



EXCERPT



Mid-Faith Crisis

Finding a Path Through Doubt, Disillusionment, and Dead Ends

June 3, 2025 | \$18, 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1036-5

Catherine McNeil is a chaplain, author, editor, and speaker searching for the creative, redemptive work of God in our ordinary lives. She lives in the Chicagoland area with her husband, three children, and one enormous garden. Catherine holds an MA in human service counseling and is finishing a Master of Divinity at North Park Theological Seminary. Her previous books include *Fearing Bravely*, *All Shall Be Well*, and *Long Days of Small Things*, which was an ECPA finalist for New Author.

When Our Prayers Fell Silent

I (Catherine) was approaching my tenth birthday the first time I reconsidered this approach. Too excited to sleep the previous night, relishing my last hours in the single digits, my brain was spinning and summoned a long-buried memory. I jumped up wide awake, afraid for my life.

Years before, I had hatched a genius plan: choose a particular age, the definition of a long and fulfilling life, then earnestly pray God would allow me to die on the birthday of that year (after presents and cake, of course). This would take away all the guesswork and worry about unknowns like accidents, illness, and death. Why not lock in your future early on?

The ripe old age I chose was ten. Of course, I had no context or life experience to inform this bold decision. And now, with just hours left to go on this earth, I leapt from bed and ran to find my parents.

My prayers had been earnest and consistent. I had prayed in faith, fully believing with all my heart that God would hear and grant my request. Like the righteous believer in James (a book I memorized word for word in fourth grade), I had asked without wavering or doubting. Surely my prayers would be “powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Plus, while I prayed these childish prayers for death, I had also been praying for a brother or sister. Even after my parents sat by my bed and gently told me I could stop asking God (their doctors were sure no little baby would join our family—now or ever), I was determined. I would pray without ceasing, no matter what they said.

And sure enough, a few months later my parents were back with news: my mom was pregnant. I would have a baby brother. That sealed the deal for me. Nine-going-on-ten-year-old Catherine viewed prayer as a wish list to offer God—a to-do list, even. And therefore, my life was in grave danger.

But my tenth birthday came and went—cake, party, presents, lasagna dinner, all of it. No one died.

As I grew older and looked back on that night, my takeaway was gratitude that God knows better than we do. A loving parent will say no to many pleading requests for bright-colored cleaning chemicals and sharp, shiny tools, no matter how badly their beloved toddlers want them. Who am I to know what I really need, compared to God’s infinite knowledge and care? Rather than shake my faith, this vivid experience became for me a doorway into Conscious Faith, into a carefully-thought-through trust in God’s work in our lives.

But since that day when my faith was strengthened by God’s failure to answer, there’s been so much water under the bridge. I’ve been abandoned and deeply harmed by people who were supposed to love and protect me. Felt all hope for goodness shatter around me. Sat in the room while my best friends’ baby died in their arms. Bristled with anger when a friend chirped “Praise God!” upon finding a good parking spot while nearly ninety million displaced people in our world can’t find a home country. Carried stories—my own and others’—almost too terrible to believe.



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Yet, I've also seen long-unsolved ailments disappear from my body during prayer. Felt God draw so near to me it changed my life's direction. Experienced spiritual and emotional healing from wounds I didn't even know I had. Been prompted to do things so clearly God's voice was almost audible. Seen those in desperate need provided for in nearly supernatural ways.

Thus far into my journey, it's not God or even prayer I doubt so much as our confidence in prayer, the hubris of our own causation, and our own willingness to overlook profound suffering in the world. When a friend's flight delivers her to vacation safe and sound, she posts to Facebook that "God knew how much I needed restful time away." But another friend texts me that, due to cancellations from the same airport on the same day, she missed getting to her sister's deathbed in time to say goodbye. Well, if God is to be praised in the first instance, is he to be blamed in the second?

What are we supposed to make of a prayer theology so confident in God's will and our prayer-to-result causation, and so unaware of our own privilege and dumb luck? Do we really think God is granting some of us luxury items simply because we asked—and does this mean that victims of genocide and sexual assault just didn't have enough prayer coverage for God to act on their behalf?

You can see how my brain starts spinning into faith crisis. The same compassion and conviction that once prompted me to pray now prompt me to question almost everything.

If God is good and loving, doesn't God already care? Does God only act in response to a popularity contest or poll? And if God *isn't* good and loving, if God *does* need convincing to do the right and decent thing, then what is the point of prayer at all? Dabble in prayer long enough, and many of us end up facing these kinds of questions. A banquet of rich prayer practices, passed down through a thousand generations, was watered down into a formula: hands folded, eyes closed. Wholehearted faith and passionate prayers caved in on themselves and started to crush us, leaving us with nothing but profound feelings of abandonment and confusion.

So that's how it started, and a bit of how it's going. I don't think I'm alone. The complexity of (mostly unsuccessfully) asking the divine to alter the world on our behalf is one of the most universally probed quandaries of faith. For some of us, the dream burst hard and fast, leaving trauma and debris in its place. For others, it's been a slow leak draining away over time, leaving us deflated and empty and confused. Many of us are weary now, with little faith that our words matter at all.

To find a way forward through Mid-Faith, I desperately need prayer to be something other than using our words to tell God what to do. Everything about that feels like a bad idea to me, now.

-adapted from chapter six, "When Our Prayers Fell Silent"



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Jason Hague is the associate pastor of Christ's Center Church near Eugene, Oregon, and the author of *Aching Joy: Following God Through the Land of Unanswered Prayer*. Jason has written extensively on the subject of the Christian faith and autism, special needs families, and his own spiritual journey toward hope for his own nonspeaking autistic son. His writing has appeared in *Christianity Today*, *Focus on the Family*, and *Fathom*. He and his wife have five children.

Prayer Warriors

For me (Jason) prayer was always about words. In my circles, intercessor was viewed as a spiritual office, like pastor and teacher. Prayer became a specialized skill, a badge for the super spiritual: we were “prayer warriors.” We saw the brokenness in our world, so we dropped to our knees in battle. Loved ones were fighting diseases; there were violence, natural disasters, and evil all around. Worse, people were dying without Jesus.

These were the enemies and our weapon was prayer. With our words we changed the world, impacted the physical and spiritual realms. If we woke in the night, we took it as a sign: time to pray. If we didn't rise to the task, our loved ones might suffer.

What a strange delusion of power. We treated the fate of our fellow humans as if it depended not on a loving Creator but on our midnight pleas, as though our lives were rooted not in God's care but in the performance of prayer warriors. But these were God-sized burdens, and they were too much for us to carry around. The weight of the world—war and peace, life and death, joy and suffering, even heaven and hell—was far too heavy for our mortal shoulders.

Looking back, I'm convinced we were not wasting our time. Jesus invites us to bring our petitions to God. God tells us to ask for help. But God also tells us to trust. To be still. To be thankful. To rest. To meditate. To contemplate. To dwell. To bring God our groanings too deep for words.

I loved words then, and I still do. I love the ways you can shape them to build stories, to leave impressions, to make people cry. A teacher once told me that language was God's greatest gift to us because language was the foundation of relationships. Without language, how can you know a person? That idea stuck with me. Maybe that's why Jack's diagnosis hit me as hard as it did.

Jack is my third child, my oldest son. He hit most of his developmental markers until he was two, but then something changed. His vocabulary disappeared. He stopped making eye contact. He began wandering around the house ignoring us, flapping spatulas in front of his face. We figured out what it was before the diagnosis came, but seeing the word on paper hit me hard: autism. It soon became clear that his was the kind of autism in which words would be rare.

Of course, this led me to prayer. Jack would grow up in a world that didn't understand him, and he would deal with a host of comorbid conditions that would increase the difficulty of his life: obsessive compulsive disorder, seizures, and raging anxiety. So I prayed a lot. Which is to say, I used all my words when I came to God.

“Lord, help us to understand why he is screaming!”

“God, don't let him run out onto the road again!”

“Please, please, please, let him sleep!”



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But the thing we prayed for most was the gift of language. How could we know our son if we couldn't converse with him? Isn't language the foundation of relationship?

It didn't occur to me then what an odd bargain I was trying to strike, using words to beg for words. And that's the problem with viewing prayer primarily—or exclusively—as convincing God to act. Prayer can become all about how persuasive we can be at getting God to do what we want.

God didn't answer my prayers anyway. By the time I reached forty, Jack was a teenager, still functionally nonverbal, still wrestling with the same comorbid conditions he'd always had.

So what happened to all those prayers I prayed in my twenties and thirties? What happened to yours, the ones that didn't get approved through the bureaucracy of heaven? Did they ever receive a hearing? Did they accidentally get deleted from God's hard drive? Or did God simply say no?

Church history has been far from silent on the issue of prayer. Believers throughout the centuries have wrestled with these exact questions and proposed profound answers. I wasn't entirely blind to the answers they offered, but neither was I all that interested in ideas outside my immediate theological grid. In my charismatic circles, we were usually looking for mechanical help. *How do I get God to answer? How do I pray with authority? How can I change my heart such that God will hear me? If the prayers of the righteous "availeth much" (James 5:16 KJV), how do I become more righteous?* I didn't want wisdom. I wanted results.

And that's fair. When our hearts are aching, we don't want to talk theology. In a crisis, we're not drawn to learn from monks and sages; we don't have time to ponder theories. We just need things to work. We just want the pain to go away.

We can't deny our experiences with unanswered prayer. Not when our pending requests have piled up like junk-mail advertisements. That's the thing that sucks the vitality out of prayer for many of us. It's not that we don't believe anymore; it's just that our words feel so empty, like expired coupons that were never a good deal to begin with.

Once that pile of unanswered prayer gets high enough, you realize prayer can't be about using your words to make God do your bidding. There's a time to clench your fists and yell at the sky, but there's a time to open your palms and surrender. A time to beg God for daily bread, a time to breathe "Your will be done" as Jesus taught his disciples to do.

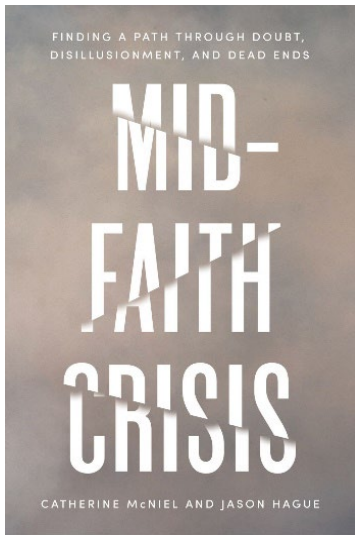
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Q & A



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With backgrounds in theology and personal narratives of their own spiritual upheavals, Catherine McNiel and Jason Hague guide readers through the complex landscape of doubt and disillusionment. *Mid-Faith Crisis* candidly addresses the often-unspoken realities of faith's evolution, offering solace and practical insights for navigating through turbulent waters.

Have You Reached a Mid-Faith Crisis?

What experiences led you to write *Mid-Faith Crisis*?

Jason Hague: I was experiencing my own crisis, after dealing with the loss of a dear friend, and a whole mess of family crisis. I realized just how many of my peers were dealing with the same kinds of doubts and disillusionments regarding their expectations for their spiritual life. So I started talking with Catherine about digging deeper into the topic in order to help others walking the same path.

Catherine McNiel: I find myself almost daily in a position where someone is confiding in me the great pain of their mid-faith crisis. Never do I find that anyone is equipped to realize that this can be, and in some ways *must* be, a healthy and normal step in a life of faith. It always feels like failure and death. Whether that hurt turns inward (I'm terrible!) or outward (Christians are terrible! God is terrible!), I always find myself yearning to provide some perspective: some of what is dying needed to die. I want them to know that there is a path *forward* to life from here.

What would you describe as the message at the heart of *Mid-Faith Crisis*?

Jason: A crisis of faith is an extremely common stage in human faith development. Rather than fearing it when it comes, we can embrace it, and actually find growth in our spiritual lives. Our approach is different in that Catherine and I approach the journey by asking "how it started, how it's going" in every chapter. We inject our own stories throughout, reflecting on our own journeys as we invite the reader to do the same.

What do you hope readers take away from *Mid-Faith Crisis*?

Jason:

- The doubt and disillusionment your feeling is quite normal.
- You're not extra broken just because you are in crisis.
- You can grow closer to Christ, with new faith practices, even as you go through this very hard thing.
- Rather than aiming for greatness in your spiritual life, it is better to aim for simple goodness.
- Even as you let go of false certainties and embrace mystery, there is beauty and hope in store for us.

Catherine:

- There are life stages to faith and they do not just go up, up, up, bigger, better, bigger, better.
- Seasons of crisis or "deconstruction" are normal and good.
- We need to be honest about all the brokenness (or simply immaturity) we associated with faith, and how that has impacted us and is impacting others.
- We can chart a path forward that is healthier and more suited to the long journey of life.
- There is goodness. You are not alone. Integration of all this is possible, and with it, peace.



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