

WHEN I COULD NO LONGER PRAY

God helps those...



A library story of silence, surrender, and the grace of waiting

by Rev. Dr. Paul David Bravard

Abstract

This story reflects on a formative spiritual crisis during my first year of seminary, when a twenty-one-day fast led unexpectedly into silence and an inability to pray. What first felt like confusion became a gracious unveiling: a familiar saying from my upbringing, “God helps those who help themselves,” was exposed as self-reliance dressed in religious language. In that dark night, God did not abandon me; he disrupted a false foundation and taught me to wait, listen, surrender, and trust. Through this experience, I came to see that holiness does not begin with striving harder, but with yielding to the God who forms us by grace. This testimony invites readers to consider how God may work in silence, obscurity, and spiritual dryness to draw the soul into deeper dependence, prayer, and faithful obedience.

Author’s Note

This story happened in the skywalk of the house my wife and I built. I probably stood there for nearly an hour, trying to take in what had just been revealed. To this day, that memory has become one of my quiet “happy place” memories—not because it was easy, but because God met me there.

Source Note

The afterword draws on the dark-night framework summarized in Tony L. Nelson, “Redeeming Disruptions: A Recommended Model of Spiritual Formation for Christian Churches of the Pacific Northwest,” Doctor of Ministry Dissertation, George Fox University, 2013, especially the discussion of *dryness in prayer, the loss of old ways, and the simple desire to love God*.

God helps those...

by Rev. Dr. Paul David Bravard

My formative years were spent growing up on a farm in north-central Indiana. That world shaped me deeply. Farm life teaches you early that work matters. You do not wait around for someone else to do what needs done. If the fence is broken, you fix it. If the animals need fed, you feed them. If the field needs attention, you get moving. There is a kind of holiness in that, even if I did not yet have the language for it.

My family instilled in me a strong belief that there was very little I could not do if I put my mind to it. I learned responsibility. I learned persistence. I learned to keep going when I was tired. I learned not to quit just because something was hard.

And somewhere along the way, I also learned a sentence that became more than a saying. It became a foundation.

“God helps those who help themselves.”

I heard it often enough that I never questioned it. It sounded wise. It sounded biblical. It sounded like something a responsible Christian ought to believe. To my young ears, it seemed to hold together faith and effort: do your part, work hard, stay disciplined, and God will meet you there.

For many years, I did not realize how deeply that sentence had formed me. It was not merely an idea I agreed with. It became a way of seeing God, seeing myself, and seeing the Christian life. I believed in prayer, but underneath prayer was effort. I believed in grace, but underneath grace was performance. I believed God was present, but I also believed that the real movement of life depended on my ability to push, strive, fix, produce, and endure.

Looking back now, I can see that this belief in self had become one of the foundational pillars of my life. I had built a great deal around it. It gave me confidence. It gave me direction. It helped me survive. But it also carried a hidden danger: I had learned how to depend on God while still secretly depending on myself.

Then, during my first year of seminary, God interrupted me.

I was in the middle of a twenty-one-day fast. I do not offer that fast as a pattern for others to imitate, only as the setting in which this particular encounter with God unfolded. I was seeking God seriously. Seminary had already begun stretching me in ways I did not expect, and I was hungry for clarity, direction, and a deeper walk with the Lord.

Then, suddenly, I could not pray.

I do not mean prayer felt dry in the ordinary sense. I do not mean I was distracted or tired or bored. I mean I could not form a prayer. I could not gather the words. I could not push through. The very thing I had always assumed I could do if I simply tried harder was suddenly beyond my reach.

That shook me.

I knew God was there. I did not feel abandoned. I did not believe he had left me. But there was silence. A deep silence. A holy silence. A silence I could not manage or control.

And that was the unsettling part.

I knew if I could pray, God would hear me. I knew if I could just get the words out, if I could just gather myself, if I could just do what I had always done, then maybe the fog would lift. But I could not.

For two days, this went on.

Two days may not sound long until you are fasting and seeking God and suddenly unable to pray. When your body is already weak from fasting, prayer becomes more than a discipline. It becomes breath. It becomes food. It becomes the one place you expect to find water for your soul.

But there I was: fasting, hungry, spiritually alert, and unable to pray.

I was dumbfounded.

At first, I did what I had always known to do. I tried harder. I reached for the familiar forms. I attempted to push through with effort. But nothing opened. No words came. The old way did not work.

Then I began to sense that perhaps the silence was not absence. Perhaps it was invitation.

Maybe God was not withholding himself from me. Maybe he was withholding the familiar tools I had used to keep myself in control.

Eventually, I stopped trying to force prayer into being. I stopped trying to manufacture words. I stopped trying to overcome the silence with my own strength.

And then I said, simply, “Okay. I am here. I am able. I am willing. What do you want me to hear?”

What came to me was the sentence I had carried for years: “God helps those who help themselves.” But this time, I did not hear it as wisdom. I felt wrongness.

That is the only way I know to describe it. It was not merely intellectual disagreement. It was not a theological footnote. It was a spiritual dislocation. Something in me knew that the sentence I had trusted was not aligned with the gospel.

Of course, I responded the way my own children have responded to me many times.

“Huh? What?”

I was confused. I was confounded. I had not thought seriously about that saying in years because I did not need to think about it. It was simply part of me. It lived beneath my thinking. It had become one of the assumptions I carried into every room, every task, every challenge, every act of ministry, and even every prayer.

I knew I had to find out where it was in the Bible. I needed to know the context. I needed to see what God was showing me.

So, I searched for it. And then I discovered something that stunned me.

It was not in the Bible.

Seriously, it was not in Proverbs, not in anything Paul writes, not in the Gospels, nor tucked away somewhere in the Old Testament. Not even as a paraphrase of some obscure verse.

It was not Scripture.

I had mistaken folk wisdom for biblical truth. That realization broke something open in me.

Now, to be clear, Scripture does not teach laziness. The Bible does not call us to passivity, irresponsibility, or spiritual carelessness. Faithfulness matters. Obedience matters. Work matters. Discipline matters. The farmer knows this. The apostle Paul knew this. Jesus himself calls disciples to follow, obey, watch, pray, forgive, serve, and endure.

But “God helps those who help themselves” places the weight in the wrong place.

It begins with human effort and imagines God as the helper who comes alongside the already capable. It suggests that the first movement belongs to us, and God’s grace follows after our initiative. It sounds practical, but it quietly reverses the gospel.

The more I sat with it, the more I began to notice how differently Scripture tells the story. Scripture does not begin with the strong finally earning God’s help. God comes to Abram and Sarai with promise. God comes to enslaved Israel with deliverance. God comes to exiles with hope. In Jesus, God comes to the sick, the blind, the lame, the sinner, the weary, and even the dead.

Jesus does not wait for people to become strong enough to deserve mercy. He brings mercy, and his mercy raises people into new life.

That was the correction my soul needed.

I had been trying to live as though grace strengthened my will so I could accomplish my vision. But God was showing me that grace does something deeper: grace surrenders my will so I can enter his.

That is where Isaiah 40:31 became living truth for me:

*“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.”*

The key was not striving harder. The key was waiting upon the Lord. That word “wait” was not passive. It was not laziness. It was not sitting back and doing nothing. It was surrendered dependence. It was trust. It was yielding my timing, my control, my strength, my need to fix, and my desire to manage outcomes.

Things change, but not always on my time. Strength comes, but not always through my effort. Prayer opens, but not always because I force it open.

That was my first dark night of the soul.

I did not know to call it that at the time. I only knew that God had led me into a place where the old way no longer worked. My usual spiritual tools felt powerless. My ability to pray had gone dry. My confidence in self-help religion had been exposed. Yet beneath the silence there was still a desire for God.

That is what I now recognize as grace.

God was not punishing me. God was purifying me. He was not abandoning me. He was weaning me from a false dependence. He was not taking prayer away from me. He was teaching me that prayer is not something I control. Prayer is communion. Prayer is gift. Prayer is surrender before it is speech.

When I finally saw the wrongness of that old foundation, I confessed it. I repented. I asked forgiveness for trusting my own will while using God's name to bless it.

Afterward, I stood for a long while in the skywalk of the house my wife and I had built. Nothing dramatic happened at first. No thunder. No vision. No great rush of emotion that swept the room clean.

Just quiet.

But it was a different quiet.

The silence that had felt closed for two days began to soften. It was as if something inside me had unclenched. The words did not come all at once, but they came. Slowly. Honestly. Like water finding its way back through ground that had been dry too long.

I could pray again.

And I remember thinking that prayer had changed, or maybe I had. Before that moment, I had often treated prayer like something I could do if I was disciplined enough, focused enough, strong enough. I had carried into prayer the same lesson I had carried from the farm: work hard, push through, don't quit, get it done.

Those were not bad lessons. They had helped make me who I was. But standing there in the quiet, hungry from fasting and humbled by the Lord, I began to see that the life of faith could not be carried by grit alone.

There are some doors that effort cannot open, some silences strength cannot break, and some prayers we do not master. We receive them.

That was what I had not known.

God had not taken prayer from me to shame me. He had taken away my ability to control it. He had let me feel the poverty beneath my strength, not to crush me, but to tell me the truth.

I was not alone. I was not abandoned. But I was not in charge.

That was the beginning of something in me. I did not have words for it then, but I think now it was a kind of surrender. Not the surrender of giving up, but the surrender of finally letting God be God.

Soon after that, I knew it was time to look for a church to serve as pastor, not because I felt ready. Not because I had become wise. Not because I had finally found the secret to ministry.

I think I began looking because, in that dark quiet, God had shifted the foundation under my feet. And I understood my calling to serve. The old sentence had cracked: “God helps those who help themselves.” It could no longer hold the weight of my call.

Something truer had taken its place:

Wait for the Lord.

That was enough.

Not easy. Not quick. Not something I could command.

But enough.

I still believe in work. I still believe in responsibility. I still believe there is dignity in showing up, doing what needs done, and putting your hand to the plow. But now I know that before the plow, before the sermon, before the church, before the call, there is a quieter place where the soul learns to open its hands.

I had spent much of my life believing strength meant being able to do what needed to be done. In that first dark night, God began teaching me another kind of strength.

The strength to wait.

The strength to listen.

The strength to be still long enough to hear the truth.

And when the silence finally lifted, I did not walk out with all the answers. I walked out with a prayer.

Maybe that was the answer.

Afterword: What I Now Understand

Years later, the language of “dark night of the soul” gave me a name for what I had experienced. At the time, I only knew that God had led me into a place where my familiar patterns of prayer and self-understanding no longer worked.

The dark night is often misunderstood as simply a painful season or a run of bad circumstances. But in the Christian spiritual tradition, it is more than hardship. It is the obscure, gracious work of God in the soul. God may work through dryness, silence, confusion, loss of old ways, and even the strange discovery that our former tools no longer carry us as they once did.

In my case, the darkness was not God’s absence. It was my inability to see clearly what God was doing. He was exposing an attachment I did not know I had: self-sufficiency dressed in religious language.

That distinction matters. “God helps those who help themselves” can sound responsible, but it can also form a spirituality where God becomes assistant to my agenda. The gospel forms something different. In the gospel, God is the initiator, Christ is Lord, the Spirit is the giver of life, and I am invited to respond in obedient trust.

This became one of the early headwaters of my understanding of holiness.

I began to see that holiness is not willpower dressed up in religious effort. It is a life surrendered to God. It is not God helping me become impressive, productive, or spiritually accomplished. It is God forming Christ in me.

Holiness cannot be reduced to self-reliance with Bible verses attached. It is yielded love, faithful obedience, and daily dependence upon the Spirit.

That first dark night taught me that the river of holiness does not begin downstream with mission, achievement, productivity, or pastoral usefulness. It begins upstream in the presence of God, where false foundations are exposed and the soul learns to wait.

And once that lesson began to take root, ministry could no longer be about proving myself. It had to become a response to grace.