

Books by Gary Thomas

Authentic Faith

Devotions for a Sacred Marriage

Devotions for Sacred Parenting

The Glorious Pursuit

Not the End but the Road

Sacred Influence

Sacred Marriage

Sacred Parenting

Sacred Pathways

Seeking the Face of God



Authentic Faith

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SEVERE GIFTS

Fire-Testing Seasons from a Loving Father

The Church is the one thing that saves a man from the degrading servitude of being a child of his time.

G. K. CHESTERTON

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

When I arrived on Western Washington University’s campus in 1980, Mike Dittman was perhaps the most dynamic Christian 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, and a walk of integrity, as well as being a skilled worship leader and a good teacher. He could lead you into the presence of God like few I’ve ever met. I often sought him out at lunchtime to talk, and was later pleased to end up being in the small group 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 at a church for a number of years until finally an “intervention” of sorts took place. Men whom Mike respected and loved confronted him and

said, “Mike, you’re very competent. Very insightful. A dynamic leader. A guy who inspires admiration and respect. But you’re also too blunt. You hurt people with your words. You lack compassion and empathy.”

Mike was devastated, but in a good way. He realized that not one of the positive traits mentioned by these men was a “fruit of the Spirit,” and he found himself praying, “God, I wish I was a little less ‘dynamic’ and a little more compassionate.”

It was just a couple years later that a close friend told me the shocking news: After a morning workout, Mike’s body dropped to the locker room floor. A brain hemorrhage almost took his life, but after a furious scare, doctors were able to keep Mike in this world—albeit, a very different Mike.

His Hollywood-handsome appearance was gone. Half of Mike’s face now looks “fallen,” pulled over to one side. He can’t sing anymore or play his guitar, so there’s no more leading worship. For a while his speech was slurred, so he couldn’t teach. He was humbled in just about every way an ambitious man can be humbled.

After months of grueling therapy, Mike moved on. The devastating effect on his body was paralleled by an equally powerful—and wonderful—change in his spirit. Now, years later, Mike’s ministry has never been more productive. He started a phenomenally successful department of counseling at the Philadelphia Biblical University, which has grown from a handful of students to hundreds of participants. People fly in to Philadelphia from all over the country to meet with Mike—pastors who have fallen, marriages that have broken apart, children who are rebelling. Mike’s seen it all. 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 told me recently, “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 think the main difference is that in college, when I was around Mike, I wanted to be like Mike. Now, after spending time with Mike, I want to be more like Jesus.

The amazing thing is that Mike's story, though inspirational, is not particularly unique. I have heard so many Christians tell me of a gut-wrenching season they walked through, only to hear them say, "In the end, I'm glad it happened. The fruit it creates far outweighs the pain and angst that come with it."

None of them would have chosen ahead of time to walk through such a difficult trial. But all of them are grateful, in hindsight, that the trial came. Such fire-testing seasons are severe gifts from a loving Father, though initially they are rarely received as such.

These 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 as we become astonished at the insights that pour from the 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 among 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* as though it's all about God, but the focus of new believers' lives is still mostly taken up with how they're doing with regard to defeating sins, as well as cultivating the new joy and spiritual depth that come from walking with God. They're thrilled with what Christianity has done *for them*.

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. This growth can be painful for us, but it's a growth that is necessary if we are to become the type of women and men whom God can use. Instead of focusing on our desire for God to answer our prayers, spiritual maturity leads us to yearn for faithfulness, Christlikeness, 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.

It is a mistake to ask someone to grow out of spiritual infatuation too quickly. Such a season has its place. There’s no getting around the fact that babies need diapers and milk. But when a ten-, twenty-, or thirty-year-old still wears diapers and still acts as though the world revolves around his or her own personal happiness, something has gone wrong.

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Whereas before they thought of God as only kind, only merciful, and only loving, they now tend to view him as stubborn, severe, and unyielding. A wise spiritual director will seek to lay the groundwork for a new way of thinking during this stage. There’s a place for this disillusionment, provided it effects the sea change that leads to mature friendship with God.

If disillusionment remains, however, it ceases to motivate and eventually may bury the believer under its despair.

The second mark is an ongoing *what’s in it for me personally?* attitude. We live in a “me-first” culture, and we often try to individualize corporate promises, largely because we’re more concerned about what the Bible says to us individually than about how it calls us to live in community—that is, as those who are a part of the church. Peter tells us that, corporately, we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” Why? Not for any individual purpose, but for a corporate one that honors God: “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9–10).

When God calls us to himself, he calls us to his church, to a purpose bigger than ourselves. This may sound shocking to some, but biblically, living for God means living for his church. There is a glory in the presence of Jesus Christ, seen when believers come together, that will necessarily be missing in an individual pursuit of God. When the gospel is turned from a community-centered faith to an individual-centered faith (“Jesus would have died for me if I had been the only one!”), we eclipse much of its power and meaning.

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 in order 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 or her life to build God’s kingdom and to serve God’s church. This is a radical shift—indeed, the most radical (and freeing) shift known in human experience—and it leads to a deep friendship with God.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

In relationships, even our best intentions can go ridiculously awry. I read of one man who thought he had planned the perfect date with his wife: “For Valentine’s Day,” he wrote, “I decided to take my wife out for a nice romantic dinner, and all she did was complain. Next time I want to eat at Hooters, I’ll go by myself.” We can bring this same self-centeredness into our relationship with God. Much of what we say, or even think, we’re doing on God’s behalf is really being done for ourselves.

On a deeper level, I believe many of us are hungry and thirsty for a faith based on sacrifice instead of on self-absorption and simplistic denial. We don’t want to become Christians in order to become an *improved* man or woman, but an *entirely new* man or woman—people who live with a different outlook on life, who find joy while others pursue happiness, who find meaning in what others see as something to simply be overcome or cured, who want to drink deeply of life—with its mountains and valleys, twists and turns—rather than to “rise above it.”

This is an authentic faith, prescribed for a disillusioned world. It is a faith taught by Jesus, passed on by the ancients, and practiced throughout two thousand years of church history. It's our heritage, our birthright, and our blessing. It has been witnessed to as ultimately the most fulfilling life ever lived, though it is frequently a life of hardship and difficulty.

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, heartaches, and responsibilities. God does indeed bear our burdens. Certainly, he blesses us in many ways, but this initial relief is for the purpose of assigning to us more important concerns than our own. Only this time, we weep not because our house is too small or because we have overextended our credit, but because we are taxed to the limit as we reach out to a hurting world. Yes, we experience peace, joy, and hope, but it is a peace in the midst of turmoil, a joy marked with empathy, and a hope refined by suffering.

Ultimately, spiritual maturity is not about memorizing the Bible and mastering the spiritual disciplines. These are healthy things to do, but they are still only means to a greater end, which in itself is *learning to love with God's love and learning to serve with God's power*.

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limited by what we don't
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In a fallen world, love begs to be unleashed—a love that is supernatural in origin, without limit, a love that perseveres in the face of the deepest hatred or the sharpest pain. It is a love that becomes silhouetted in a broken world, framed by human suffering, illuminated in an explosion of God's presence breaking into a dark cellar.

In a 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. Mature friendship with

God reminds us that our existence is much broader than our suffering and difficulty. 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, so very much more, than anything this fallen world can offer.

In short, we are missing out when we insist on self-absorption, affluence, and ease over against pursuing a deeper walk with God. We miss out on an intimacy that has been heralded by previous generations, a fellowship of labor, suffering, persecution, and selflessness. It doesn't sound like much fun 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 as they try to figure out how someone who walks such a difficult road could possibly be happy.

In a broken, fallen world, we really only have two choices: mature friendship with God, or radical disillusionment.

A CLASSICAL FAITH

Today's self-oriented gospel is no stranger to the church. In fact, it is relatively similar to the faith that spawned the Christian flight to the desert in the fourth century, the spread of monasticism in the sixth century, the reform of monasticism in the Middle Ages, and then the spread of Puritanism in the seventeenth century. Throughout history, God has always left his witness of a "classical faith"—that is, a God-centered, authentic faith. Not the faith of the Pharisees, who majored on the minors and made legalistic obedience their god; not the faith of those who see God as their ticket to comfort and ease; nor yet the faith that sees Christianity as still another means to "improve ourselves" and become "more disciplined." God has served us and does serve us—but ultimately, classical, authentic Christianity is about glorifying, proclaiming, adoring, and obeying God.

If you've found yourself disillusioned in any way with Christianity or with your faith in God, make sure it's really Christianity you're disillusioned with and not some perversion of it that is only

masquerading as faith. Check to see if you are caught in the crossroads of moving beyond spiritual infatuation, and being invited into the quieter—and, quite frankly, seemingly darker—waters of mature friendship with God. Authentic Christianity majors on a powerful display of God’s presence, often through his people, in a world that is radically broken.

Authentic faith penetrates the most unlikely of places. This faith is found, for instance, when we die to ourselves and put others first (chapter 2). Such a faith is nurtured when we cultivate contentment instead of spending our best energy and efforts to improve our lot in life (chapter 9). Classical faith is strengthened in suffering (chapter 4), persecution (chapter 5), waiting (chapter 3), and even mourning (chapter 8). Just as surely as water seeks the lowest point in the land, so such a faith seeks the least of all people (chapter 6). Instead of holding on to grudges, authentic faith chooses forgiveness (chapter 7). Authentic faith lives with another world in mind, recognizing that what we do in this broken world will be judged (chapter 11).

The “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.¹ God brings them into our life when he wills and as he wills. Just by 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, and the like—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, I can't initiate, I can't bring about. It is a radical dependence on God's husbandry. All I 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.

When we live with such an authentic faith, in a mature friendship with God, we cultivate what I like to call a “defiant beauty.”

DEFIANT BEAUTY

I once spoke at a married couple's retreat in southwestern Washington. To get there I had to travel through “tree country,” miles and miles of tree farms planted by Weyerhaeuser, one of North America's largest producers of timber. Each farm had a sign announcing, “These trees were planted in 1988.” “These trees were planted in 1992.” “These trees were planted in 1996.”

Interspersed among the tree farms were occasional stretches of clear-cut logging projects. I love trees, and perhaps because of that, I find few things more ugly than a clear-cut stretch of land. It looks devastated, broken, and abused. I know that, after planting, the land will come back, but it's still sad to see such brutal scarring of a forest.

As I drove up the highway, I passed yet another clear-cut stretch when my eye suddenly caught something that almost made me pull off the road. There, in a devastated patch of land, stood a startlingly beautiful maple tree in full autumn colors. Somehow, the loggers had missed it.

The contrast could not have been more stark and, for that reason, more beautiful. Beauty surrounded by beauty begins, after a time, to seem mediocre. Beauty in the midst of chaos or ugliness is stunning. It's onstage, and it seizes your attention. In a barren, broken stretch of land, this tree captured my imagination and told another story. Had it been in the midst of New Hampshire's White Mountains during autumn, it likely would have been missed—one stunning tree in a forest of stunning trees blends right in. Here, in a broken, hurting land, this glorious tree proclaimed a transcendent truth.

In the deepest part of us, we truly yearn, I believe, for such “defiant beauty.” In a world where people live self-centered lives, where ugly

things happen, where sin seems to spread unchecked, where daily assaults take their toll, we can point to the defiant beauty of a selfless

In a world where people live self-centered lives, we can point to the defiant beauty of a selfless life.

life, seeking first the kingdom of God, putting others first, and even sacrificing ourselves in the process, if need be—all to proclaim a transcendent truth that is greater than ourselves.

In this book, I'm going to invite you to develop a defiant beauty—the kind of defiant beauty that has shone through all generations of the church. At some points in our history, the beauty has been marred and partially

hidden. But it's always been there. It's our legacy, and this is an invitation to pick it back up once again.

Authentic Faith

Following Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox during the waning days of the Civil War, the son of Henry Wise, an ex-Southern governor, told his father that he had taken the loyalty oath to the United States.

"You have disgraced the family, sir!" Henry Wise responded.

The son, a former captain in the Confederate Army, was mortified and pled his case: "But, Father, General Lee advised me to do it."

Hardly a moment passed before Wise recanted. "That alters the case," he told his son. "Whatever General Lee advises is right."

There may be some assertions in this book that, at first glance, don't seem right; they may lead you to ask, "Does Christianity really involve that?" My appeal to you is the same one made by Henry Wise's son: I ask you to consider who first said these words. I have purposely filled this book with more Scripture than any of my previous books, and I have worked just as diligently to root these thoughts and concepts in the precedence of the Christian classics, showing how

each tenet was supported, affirmed, and taught by classical Christian writers throughout the centuries.²

Mine is not the role of a *pioneer*, much as this title sounds exalted for an author. To my chagrin, a far more honest description for what I'm doing is that of a *tour guide*, taking us through long-ago discovered truths and helping visitors discover their meaning for today. If at first these ideas seem to go against common sense, if some seem to be outdated or impossible to believe, my answer is to point back to these authorities.

What I hope you will find is an authentic faith that rings true throughout the ages. Some of the truths may sound hard, but they are the prescription we need in order to live a truly meaningful and productive life in Christ. And they are a sure remedy for the disillusionment that eventually arises whenever we discard God's truth for an immature, self-centered faith. Even more important, though, together they construct a time-tested pathway to a deeper and more mature friendship with God.