

Broken Writer, Healed Readers

By Jennifer Slattery

It's often true—those used mightily by God have first been broken. For Athol Dickson, his pain-filled past made him the writer he is today.

Dickson has struggled with heartache, depression, and moments of faithlessness—these struggles helped him understand humanity at its core. He knows what it's like to run from God, to face betrayal, and to lose those he held dear. His pain contributes to the gripping realism of his books and allows him to penetrate to the very soul.

'I'm done with You'

A few years before his novel *River Rising* was published, Dickson's mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The two were extremely close, enjoying vacations together, frequent phone chats, and daily visits. While she was sick, he was her primary caregiver. As a result, he saw firsthand how devastating cancer could be.

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Then, a few months after his mother's diagnosis, when she was already bed-ridden, losing weight, and losing her battle, Athol received more tragic news. His mother's sister and best friend of 70 years had died of cancer and someone needed to tell his mother.

"I got so mad at God," Dickson says. "I was struck with an overwhelming sense of futility and loss and misery. I decided God and I were finished. I told him, 'If this is how you treat the ones I love, I'm done with you.'"

At that point, Dickson deliberately stopped praying and tried to pretend God didn't exist.

'I came crawling back'

But, his depression increased. Plunged into the depths of despair, living far from God, Dickson says he learned exactly what Solomon meant in Ecclesiastes when he talked about the futility of life. "When you turn away from God, having known Him as He truly is, what you're turning toward is nothing. Nothing at all. Everything becomes two dimensional, like cardboard cut-outs."

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Dickson continued to spiral into a cycle of relentless negative thinking. Feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear trapped him for no rational reason. He wanted out.

Before seeking professional help, he and his wife decided to get away. They embarked on a two-week road trip to the Rocky Mountains. While she drove, Dickson focused on the beauty all

around. Before long, Christ broke through. By their return home, he had remembered who God was, how beautiful He is, and how much God loves him.

“So, of course, I came crawling back,” Dickson says, “and like the father of the prodigal, God came running out to meet me.” From where he is now, Dickson cherishes the experience. Not only did it teach him about the depths of God’s love, it showed him there’s nothing he could say or do that God will not forgive.

‘He treats them no different’

Each painful experience, from the death of his mother to a personal struggle with drug addiction, has made Dickson the person and writer he is today. Having experienced the healing love of Christ, he now spends a great deal of his time demonstrating that grace to others. Once a week, he teaches a resume writing class at a homeless shelter. Each month, he serves “the least of these” his famous ribs, looks them in the eye, and treats them with dignity and respect.

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“Athol interacts with the homeless the same way he interacts with me if we are spending time together,” says Eddie Orem, Dickson’s close friend. “He treats them no different than if he was chatting with a businessman, a pastor, or a waitress at a restaurant.”

One week, an inebriated man walked into Dickson’s weekly Bible study. The man sat down, quiet, and listened as Dickson expanded on some deeper truths of Scripture. Toward the end, the man broke down and started to cry. He asked for prayer, wanting release from his addiction. Dickson, having struggled with his own inner demons, was moved not just to compassion, but also to action. He got up, walked over, and held the man while everyone prayed.

“Athol feels the hurt and pain others feel,” Orem says. “I see a genuine sadness in Athol when others are suffering.”

‘A man of great inner strength’

Dickson’s compassion comes from a heart set 100 percent on Christ, according to his brother, Garret Dickson. “He is a man of great inner strength, sensitive to a higher calling.”

Athol Dickson’s empathetic understanding and deep compassion bleed into his writing and impact his character development. “Compared to writers who haven’t dealt with things like addiction, depression, disease, and death, it’s probably easier for me to imagine some of the dark places where my characters live and the difficult times that have shaped the way they are,” he says.

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His latest novel, *The Opposite of Art*, is an example. One of his characters, raised around drug addiction and prostitution, is deeply scarred. “I lived some of that before I became a Christian,” Dickson said. “And I’ve known many people in that kind of life, so I can write with some authority about it.”

That authority and compassion in Dickson’s novels is a result of what he’s learned from his own trials. His books are driven by a passion in deep affection for his Savior.