

It's been said, those used mightily by God have first been broken. For Athol Dickson, his pain-filled past made him the writer he is today. Having struggled with heartache, depression, and moments of faithlessness, he understands humanity at its core. He knows what it's like to run from God, to face betrayal, and to lose those he held dear. This enables him to write with a gripping realism that penetrates to the very soul.

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, Athol was her primary caregiver and he saw firsthand how devastating cancer can be.

And things got worse. A few months after his mother's diagnosis, when she was already bed-ridden, losing weight, and losing her battle with the disease, Athol received tragic news. His mother's sister and best friend of seventy years had died of cancer, and someone needed to tell his mother.

"I got so mad at God," Athol said. "There was a televangelist talking on the TV set at that moment, and I watched that man jabbering on and on and strutting on the stage. 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, Athol deliberately stopped praying and tried to pretend God didn't exist.

Athol's depression increased. This period of darkness lasted for two weeks. Plunged into the depths of despair, living far from God, Athol said he learned exactly what Solomon meant in Ecclesiastes when he talked about vanity and the futility of life. "When you turn away from God, having known Him as He truly is, what you're turning toward is nothing," Athol said. "Nothing at all. Everything becomes two dimensional, like cardboard cut-outs."

Athol continued to spiral into a cycle of relentless negative thinking. He became trapped by feelings of shame, inadequacy, and fear for no rational reasons. 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, Athol focused on the beauty all around and before long, Christ broke through. By the time they returned home, Athol remembered who God was, how beautiful He is, and how much God loves him.

"So of course, I came crawling back," Athol said, "and like the father of the prodigal, God came running out to meet me." Looking back, Athol cherishes the experience because 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.

Each painful experience, from the death of his mother to a personal struggle with drug addiction, has made Athol 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, you'll

find him down at his local homeless shelter where he uses his writing skills to teach a resumé class for those seeking jobs. Each month, he serves “the least of these” his famous ribs, looks them in the eye and treats them with dignity and respect.

“Athol interacts with the homeless the same way he interacts with me if we are spending time together,” said Eddie Orem, Athol’s close friend. “[He treats them] no different than if he was chatting with a businessman, a pastor, or a waitress at a restaurant.” According to his closest companions, Christ’s love radiates from within and overflows to all he encounters.

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

“Athol seems to feel the hurt and pain that others feel,” Eddie said. “I can see a genuine sadness in Athol when others are suffering.”

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

Athol’s empathetic understanding and deep compassion bleed into his writing. When asked how his personal struggles impact the way he develops his characters, Athol said, “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.”

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

Athol’s novels are written with the authority and compassion based on experience. They are driven by a passion rooted in deep a deep for his Savior. It’s easy to see why Athol’s fiction continues to win awards and impact lives.

Side Bar:

A man of many passions, Athol Dickson’s novels transcend description with a literary style that blends magical realism, suspense, and a strong sense of spirituality. They have been favorably compared to the work of Octavia Butler (*Publisher’s Weekly*), Daphne du Maurier (FaithfulReader.com, by Cindy Crosby, *Christianity Today* fiction critic), and Flannery O’Connor (*The New York Times*). He’s a three time Christy Award winner and his novel, *River Rising*, a gripping story that personifies the gospel, won the Audie Award. He loves reading and

digging deep into the pages of Scripture and draws inspiration from God’s creation. Those who know him best describe him as “deep” and “compassionate”—someone who puts feet to his faith, on and off the page.