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**A LETTER TO MY CHILDREN**

I just mailed a letter to one of my four children through the Post Office (remember the Post Office?), and decided to forward the part that is not personal to the rest of my children (you guys):

“Dear Sons and Daughters:

I recently read a book that deeply challenged me in my pursuit of God, and the author focused again and again on solitude and silence. I’ve set a goal of spending more time each day simply being quiet and listening, trying to hear God, which has always been easier said than done for me.

I also determined that I would challenge each of my children and grandchildren to spend at least 20 or 30 minutes a day, early or late, trying to quiet your mind, shut out all distractions (TV, internet, phone, music, wandering thoughts) and simply listen. Maybe start by saying, ‘Well, here I am, Lord.’ Or saying the Lord’s Prayer, or reading a Psalm, or reading a devotional from Daily Light or Oswald Chambers or The Book of Mysteries, or whatever you use. The listening part is really hard for everyone.

Anyhow, I’m more convinced than ever that God loves you desperately, and He has something more, something deeper, something good for you.....but He says, ‘You have to want what I have, you have to really want to hear Me in order to discover that deep well of love I have for you.’

I love you so much, but there is One who loves you even more. Let’s determine to spend more time with Him each day.

Dad”

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**LISTEN**

A footnote in the NLT Study Bible seems to apply to my letter to my children, and it helps us understand what God desires from us:

“In Hebrew, the word translated listen also means obey. There is no distinction as there is in English, in which a disobedient person can hear a command but not obey.” This footnote is found in Exodus 34, which I quote in part below, starting at Exodus 34:10: The Lord replied, “Listen, I am making a covenant with you in the presence of all your people. I will perform miracles that have never been performed anywhere...and all the people around you will see the power of the Lord...But listen carefully to everything I command you today. Then I will go ahead of you and drive out the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. You must worship no other gods, for the Lord, whose very name is Jealous, is a God who is jealous about His relationship with you.”

Let me paraphrase what God might be saying to us today: Listen, with the intention of obeying, what I am speaking to you today. I have made a covenant with you through My Son’s death on a cross. If you will seek Me and love Me as I love you, then I will perform miracles in your life. I will drive out the enemies that want to destroy you: Hopelessness, Anxiety, Stress, Anger, Bitterness, Toxic Memories, Addictions that enslave you, Lust and uncleanness, Thoughts of suicide. Don’t listen to lies that tell you that I am against you. No! I created you, I love your heart, and I designed you for purpose. I’m jealous for your heart, just as a husband does not want to share his wife with another man (a disgusting thought!). You belong to Me, and I belong to you. Now is the time. Today. Listen!”

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## **GOD'S PERSONALITY**

(Reaching for the Invisible God, by Philip Yancey, was a difficult book for me to read. Philip says that believing in an invisible God is incredibly difficult. This book is for serious Christians. I think you would love it. Following are some of Philip's thoughts interspersed with my thoughts. If part of this teaching doesn't make much sense, that is not Philip's part:)

### **(a) GOD IS SHY**

I don't mean God is bashful or timid. God may speak in a voice like thunder, and when he shows up in person, humans fall terrified to the ground. Rather, God is shy to intervene. Considering the many things that must displease him on this planet, God exercises incredible – and at times maddening – self-restraint. We tend to focus on the miracles and dramatic appearances such as to Moses in a burning bush and to the prophets in dreams and visions. Yet these are tucked in between periods when God is nowhere to be found. Usually the intervention comes only after many cries and prayers, delayed by decades or even centuries. God is not impetuous but shy to act.

### **(b) GOD HIDES HIMSELF**

Isaiah said it plainly: "Truly you are a God who hides himself." At times, God seems to withdraw Himself utterly from the earth and no longer to participate in its existence. At such times, history is full of noise but seems empty of God.

For the past sixty years I (Glenn) have spent time most every morning reading the Bible, and other Christian books, and praying. But several years ago I determined that I would get more intentional about seeking God, so from Monday to Friday I started driving to the Prayer Room at church and spending from 6:00 to 8:00 AM praying, reading the Bible, and seeking God. I did this for about three years, and then I stopped out of frustration. I became frustrated because day after day, week after week, month after month, I was not hearing or experiencing God during those times. It was as if God was totally absent, or as if there was not really a God, but I was talking to the wall. I prayed the way I had always prayed, and I prayed in ways that I had heard or read about other people praying. I prayed the Scriptures, I prayed in tongues, I prayed in petition and declaration, I prayed while walking, I prayed with hands raised, while on my knees or on the floor on my face (but that hurts my old body too much), and mostly while sitting. I prayed for my family, church, city, county, state, and nation.

The problem for me was that no matter how I prayed God didn't respond in any way that I was conscious of. Of course, I got a lot of insight from the Word, but I wanted God to manifest Himself to me in some way. But He simply did not and would not. Periodically, I got frustrated and angry with God. I said, "God, you don't need my daily instructions, and I need you to give me some direction here. Please tell me that you are pleased with my daily time of prayer, or tell me some other way to do it, or tell me what is wrong with our relationship that I can't seem to hear you in these times. You said, 'My sheep hear my voice.' I think I'm one of your sheep because I truly believe in you, so why aren't you communicating with me?" His answer was.....total silence.

What made the experience even more frustrating was that a number of people noticed that I was coming to church early and spending time in prayer, and they decided that I was Father Teresa. I couldn't stand it. I know that our connection with God is by faith and not by feelings, and I've even preached on that subject. But I guess I didn't really know that deep in my heart. I know that God was close to me and that He hears my prayers every day - - whether I'm in the Prayer Room or wherever. I also know that although I am as old as Moses I am a shallow Christian at best. I vacillate seamlessly between being the Prodigal Son and being his Elder Brother. I've lived through extended periods when I became puffed up with pride and thought of myself as a Super-Saint, but after God almost killed me to bring a little correction (that's the way it felt) I humbly decided that I should repent of that idea.

**QUESTION:** If I had such a disappointing experience in spending time in silence and trying to hear God, why am I counseling my children, and you, to spend your time doing that?

**ANSWER:** What I was doing externally, spending time in the Word and prayer, was good. The problem was that my heart was not right. Who in the heck did I think I was to get angry and frustrated at GOD because He didn't respond to me in the way I felt I merited?

You see, my sacrifice of time and sleep earned for me (in my mind) a certain positive response from God. I'm a slow learner, and it took three years for me to start realizing something pretty basic about God and about myself.

So when I counsel my children, and you, to spend more time each day listening to God, I know that this is a difficult path and somewhat dangerous. It can lead to deeper faith, but it can also lead to loss of faith. Because God hides Himself, or reveals Himself, as He determines. We can't program God to respond in a particular way, because He is God and He is free, just as He has created you and me to be free. There have been many occasions when God has "spoken" to me through inner impressions, dreams, visions, other people, life experiences, sermons, books, the Bible. I've also "heard" God speak to me and give me insight during times when I am ministering to other people, but not nearly as clearly as many of my friends. But, as expressed above, God normally refuses to submit to my desires and expectations during times of prayer and devotion. I continue to have those daily times with God, and I am trying to adjust to Him instead of expecting Him to adjust to me. (Isn't that big of me?)

Philip Yancey says, If God merely wanted to make his existence known to every person on earth, God would not hide. However, the direct presence of God would overwhelm our freedom, with sight replacing faith. God wants instead a different kind of knowledge, a personal knowledge that requires a commitment from the one who seeks to know him.

### **(c) GOD IS GENTLE**

Mark 9 gives a vivid description of possession by an evil spirit: ...It throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. It has thrown him into fire or water to kill him....Take pity on us and help us. When the evil spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into one of his fits.

Contrast that scene with possession by the Holy Spirit. Paul warns in one place, Quench not the Spirit, and in another place, Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God. God humbles himself so deeply that he puts himself somehow at our mercy. Whereas an evil spirit throws a person into fire or water, a sovereign God takes up residence in that same person and says, "Don't hurt me." You can only grieve, or hurt, someone who has emotions, who cares deeply.

Why is God shy? Why does God hide? Why so gentle? God recognizes that we are the ones on the journey, not himself. The journey does not transpire like a treasure hunt, such that if we follow the instructions and look hard enough we will find the treasure. No, the journey itself is the goal. The very quest for God, our determined pursuit, changes us in ways that matter most. The silence and darkness we encounter, the temptations, the misunderstanding, and even the sufferings can all contribute to God's stated goal of shaping us into persons more like He intended – more like His Son.

God's ceaselessly repeated word to his created ones is: "Choose! I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life. Stay as you are and drop out; change, however painfully, and move towards life."

### **(d) GOD'S PRESENCE VARIES**

During the long period of God's silence, Job said, How faint the whisper we hear of him. By the end of the book, he could have amended that to, How loud the roar we hear of him! Within the pages of one book the same person experiences God's absence and also an overwhelming sense of God's presence.

I have learned one absolute principle in calculating God's presence or absence, and that is that I cannot. God, invisible, sovereign, who according to the psalmist – Does whatever pleases him – sets the terms of the relationship. As the theologian Karl Barth insisted so fiercely, God is free: free to reveal himself or conceal himself, to intervene or not intervene, to work within nature or outside it, to rule the world or even to be despised and rejected by the world, to display himself or limit himself. Our own human freedom derives from a God who cherishes freedom.

I cannot control such a God. At best I can put myself in the proper frame to meet him. I can confess sin, remove hindrances, purify my life, wait expectantly and – perhaps hardest of all – seek solitude and silence. I offer no guaranteed method to obtain God's presence, for God alone governs that. Solitude and silence merely supply the state most conducive to attending to the still small voice of God.

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## **MORNING PRAYER**

Dear God: I thank you because today I have not been: Resentful, Angry, Jealous, Self-Centered, Arrogant or Afraid. But I think I still need your help because soon I will have to get out of bed. Amen.

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## **DANGEROUS CALLING -- Part 2**

Dangerous Calling is a book written by pastor and former seminary professor Paul David Tripp about the danger of being a pastor. I shared Part 1 in July. (You can find my previous Newsletters on my Website, [glennbrownministries.com](http://glennbrownministries.com).)

### Big Theological Brains and Heart Disease

I was studying the book of Romans when I had a moment of divine rescue. I had pages of exegetical notes, sermon outlines, syntax, tenses, contexts, etymologies and expert opinions. Countless hours of disciplined private study left me feeling very pleased with myself. One evening it hit me that after all that study I had been fundamentally untouched by its message. I stared at the many pages of notes and realized that the divinely inspired words all seemed detached from me, my real life, my marriage, my struggles with sin, my past, my future, my hopes, dreams and fears. I burst into tears and spent several hours talking to God and to my wife about the danger that I sensed.

One of the courses I taught at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia was a required course in pastoral counseling. I told my students the horror stories that pastors have to deal with: the late-night calls from wives who have just been slugged by their husbands, the grief of the mother who has just learned her fifteen-year-old daughter is pregnant, the hours spent with the man who has gambled his family into financial disaster, of standing with a mom and dad before the casket of their four-year-old son. I wanted my students to understand that they are called not just to preach theologically correct sermons but also to pastor people, to walk, live, and suffer with them.

I recounted my heart struggle when asked again to visit a man who had already eaten up much of my pastoral time and energy, when one of my students raised his hand and blurted out, "All right, Professor Tripp, we know that we will have these projects in our churches. Tell us what to do with them so we can get back to the work of the ministry." Notice this: he didn't even call such folks "struggling people." He called them "projects." Now, if these people are not the focus and object of ministry, then what is ministry? There was no love for people in this student's statement, and if he had no love for people it is safe to conclude that there was little love for Christ either.

I walked down the aisle to his desk, knelt down so we were face-to-face, and asked him to repeat what he had said, loudly and word for word. I wanted him and the class never to forget what he had said. I asked him to repeat what he had called these people. He softly said, "Projects." It was a wonderful, God-given teaching moment. Not too long ago I was greeted by a pastor who had been in that class years before. He had remembered it and had been warned again and again by his memory.

As I ministered to many of my students who asked me to counsel them, I was unprepared for the narratives I would hear. "Frank" was one of the first. He had been married fifteen years, had four children from young teenager on down, and had come to seminary after a successful career in finance. After much small talk, it became obvious he was having trouble talking about what was troubling him. I assured him of my commitment to him and the confidentiality of our relationship and he blurted out: "I have a closet of women's clothes in my basement that I put on at night." I was blown away. He was a gifted theologian, seriously committed to Christ, but lost in a world of deep identity confusion, and the gospel he was studying in order to help others seemed unable to rescue him.

I was told stories of nearly broken marriages, of domestic violence, of women who were ready to walk out, of angry men, of broken relationships with children and extended families, of private sexual sin, of conflict with neighbors and in church, of deep debt, of battles with depression and anxiety, of obsessive and compulsive thoughts, and of internet pornography. Were all of my students in some kind of personal spiritual trouble? Of course not, but many were, and most of them had no idea, even though they were looking in the mirror of the Word of God every day. This led me to meditate upon the question: what is wrong with the way that we seek to prepare people for local church ministry? Isn't it dangerous for students to become comfortable with the message of the Bible while not being broken, grieved, and convicted by it? Shouldn't the church's mission be for students not just to master the Book, but for students to be mastered by the God of the Book?

Isaiah 55 confronts us at this point: For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

I believe the ultimate purpose of the Word is worship of God. When the Word of God, faithfully taught by the people of God and empowered by the Spirit of God, falls upon the people, they become different. Lusting people become pure, fearful people become courageous, thieves become givers, demanding people become servants, fearful people become courageous, angry people become peacemakers, complainers become thankful, and idolaters come to joyfully worship the

one true God. The ultimate purpose of the Word of God is not theological information but heart and life transformation.

**Academized Christianity which is not constantly connected to the heart and puts its hope in knowledge and skill, can actually make students dangerous.** It arms them with powerful knowledge and skills that can make them think they are more mature and godly than they actually are. They can do great harm to the people they are meant to help. Following are some things that can happen in the lives of students when the seminary environment is not faithful to God's intention:

Spiritual blindness. Students who don't regularly look into the mirror of the Word and see themselves will enter ministry convinced they are prepared to fix the world but will fail to recognize they need fixing as much as anyone else.

Theological self-righteousness. They think that godliness is more a matter of what you intellectually grasp than a matter of how you live your life.

Dysfunctional relationship to the Word. He loses his devotional relationship to the Word and to the God of the Word.

Lack of personal gospel neediness. He doesn't approach God's Word with a tenderness and neediness of heart.

Impatience with others. Self-righteous people tend to be critical, dismissive, and impatient with others.

Wrong perspective on ministry. Sermons can become a theological lecture rather than an exposition of the grace of the gospel and a plea to run after the Savior. It can degenerate into a Christ-less Christianity that puts its hope in theology and rules rather than in Jesus who had to come, live, die and rise again in order to set us free.

I am suggesting that every course of study hold before each student a beautiful Savior, whose beauty alone has the power to overwhelm any other beauty that could capture his heart.

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## **THE GREATNESS OF GOD**

Fifteen years ago I was driving down the street with Doris, my wife of 53 years, when she had a stroke and slumped forward. I called her name in alarm, and cried out to God in desperation, but she was gone. Her body was still right next to me, but Doris, my wife, the person I had known, the mother of our four children, was gone. She was gone to God.

You and I are spirits. We have a body, but we are not our body. God is a Spirit. He doesn't have a body. He fills the universe the way we fill our body.

The earth is a big glob of molten iron, over 2,000 degrees, with a thin crust or mantle floating on top. The continents are like potato chips floating in a vat of boiling oil. Every once in a while, the molten iron spews out, and we call that a volcano. Every once in a while, the potato chips bump into each other, and we call that an earthquake. (I hope this is not too technical for you.)

The great, magnificent, incredible God who created all of this, has made Himself known - - through the history of the Jews, through the Bible, and through Jesus Christ. If you can't trust the God who created all of this and who revealed His great love and His great purpose through Jesus, what in the world are you trusting?

God Bless  
Glenn

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