

FIVE TRAITS OF  
PEOPLE WHO PRAY

MARKED

 BY 

PRAYER

G. DWAYNE MCCRARY

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Dedicated to my monthly prayer partners, thank you for showing me what it looks like to be marked by prayer.



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## *Introduction*

# WE ARE MARKED!

**N**o matter how hard we may try, we continue to be detected. It may be our accent, our clothing, or how we mingle (or don't). No matter how hard we try, we are detected by the locals who somehow know. We are marked.

We can watch our diet, exercise, and do everything our doctors tell us, and still deal with heart disease. Some things are simply in our DNA. We are marked by genetics.

Soldiers may be thousands of miles from a battlefield, but those experiences feel like the battle is next door. We may never have been a soldier but still carry marks from other experiences that cause us to respond to items that trigger a memory. We are marked by our experiences.

People judge us by the schools we attended, expecting us to carry a certain attitude based on their view of others they know who attended that school. The same is true of our employers, past and present. We are marked by relationships.

## MARKED BY PRAYER

Some marks can be emotional, psychological, and physical. I broke my leg playing football in high school, and that experience involved all three of these. Physical scars decorate both sides of my right ankle. Seeing a player injured brings back the emotions of that day and the psychological triggers that surround it. I am marked.

Marks can also carry spiritual significance. The scars on my ankle remind me that God used that broken leg to draw me to Himself. Staring at the cast made me ask some honest questions that were only answerable by Him.

Followers of Jesus are told by Paul that we are to display the fruit of the Spirit. We are to show “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). In this same letter, Paul also declared that he carried “the marks of Jesus” in his body (Gal. 6:17). Paul was talking about the physical scars from the beatings, chains, riots, and host of other indignities experienced because of his commitment to Christ (see 2 Cor. 6:3–10).

Jesus told His disciples that they should expect to be marked both physically and spiritually. Peter was told that he would be led to a place where he did not want to go with his hands stretched out (John 21:18–19). Jesus warned His disciples that they would be treated the same way He had been treated (John 15:20). He died on a cross, and they were to expect the same kind of mistreatment and ridicule simply because they were associated with Him. Jesus also reminded His disciples that they would demonstrate love to such a degree that they would become known for that love (John 13:35). John echoed this teaching, as he called for his readers to lay down

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their lives for others, just as Jesus had done for us (1 John 3:16–18). Benson in his commentary on John 13:35 identifies this love that is to be shown as the “noblest badge of our profession.”<sup>1</sup> When we see the word *badge*, we should think “marked.”

Love is the fruit of the Spirit that shows our commitment to Jesus. So, how does prayer fit into this? Prayer is not listed as a fruit of the Spirit. However, prayer is part of the pathway that enables us to demonstrate the fruit listed. The fruit comes from an abiding relationship with the Father and grows through that relationship. Prayer enters the picture at this point since our relationship with the Father grows through our dialoguing with Him. We learn His heart and are then able to respond in a way that reflects His heart. We are to be marked by prayer.

### How Did I Get Here?

Like many of you, I am a fellow learner when it comes to prayer. Prayer was modeled by the church in which I grew up and by some key leaders who impacted me through their prayer life. These leaders sought out people to ask them about their life and then prayed for that person. I was a benefactor of their commitment to prayer. Notes received are treated as priceless treasures and are evidence of their being marked by prayer. I don't count myself in that group. I wish that were not the case, but I am a novice when compared to them. No one is more surprised about my writing this book than I am.

This book began with a group of people sitting around a table discussing how we can encourage church leaders to lead their

churches to pray more effectively. During that conversation, one member of that circle began praying, directing a prayer for me to be a champion for prayer. As he prayed, terror filled me with that thought. That is not me. Teacher, sure. Organizer and planner, you bet. Conference leader, bring it on. Champion of prayer . . . NOPE.

As that prayer time concluded, the people sitting around that table shared favorite books about prayer. Once I got home, the most referenced books were added to my reading list. I gleaned prayer practices and tips through that reading and added more books to the reading list. In the process of reading, patterns began to emerge that pointed to characteristics possessed by people known for their prayer life. These characteristics were more than practices; they were marks. They were marked by prayer.

Those patterns then led to an examination of Scripture. My quest was to determine if these same marks could be seen in a Bible character. Doing so was a challenge since we mostly see only snapshots of their lives. John even tells us as much in his Gospel account (John 21:25). However, several Bible characters were identified with clues about how they were marked. In effect, they give us actions we can take to foster that marking in our own lives.

In the pages that follow, we will examine five markings that emerged through my reading and reflection. People of prayer:

1. Experienced helplessness in some way
2. Voice prayers informed by Scripture
3. Exhibit personal grief over sin
4. Possess a deferred confidence
5. Are consumed with God's presence

## YOU ARE MARKED!

We will focus on these five markings, dedicating a chapter to each. We will explore a snapshot from the life of a Bible personality who demonstrates that marking and propose some actions we can take that put us in a position to be marked as well.

During this season, God taught me some important things about people marked by prayer. As already shared, this journey included the reading of several books on prayer. (I still have a few more to read on my list.) I wanted to simply read their stories and learn from them, thinking that the knowledge gained would be enough. But God tends to let us experience the truth so we understand the nuances of that truth.

Gaining knowledge is important, but it's not nearly as important as the practice. We tend to want knowledge and not the experience. Experience carries a price tag, and that would be true for the marks of prayer. Marks are not cheap or easy.

As you read this book and other books on prayer, my hope is that God will mark you with these same traits. This prayer is a hard and dangerous request especially when considering the nature of these traits. The path to being marked is not easy. While transforming and painful, this quest for the marks is worth the transparency and effort.

## Chapter 1

# HELPLESS

*People marked by prayer experienced helplessness in some way.*

**W**e purchased a new electric can opener. My wife had no trouble whatsoever with the new kitchen gadget. The hum could be heard from another room as she opened a can. Then it was my turn to use it. I have no idea what I was doing wrong, but the gadget never locked on the can I wanted to open. Nothing worked, and my wife was not home at the time to help me.

In desperation, I began to look for the instructions, but they were nowhere to be found. Later, the instructions were discovered sitting on the kitchen table. I had been too frustrated to notice. The old electric can opener had already been thrown away so that was not an option either. Eventually, a manual can opener was located in a drawer under some serving spoons, and I was happy to use that tool to get the can opened.

Not being able to get that new can opener to work brought in a sense of helplessness, especially since I knew my wife had used it just hours before without any problem. The potential of finding the manual opener gave me hope as the useless electric can opener sat on

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the counter mocking me. That opener would mock me again after my wife returned and placed it on a can and it worked without a hitch, making me feel even more helpless than before.

Plenty of other things in life can make us feel helpless. A flat tire in the middle of rush hour while it's raining. Being given a task to complete by our boss that no one else has been able to figure out. Looking at our bank account and knowing there is more month to cover than there is money in the bank. Approaching storms, relationships, injustices, and a variety of other items could be added to this list. The point is we have all faced things in life that leave us feeling helpless. If this has not happened to you yet, get ready. It will.

When we look at the lives of people who are marked by prayer, we tend to find a defining life event that made them feel helpless. This event can be a cancer diagnosis for themselves or a spouse, a child born with a disability, a prodigal child, or a work challenge. Most of these events relate to someone they love or trust with that event testing that love and trust.

Since we all face situations that cause us to feel helpless, the issue is more about how we respond to the event rather than about the event itself. Two people can face the same challenge, both feeling helpless, but one feeling hopeless while the other is filled with hope.

*Helpless* is defined as “being unable to defend ourselves or unable to act without help.” No matter how much I tried, the new electric can opener was not cooperating. Nothing I did worked. However, hope was found in knowing that help was available,

immediately in the manual can opener and ultimately in my wife's sharing her expertise. Hope came through being able to search and ask. Had I not been able to search or ask, the helplessness would have morphed into hopelessness.

People marked with helplessness understand that hopelessness can be avoided. They live with the realization that God can always be found, and as long as He is present, there is hope. David gives us a picture of what this helplessness looks like.

## Helpless King David

David dug himself into a helpless situation. He had faced many challenges in his lifetime including a giant and a father-in-law who was out to get him. He had fought many battles, and now his troops were fighting yet another one. Instead of being in the field, we find him staying behind in one of his palaces. He spied the spouse of one of his elite warriors bathing. David would have known she was married since she was introduced to him as the wife of Uriah. He summoned her and they committed adultery. Bathsheba discovered she was pregnant, and since her husband was deployed, David was obviously the father of the child. David arranged for Uriah the mighty warrior to get some leave, thinking he would spend that time with Bathsheba so the child would appear to be his. That did not happen, and Uriah was sent back to the front lines with a sealed letter. True to the directions in the letter, Joab sent Uriah into the fiercest part of the battle where he was killed (see 2 Sam. 11).

Thinking he had covered all his tracks, David then took Bathsheba as his wife. Enter Nathan who confronted David about

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his adultery and murder conspiracy. In 2 Samuel 12, we are told that David would be forgiven, but the child yet to be born would not survive. After birth the infant became ill, so David fasted. After seven days the child died. Imagine those seven days as David prayed and fasted, knowing that the child was ill because of his own sin. David was helpless at that point. He could do nothing to change the situation or hide from his sin.

Out of that helplessness David turned to God. Where else could he turn? No other help was available. He was king, but the crown on his head and accolades received were useless now. Most would view David as a resourceful and capable person, able to get himself out of some tight situations. He even played like he had gone mad and was able to escape from the hands of Achish (see 1 Sam. 21:12–15). No escapes were present for David to get himself out of the mess he had created.

Out of that season of helplessness, David wrote Psalms 32 and 51, two of the more read and studied psalms. Both psalms point to our need for help when it comes to our sin (more on this in chapter 3). We are not sure how many of the other psalms came out of this experience, but we know these two did at least and can imagine that this experience profoundly impacted how David dialogued with God moving forward.

Other Bible personalities experienced helplessness: King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, Peter while imprisoned in Acts 12, and Paul and Silas while in prison in Philippi in Acts 16. In and of their own power, no actions would change their situation. They needed help and found it in the only

One who could help. That helplessness drove them to trust God. They were not hopeless but helpless, unable to find a resolution in and of themselves.

## When We Are Helpless

When we read about the experiences of people marked by prayer, we eventually find them sharing about a time in which they felt helpless and embraced it.

Those helpless moments make us useful vessels for God's purposes. We do not fully understand the power and promise of prayer until after we become helpless because that helplessness pushes us to fully depend on God. Helplessness also invites us to seek His heart and not ours. In those helpless moments we learn to follow Him, staying in step as He leads, and we learn that our hearts can and will deceive us. Once we align with His heart, we find contentment.

This alignment begins with accepting that we are helpless. Salvation is the ultimate expression of helplessness as we come to Christ acknowledging our inability to rescue ourselves. But salvation is just a first step. As we face other challenges, we find ourselves needing to accept that we are helpless once again. Freedom is found in embracing our helplessness because we are turning to the One who is able to provide the needed aid. We grow in our trust of God as a result, which is manifest in our prayers.

*Wait and Seek*

Jeremiah faithfully delivered God's message for more than forty years and was mostly ignored. God told him that would be the case, but knowing this did not make being ignored any easier. In Lamentations we find a man who had witnessed the destruction he had foretold. Jerusalem was in ruins and God's people were in exile, away from their promised land. In the middle of his lament, Jeremiah gives us two actions to take when feeling helpless. In Lamentations 3:25, we are told to wait and seek.

We see these two actions in David's life as well after the birth of the first child with Bathsheba. Waiting and seeking were his only options.

Waiting is not my strength. That would be the understatement of this book! Many of us are wired with a drive to get something fixed when it breaks so we can keep moving forward, checking boxes on our to-do lists. Most of us do not include a line on our to-do list for waiting. And yet Jeremiah included it as an action to take when we find ourselves in a helpless position, and it was what David did as well.

Waiting makes sense when we are helpless since action may very well make the situation worse. Waiting requires us to get out of the way and let God do what only He can do. Our tendency is to try to do what only God can do, something we are not qualified to attempt. Waiting is an admission that we are helpless and in need of God. We may wonder with King David how long we need to wait

for God to act (see Ps. 13); however, doing so does not negate our need to wait.

A related challenge is admitting we are helpless. Jeremiah could preach all day long, but he could not make the people respond to his message. David could call on all the doctors and prophets available to him, and the child would still die. The sooner we realize we are helpless, the better.

Waiting does not mean sitting. Think about the role of a waiter in your favorite restaurant. We rarely see them sitting. The term *waiter* has its origin with attendants of nobility standing at the ready in the dining room waiting to serve, ensuring that the needs of the people eating were met. When we wait on God, we don't sit back and coast. Instead, we serve. We serve those who are hurting, those who are encouraging us, and those whom God places in our path during that season.

The second action recommended by Jeremiah was seeking. David took this same action. In Psalm 32:5–7, David declares that he acknowledged his sin to God, seeking Him while God could be found. This declaration emphasizes David seeking God. We are promised that if we seek Him, we will find Him. But what does that seeking look like? Is it more than calling out to Him or going to a worship service? Jeremiah reminded the Israelites who were in exile that they would seek after God and find Him and added that they were to search for God with all their heart (Jer. 29:13). This passage also promised their restoration as God's people, which reminds us of why they were banished from the promised land in the first place.

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Their sin was simple; they had abandoned God as their only love. They still wanted God's blessings but not the relationship that came with those blessings.

They would remain in exile for seventy years, which required them to keep seeking. Plenty of opportunities would exist in those seventy years to stop seeking. Many would never see Jerusalem again, but that was not to be an excuse for discontinuing the seeking. Even in exile, they could ask God to show them what He wanted them to know about Him. He had not ceased being God, nor could He only be God if they were in Jerusalem or the temple. Being in exile gave them an opportunity to learn that God was capable of sustaining them even in Babylon. God would use that time to help His people regain their focus on Him, but they had to seek Him in a foreign land for them to rediscover Him.

The same is true for us. We too must keep seeking as we wait. Jeremiah combined these two actions on purpose. God's discipline and redemptive plans called for them (and us) to wait. Their need demanded that they seek as they waited. Both were necessary then and are necessary now. Together, they foster trust in God at all times and develop the habit of turning to God first when facing life's challenges.

It helps when we have people in our friendship circle who turn to God first as a regular habit and will hold us accountable to do the same, but someone has to set the standard. God was inviting His people to set that standard by waiting and seeking, knowing that doing so would be the first step in their being marked as His and by a trust in Him seen in every area of their lives, including prayer.

## Your Turn

List things going on in your life that make you feel helpless. Pray about these items, using Psalm 13 as a guide.

## Taking a Deeper Look

Review Psalms 51 and 32, looking for expressions that point to helplessness and hopefulness.

Compare the stories of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, Peter while imprisoned in Acts 12, and Paul and Silas while in prison in Philippi in Acts 16. How did their helplessness drive them to God?

Use a concordance to look at passages in the Bible that include the words *wait* and *seek*, especially passages that include both words. What do you learn about these two actions? How are they related? What are you waiting for? How can you seek God while waiting?



Some people are marked by prayer.  
They are the people we turn to for wisdom  
and a listening ear, knowing they carry  
the marks of prayer.



*What does it take to become one of these people?* Author G. Dwayne McCrary takes us on a journey to identify five traits and gain a deeper understanding of each. Discover how these traits developed in the lives of biblical characters, giving us clues as to how these same marks can be fostered in our own lives. Along the way, the reader's understanding of prayer moves from a to-do list for God to a response to His character.

**G. DWAYNE MCCRARY** manages the group that creates weekly Bible study resources for adults at Lifeway. He is married, has two children, and four grandchildren. Prior to coming to Lifeway, he served on church staff for 20 plus years. Dwayne is an experienced conference leader, writer, and enjoys history books and endurance road bicycling.

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