

While we learn about God at an early age and are taught how much God loves us, and taught to pray and to be kind to others, as life goes on, sometimes it can be a bit easy to forget about God. For some, they focus on the things of the world. For others, life just kind of beats them down. And for many it's a combination of both. But many also go through the peaks and valleys of life, and realize they reach a point where they need to ask themselves where are they going and why, and are able to then let God back into their lives.

One of these men is a veteran by the name of Dave Peters. An Iraq War vet, he is also a chaplain, but as he shares his story in his short book called "Death Letter," a reference to the letter many combat soldiers write as the last letter back home to loved ones in the event something happened to them, his journey to God has been a winding road.

He served as an army chaplain, and in 2005 he was 30, a former youth minister, and had been raised in an evangelical fundamentalist church. He later became an Episcopal priest. But his road to that was quite rocky, because it was a faith that was tested.

He had fallen in love with the church as a teenager. He became youth pastor at a suburban church, and after the invasion of Iraq signed up to be a chaplain. But as a chaplain, he was surrounded by death. Shortly into his tour, he was present when an explosion ripped into a Humvee killing two. And the hardness of war began to take a toll on him.

But through it, he tried to bring the soldiers hope. He was always present to the soldiers. In the middle of the night, he'd go out to see engineers who were building a guard shack for the Iraqi Army, working at night as the curfew kept the streets clear. He went around the worksite, shook hands, and tried to cheer up the men and women who were up all night clearing dirt and garbage off the side of the road. In his words, "I go to see them at night because they are tired, bored, and covered in the shadows of war. I want them to know that I'm one of them, even though they know I'm different. I walk around Baghdad without a rifle and with a cross on my chest. They know I didn't have to come and see them at night. I come at 2 a.m. because I love them" He rides out on missions too, and noted sometimes the soldiers said he was glad he was with them because they knew they'd be alright. He tells them the founder of his religion was killed about 500 miles from where they are, and he doesn't expect his life to be any different.

Another part of his job was just listening. He sat up late with a young sergeant who had to shoot back at someone who shot at them, and the dead body of the shooter was found. Though he was hailed by others as a hero, shooting someone for the first time was something the young sergeant had a hard time reconciling with.

But all of this takes a toll. In his memoir he writes "I went into the religion business so I could understand death. I wanted to see life and death and I wanted to do something about it. I went to college and then to theological seminary where I learned to translate Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic into English. I also learned about theology and stocked up on an impressive set of conclusions and beliefs. I wasn't ready for what I would face in war. I didn't know there would be so much death and I would see most of it with my own eyes and touch it with my hands. In the valley of shadow and death there are only metaphors and mysteries. Some clergy could tap

into this unseen world and I wanted to be one of the ones who could.” But his world was actually falling apart.

When his unit came home from Iraq, he looks at the phone bill and sees his wife was calling the neighbor talking for hours at a time. He’s a major, one rank above him, and a good neighbor. This included a 123 minute conversation on Valentine’s Day. Dave couldn’t remember even being on the phone with his wife that long. The calls come from pay phones all over town, but soon there was only one number on the bill, that of his neighbors. He confronted him at a restaurant, just the two of them, told him to stop seeing his wife and he agreed. But it didn’t end; he confronted his wife about it but she was indifferent, and a few days later was on a plane headed to her parents home. When he followed her there some time later to try to win her back, it fell on deaf ears. And the anger began to set in. Along with the darkness.

He gets into short-term relationships that never last. One night after he tucks his kids into bed, he finds himself on the balcony at night. *“Like Abram in the Old Testament, I look up at the sky and question the God who promised me a good marriage. I tell him I had done near everything I was supposed to do and now everything is a mess. My voice rises from the whisper of my mind and I speak. I yell at the Master of the Universe and tell him I didn’t like what happened. I taunt him for how he turned his Almighty back on me when I needed him most. I rail on, ‘Don’t you care that she left me? Don’t you want us together?’ There is nothing but silence. I know that answer but I can’t believe it. I know that God loves my ex-wife as much as he loves me. I feel most betrayed by this thought.”* But it was then he heard a voice - the voice of silence. The voice told him to move on from his failed marriage, but it was also not his own. At that moment, he knew his weeping had been heard, and God surprised him. He thinks of the story of Jacob, who wrestled with a mysterious figure on the road who we later learn to be God. Jacob leaves that wrestling match with a limp and a bad leg, and sees that his blessing is that hurt leg. For David, he says he would wrestle with that man every night. And he realized that God doesn’t care about Jacob’s conflict with his brother, He just cares about winning the wrestling match. He tests Jacob’s resolve as he’s about to lose it all. And David realizes this is the only challenge in the universe. God loves the world, humanity, and David realizes God cares about him too. But his problem is he has a hard time letting this love truly change him, because of his pain.

That pain caused him to still be angry at God, to wall himself from any hurt. And while he was involved in relationships, he still was not letting them develop, because he was angry at all women too. Working at Walter Reed as a chaplain, he knew the anger inside of him could be so intense that it was a thin line from him being a chaplain and a patient there.

This, coupled with his own painful life experience of losing a brother as a child in a bike accident, and himself being in an accident in 1989 that resulted in the death of a motorcycle passenger even though he wasn’t at fault, caused him to have this prolonged Good Friday experience. He published his book with his wife’s encouragement along with combat veterans. Today, he has a renewed relationship with God. But he also remembers the words from an Easter Vigil Sermon in Baghdad in 2006: “We live in a Good Friday world, but we are an Easter people.” He’s found reconciliation, healing and hope.

In D.C., he went on pilgrimages to the National Cathedral, prayed the Daily Office, and made his confession to God. He became restored to the community he lost in war. Eventually he was ordained a priest in the Episcopal church.

But for that to happen, he had to wrestle with God. He says it took him a long time to come back to a place of faith and trust in God, Father, Son and Spirit. It happened slowly, and it is still happening as he journeys deeper into his relationships with God through Scripture, worship, prayer and contemplation. He knows God spoke to him on the night he told him how he felt. He says "I know Jesus suffered on this planet, which made my suffering have meaning. On the night he was betrayed, he took bread, and every time I receive communion, I take a step toward healing. I know the Spirit moves within me and my community, taking us places we are afraid to go, even the place where I published Death Letter."

He's also made peace with his ex wife, and emphasizes in the epilogue that he is thankful for her and how she cares for their children, and things are better now that he has worked through the pain.

His wife Sarah has given him a very important gift - that for the healing gift of love. He treasures the vows they shared and now he lives his life renewed in his relationship with God, and passing on the love that he has been given.

For Fr. David, it took time, but he eventually found his way. And our readings this week reminds us that while sometimes things can be dark, the bridegroom is coming. But this is something we have to prepare for.

Our second reading from Paul gives us a message of hope of Jesus triumphing over darkness and death. And this is because Paul goes through his own conversion. Like Fr. David, Paul made bad decisions, persecuting the Christians, and it took this experience of seeing Jesus alive again to turn his life around.

Paul thought this might very well happen in his lifetime. But as we all know, it didn't. We still wait.

And in the Gospel, we see the impacts of waiting. Matthew was written about 30 years after our second reading, and the people have been waiting, watching, wondering, when is God coming back? And understandably, some have become impatient, others indifferent. But the reality is the bridegroom is coming.

In ancient Israel, the bridegroom came at night to meet his bride and take her to his home, where a celebration began. But while we are accustomed to the lights of the city and electricity, in Israel it would have been pitch black and incredibly dark. We meet in the Gospel the 10 bridesmaids. Five are prepared for the delay, and continue to wait. Five aren't, not having enough oil for their lamps. And when the bridegroom does come, they aren't there to meet him. So how do we read it?

Two takeaways.

One is that as we wait, we wait, at times, in darkness. We have electricity unlike in ancient Israel, but we all can have intense spiritual darkness. And it can be easy to think the bridegroom will never come. For Fr. David, he never left being a chaplain, but his heart wasn't in it as he had a hard time seeing God at all, and went down various paths to deal with the anger, the pain, and the sadness of a failed marriage, a life he felt partially responsible for in an accident, and dealt with death all around him not to mention the spiritual battles his fellow soldiers were going through. But what happened to him over the 8 year period was he found the oil for his lamp. He returned to God. He returned to prayer. He listened to people who said he had another vocation but needed to heal first, and it led him to a deeper faith.

It begs the question for us, how is our oil supply for our lamp? It can be easy to not think of God at all in our day and age as the busyness of life takes over. Or sometimes it can seem that God does not care at all about us when life overwhelms us. But the reality is He does. We may not understand everything that goes on in life, but the oil given to us is called grace and love. When we turn our hearts over to God, He listens. But we also want to prepare for the day we will meet the bridegroom and not get distracted. For Fr. David, the emptiness that was in his soul he attempted to fill with anger, with sensualism or by just trying to forget, but all of those were roads to emptiness. It took time, but when he prayed, studied his faith, and made time for God, he was able to experience transformation. Sometimes our oil can run real low (even if we aren't aware of it), and we have to be honest ourselves where we are at in life. And ask ourselves questions about our faith journey. How do we pray? How do we enter into Mass - do we skip it when it's inconvenient, or just see it as an obligation? Do we think about our faith and seek to understand it through spiritual reading? Do we maintain that ongoing relationship with God every day, or see Him as removed or just as the fire extinguisher behind "break glass in case of emergency?" God loves us so very much. And truth be told, when you love someone, sometimes there are emotional highs, but also emotional lows where the relationship is strained, or you don't feel that love. But when we remind ourselves what God did for us all, and of His promise that He knows even the number of hairs on our head, we can remember we might not see the bridegroom, but we will eventually see Him face to face, and He sees us.

Second, it's so important to love daily. Consider keeping a list of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. A quick refresher:

The **corporal works of mercy** remind us how we treat others. They are:

1. Feeding the hungry. There is so much poverty in the world, and donating to food shelves or packing food can do much to help.
2. Give Drink to the thirsty. We take it for granted that we have access to clean water. There are many charities that provide for the building of wells around the world, and we can distribute water to the needy.
3. Shelter the Homeless. Consider donating time to Sharing and Caring Hands. Look through your old clothes and donate them - often a truck will come right to your door.

4. Visit the sick. We live this out by visiting immobile loved ones, giving blood, becoming a Samaritan minister or bringing someone Communion.
5. Visit the Prisoners. We are all sinners, but for those who pay a public consequence for their action, they can wear a scarlet letter for life. Our parish participates in prison ministry with others, and we can pray for those in prison and those recently released. You can also donate presents to children whose parents are in prison.
6. Bury the Dead. Funerals bring consolation to the family, and it's important to go to them. To pray for the dead. To visit a cemetery and tend to a grave. To offer comfort to people who grieve, remembering grief does not have an endpoint, and it's a long journey.
7. Give Alms to the Poor. There is so much need out there, and maybe we can live this out by skipping a morning coffee at Starbucks and donating that money to the poor one day, and donating to charity.

The **spiritual works of mercy** help the spiritual needs of people. They are:

1. Counseling the doubtful. Doubt is a part of the faith journey; we need to listen and receive instruction, and journey with people through their Good Fridays and Easter Sundays but let others do that for us too.
2. Instructing the Ignorant. So many do not know their faith. So many fear talking about it these days. Consider being a catechist. Go on a service trip. And learn your faith by finding a theology book.
3. Admonishing the Sinner. It doesn't mean shame. But it means we guide others. We correct others out of love and must act when we see sin. But we also must be aware we are a sinner too and remove the wooden beam from our eye first before the splinter from our brother's eye is removed.
4. Comforting the Sorrowful. People deal with grief. Sometimes we just need to be present and listen as they go through a tough time, or make someone a meal or send them a card to remind them that we love them.
5. Forgiving Injuries. Part of our oil from God is mercy; but this must be passed on. We need to let go of grudges and work towards healing.
6. Bearing Wrongs Patiently. We are all hurt by others. But as Fr. David learned, it doesn't do much good to harbor resentment. We must place our hope in God so we can endure the troubles of this world. When people frustrate us, rather than reacting with anger, we can step aside, pray and ask for God's help.
7. Praying for the Living and the Dead. We are all connected, and prayer helps us and is a way we can support others. We can have a Mass said for someone. We can write down who to

pray for each night and keep it on our bedstead. And we can make an effort to pray for those in life we may have a hard time with.

Sometimes as Fr. David experienced, we can forget that we are invited to the wedding and have been given a lamp with oil from God to provide light in the night, and to provide light to others. We will meet the bridegroom, and we are the bride. May we never forget how much he loves us and prepare for that day when we will meet him by keeping our oil well stocked.