializes in healing hurting hearts, one at a time.

“The brain hemorrhage took a lot away from me,” Mike confessed, “but it gave me even more.” Mike is now the type of guy whose spirit invites you to quiet your heart, get rid of all pretenses, and revel in God’s presence. I explained the difference when I called my wife the first night I talked to Mike after he had had his brain hemorrhage.

“When I was in college, I wanted to be like Mike,” I confessed, “but I don’t get that impression anymore. Now, after spending time with Mike, I want to be more like Jesus.”

There’s something about going through such a difficult time that rips through the preening veil of human accomplishment and achievement, and ushers in the unadulterated presence of Christ himself. Suddenly, you’re not impressed with a person’s abilities or charisma, but instead are humbled by a very real sense of God’s presence. There are hundreds of persuasive speakers and communicators for every one person who has this ministry. This isn’t a transformation that can be manufactured; it is a severe gift from a loving heavenly Father.

Going Deeper

These fire-testing seasons are necessary because we do not walk easily into maturity. At first, Christianity can be an intoxicating blend of freedom, joy, exuberance, and newfound discovery. Longtime sins drop off us with relatively little effort. Bible study is rich; we may feel like archaeologists finally coming across an

unexplored cave, astonished by the insights that pour out of the paper book in front of us. Intimacy, tears, and the assurance of God's voice and guidance mark our times of prayer.

This "spiritual infatuation" phase is well-known and well-documented amongst spiritual directors and those familiar with spiritual formation. Just like romantic infatuation is self-centered, so spiritual infatuation tends to be "all about me." It *seems* like it's all about God, but the focus of new believers' lives is still mostly taken up with how they're doing overcoming sins, as well as cultivating the new joy and spiritual depth that comes from walking with God.

Eventually, God asks us to discard this infatuation and move on to a mature friendship with him. In a true friendship, it's no longer all about "me." It's about partnering with God to build his kingdom. That means first, being "fire-tested," and second, growing in ways that we naturally wouldn't be inclined to grow. Instead of focusing on God answering our prayers, spiritual maturity leads us to yearn for faithfulness, Christlike-ness, and others-centeredness. This is a painful process, a very real spiritual death that some have described as being "born again" *again*, except for the fact that it is never a one-time event.

The new groundwork that needs to be laid is an authentic faith that is based on a God-centered life. Rather than the believer being the sun around whom God, the church, and the world revolve to create a happy, easy, and prosperous life, God becomes the sun around which the believer revolves, a believer who is willing to suffer, even to be persecuted, and lay down his life to build God's Kingdom and to serve God's church. In the old way of thinking, Christianity is all about the blessings it brings into the life of the believer. Accept Christ, we say, and you'll find new joy, inner peace, power over addictions, restored families, even prosperity and health. In fact, if a non-believer were to stand up in many a Christian church and cry out, "Why should I become a Christian?" it is likely that more than eighty percent of the responses he would receive would be focused on his personal advancement—what his faith will do for him, how it will make his life easier, secure his eternal destiny, and so on.

What this does is spawn a faith belief that goes something like this: "Because God loves me, he'll soften the corners. He'll let me follow the easy path. I might have a few problems, but nothing major. Everything God asks me to give up will be for my own good, as he ultimately leads me into relative affluence, well-being, and a happy family."

Thus, when cancer strikes, or we're faced with persecution, hatred, or even God's silence, and we're

asked to care for someone who can never pay us back, we think we've been cheated, or at least treated unfairly. We might even assume that God hasn't kept up his end of the bargain. After all, we've given up our sins, haven't we? Then why am I being asked to give away money that I'm not sure I have? Why do I have to watch a loved one die of a terrible disease? How come everything I ask for isn't falling into place?

If we enter the faith for selfish reasons, we stand an almost certain chance of becoming radically disillusioned when God takes us at our word that we are accepting him as *Lord* and Savior. Because this world is broken, as God's ambassadors and representatives we are given certain *responsibilities* and *duties* that will impinge upon our time and comfort. There is no getting around this. It is deep denial to try to live as if all that Christianity involves is avoiding a few choice sins while we build the best and most comfortable life possible.

God's word couldn't be clearer. His Son clearly taught us that faith in Him entails being hated by all men; persecution; an increased sensitivity leading to mourning and sorrow; new difficulties and struggles; a life of giving instead of acquisition; and a life of service instead of amassing power.

Friendship with God

To embrace God's love and Kingdom is to embrace his broken, passionate heart. It is to expose ourselves to the assaults brought on by the world's hatred toward God. The active Christian life is a life full of risks, heartache, and responsibility. God does indeed bear our burdens. Certainly, he blesses us in many ways, but this initial relief is in order that He might assign to us more important concerns than our own. Only this time, we weep not because our house is too small or we have over-extended our credit, but because we are taxed to the limit reaching out to a hurting world. Yes, we experience peace, joy, and hope, but it is a peace in the midst of turmoil; joy marked with empathy; and hope refined by suffering.

Ultimately, spiritual maturity is not about memorizing the Bible, mastering the spiritual disciplines, or growing calluses on our knees from lengthy times of prayer. These are all healthy things to do, but they are still means to a greater end, which in itself is *learning to love with God's love* and *learning to serve with God's power*. In a fallen world where suffering and difficulty are certain, friendship with God frees us from being limited by what we don't have, by what we are suffering, or by what we are enduring. God doesn't offer us freedom *from* a broken world; instead, he offers us friendship with himself as we walk *through* a fallen world—and those who persevere will find that this

friendship is worth more than anything this fallen world can offer.

Ironically, we are missing out when we insist on self-absorption, affluence, and ease over pursuing a deeper walk with God. We miss out on an intimacy that has been talked about by previous generations, a fellowship of labor, suffering, persecution, and selflessness. It doesn't sound like much of an invitation initially, but those who have walked these roads have left behind a witness that they have reached an invigorating, soul-satisfying land. These women and men testify to being radically satisfied in God, even though others may scratch their heads trying to figure out how someone who walks such a difficult road could possibly be happy!

Authentic faith penetrates the most unlikely of places. This faith is found, for instance, when we die to ourselves and put others first. Such a faith is nurtured when we cultivate contentment instead of spending our best energy and efforts to improve our lot in life. Classical faith is strengthened in suffering, persecution, waiting, and even mourning. These "authentic disciplines," as I call them, differ from the traditional spiritual disciplines in that the authentic disciplines are, for the most part, initiated outside of us. Mike didn't *choose* to have a brain hemorrhage, but God in his providence allowed it. God brings these disciplines into our life when he wills and as he wills. Just reading about suffering doesn't bring you through suffering. You can't *make* these disciplines happen, as you can make fasting or meditation take place. This is a God-ordained spirituality, dependent on his sovereignty.

The traditional disciplines—fasting, meditation, study, prayer—are all crucial elements of building our faith, but let's be honest: they can also foster pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency, religiosity, and worse. Their benefit is clearly worth the risk, but that's why the authentic disciplines are such a helpful and even vital addition; they turn us away from human effort—from men and women seeking the face of God—and turn us back toward God seeking the face of men and women.

There's no pride left when God takes me through a time of suffering. There's no self-righteousness when I am called to wait. There is no religiosity when I am truly mourning. This is a spirituality I can't control or initiate. It is a radical dependence on God's husbandry. All we can do is try to appreciate it and learn from it. The rest—the duration of the trial, the intensity of the trial, the ultimate cessation of the trial—is almost always up to him.

Seasoned by Suffering

During the height of his writing years, C.S. Lewis cared for a very sick woman who had varicose veins, so whenever she called, Lewis had to go to her—and she called him many times a day. Added to this burden was the constant irritation of his brother Warren's alcoholism, and Lewis's constant fears that he was about to go bankrupt.

As one who writes for a living, I can empathize with the difficulty of continuing work amidst so many interruptions; yet, it was precisely under these conditions that Lewis wrote *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. George Sayer suggests, "That the Narnia stories are full of laughter and the fact that they breathe forth joy does not mean that the years of their writing were happy for Jack. What it does mean is that his faith had taught him how to cope with difficulties and to rise above miseries that would have overwhelmed most men."

Yet, Sayer goes a step further, suggesting that the brilliance of the Narnia series was not achieved *in spite of* being written under such stress, but *because* it was written in a situation of human suffering. "If [Lewis] had lived the cloistered existence of a bachelor don, his writing would have suffered from a loss of warmth, humanity, and the understanding of pain and suffering."

A life with no difficulty was not an ideal life in Lewis's mind, precisely because it tempted him to become what he despised: overly comfortable, complacent, and apathetic. In fact, when war was just breaking out between Britain and Germany in 1939, Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greves, "I daresay, for me, personally, [the war] has come in the nick of time; I was just beginning to get too well settled in my profession, too successful, and probably self complacent."

Lewis's work was seasoned with pain, real suffering, heartache, and tremendous difficulty. Yet out of this seemingly bitter stew emerged the honey of a proven character, a seasoned soul, a stalwart defender of the faith. This is Christianity in its truest and finest form, the extension of Christ's own work as he suffered and died that we might live. Though these soul-shaping "gifts" may *seem* severe, they are God's primary way of creating eternally productive lives.

Gary Thomas directs the Center for Evangelical Spirituality, a writing and speaking ministry he founded to integrate Scripture, church history, and the Christian classics. "My mission is to apply that wisdom to today, and recapture its contemporary relevance," he says.

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His books include: Sacred Marriage, Sacred Pathways, The Glorious Pursuit, Seeking the Face of God, and most recently, Authentic Faith. He has collaborated on books with Franklin Graham, Michael W. Smith, Norma McCorvey, (a.k.a. Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade), and Attorney General John Ashcroft. His book with then-Senator Ashcroft, Lessons from a Father to His Son, was a finalist for the Gold Medallion Award.

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