

A different way to pray

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue



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You're having coffee after the worship service on a Sunday. You say "Hi!" to someone you know, ask how are you, what's up, and you catch up on this and that. And then, just as you're finishing, your conversation partner takes hold of your forearm, and her tone changes. "Say a prayer for my dad, will you? He's not himself, the dementia's really kicking in, and I feel like he's losing his identity inch by unrelenting inch." And you look into your friend's eyes and see the cost of what's required to keep going, and you say, "I'm so sorry. This must be such a bewildering time for you. Of course I'll pray for your dad. And I'll pray for you too."

But then you've made a promise. A promise you have to keep. How exactly do you pray for a person in such a situation? What words can you find to wrap around this kind of long, slow-burning tragedy, in which lives and souls unravel and there's no sign of the dawn?

There are two conventional ways to pray for your friend and her dad. I'm going to call the first way resurrection. It's a call for a miracle. You just say, "God, by the power with which you raised Jesus from the dead, restore this man in mind and body, make him himself again, and bring my friend the joy of companionship and the hope of a long and fruitful family life together."

There's a big part of you that wants to pray this prayer. You love your friend. You see how watching her dad disintegrate before her eyes is breaking her heart. You want God to show some compassion, some change, some action. In the back of your

mind you maybe have a sense of some other Christians who seem to pray for resurrection all the time, and you wonder if you should have more faith and expect God to do amazing things every day. But you've also seen hopes dashed, Alzheimer's ends only one way, and part of you can't even say the word heal because it seems that healing just isn't going to happen. You know Christianity's founded on the prayer of resurrection—but sometimes you just find it too hard to say.

The other conventional kind of prayer is the prayer of incarnation. It's a call for the Holy Spirit to be with your friend and her father. It's a recognition that Jesus was broken, desolate, on the brink of death, and that this is all part of being a human being, part of the deal you sign onto the day you're born. Our bodies and minds are fragile, frail, and sometimes feeble. There's no guarantee that life will be easy, comfortable, fun, or happy. The prayer of incarnation says, "God, in Jesus you shared our pain, our foolishness, and our sheer bad luck; you took on our flesh with all its needs and clumsiness and weakness. Visit my friend and her father: give them patience to endure what lies ahead, hope for every trying day, and companions to show them your love."

The irony about this prayer is that while the resurrection prayer expects God to do all the work, this prayer stirs us into action ourselves. If we say, "Send them companions," we've got to be wondering if there's anyone better placed to be such a companion than we ourselves. Deep down our friend knows that the prospects for her father are pretty bleak. What she's really asking for when she nervously puts her hand out to clasp your forearm is, "Help me trust that I'm not alone in all of this." Chances are you can help her with that. But you'd hardly be human if you didn't feel powerless and inadequate in the face of all she's going through.

Although these are the most common prayers, and in many circumstances they say pretty much all we want or need or ought to say, resurrection and incarnation aren't the only kinds of prayer. There's a third kind—a prayer of transfiguration. It goes like this: "God, in your son's transfiguration we see a whole reality within and beneath and beyond what we thought we understood; in their times of bewilderment and confusion, show my friend and her father your glory, that they may find a deeper truth to their life than they ever knew, make firmer friends than they ever had, discover reasons for living beyond what they'd ever imagined, and be folded into your grace like never before."

Maybe this is your real prayer for your friend and her father, and for yourself. "Make this trial and tragedy, this problem and pain, a glimpse of your glory, a window into your world. Let me see your face, sense the mystery in all things, and walk with angels and saints. Bring me closer to you in this crisis than I ever have been in calmer times. Make this a moment of truth, and when, like your disciples, I cower in fear and feel alone, touch me, raise me, and make me alive like never before."