FOREWORD BY JOHN MARK COMER

DEEPENING OUR EXPERIENCE IN GOD



STRAHAN COLEMAN

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transforming lives together

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Chapter 1

DISCOVERING BEHOLDING

"Jesus, faithful, Holy-Carpenter, You bring meaning out of broken things severed things—those lonely branches amidst the untamed forest."

Prayer Vol. 01

"I begged You for employment; You offered me friendship. I assumed Your distance; You presumed our intimacy." Prayer Vol. 02

"I no longer call you servants ... now I call you friends."⁴ Jesus Christ

I've searched for God my whole life. As I look back, wonder of Him was effortless when I was a child. I would look up at the stars and somehow know, even deeply feel, that He was simultaneously up there in the vastness and down here in my minuteness. Created things told me that. The world was too expansive and beautiful to have come about without love and intention. God hid among it, waiting to be discovered.

As I grew into my teens, if you'd asked me in a word to describe God, I would have said "beautiful" without even considering whether there were more important words. I have no idea where that came from. Reflecting on it now, it's obvious God put it there. Children intuit things we fight so much harder for as adults.

My later teen years were marked with a hunger to be able to harness that sense, and to truly know God. Prayer was like a steam engine driving me toward Him, sometimes out of desire, other times out of frustration and confusion. But the longer you live, the longer you think, which for me at least meant overthinking. What was easy as a child, looking up to the stars and feeling God, felt mistier as I grew older. I began to see the world in varying shades, and found myself asking more questions of God than I was getting answers to.

Prayer turned to fasting, late night prayer meetings, and Pentecostal fervour as I broached my twenties. I was hungry, starving even, to reach the point where occasional prayer turned into continual union. I was reaching upward with everything I had, becoming increasingly frustrated that my efforts couldn't quite deliver. Prayer slowly felt like speaking into nothingness and less like wonder.

Around that same time in my twenties, I was beginning a painful mental descent. This Beauty I was chasing, though it consumed my desire, seemed more and more untouchable. I had unexplainable bouts of heaviness that threw me for sometimes months at a time. A friend going through a bad break-up once shared that the loneliness made him feel like a "cosmic orphan." I loved that; it spoke exactly to how I felt at times with God.

God would punctuate my life with moments of His love and presence, but I didn't know how to build a life container deep within me for the kind of relationship with Him that I knew I was made for. It wasn't enough to see visions, have dreams, or experience powerful sung worship moments only to wake up the next morning feeling unsure how to find that very same God in my ordinary life. That ache for a union with Beauty beyond ministry and the "doing" stuff moved from a dull ache to a desperate hope.

Then in 2015, my body started shutting down on me. I'd been touring as a musicianary for several years with my wife, Katie, taking leaps of faith across continents and following the Spirit's invitation to love those who didn't yet know Him. We were giving it everything when my body decided that it had had enough of healthy operating and slowly gave way to frequent sickness and, in turn, a depth of depression and anxiety that I had never reached before.

For a number of years, I spent the majority of my time in bed or too unwell to work for one reason or another. I got every virus you could think of, often back to back for six months during winter. My head constantly spun, and I lived with an enduring mental

fog. I was spending hundreds of dollars a week on vitamins that my body refused to absorb.

During that time, I forced myself up and spent days at a Franciscan retreat centre on the east coast of Auckland. I couldn't do much, but I would journal, look out the window, sleep on single beds in the guest rooms, and just be silent and still before God. Back then, it was enough for me just to exist, and to exist in front of God. It was all I could really do.

But it wasn't all quiet and nice. There were plenty of days when I would crawl on the floor and rage at God, asking how He could allow this to happen when I had devoted my life to Him. I begged Him for an answer. The Psalms and their prayerful wrestling became a treasure to me like never before. All the while, I lost my wonder, and that union with God I longed for felt more and more distant. It was hard to love a God who stood by as my life fell apart. Especially after everything I'd done for Him.

Though it didn't help one bit, I tried my best to hide the depths of both my physical struggle and my emotional struggle from those around me. I couldn't explain it to them, so I hardly tried. The doctors could never give it a name, and at times I wondered if I was just making it all up.

It wasn't just the sickness either. Before all this started, we'd lived a somewhat miraculous life. Genuinely. We'd lived literally week to week in faith trusting God would feed us and pay our bills whilst we lived out our calling. It felt like we always had a story to tell of incredible financial provision, miraculous global connections, dreams in the night that came true the next week, and stories of healing and deliverance through my songs at shows.

Then, it was like overnight, all of that just ceased. The provision ended, the stories stopped, the miraculous connections dissipated. Cars, dishwashers, computers, and hot water cylinders broke down for nothing. It was like living in a weird horror movie. A few Christians close to me actually said they thought I was cursed. This was a full-blown spiritual and mental health crisis. And it just kept going and going.

Living in that kind of confusion and chaos doesn't make prayer or closeness with God very easy. If my mind becomes the battleground, how can I open up to God in any real way? If prayer is about conscious mental dialogue with God, what do I do when dialogue of any kind is difficult, let alone with a Being who has all the answers but, it seems, is refusing to give any?

Existence was hard enough without the existential madness of sharing it with God. My theology was being shaken and shattered, and I didn't know how to commune with Someone who no longer made any sense to me. Was true communion something only those with a clear enough mind or enough physical strength could have? Suddenly I felt very "unspiritual." God was in the dark.

But then something important happened. I gave up.

I gave up on being able to pray, on understanding what was going on with me, on waiting for it all to be fixed, and on needing answers. I gave up on trying to perform my way into God's heart too. It started to dawn on me almost three years into this crisis that what I was experiencing might not just be a blip on the map of life. That this—the illnesses, the mental overwhelm, the frustration—could be part of my existence for the rest of my life,

and so, what was I going to do about it? Was all this really powerful enough to limit union with God? Was Jesus' life, death, and resurrection under threat from my feelings of cosmic orphancy and persistent brain fog? Or could I commune with God there in the midst of it, even without healing, answers, or a clear mind?

When I thought about it, though this new existence didn't line up with the charismatic expectations of life in God's kingdom I'd had as a younger man, I was noticing a different sense of God in my life. One not built around felt sense, but a growing, insistent trust that He was there somehow. There in a loving way.

I was slowly learning that God either loved me or He didn't, and if my ability to pray well, do good Christian things, or live some idealized way had more power to affect that love than my simply existing, then I couldn't do anything about it in my present, unable state. I couldn't control my situation, and God didn't seem to want to give me answers for it either, so I had to make a decision: Would I stay offended by God's seeming silence and absence amidst my horror, or would I choose to look for and know Him in the midst of my frustration and despair?

I vividly remember the morning I decided. It was during a low month, and in those times, I used to force my fatigued body out of the house and down to the cafe nearby as a ritual for keeping some semblance of normality in a life of physical lack. It was a chilled but sunny spring morning, and the ascending sun reflected light off the shop windows at sharp angles along the main road. I was sitting in the bench window seat with my espresso, tensed up as usual, thinking about what to say to God. As often was the case, my prayer could have gone one of two ways—anger or relent.

That day I chose relent, and I wrote in my prayer journal, "Thank You, God, for my life." I then prayed, "Father, if this is it, if this is what my life will look like till the day I die—financially strapped, vocationally stuffed, relationally strained, and medically confused—then it's okay. I have You, I have life, I have this beautiful world and my beautiful family. Let me be alive to enjoy and behold You whatever may come." It was a prayer of acceptance.

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Something lifted, something I'd been carrying for a long, long time. I don't even know what it was precisely, but it felt like the equivalent of a sports stadium floated off my chest with the ease of a down pillow. Maybe it was my dependence on understanding as a prerequisite to truly experiencing God. Maybe it was my realising that external things couldn't control my internal world. Or maybe it was my acknowledgement that God really was close in that season. Wherever the lift came from, it was the beginning of learning to let God be God, and to not allow my confusion to be the focus of our relationship anymore.

The immediate side effect was that my prayer life carried less mental hardship, less striving for God, for healing, for answers, for release. Instead, prayer became more just sitting in front of Him watching, learning to discover the beauty that was already present

to me. It wasn't about giving up on my questions and needs, but they were no longer the be-all and end-all of my adoring God.

I still talked to Him about my suffering and was more honest than ever, but we talked about it now within the confines of beholding love. Letting God be Himself allowed me to be more truly myself also. Prayer was no longer work. It was becoming recreation.

I knew I didn't need to hold my punches any longer with God because I wasn't trying to impress Him anymore. I finally realised I didn't really have much to impress Him with anyway. And because my life was constantly shrinking as I was able to do less and less, there was little left to ask God to do aside from healing myself or others. Prayer became the whole point of my faith, and the whole point of prayer became being together. I had a lot of downtime then, and as it turns out, so does He.

A strange thing happens when we decentralize asking in our prayer life. What do we do? How do we commune with God without agenda or necessity? I wonder if the answer is partly why so many of us pray like crazy in suffering, then forget about God in healing, because we don't know what to do when the basis of our relationship is no longer desperate acceptance, healing, longing, or need.

This was my crisis, but you may have your own. It may be more or less drastic. It may just be the persistent ache of wishing God felt closer more often or the sense that prayer is exhausting, hard work or a chore. Over the years of telling my story, I've come to understand that so many of us have had to wrestle with what it means to *be* with God.

Because when the dust settles on our questions, frustration, deconstruction, suffering, or numbness, what's left is a desire to reclaim that wonder—that beauty—again. What rises to the surface is the deep longing to behold and be beheld by God.

During those years, my life with God became about watching Him, watching life, and accepting who He is even when He offended me by not healing, not changing, not providing, and not answering. God never did tell me why I went through what I did, or why He felt quiet all those years. But He did tell me He loved me, and I learned to accept that as enough.

How do we commune with God without agenda or necessity? I wonder if the answer is partly why so many of us pray like crazy in suffering, then forget about God in healing, because we don't know what to do when the basis of our relationship is no longer desperate acceptance, healing, longing, or need.

My need to know and understand what God was doing in my life in order to trust and admire Him was dethroned. I began to love God and trust His goodness aside from the chaos of my life. Aside from the good things too.

In the years since that experience sitting in the cafe window, I have had less and less to say. I sit more with God, letting Him be. I let Him be Mystery, Wonder, Grace, Goodness, and Truth, despite whether I understand it or not. This isn't an ecstatic experience,

but an ordinary, humanising one. My feelings didn't necessarily change, but that mattered less because I could behold God without depending on my emotions.

On days when depression and despair consumed me, I was able to lie there and say to myself, "God is still God today, still beautiful, still wonderful, still loving," and sit in my darkness knowing that my feelings couldn't change that reality. God was among my feelings, but I was finally learning that God is more than a feeling. He's God.

Without my noticing it, I gradually changed. Weirdly, though I didn't have the mind space to ask for such things as patience, kindness, gentleness, or long-suffering, I began to embody them in new ways. I softened in my interactions with my wife, my children, my friends, and those others in the world who had felt like unlovable strangers to me in the past. As I learned to let God be Himself without making sense of my circumstances, I wept over people who I had previously considered enemies. People I couldn't understand. I was losing all my enemies. All I could see now was God.

I was changing, and my prayer life was too. As I began to feel this unity with Beauty, I simultaneously felt connected in love and friendship with every other person—like I could see God in them more clearly. Like we were all just little children, some more lost than others. Beholding God came to mean beholding the other.

Learning to sit and let God be God, learning to experience the world with this kind of tender mystery, irrevocably transformed my life. It removed the power of sickness, division, despair, and hopelessness. My world wasn't free of those things, but they became peripheral issues.

It was like I was falling in love with God again. Not with a naive first love, but an older, deeper, and more truthful love. Like we were both seeing each other for who we were for the first time, not who we wished the other was. Except, it was me, not God, who was finally waking up. Prayer became existence. Existence became beautiful. I realised I'd been praying in reverse my whole life, looking for a working relationship when God longed for a friend.

Beholding prayer saved my spiritual life.