

Moving from comfortable prayers to bold and faith-filled prayers doesn't happen automatically. I love how Craig teaches us, urges us onward, and models how to have the kind of prayer life we've always wanted. It's not about always getting what we want. It's about growing closer to the heart of God and truly trusting him with whatever happens next.

—Lysa TerKeurst, *New York Times* bestselling author; president, Proverbs 31 Ministries

The Christian life was never meant to be a safe life. Yet all too often we settle for comfort over risk and abandon our purpose in the process. Pastor Craig challenges us to put it all on the line with God and build our faith for a life of risk as we walk in our God-given purpose.

—Christine Caine, bestselling author; founder, A21 and Propel Women

In this book, you'll feel yourself neither pushed nor pulled toward more prayers that feel like they merely bounce off of the ceiling. Instead, you're invited to pray the kind of dangerous prayers which have the power to change yourself, the people you love, and the people God loves—which is everybody.

—Bob Goff, author, *New York Times* bestsellers
Love Does and *Everybody Always*

To lean in to prayer the way Pastor Craig so brilliantly expounds on is to lean in to prayers that will change the world, and just might change you at the same time. This book is profound and prophetic and so, so helpful.

—Jefferson Bethke, author, *New York Times* bestselling *Jesus > Religion*

This book will challenge you to trade your stale, safe prayer life for one brimming with danger and excitement. Discover how to offer

genuine and gutsy prayers, the kind of dangerous prayers that change not only hearts but also our world.

—Lisa Bevere, *New York Times* bestselling author, *Without Rival* and *Girls with Swords*

If your prayer life needs a boost, you will enjoy this powerful new book. It will build your faith, strengthen your walk with God, and teach you to pray in dangerous ways.

—Mark Batterson, *New York Times* bestselling author, *The Circle Maker*; lead pastor, National Community Church

Craig Groeschel is convinced our prayers need to get bigger. In *Dangerous Prayers*, he tells us why and how. Taken to heart, this book has the potential to radically transform not only how you pray but also how you view the world and how you view God's activity in the world. Thank you, Craig!

—Andy Stanley, author; communicator; founder, North Point Ministries

If there's one mistake in prayer we should avoid at all costs, it's playing it too safe. In *Dangerous Prayers*, my pastor and friend, Craig Groeschel, will challenge you to embrace the uncertainty and lean into a more daring, more fulfilling prayer life.

—Steven Furtick, pastor, Elevation Church; *New York Times* bestselling author

This isn't another sweet book about the practice of prayer that will leave you feeling condemned and ashamed that you don't pray more. On the contrary, it's about what happens when we sincerely talk with a living God. And *that* can be beautifully, wonderfully dangerous.

—Judah Smith, lead pastor, Churchome

DANGEROUS PRAYERS

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Altar Ego: Becoming Who God Says You Are

Chazown: Discover and Pursue God's Purpose for Your Life

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DANGEROUS PRAYERS

BECAUSE FOLLOWING JESUS
WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE SAFE

CRAIG GROESCHEL

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Dangerous Prayers

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*This book is dedicated to my mom.
Thank you for praying faithfully all those years.
Your prayers made all the difference.
I love you and honor you.*

Thank you for purchasing
Dangerous Prayers!
All of the author's proceeds
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INTRODUCTION

WHY YOUR PRAYERS NEED TO BE DANGEROUS

Hey, Craig, do you believe God still does miracles?”
“Of course,” I said.

“Good—because your prayers are so *lame*.”

I tried to laugh with him, but my friend’s joke stung—mostly because he was right. We had just left a prayer service together, back when I started working in ministry. My buddy knew me well enough to tease me, but I suspect he was also making a point. Left speechless, I offered no defense as I processed the truth of his observation. I couldn’t deny that he voiced a secret I already knew but didn’t want to admit: my prayers were pathetic.

As a young pastor at the time, I should have had a handle on prayer. It’s one of those job responsibilities, like preaching and greeting people after the service, I should’ve mastered.

WHY YOUR PRAYERS NEED TO BE DANGEROUS

But praying long, focused, eloquent, and powerful prayers to the God-I-couldn't-see had always been challenging for me. I wasn't comfortable praying in a King James dialect of *thees* and *thous*—like trying to perform Shakespeare. But I wasn't satisfied just rambling in a shoot-the-breeze, best-buddy tone with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe either.

And even when I did pray, I had a difficult time focusing for long. Which meant I'd try even harder the next time. But no matter how hard I'd try, I always seemed to fall back into the same old prayer rut. I'd pray about the same things. In the same ways. Usually around the same time.

Looking back, I wonder if sometimes God got bored with my prayers. When I'd pray, "Lord, show us traveling mercies and keep us safe," I could imagine him saying, "What are you worried about? Just drive the speed limit and wear your seatbelt. You'll be fine." Or when I prayed, "God, bless our food," I just knew he was probably thinking, "Really? You want me to bless boxed macaroni and cheese and some potato chips?"

As I studied the Bible more, I marveled at the variety of prayers spoken by God's people. Not only did they pray about things that were incredibly personal—to conceive a child, for instance (1 Sam. 1:27)—but also their prayers were often so practical, for food and provision (Matt. 6:11) and escape from their enemies (Ps. 59:1–2). Sometimes they seemed to gently whisper to a loving God. Other times they yelled at him in agony and frustration.

They often pleaded with God sincerely. Then later they'd

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cry out from the depths of their anguish and rail at God like a tired toddler thrashing in the arms of a parent. They prayed for boldness to share their faith. They prayed for walls, both internally and externally, to fall. Daniel prayed for the mouths of hungry lions to be shut, and Jonah prayed for the belly of a hungry whale to be opened. Gideon prayed for his fleece to be wet one day and dry another. God's people prayed whether they were giddy with joy or crushed by sorrow.

Their prayers were honest. Desperate. Fiery. Gutsy. Real.

And there I was praying that God would keep me safe and bless my burger and fries.

My friend was right.

My prayers were lame.

Maybe you can relate. It's not that you don't believe in prayer. You do. But you're stuck in a rut. You pray about the same struggles and the same requests. In the same way. At the same time. If you even try to pray at all. Like me, you probably know you should pray more. And with more passion. More faith. You want to talk to God and to listen to him, to share an intimate conversation like you would with your spouse or best friend. You really want to but aren't sure how. So your prayers remain safe.

Flat. Dull. Predictable. Stale.

Boring.

My friend's wake-up call convinced me that it was time for a change in my prayer life. For too long, I had tolerated lack-luster, faithless, and mostly empty prayers. I knew God wanted

WHY YOUR PRAYERS NEED TO BE DANGEROUS

more for me, and I wanted to know him more intimately, despite my hesitation about what it would require of me.

To get there, I began by unpacking some of my spiritual baggage. For years, I'd felt deep shame about my half-hearted prayer life—me, a pastor. If you've ever felt insecure about your prayer life, think about what it's like to be a pastor. I'm supposed to be a prayer warrior—full of fierce, unrelenting faith and unbridled, Spirit-led power. And yet I found myself drifting while trying to pray.

In the middle of a prayer, whether praying silently or aloud, my mind would bounce from one thing to the next. *Dear God in heaven, I pray that you heal my friend who has cancer. Work in her life now in the name of. . . I really need to go to the hospital to see her again. Oh wait, I haven't changed the oil in the car. And we're out of cereal. The kids are gonna kill me. And Amy has a doctor's appointment today—did we pay that last insurance bill? I can't believe how much it's going up this year! Oh, yeah, this week's sermon—still need to find a strong illustration . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Lord, what were we talking about?*

To make matters even worse, I always dreaded prayer meetings. (Talk about feeling guilty.) They seem to last forever with people who not only know how to pray but also love to pray. Not to mention that whenever you have to hold hands with others in a prayer time, it seems to get weird really quick. On one side is always the Wise. The louder she prays, the harder she squeezes. "God, we bind up the work of the devil, IN JESUS' NAME!" Squeeze. Squeeze. *Squeeze*. Your knuckles turn white

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as you lose feeling up to your elbow. But then on the other side, you often have the Fish, a cold, pulseless hand barely grasping yours. The Vise cuts off your circulation while the Fish makes you eager to shrug off that clammy appendage passing as a hand.

And there's always the Power Pray-er, the person who loves to pray loud and proud. You know, the one who quotes tons of Bible verses and makes you feel even more inadequate. "God, you said in your Word in Deuteronomy 28 that we would be the head and not the tail. We know from John 3:16, Lord, that you so loved the world." With so many numbers thrown around, by the end you feel like you've been listening to a lecture on accounting.

Then there's always the Competitor. When I was a new Christian in college, I frequently experienced this kind of prayer one-upmanship with my roommate. He'd pray loud and long, sounding so sure of himself, and display his vast knowledge of God and the Bible. Feeling pressure not to be outdone, I'd up my game but usually found myself taking it too far. Since I didn't know much about the Bible then, I'd just roll out things that sounded powerful and Bible-like. "God, you said in your Word that you are not only Jehovah Jireh but that you are also Jehovah, um, let's see, um, Jehovah Ni . . . um, *Nissan*. Yes—you are Jehovah NISSAN! And, Lord, you are good. You are good to, um, to the . . . God, you are good to the last drop. And your Word is so sweet, like honey on our lips, and it tastes so good . . . it, um, it melts . . . in our mouths . . .

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and not in our hands. Oh, God, like a good neighbor . . . you're always there!"

These weren't my only prayer problems. Too often, praying just didn't make any sense. It seemed like God would often respond quickly to my meaningless requests, like the time I almost jokingly asked God to heal our broken air-conditioning unit, and he did. Then I'd fast for days and pray my guts out for months that God would heal a friend from a disease, and he didn't. Sometimes I believed in the power of prayer, and other times I wondered whether it was all a big waste of time.

Since those early years, I've learned quite a bit about prayer. For one thing, God hates showy prayers, so there's no pressure, no right way other than being open and honest with him. Jesus repeatedly railed against the Pharisees for praying long,

God hates showy prayers, so there's no pressure, no right way other than being open and honest with him.

loud, and fancy prayers that lacked authenticity. Christ taught us, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full" (Matt. 6:5).

Instead of long, loud, and fancy, the prayers that move God are simple, authentic, and heartfelt. But simple is not the same as safe. And that's the reason I'm compelled to write this book. The biggest mistake I made in my prayer life, the reason my prayers were so lame, is because I prayed too safely. I was in a comfort zone with God, built on lame, half-hearted

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communication. I wasn't on fire and I wasn't cold. My prayers were tepid. But safe, lukewarm prayers don't draw us closer to God or help us reveal his love to this world.

Prayers are inherently dangerous.

This idea about prayer dawned on me while reading about Jesus talking to his Father in the garden of Gethsemane, just a short time before he gave his life on the cross. Knowing what was ahead, Jesus asked God if there was any other way. Then Jesus, not just a regular disciple or a person in the Bible, but J-E-S-U-S, the Son of God, prayed a vulnerable and dangerous prayer of submission: "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42 NLT).

Jesus never asks us to do something he wouldn't do himself. He calls us to a life of faith, not a life of comfort. Instead of coming to him

for a safer, easier, stress-free lifestyle, the Son of God challenges us to risk loving others more than ourselves. Instead of indulging our daily desires, he calls us to deny them for something eternal. Instead of living by what we want, he tells us to pick up our crosses daily and follow his example. In this book, we'll dig more deeply into these ideas through three powerful prayers drawn from Scripture. These three prayers may be short. They may be simple. They may be straightforward. But they are not safe.

In the next three sections of this book, we'll attempt to stretch our faith, expand our hearts, and open our lives to God praying these three dangerous prayers:

Jesus never asks us to do something he wouldn't do himself. He calls us to a life of faith, not a life of comfort.

WHY YOUR PRAYERS NEED TO BE DANGEROUS

SEARCH ME.

BREAK ME.

SEND ME.

When we're seeking to communicate with God in real, vulnerable, and intimate prayer, he's not wrapping us in a bubble of spiritual safety. Instead he bursts our what's-in-it-for-me bubble and invites us to trust him when we don't know what he will do next. Some days we feel blessed. Other days we face challenges, opposition, and persecution. But every moment of dangerous prayer will be filled with his presence.

I worry that for a lot of people prayer is like buying a lottery ticket, a chance at a life here on earth that's problem free, stress free, pain free. For others, prayer is merely a sentimental routine, like reciting favorite song lyrics or a beloved nursery rhyme from childhood. Yet others pray only because they feel even guiltier if they don't.

But none of these prayers reflect the life Jesus came to give us.

Instead, he called us to leave everything to follow him.

When a rich and powerful young man approached Jesus to ask some weighty spiritual questions, Jesus didn't lower the bar in his response. Instead, "Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'" (Mark 10:21).

I've always been moved by the fact that *before* Jesus asked

Why Your Prayers Need to Be Dangerous

this man to leave everything, Jesus made this bold request in love. Jesus wanted the best for this man, who had everything on the outside but still lived with a void on the inside. Jesus loved him and almost dared him to abandon it all to follow him.

Jesus didn't just challenge others to leave their own wills behind. He too lived a dangerous faith. He touched lepers. Showed grace to prostitutes. And stood bravely in the face of danger. Then he told us we could do what he did—and more.

And that's why we can't settle for simply asking God to bless our food or "be with us today."

Are you ready for more? Are you sick of playing it safe? Are you ready to pray daring, faith-filled, God-honoring, life-changing, world-transforming prayers?

If you are, then this book is for you.

But be warned. There will be bumps. When you start to pray things like "search me, break me, send me," you may experience valleys. Attacks. Trials. Pain. Hardship. Discouragement. Even heartbreak. But there will also be the joy of faith, the marvel of miracles, the relief of surrender, and the pleasure of pleasing God.

It's time to stop praying safe.

It's time to start talking, really talking—and really listening—to God.

It's time for dangerous prayers.





PART 1

SEARCH ME

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

—PSALM 139:23–24





CHAPTER 1.1

SEARCH ME

One of my first breakthroughs about prayer occurred years ago when my mother had surgery. My family and I had gathered in Mom's hospital room, trying to reassure her that the procedure would go smoothly the next morning. She was understandably nervous, so when a middle-aged man in a black suit and clerical collar knocked and asked if she would like him to pray for her, she exclaimed, "Well, of course I want you to pray for me!"

He smiled and nodded, confident in his demeanor as he produced a small well-worn leather book from his suit pocket. Standing beside her bed, he asked, "What is your denominational preference?"

"I'm just a . . . well . . . just a regular Christian. I don't have a denominational preference. Just Protestant."

I knew she had grown up attending a Lutheran school, but also that our family had been attending a Methodist church for as long as I could remember. It never seemed to be a big

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deal, really. Apparently, though, the chaplain didn't share our casual attitude about denominations. "Uh, I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "It would just help me know which prayer to read if you could pick a denomination that you're comfortable with."

"Well, let's just go with Methodist then." Mom smiled politely, eager to help the chaplain do his job.

Relieved, he returned her smile and thumbed through his little book until he found the page he wanted. He then began reading the prayer, and honestly, the only way any of us knew it was a prayer was because he told us. With his cheery monotone voice, the chaplain could have been reading a nursery rhyme or his grocery list.

Before he could finish, Mom interrupted him. And you'd have to know my mom to fully grasp the impact of her interruption. She's the nicest, most thoughtful, caring person you will ever meet. She would give you her last dollar, walk across town to help you out, and write you a three-page thank-you note for the gift you sent her. She's absolutely as kind as they come—but she's also known for being a bit ornery. Not only does she enjoy having fun, she rarely minces words. If she thinks it, she will say it. Without holding back.

While the chaplain was still reading from his prescribed Methodist prayer, my mother interrupted. Loud enough to be heard all the way to the nurses' station, she playfully called out, "Will somebody please find me a chaplain who knows how to pray his own prayers?"

At first, we all tried not to laugh, but it was impossible to hold it in. Even the chaplain, poor guy, had to grin. Everyone in my family still chuckles when we retell this story about Mom's frank assessment of this man's prayer. But Mom made a good point.

Praying from the heart is personal and unmistakable.

There's certainly nothing wrong with reading a prayer or using someone else's words to pray. In fact, reading prayers can be a good starting point in learning to pray your own. Over time, though, if you want to know God intimately, you will begin to pray more unscripted prayers that come straight from your heart. As your faith grows, your prayers will likely well up deep inside you. You may not even know how to express them in words. They're simply communication between you and your Father, the living God Almighty. Deeply personal and just as unique as your fingerprint.

Praying from the heart is personal and unmistakable.

You don't have to look far in the Psalms to see the honest cries from the heart of David. He questioned God. He complained to God. He petitioned God. From the depths of his soul, David cried out to his heavenly Father, asking, "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (Ps. 13:1-2).

But I'm afraid many of us aren't comfortable praying openly and freely. We assume there's a right way or a better way or a

PART 1: SEARCH ME

more eloquent way. We tend to stumble into ruts and pray for the same things over and over. We get bored with our prayers.

And if we get bored praying, then I wonder if we're really praying.



CHAPTER 1.2

TRUTH OR DARE

Prayer is sacred communication, the language of longing, a divine dialogue between you and your heavenly Father, your Abba, your Daddy. When you pray, the God of the universe listens. And not only does he listen, but he also cares. About what you have to say. About all the things you carry around in your heart that no one else knows about. Maybe even some things *you* don't know about. God wants to hear you and speak to you. He wants to communicate with you the same way you sit across from a loved one and enjoy an intimate conversation.

Your prayers matter.

How you pray matters.

What you pray matters.

Your. Prayers. Move. God.

We're told in the Bible that we can "come boldly to the throne of our gracious God" (Heb. 4:16a NLT). We don't have to approach timidly or feel awkward—we can come before him

PART 1: SEARCH ME

with confidence, assurance, and boldness. When we pray this way, then “we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most” (Heb. 4:16b NLT).

Do you need grace in your relationships with other people?

Do you need mercy for all the secret things you struggle with?

Do you need help to get through your day?

I do. In big ways. Every day. And in every way.

So let me share something that’s helped me grow some spiritual muscle in place of those wimpy prayers my friend pointed out. They are simply three prayers drawn from the Bible that you can pray and make your own. By this, I simply mean you can pray them in your own words, allowing them to rise up to heaven even as they sink into your bones. They’re tools for focusing your prayers and communication with God.

But I must warn you. They’re not safe prayers. They’re not benign or polite or tepid. You can’t just memorize them in hopes of a warm, fuzzy moment with God.

These prayers require faith. Courage. They ask you to risk.

They’re almost guaranteed to push you out of your comfort zone. To stretch you. To help you grow righteously uncomfortable. They will require you to look deep within yourself. To stop pretending about certain aspects of your life. To be honest with yourself before the One who knows you better than you know yourself.

These prayers may melt your heart and open an awareness of sin in your life. You may feel compelled to take a bold step of radical faith, trusting God as you follow him and go off

script from the predictable pattern of your life. You will likely be challenged to leave spiritual safety, comfort, and convenience behind you.

Instead of a safe, all-about-me prayer, you might pray for others first, hurting for them, hoping for them, reaching out to God on their behalf.

Instead of just asking for protection and safety, you might ask what God wants you to do and where he wants you to go.

Rather than always asking him for more, you might praise him for all the blessings he's already poured into your life. Recognizing all these blessings, you might then reach out to bless someone else.

Instead of just checking a box, your prayers might actually change eternity, shaking hell, scaring demons, and enlarging heaven. Sound extreme? I promise you it's not. More importantly, *God* promises. If you call out to him, God assures you that he hears the cries of your heart.

Your prayers become dangerous.

But following Jesus was never supposed to be safe.

He promised his followers they would face trouble (see John 16:33). Jesus warned those who faithfully served him that they would be persecuted just like he was (see John 15:20). Jesus alerts us of upcoming challenges. Because we love him, we will face trials and opposition. But even in the middle of painful trials, Jesus invites us to respond with grace and pray what feels

If you call out to him, God assures you that he hears the cries of your heart.

PART 1: SEARCH ME

like a vulnerable and dangerous prayer. Jesus said, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Love those who want to do you harm. And pray for those who are intent on your demise.

Do you dare to pray in a way you’ve never prayed before? With all of your heart, soul, mind, and the full extent of your being? What would happen in your life and the lives of those around you if you started praying dangerous prayers?

Do you dare to find out?



CHAPTER 1.3

THE STATE OF YOUR HEART

The first prayer comes from David, and it's a doozy. In the Old Testament we see David squaring off against God's enemies left and right. In a raging fit of jealousy, King Saul falsely accused David of treason and attempting to assassinate the king. Saul sent his full forces after David in repeated attempts to take his life and remove what Saul saw as his biggest threat. And he knew how to hit where it hurts—he claimed David wasn't faithful to his God.

With all his heart, David wanted to please God. He fought against his anger in order to protect and show honor to the king. Yet knowing that his motives weren't always perfect, David surrendered his heart before God and prayed one of the most vulnerable, transparent, and dangerous prayers you'll ever hear. Wanting to honor God in every aspect of his being, David prayed, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any

PART 1: SEARCH ME

offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

Not only is this prayer difficult to pray, but it’s even more challenging to apply and live out. Because if you have the courage to pray it, then you’ll need to exercise the courage to live what God shows you in reply. So don’t pray it if you don’t mean it.

Be forewarned, this prayer has the potential to convict you. To correct you. To redirect your life. To change the way you see yourself. To change how others see you.

Maybe you’re still thinking this is no big deal. Maybe you’re wondering why you should ask God to search your heart when he already knows all that’s inside you. You know what’s in there. He knows what’s in there. So why ask something so obvious?

This is where it’s tricky. On the surface, it seems like we would know our own hearts. Right? *I know my motives. I know what’s most important. I know why I do what I do.* Besides, you might tell yourself, *I’ve got a good heart. I’m not trying to hurt people. I want to do what’s right. My heart is good. I’m praying, aren’t I?*

But God’s Word actually reveals the exact opposite. It might be a shock when you hear it the first time, but Jeremiah tells us some straight-up truth. Jeremiah was the son of a Levitical priest born around 650 BC. During the reign of King Josiah, God raised up this young prophet to take God’s Word to Israel and the nations. Jeremiah flat out says you—along with me and everybody else—don’t have a good heart. In fact,

not only is your heart not good, but your heart is wicked and sinful in all its ways. The prophet said, “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?” (Jer. 17:9 NLT).

It’s easy to pretend we are good at heart, but the Bible teaches us that our heart deceives us and is desperately wicked. At its core, our heart is all about self—not Christ. It’s about what’s temporary—not eternal. It’s about what’s easy—not what’s right. It’s obsessed with what we want—not what God wants.

You might think, no, not me. My heart is good. Please remember, without Christ, it’s not. If we think it is, we are being deceived by our own heart. Our original nature at birth is sinful. (You never have to teach a two-year-old to be selfish, right?) Our ways are not God’s ways. That’s why we need Christ. Not just to forgive us, but to transform us. To redirect us. To make us new.

Our ways are not God’s ways. That’s why we need Christ. Not just to forgive us, but to transform us. To redirect us. To make us new.

If you still believe you’re inherently good, then let me ask you, how often do you lie? If you answer “not that often,” then you’re probably lying right there. If you answer “never,” then I know you’re lying.

Research studies reveal that most people tell multiple lies every day. We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. Or we want to make ourselves look good so we exaggerate. But the

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most common lies are the ones we tell ourselves. Have you ever done this? You tell yourself what you believe is true in your heart: *I won't eat much. I promise. Just a couple of bites.* And

The most common lies are the ones we tell ourselves.

the next thing you know you're holding an empty bag of chips or licking the pan clean.

We all rationalize. No one likes to face the ugly truth that they drink too much, that they think about things that they'd be

ashamed for anyone else to know, that they laugh at others' mistakes and gossip behind their backs. And the rationalizations continue. You tell yourself, I'm not materialistic; I just like nice things. I'm not a gossip; I'm just telling them so they can pray. I don't have a problem; this is just my one thing I do to cope.

I bet David was tempted to cope when he was running for his life from Saul. He could have used alcohol to escape. He could have turned angry, resentful, and bitter. Or David could have plotted to harm King Saul, justifying his actions in the name of self-preservation. But instead of taking the easy path, David chose a more daring one. The "man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14) decided to pray, knowing that his own heart was capable of tricking him again and again.

Without Christ, your heart is deceitful.

That's why this prayer of David's is crazy dangerous.

"Search my heart, Lord."



CHAPTER 1.4

HARD CHOICES

I was in high school the first time I came across David's dangerous prayer. On Wednesday nights at our Methodist church, my buddies and I would go to our weekly youth group meeting. While I'm not sure how much I grew spiritually at these meetings, a few things stand out. First would have to be our epic four-square battles. I don't think four square is mentioned in the Bible, but you'd think it was Armageddon considering the way we played it.

I also remember the refreshments in our small cafeteria. Each week, some of the older ladies would bake us goodies—brownies, cookies, lemon bars. Some weeks I went just to see what the spread would be. These Methodist ladies were serious about proving the Bible true when it says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8).

I also remember our youth pastors didn't last long. Most seemed temporary, like they were just visiting to see if we

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might be a church they wanted to settle in. It had to be tough, trying to connect with a bunch of moody teenagers all trying to impress each other more than wanting to learn about God. Despite the turnover, one guy had a real impact on me.

I must've been a junior in high school when several of us boarded a small bus to travel to the Methodist campground about two hours from our church. The first day at camp, after a time of worship, our youth pastor taught a lesson on David's introspective prayer asking God to "search him." At the end of his lesson, he encouraged us to go off alone and pray that prayer over and over again, listening for what God might tell us in response. I was into it but had no idea what God was about to set in motion in my life.

I left the crowd and walked to the edge of the playground where the trees hadn't been cut down. The air smelled fresh, like pine, as white clouds unraveled in the blue sky overhead. Sitting near the edge of the tree line, I took the assignment seriously. *It's time I learned to pray—really pray.* I couldn't see anyone else around so I said it out loud: "God, search my heart."

I wish I could tell you that God showed me that my heart was pure, my ways were holy, and my motives all about serving him. But on that day, I distinctly remember sensing an answer to my request. God didn't speak audibly, and I didn't see a sign in the sky. No parting clouds or thunderbolts. I just sensed a very personal and holy presence. And in the same moment that I felt an unmistakable heavenly love, I also simultaneously realized the extent of my sinfulness.

I was such a hypocrite.

My peers had voted me to be president of our youth group, a leader and role model for all the other kids at our church. But my life was a sham as far as my faith was concerned. I acted sincere and serious on Wednesday nights at youth group and then partied with a wilder crowd on the weekend. I pretended like I knew God, but my life and heart revealed how far from him I really was. I put on a show for one crowd and played a completely different role for a more comfortable audience.

So when I paused to pray “Search me” that afternoon at church camp, I was blindsided by the reality of the depths of my sinfulness. Years later I discovered a verse that says it well: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isa. 29:13). I gave God lip service, but my heart was wicked. I talked the talk, but I didn’t walk the walk. I pretended to be a Christian, but I didn’t know the Christ.

It was then that I realized the closer I got to Jesus, the more I’d have to face my shortcomings. My pride. My selfishness. My lust. My critical spirit.

Praying this dangerous prayer that day opened a channel of communication with God I didn’t know existed. Instead of simply asking God to do something *for* me, I asked him to reveal something *in* me. And he revealed things to me that day that began my journey toward knowing God personally. It became clear to me

I realized the closer I got to Jesus, the more I’d have to face my shortcomings.

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that I was a mess. I lied. Cheated. Stole. And did what I wanted no matter who it hurt. What had seemed normal now felt wrong. The life I thought I wanted led me to become someone

Instead of simply asking God to do something *for* you, ask God to reveal something *in* you.

I hated. Unfortunately, this moment of truth with God didn't change me instantly, but it did help me recognize my spiritual need. I knew that

something would need to be different. And I would grow to learn that that *something* was actually learning to love and serve with every fiber of my being a *someone* named Jesus.

It's a dangerous prayer.

But it's one that could redirect your life.

"Search me, God."



CHAPTER 1.5

REVEAL MY FEARS

What is it that makes you anxious? Nervous? Unsettled? Afraid?

I'm not talking about normal external fears like snakes, spiders, or the fear of flying. I'm wondering what keeps you up at night, those things that ricochet in your mind and refuse to be quieted. Things like losing your job. Not getting married. Or being stuck in a bad marriage. Having your health fail. Draining your savings account just to get by.

We don't know what exact fears were running through David's mind, but it's clear he was troubled about his safety and perhaps his future. Because after asking God to search his heart, David prayed, "know my anxious thoughts" (Ps. 139:23). He wanted to share his worst fears with God. To face them and give them a name. To trust that God was bigger than any fear David could dream up.

Are you willing to pray such a prayer? "Lord, reveal what

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holds my mind hostage. Show me what I fear the most. Go ahead, help me face what terrifies me.”

You might wonder why our “anxious thoughts” matter to God. It’s not necessarily about our comfort and experiencing a stress-free life. But the answer to this question is perhaps much more important than most of us would understand on the surface.

What we fear matters.

Years ago, I had a revelation about this subject that touched me in a very personal way. God showed me that what I feared the most revealed where I trusted God the least. After the

What we fear the most often reveals where we trust God the least.

birth of our third daughter, Anna, Amy started having physical challenges. At first, we thought it was just fatigue, but when half her body went numb, we feared it was something much worse.

Doctor after doctor couldn’t provide answers. As her symptoms continued to worsen, my trust in God started to weaken.

This fear led to others, and at night my thoughts snowballed out of control. *What if Amy is dangerously sick? What if I lose her? I won’t be able to raise our kids without her. I wouldn’t be able to continue to lead the church. I wouldn’t want to go on.* Then it hit me. The things that kept me awake at night were the things that I wasn’t trusting God to handle. I was holding onto them, ruminating over them, trying to find a way to gain control over them, to solve all my problems, to plan for every contingency. Thankfully, by the grace of God, Amy gradually

improved back to full strength, but her challenges exposed one of my worst weaknesses. Fear had consumed me.

What about you? What are the areas that you're clinging to even while allowing them to terrify you? What fears are you withholding from God?

Think about it. If you're gripped with fear about the future of your marriage, this is an indication that you don't completely trust God with your marriage. If you're overwhelmed with worry about how you will pay your bills, this reveals that you may not be trusting God to be your provider. If you're paralyzed with worry about the safety of your children, could it be that you aren't trusting God to keep them safe?

From my experience praying this prayer, God has often revealed my anxious thoughts and the fears fueling them. One of the first fears he revealed has also proven to be one of the most persistent. I'm terrified of failing. It started as a child playing baseball and feeling scared to death I'd strike out in front of my once professional-baseball-playing dad. As an adult, I'm afraid of striking out on my next sermon, my next project, or my responsibility to be a good dad. I'm scared to death to let people down, of not being enough, of not doing what needs to be done. I always feel inadequate.

In fact, as I'm typing the words on this page, I'm worried about my daughter's health. Mandy's twenty-three, married, and as gifted as anyone I know. Yet for almost three years now, she's been unable to function like a normal person. We've prayed more prayers than we could count. We've seen doctors

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across the nation. We've tried the most specific diets you could imagine. We've tried natural approaches and even some things that would make some people think we are crazy. Not only am I a Christian, I'm a pastor. I know I'm not supposed to worry. But when it's your own child, it's hard not to let your mind race in the wrong direction.

Which brings me back to why I wanted to write this book. With all my heart, I know the power of praying dangerous prayers. And I'm continually sick of my safe prayers. I can't stand another day of my self-centered Christianity. So this message burns within me. But I'm worried that I won't be able to get the idea from my heart onto the page. What if my writing isn't powerful enough? Isn't convincing? Isn't convicting? Doesn't move your heart?

Our fears matter. Because ultimately, our fears show how we're relying on our own efforts and not trusting in our Savior. The truth is we—you and I and everyone—are always inadequate.

Our fears matter. Because ultimately, our fears show how we're relying on our own efforts and not trusting in our Savior.

We're never enough. We're always weak. But here's the incredible thing: when we're weak, God's power is made perfect (see 2 Cor. 12:9).

Your greatest fear may point you to your best chance at making a difference in the world. You need God for every moment of every day. Everything you do of value is born out of his heart, his power, his grace.

To please God, to serve him, to honor him, to live for him,

you cannot be driven by fear. You must be led by faith. I've often said, the pathway to your greatest potential is often straight through your greatest fear. Faith will propel you forward. In fact, what God wants for you may be on the other side of what you fear the most. The apostle Paul encouraged his protégé Timothy to cling to faith by reminding him, "God has not given us a spirit of fear and

timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7 NLT).

Through the centuries, many Christians have believed that God's enemy, the devil, attempts

to influence believers with lies. If you're afraid of failing, it could be that your spiritual enemy is trying to talk you out of doing what God has created you to do. So pray and step into your fear. Let God propel you forward by faith. Without faith, it's impossible to please God. Remind yourself that you love pleasing God more than you fear failing.

As you pray this dangerous prayer and he reveals what is keeping you from fully following him, don't miss out on experiencing his love. Soak in his extravagant grace. Enjoy the unconditional goodness of God poured out for you in the life of Christ. Remember, "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

As God reveals your fears, he will also build your faith. You need him. You need his presence. You need his power. You need his Spirit guiding you. You need his Word strengthening you.

To please God, to serve him,
to honor him, to live for him,
you cannot be driven by fear.
You must be led by faith.

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Faith doesn't mean you don't get afraid. Faith means you don't let fear stop you.

What you fear the most shows you where you need to grow with God. What do you fear? What are your anxious thoughts?

What is God showing you?

Where do you need to grow in faith?

Trust him.



CHAPTER 1.6

UNCOVER MY SINS

If David's prayer hasn't seemed dangerous enough already, then I'd like to gently warn you. It's about to get even more intense.

David was called "a man after God's own heart" (see 1 Sam. 13:14 and Acts 13:22). He was devoted to God's will and worshiped passionately, gave extravagantly, and led courageously. Yet he still made mistakes—big ones. Like you and like me, he was tempted to sin and didn't always make the right choice. Even after he knew the goodness of God and had walked with him for most of his life, David still blew it. And that's why he prayed this dangerous portion of the prayer: "Search me, God . . . know my anxious thoughts. . . . See if there is any offensive way in me" (Ps. 139:23–24).

Show me if I am doing anything that offends or hurts your heart.

Hearing God's response to this portion of the prayer can