

When Life Falls Apart, Prayer Gives Us Somewhere to Turn

Faith, connection, and the courage to keep going

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The Season When Everything Came Apart

Prayer saved my life.

That is my testimony. It is why I care so deeply about this subject, and why I want to speak directly to the person who is wondering whether they can keep going. There are seasons when life asks more of us than we know how to give. I lived through one of them.

My wife had been facing cancer. We feared that my daughter might have cancer, too. Our son, Gregg, was in Iraq, dodging land mines along with his fellow Marines and let's just say, not everyone came home. Around the time of the 2008 financial crisis, I was facing the possibility of losing pretty much everything.

My life felt as though it had completely fallen apart.

I was a psychologist. I understood the language of stress, trauma, and resilience. But understanding suffering professionally does not spare you from experiencing it personally. There comes a point when the person who helps other people hold their lives together finds himself wondering how he will hold together his own.

I reached that point.

At times, I honestly wondered whether I would make it. I found myself on my knees, often in tears, praying. Sometimes that was all I knew to do.

That is where this discussion begins for me. Before the brain scans, before the cortisol measurements, before the arguments about what a particular study did or did not prove, there was a man on his knees who needed help.

I was that man. Dear brother, dear sister, if you recognize yourself in that description, please stay with me. The way you feel today does not have to be the final word on your life. I want you to know why I still believe in hope, and why prayer is a gift I want to share.

Big Men, Gentle Hands

During that dark period, I had joined the Christian Motorcyclists Association. Some of those big, burly Harley riders gathered around me, laid their hands on me, and prayed.

I still remember those hands.

They came close to me in my despair. They took my suffering seriously. They prayed when I was struggling to carry what life had placed in front of me.

I experienced their prayers as love.

There is something profoundly moving about being surrounded by people who are willing to enter your pain with you. Their presence says something that a suffering person may desperately need to hear: You matter enough for us to stop. We will stand here with you. For me, that moment had a sacred dimension. These men were bringing me before God. Their faith was taking physical form in their presence, their voices, and their hands.

I cannot give you a laboratory measurement of what that meant to me. I can tell you that it mattered deeply. When I speak with excitement about prayer, this is part of what I mean. Someone came close. Someone cared enough to stay and pray. I want more hurting people to experience that kind of love.

You Can Put the Burden Down

Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28, King James Version). I hear that invitation differently after having lived through despair. Come with the life you actually have. Come with the fear you cannot talk yourself out of. Come when you are too tired to sound strong.

For the Christian, prayer opens a relationship with a power beyond ourselves. We bring our burdens to God. We confess our sin, ask for forgiveness, and receive the invitation to begin again. First Peter 5:7 puts it beautifully: “Casting all your care upon him; for He careth for you.”

There is such tenderness in that last phrase. He cares for you. Your life matters to Him. Prayer gives us a way to answer that care with trust, even when trust begins as a whisper.

Surrender can be an act of courage. We can release the demand that we must carry everything by ourselves and still take the next responsible step. We can pray and call the doctor. We can ask God for strength and tell a friend that we need company. Grace can reach us through people willing to help.

I believe there is hope for you, a future worth reaching toward, and the possibility of restoration beyond what you can presently imagine. That is why I want this discussion to lead somewhere more personal than an interesting collection of studies. I want it to open a door.

We Were Made to Reach for One Another

John Cacioppo helped bring loneliness out of the margins and into the center of serious psychological research. In longitudinal analyses, Cacioppo et al. (2006) found that loneliness predicted later depressive symptoms beyond several other risk factors.

That finding has a human face. It belongs to the person who has no one to call, the caregiver who feels forgotten, the frightened parent who lies awake with worries that seem impossible to share.

The consequences reach beyond emotional pain. In a meta-analysis of 148 studies involving 308,849 people, stronger social relationships were associated with 50% higher odds of survival during follow up (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). That statistic does not mean people lived 50% longer. It does mean that the association between relationships and survival was substantial.

A more recent meta-analysis involving 608,561 people found that loneliness was associated with approximately 31% higher dementia hazard (Luchetti et al., 2024). Our relationships matter enough to belong in a serious conversation about health and survival. A phone call, a shared meal, a willingness to sit with someone who is frightened: these are ways we can offer connection today. Shared prayer can give that care a language, a purpose, and a sacred meaning.

These are findings about relationships, and relationships are central to the kind of shared prayer I am describing. The caring community around a praying person belongs in the story of its power.

Those men around me were part of the experience. Their care was part of its power. If despair has persuaded you to withdraw, I hope you will let someone know how much you are carrying. You do not have to feel hopeful before you ask for company. Sometimes we begin by letting another person help us hold on.

The Body Carries What the Heart Is Facing

When your wife has cancer, your daughter may be ill, someone you care about is in danger overseas, and your financial security is collapsing, fear can become a constant companion.

What encourages me about this research is that our experience of support deserves to be taken as seriously as our experience of stress. We are learning more about how deeply emotional life reaches into the body.

Adam et al. (2006), working with Cacioppo, studied 156 older adults and found that loneliness, sadness, threat, and lack of control on one day predicted a larger cortisol awakening response the next morning. Tension and anger were associated with flatter daily cortisol patterns, largely through higher evening levels. Cortisol is necessary for life. The issue is its regulation and timing. The study illustrates how closely our experience of the world can be associated with the body's preparation to face it.

Then consider the power of a hand.

Coan et al. (2006) studied 16 married women facing the possibility of an electric shock. Holding a husband's hand reduced activation in neural systems involved in responding to threat. A stranger's hand produced more limited effects, and better marital quality predicted stronger effects in certain regions.

A small experiment, certainly. But what a meaningful possibility to investigate: the presence of someone we trust can change how we experience danger. For the person who feels overwhelmed, that is a reason to welcome companionship. We may still have the same difficult circumstances to face, yet facing them together can feel different.

That finding helps me appreciate those Harley riders' hands. It cannot explain the whole encounter, and I would not ask it to. It gives us one scientific window into something many suffering people recognize: being accompanied can change the experience of facing what frightens us.

There Is Hope in What Faith Can Mean

Lisa Miller's work is one reason I feel such excitement about this field. It invites us to consider faith as a potentially substantial resource in the lives of people who are vulnerable to depression.

Miller et al. (2012) followed 114 adult offspring of depressed and nondepressed parents. Participants who regarded religion or spirituality as highly important had substantially less major depression over the following decade. The authors described approximately one quarter the risk overall and approximately one tenth the risk among participants with a depressed parent. The association primarily concerned recurrence of depression.

That last finding is the source of the widely discussed 90% figure. A deeply meaningful spiritual life may have a consequential place in how some people live with vulnerability. That is a reason to ask about spiritual life in clinical care and to study its protective potential with energy and seriousness.

In a related investigation, Miller et al. (2014) examined brain images from 103 adults in the same broader family study. Greater religious or spiritual importance was associated with thicker cortex in several regions, with particularly notable associations among those at higher familial risk for depression. The authors proposed a possible contribution to resilience.

Together, these findings point toward the potentially neuroprotective role of personally meaningful spirituality. Here, neuroprotective means evidence consistent with resilience and reduced vulnerability to depression, including brain differences that may help explain that protection. Spiritual life deserves a place in our conversations about a healthy, resilient mind.

For someone whose world has fallen apart, faith may offer a continuing sense of belonging, meaning, and worth. Prayer gives that faith somewhere to go. It gives us words when fear has filled the room. It gives us a practice when the future feels impossible to imagine. Sometimes it gives us enough hope to ask for help and face the next day.

That is how I experienced it. You may begin without certainty, without calm, even without knowing what to say. "God, I need help" can be an honest place to start. You do not have to settle every question about faith before you bring your questions into prayer.

A Prayer Has a Place in the Brain and a Rhythm in the Body

Newberg et al. (2003) studied regional cerebral blood flow during meditative prayer in three Franciscan nuns. They observed changes that included increased prefrontal activity and an inverse relationship between prefrontal and superior parietal changes.

This small preliminary study opens a fascinating question: what happens in us when we turn our attention toward God? The experience has a measurable biological dimension, and there is much more to discover.

Focused prayer engages attention and may change the experience of self in that moment. A frightened person turns toward a loving presence. Attention finds somewhere to rest. The experience of being alone with the crisis can begin to change.

There is also something compelling about the rhythm of prayer.

Bernardi et al. (2001) studied 23 healthy adults reciting the rosary or a yoga mantra. Both practices slowed breathing to approximately six breaths per minute and increased heart rate variability and baroreflex sensitivity, a measure related to reflex regulation of blood pressure.

A familiar devotional practice had measurable physiological effects. I find that encouraging. Something woven into ordinary spiritual life, a repeated prayer, a familiar rhythm, can also engage the body in ways researchers can observe.

The similar findings with the mantra suggest that breathing rhythm was important. For the person praying, that rhythm may also carry memory, devotion, and a sense of belonging to something larger than the immediate crisis. Understanding a physiological mechanism can deepen our appreciation of a practice. It need not exhaust its meaning.

HeartMath®: Making Room for Appreciation

HeartMath®'s research offers a related perspective.

McCraty et al. (1995), publishing in *The American Journal of Cardiology*, found different heart rate variability patterns during anger and appreciation. Deliberately cultivated appreciation was associated with a different distribution of heart rhythm oscillations.

Our emotional lives have cardiovascular expression. There is something hopeful about being able to practice appreciation deliberately, even when life is difficult. We can make room for a moment of care without pretending that everything is well.

HeartMath® uses the term coherence to describe a more ordered, oscillating heart rhythm pattern. Breathing strongly influences that pattern. Practices that combine comfortable breathing with appreciation or care offer a way to work with emotional and physiological regulation. For someone in distress, this creates a practical possibility. A person might pray while breathing gently and recalling someone they love. Another might sit with a brief prayer of gratitude. Someone else may need to begin with an honest cry for help.

We should leave room for all of them. If gratitude feels out of reach, begin with the truth of where you are. Remember a person who has cared for you, or ask someone to sit beside you. Prayer can hold longing as well as thanksgiving.

The broader research on HRV biofeedback is encouraging. Across 24 studies, Goessl et al. (2017) found a large between group reduction in self-reported stress and anxiety, with Hedges' $g = 0.83$. That analysis concerned HRV biofeedback broadly, rather than HeartMath® or prayer alone.

Within NeuroFaith®, prayer, appreciation, and comfortable breathing can be brought together thoughtfully, with attention to the needs of the person in front of us. I love the accessibility of that possibility: a few quiet moments, an honest prayer, an opportunity to attend to someone we cherish. We can explore what helps without turning the practice into another performance we have to get right.

Prayer Gives Connection a Voice

Neurocardiology reminds us that heart and brain participate in an ongoing conversation. Breathing, cardiovascular reflexes, attention, and emotion influence one another. HeartMath® brings appreciation and care into that conversation deliberately. Polyvagal theory offers a complementary framework, emphasizing how voice, expression, and other cues of safety can support social engagement and regulation (Porges, 2022).

Think of someone speaking gently while you are frightened. Think of being listened to without judgment. Their steadiness can help you settle enough to speak, breathe, or ask for help. This interpersonal process is often called co regulation. It is an important part of how I understand the encounter with those riders.

Morris (2010) explored heart rhythm coherence and synchronization in small groups. The study involved 15 trained participants, 25 additional volunteers, and repeated trials. Higher coherence in untrained participants appeared in about half the matched comparisons, with the highest levels when everyone worked toward coherence. The work invites further investigation of how our physiological states become coordinated. Synchrony alone does not establish a healing energy field, and it is not automatically beneficial in every setting.

Here is the possibility that excites me: prayer can bring meaning and language into an encounter that already carries care. “You are loved.” “We are here.” “God, help us carry this.” The voice, the welcome, and the words belong to the same human moment. In my clinical and spiritual understanding, prayer can deepen that experience of connection. It allows us to express what the body may be beginning to feel: perhaps I can let someone come close.

And prayer reaches inward as we offer it outward. In three experiments, Bremner et al. (2011) found less anger, aggression, or hostile appraisal after participants prayed for others following provocation. Praying for another person’s good can become a way to soften our own response. Imagine making room for that practice in a strained friendship or a family conversation. Compassion becomes something we do.

Prayer Gives Faith Something to Do

NeuroFaith® brings together polyvagal informed therapy, HeartMath® and neurocardiology, Internal Family Systems, and faith and identity. Within that framework, I regard faith as pivotal to meaning and restoration.

Prayer gives faith a practice we can return to in the middle of an ordinary day. We can give thanks when something beautiful happens. We can ask for courage before a difficult conversation. We can bring our grief when there is no easy answer. It allows a frightened person to speak. It can accompany comfortable breathing and appreciation. It can create space to approach a despairing part of oneself with compassion. It can express the conviction that suffering has not erased one’s worth or belonging.

For a Christian, prayer also means turning toward God. That spiritual meaning deserves to be represented honestly, rather than reduced entirely to a breathing exercise or a stress management technique.

I also know that people of deep faith continue to experience illness, grief, and unanswered questions. I would never tell a suffering person that continued pain reveals a failure to believe. Prayer belongs alongside skilled care, practical help, and people willing to stay.

Some of my most sincere prayers came through tears. Please hear that if you are hurting: you do not have to become cheerful before you pray. Bring the life you actually have. Bring the fear, the exhaustion, the part of you that still wants to hope. And let prayer open a door toward the people and the care that can help you.

Give Our Children a Living Source of Hope

Why wouldn't we want our children to discover prayer? We teach them to study, persevere, and ask for help. We can also help them develop a spiritual life that offers meaning, belonging, and a way to bring their deepest concerns to God.

In *Building Adolescent Resilience*, Dr. Russell L. Gombosi and I discuss faith as an integral part of resilience within NeuroFaith® (Hansen & Gombosi, 2026). Prayer gives that faith a daily expression. A child can give thanks, grieve, ask forgiveness, and seek courage. A family can make room for honest questions and respond with love.

Lisa Miller's work gives this invitation substantial scientific encouragement. In *The Spiritual Child*, Miller (2015) describes spirituality as a felt relationship with a loving, guiding presence. Her synthesis highlights markedly lower rates of adolescent depression and substance problems, including the widely discussed figures of 60% less depression and 40% less substance use and abuse. These summarize different strands of research, not a single trial or a universal percentage of improvement. The underlying studies deserve a closer look.

Miller and Gur (2002) examined 3,356 adolescent girls. Personal devotion and participation in a religious community were associated with a 19% to 26% lower likelihood of depression among less physically mature girls and a 32% to 43% lower likelihood among more physically mature girls. At a vulnerable developmental stage, personal devotion and belonging stood out as potentially protective resources.

Miller et al. (2000) also studied 676 adolescents in the National Comorbidity Survey. Personal devotion was associated with less substance use and fewer substance abuse or dependence problems across several substances. What a meaningful direction for prevention: helping young people develop a life they experience as connected, purposeful, and worthy of care.

The findings concerning suicidal thoughts and attempts deserve particular attention. Svob et al. (2018), working in the related Columbia family research program, studied 214 children and adolescents aged 6 to 18. Greater personal religious importance was associated with lower odds of suicidal thoughts or attempts in girls, with an odds ratio of 0.48 per increasing level of importance; that association was not found in boys. Parents' religious importance was also associated with lower odds in their offspring. The authors described roughly an 80% reduction across the highest versus lowest parental importance levels. These outcomes concerned thoughts or attempts, rather than deaths by suicide.

This is encouraging evidence that spiritual life within a family may be a protective resource. It is also a reason to offer faith warmly, through relationship, with room for questions and without making a child's distress a judgment on their belief.

There is direct research on adolescent prayer or meditation, too. Chen and VanderWeele (2018) followed thousands of young people for 8 to 14 years. Compared with never practicing, daily prayer or meditation in adolescence was associated with greater positive emotion, emotional expression, volunteering, purpose, and forgiveness in young adulthood. It was also associated with approximately 25% lower marijuana use, 44% lower use of other illicit drugs, and 28% lower prescription drug misuse. The study grouped prayer and meditation together and adjusted for numerous earlier characteristics.

That is a much richer picture than simply asking whether spirituality reduces symptoms. It includes how young people grow into a life of purpose and contribution. Those are qualities we want to cultivate!

Taken together, these observational findings support a protective association rather than a guaranteed effect of assigning prayer. They give us ample reason to nurture spiritual development. For a parent who wants a child to grow in hope, purpose, and connection, this is encouraging evidence worth acting on thoughtfully.

For me, teaching prayer is a central part of that invitation. "God, I am scared." "Thank you for my friend." "Help me make this right." A child does not need impressive words. They need to know that they can speak honestly and that caring adults will listen, pray, and help.

I call prayer a superpower because I know what it meant when my own strength felt exhausted. I want our children to have somewhere to turn long before a crisis arrives. And I want them to know prayer in happiness, too, in wonder at the world, delight in a friendship, and gratitude for being alive.

The Old Wound Does Not Have to Write the Ending

Trauma can leave a person living with painful convictions about themselves: I am unwanted. I am unsafe. I do not deserve love. Those beliefs can feel like facts because they have been learned through experience.

Research on spirituality reaches into the brain systems involved in our inner lives. Svob et al. (2016) studied 104 people aged 11 to 60. Among those at higher familial risk for depression, greater religious or spiritual importance was associated with lower connectivity within the default mode network. The authors proposed a potentially protective adaptation. The default mode network participates in self-related processing and autobiographical thought; it is not a single storage place for traumatic beliefs.

Another source of hope comes from memory reconsolidation. Bruce Ecker and Alexandre Vaz (2022), and Tori Olds (n.d.) in her teaching, describe how an old emotional expectation can become available for updating when it is activated and met with a compelling experience that contradicts it. The important ingredient is the new learning, not simply feeling positive.

The underlying biology includes protein synthesis. Nader et al. (2000) demonstrated in animals that reactivated fear memories required new protein synthesis to stabilize again. In human research, Speer et al. (2021) found that discovering positive meaning in negative autobiographical memories changed later recollection and emotion, with effects lasting two months. These findings offer hope that what we have learned emotionally need not remain fixed forever.

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Here is where I see a powerful clinical and spiritual possibility. Someone expects rejection, reveals their pain, and is met with patient love. Someone brings shame into prayer and encounters a community that offers forgiveness and welcome. The experience can challenge the conviction that they are beyond care. I believe prayer can be part of such healing experiences. A specific claim that prayer releases proteins or erases trauma circuits has not been demonstrated.

Scripture gives this hope a language of identity. Romans 8:1 speaks of freedom from condemnation in Christ. First John 1:9 promises forgiveness and cleansing through confession. Second Corinthians 5:17 describes new life in Christ. These are invitations to receive an identity larger than our wounds and failures.

When we pray, we can bring the old accusation into the presence of a different truth: I am loved. I can be forgiven. I can begin again. Let those words become part of a lived relationship, supported by care and repeated experiences of welcome. The possibility of change is worth leaning toward.

Wonder Has a Place Here

In *The Awakened Brain*, Miller (2021) explores spiritual awareness as a way of experiencing connection and meaning. That resonates with my experience of prayer and invites a question I welcome: what if the love available to us exceeds what we have learned to expect?

For me, prayer is a conduit to God, to a power and love beyond my own resources. Research can investigate its measurable effects. It does not exhaust the meaning of communion, forgiveness, surrender, or grace. Those who have experienced prayer deeply may recognize something in that encounter which a questionnaire cannot fully convey. I know that recognition in my own life.

I believe God can restore what seems beyond repair. I believe in miracles. That conviction belongs openly in this essay as faith, alongside the scientific reasons for taking spiritual life seriously.

Make Room for Joy, Too

I want prayer to have a place in the beautiful days. In gratitude. In laughter. In the ordinary moments when we pause long enough to recognize something we might otherwise hurry past.

There is so much to receive from life, even while we carry its difficulties. A person we love. A kindness we did not expect. A moment of peace after a hard day. Prayer can be a way to linger with that goodness and give thanks for it.

I want a spiritual life that helps us savor joy and meet sorrow with support. Prayer can help us pause long enough to receive the goodness already present in our lives.

Please Keep Reaching

Dear brother, dear sister, do not give up. Do not give in to the conviction that nothing can change.

Churchill's words at Harrow in 1941 were "never give in," with an exception for honor and good sense (International Churchill Society, n.d.). For the hurting person, I would offer that encouragement gently: you do not have to prove your strength by enduring alone. Let someone help you keep going.

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I know how difficult those words can be to hear when you are exhausted and frightened. I have been on my knees, in tears, unable to see how I would get through what was happening. Prayer made a difference for me. People who prayed with me made a difference. Their willingness to come close is something I still carry. So, my invitation is heartfelt: lean into prayer. Bring what you actually feel. Bring the fear, the anger, the questions. You do not have to manufacture peace before you come to God.

And let someone know how much you are hurting. Let prayer become an opening toward connection, toward care, toward the help you deserve. If you cannot find words, ask someone to sit with you. Ask them to pray with you. Let them help you take the next step.

If you are the person standing beside someone in pain, come close. Listen. If prayer is welcome, pray with them. If touch is welcome, offer a hand. Follow up tomorrow. Help them obtain care. Bring your compassion into the ordinary details of their life.

Let the prayer continue through your hands.

I think again of that season: my wife's cancer, the fear about my daughter, Gregg in Iraq, the financial crisis, and the possibility of losing almost everything. I remember how overwhelmed I was. And I remember those men. Their hands did not erase everything I was facing. Their prayers became part of how I faced it. When I speak about faith, connection, and caring presence, I remember those men.

Prayer saved my life. I say that with gratitude, and with a deep desire that you discover the help and hope available to you. Psalm 34:18 tells us that the Lord is near to the brokenhearted. You do not have to hide your broken heart from Him.

You can begin right now, in words as simple as these:

God, I am here. I am tired, and I need You. Help me release what I cannot carry alone. Help me receive forgiveness, love, and the courage to take the next step. Show me whom to reach toward, and help me let them come close. Amen.

There is room for your tears in that prayer. There is room for questions. And there is room for the first small beginning of hope.

Somewhere, right now, another person is on their knees, wondering how they will endure. I want us to be the people who come close.

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