

Gideon's Fleece + The Dark Night Of The Soul

There was a time, not so long ago, when my world was very dark. Have you ever stood outside, on a moonless night, with the thick, velvety air pressed all around you and the inky black sky above, and realised that you could see precisely nothing? That's the kind of dark I mean.

Of course, I had all the feels as well; sadness, disorientation, confusion, an underlying sense of panic, but, primarily, the overwhelming sense was one of complete obscurity. I couldn't see through the impenetrable blackness all around me, I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face.

I had never been in a place like that before. It wasn't until a long time afterward that I was able to be thankful for such a darkness, but right in the middle, I longed for light, for the path to be made clear, for God to give me a sign.

GIDEON'S FLEECE

A story kept coming to me during this time—one about a man named Gideon from the Old Testament, whom God raised up as a mighty hero and rescuer of Israel (Judges 6-8). The Israelites had been harried for seven long years under the hand of the Midianites (who were related to Israel through their common ancestor, Abraham).

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon one day while he was secretly threshing wheat, so as to hide the grain from the marauding Midianites.

The angel told Gideon, "Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you."

Gideon wasn't so sure. It wasn't so much that he doubted God, but rather he doubted God would use him. He wanted proof.

He asked God for a sign. He would put a woollen fleece out overnight on the threshing floor and if the fleece was wet with dew in the morning and the ground around it was dry, he would know for sure that God was with him and would help him rescue Israel.

The following morning, Gideon awoke to find a wet fleece on a dry floor. In fact, it was so wet that he was able to wring it out into a bowl, filling it to the brim. Convincing, yes?

Not quite enough for Gideon. Maybe it wasn't God's doing, just some strange quirk of overnight temperatures and precipitation and such.

He asked for a second sign, imploring God not to lose patience with him. He would put the fleece out again, but this time he asked that the fleece be dry in the morning while the ground all around would be wet.

Amazingly, that's exactly what happened. And that's where the story also ends, at least in relation to the signs.

Gideon does go on to march against the Midianites, winning a decisive battle and freeing the Israelites from their control. The book of Judges, which chronicles these events, tells us that the Midianites never recovered from that day onward. The people of Israel were so impressed with Gideon's bravery and leadership, that they tried to make him king, but he refused,

We're told nothing, however, about Gideon's thoughts or feelings after receiving the second sign, only that he went confidently into battle soon after, clearly believing God to be with him.

I had always taken this story to mean: 'ask God for a sign and the way will be made clear.' And so, as I entered my dark

night of the soul (although I didn't know that's what it was at the time), I repeatedly asked God for a sign. Not so specifically as, 'make this or that happen', but more like 'show me which way to go.' Metaphorically speaking, I was laying out my fleece each night, *looking for a change*; either a wet fleece and dry ground, or a dry fleece and wet ground. I didn't much mind which one it was, I just wanted some indication of God's presence, showing me which direction to take.

Like Gideon, I wanted to be brave but I didn't want to make a decision without knowing for sure that God was with me in it.

Bafflingly, it felt like God remained silent. I couldn't understand it, I felt like I desperately needed a sign, I was actively *looking* for a sign – and yet my world remained dark.

THE SIGN WAS THE SIGN

I kept wondering about the story of Gideon and the message I thought the story communicated – *ask God to show you, and then go that way* – yet I couldn't understand why God wasn't coming through for me.

And then, suddenly, it hit me. The sign *was* the sign.

The story of Gideon wasn't so much about *direction* but about *trust*. God already knew the way and could see the future mapped out, even if Gideon couldn't. And Gideon didn't need to be able to see that future to *trust* that God was already in it and that He had already gone before him. He just had to believe.

God had proven to Gideon He was able to do both things in relation to the fleece, and that, in fact, nothing was impossible with God.

This was the God who had led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry ground. This was the God who had

spoken to Moses from the depths of a burning bush which had not been consumed. This was the God who had called faithful Abraham out of the wealthy and prosperous civilisation of Ur to come to a place that only God knew, *to a place that would become his home.*

The sign *was the sign* – God can do anything. He already had my future mapped out, I just had to trust Him with it *and step out.*

I needed to make a decision.

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

I'd like to be able to say that I then stepped out boldly and unafraid into a darkness that seemed all-encompassing. In reality, however, the fact that I couldn't see where I was about to place my first step was terrifying.

Although deeply unhappy with where I was, I was also really scared to leave the place of no-decision. At least it was safe. At least it was known. At least I didn't have to wrestle with all the doubts and fears that come when trying to make a decision – will it be *the right one*, will my *family be ok*, what if this *changes everything...?*

I was really scared to say 'yes' to God, without a single clue as to where He would take me. But I finally understood that the lesson of the story of Gideon wasn't about waiting for the perfect sign before stepping out, but rather stepping out in faith, believing God had gone before me—and then watching God go to work.

They say that courage isn't the absence of fear, but feeling the fear and doing it anyway (although the definition of stupidity is much the same which is why life can get complicated at times).

I noticed, almost immediately the moment I stepped out, a

small glimmer of light. Things shifted in my world, doors began opening, new relationships began to flourish, and the darkness began to edge away. Like someone who has been deep underground, I felt my eyes adjusting to the light, my skin soaking in the warmth of the sun.

"Sometimes when we're in a really dark place, it can feel like we've been buried, but we've actually been planted." – Christine Caine

I discovered that what had felt like a sentence of death was really a season of dormancy. I was like a seed, waiting for the right kind of conditions to grow. And, strangely enough, the truth is that most seeds germinate best in dark conditions.

The darkness wasn't an unhappy accident of fate, but a determined season of God. Things needed to die in the darkness in order to be reborn again in the light.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Even now, still thinking about that time, I become still and quiet, deep within my soul. It's a difficult period to contemplate, a time of profound pain for me.

The dark night of the soul is, as Inayat Khan writes, *a total annihilation of all that you had believed in and thought that you were*. Yet as Joseph Campbell states, *"the dark night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed."*

I've recently been reading 'Confronting Christianity' by Rebecca McLaughlin, who tackles the topic of suffering in Chapter 11 of her book. This chapter perhaps wouldn't have resonated with me back then as it does now; I would venture to say that I had, generally speaking, suffered very little in my life up until that point.

Rebecca offers a biblical framework around our concept and experience of suffering, sharing the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha, whose brother Lazarus had died (John 11:1-26). When Jesus finally arrives at their house, Lazarus has been dead for four days and both sisters are grief-stricken. We wonder that Jesus, who could have come sooner, didn't, and instead chose to stay away. Yet even when Jesus does come, he does not fix Martha's problem but instead invites her into a deeper, more profound realisation...

"Jesus looks her [Martha] in the eye and says, "I am the resurrection and the life." As you stand here in your desperate grief, your greatest need is not to have your brother back again. It's to have me.

This statement is yet more shocking than Jesus' failure to come in the first place. Far from being the "good moral teacher who never claimed to be God" of modern mythology, Jesus here claims not that he is offering good guidelines for life, but that he himself is life: life in the face of suffering, life in the face of death.

Jesus' power over death is absolute. I believe it is the only hope we have in the face of our inevitable end. But what fascinates me about this story is how little focus there is on Lazarus himself. Rather, the narrative draws our gaze to profound questions...In this strange stretching of the story, we get a glimpse of the whole biblical framework for suffering. The space between Lazarus' death and Jesus' calling of him out of the tomb is the space in which Martha sees Jesus for who he really is: her very life." | Rebecca McLaughlin, Confronting Christianity, pages 199-202

OUT THE OTHER SIDE

The dark night of the soul is the place where we confront the reality of death, natural or spiritual, perhaps for the first time. It's the collapse of everything we thought we knew and

understood, a painful shedding of possibly our identity, relationships, career, habits, or belief systems that had allowed us to construct some meaning to our lives.

It is often a time of existential crisis as we wrestle with our identity, our sense of self, and the purpose and meaning of life.

Yet it's also the place where we confront Life, the true Life of the world, maybe, too, truly for the first time. *"Our suffering is an entry point to relationship, a relationship formed through suffering as much as through joy. If, as Jesus claims, the goal of our existence is relationship with him, finding him in our suffering is the point."* (Rebecca McLaughlin)

As C S Lewis, British writer, literary scholar, and Anglican lay theologian, who experienced overwhelming grief at the loss of his wife, commented, *"Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

I wasn't necessarily *a better Christian* walking out the other side of that dark tunnel. I wasn't necessarily *wiser, braver, or more certain* of my next steps. The pain I experienced didn't *suddenly evaporate like mist* in the bright light of day, and I wasn't instantly *fixed*.

And yet, somehow, I *had* changed. When I emerged, finally, I did so with a deeper recognition of where I needed to be putting my trust, a better understanding of what is truly of value, and a resolution to allow the painful experience to shape me into a better person moving forward.

And I can still recall the moment in the middle of that dark night of the soul when I suddenly understood the call of God to mean that I must step forward into the darkness. And that, as I took that first step, light began to spill in through the

darkness, illuminating my path, and I discovered that the One I was following had been there all along.

By One Man

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I like the Apostle Paul.

I like his ability to 'call a spade a spade', the unrelenting pursuit of his faith, and his bold assertion to "preach nothing but the cross of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:2). No doubt he ruffled more than a few feathers at times, with his unapologetic directness and refusal to tolerate any other gospel than that of being [saved by grace through faith alone](#).

He doesn't shy away from telling it how it was; the reality that his zeal for God had been seriously misplaced early on, and that he had been a violent persecutor and destroyer of the very faith he was now thankful to call his own.

He doesn't downplay the facts of his former life; that not only had he been zealous for the traditions of his fathers, he had also been considered an 'up and coming' amongst his peers, his upward trajectory in Judaism eclipsing many of those his own age (Galatians 1:13).

Yet he also doesn't state this just for effect or from a place of pride, but rather as facts relevant to advancing the true gospel narrative he now endeavors to preach. He states that he counts all those things of his former life as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord.

He has a particularly warm and fatherly relationship with

Timothy, his 'son in the faith' and he shows deep regard for several fellow workers whom he commends by name: Epaphroditus, husband-and-wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Lydia, and Onesiphorus.

He demonstrates tenderness and genuine love and concern for all those of the "household of faith" and he is a passionate evangelist to those who are yet still "strangers and foreigners" to the gospel of grace. His letters to the early churches are full of pastoral advice and authoritative direction. Yet he is also unapologetically direct and is prepared to meet and name injustice or falsity head-on, as in the situation that he writes about in 2 Corinthians 7 (see also 2 Corinthians 11, Galatians 1:6–9, Galatians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 11:26).

"Paul's letters reveal a remarkable human being: dedicated, compassionate, emotional, sometimes harsh and angry, clever and quick-witted, supple in argumentation, and above all possessing a soaring, passionate commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and his own mission." | [Britannica.Com](https://www.britannica.com)

Paul's influence, passion, and commitment enabled the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root and flourish throughout Asia Minor, and its spread continued long after his death, reaching even to the ends of the earth.

Paul wrote several letters, one of which was the letter to the church at Rome. In chapters 5 and 6 of Romans, he covers some significant theological territory by dealing with the themes of death, life, and resurrection, which came about, he states, 'by one man'...

By One: Death In Adam

The need for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God sits at the heart of the gospel. Paul recounts in Romans 5 how humanity found itself in the dismal state of being sinning,

dying creatures and why we need forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal.

He makes his first point in Romans 5:12 where he teaches that Sin came into the world *by one man* and that death followed swiftly on Sin's heels, enslaving all of humanity in a dominion of darkness and, ultimately, separation from God.

The word he uses for 'man' is the Greek word ἄνθρωπος (anthrṓpos) meaning *human*. We get our English word anthropology from the combining of *ánthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος, "human") and *lógos* (λόγος, "study"). It's therefore strictly more accurate to say that *by one human* Sin entered the world and death spread to all.

While Adam becomes the representative of us all, the focus, I think, is not primarily on his gender (as a man) but on his humanity. In fact, scripture elsewhere confirms that Eve was complicit in sin alongside Adam (Genesis 3:6,12, 1 Timothy 2:14). Together, they were responsible for the catastrophe that unfolded.

"The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution. God's purpose from the beginning is to have His presence fill the earth; humans are to image God and subdue the earth, i.e., bring about order and fruitfulness in creation (Genesis 1–2). Conflict enters the story when humans rebel against God (Genesis 3). Shalom is shattered, and the earth is cursed. Further degeneration takes place (Genesis 4–6) until God brings judgment and mercy (Genesis 6–9). Humans then attempt to restore God's presence (Genesis 11) before God launches His own initiative to re-establish His presence on Earth (the covenant). Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God's initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his

descendants, provides the structure for living in God's presence, and lays the foundation for God's presence to be established on earth." | [BioLogos](#)

The consequence of the fall in Eden – mortality – flowed from Adam and Eve to all of humanity; a literal reality and a core theological truth embedded within the Genesis record. Dying became hard-coded in our DNA.

Not only that, Paul comments later in Romans 7, Sin is a powerful and destructive force that humans find impossible to resist. Humanity has been *sold under sin*, constantly battling against the pull of our own self-will, which is invariably in opposition to God. Despite having the desire to do good, more often than not, we lack the ability to do what is right, so powerful is Sin's hold and influence over us. There is no one in all the world who has not fallen prey to Sin's insidious, whispering temptation* (Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:21).

The introduction and continued presence of Sin in the world is what gives death its power over humanity. We die because we're mortal and death now reigns supreme and we remain dead because of the power that Sin gives death.

In Adam, all die. This is Paul's first point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.

By One: Life In Christ

Yet, says Paul in Romans 5:21, and here he makes his second point, in Christ, there is life. There is another theological truth embedded within the Genesis record, a promise "that new life would be delivered out of death."

"And I will put enmity (open hostility) Between you and the woman, and between your seed (offspring) and her Seed; He shall [fatally] bruise your head, And you shall [only] bruise His heel." | Genesis 3:15, AMP

Humanity was promised that a descendant of Eve – [another human](#) – would arise to wage war against Sin and to overthrow death. Yet in waging this war, death would deal him a powerful blow, a seemingly mortal wound. But out of his death would flow life.

This promise would be affirmed countless times throughout scripture, and, particularly, by Jesus himself during his ministry, who stated the reason for his coming was that “they [humanity] may *have life*, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]” (John 10:10, Amplified Bible).

Unable to wage the war for themselves, God’s promise and gift to the world would go into battle on humanity’s behalf. He would wage war for all those who were weak, utterly helpless, and hopelessly enslaved to Sin. Those who were living in darkness, far from the eternal life God had intended for them. Those whose greatest enemy was death itself.

In fact, this hero’s [redemptive work](#) *on behalf of humanity* would be deeply connected to *his own humanity*. He had to be human, like us, in order to make atonement for the sin of humanity (Isaiah 53:6, Hebrews 2:17)

As a human, he would still feel keenly the pull of Sin’s seductive promise, the desire and temptation, as *the first Adam* had, to undertake this battle on his own terms. He would wrestle with the terrifying but necessary reality of confronting death up close; not just any kind of death but the painful and humiliating death of a traitor.

He would face the world’s great enemy alone, rejected by all, even by those who were closest to him, in the moment of his greatest need. Defenseless, *like a lamb led to slaughter*, he would cling to the words of the Psalmist that, though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God would be with him still. He would choose to suffer according to God’s will, committing his soul to a faithful Creator.

This war would be brutal and bloody and seemingly fatal for our hero.

And yet, there would be an extraordinary twist...

Where *the first Adam* had been a living being; *the last Adam* would be a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). This hero would be human *but not merely a human*. He would be the "Word-Made-Flesh" – the 'one and only of his kind' and in him would dwell 'the entire fullness (completeness) of God's nature (Colossians 2:9).

Written into the very fabric of our reality was a powerful promise that Sin *could be* defeated by the willing sacrifice of one who had committed no sin and who had lived a perfect, moral life according to God's will. The sacrificial death of such an individual, on behalf of all of humanity, would heal the division between God and humanity, reopening the way to the eternal life God had always intended for His creation.

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over Sin and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son, the Word-Made-Flesh. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

Not only that, in meeting death head-on, he would deal it a fatal blow, overturning and destroying its claim on him. Sin's power to command death would be vanquished. Jesus himself would now hold the keys of death and the grave. On the third day, at the break of dawn, he would rise from the silence, *Life* himself having swallowed up death in victory (Acts 2:24, Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54).

One act of righteousness, Paul says, led to justification and life for all humanity. By one man's obedience, many would be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

“As sin has exercised kingly sway in inflicting death, so grace, too, may exercise kingly sway in bestowing a righteousness which results in the Life of the Ages through Jesus Christ our Lord.” | Romans 5:21, Weymouth New Testament

Deeper Magic

I love how C S Lewis writes about this epic moment in his fictional work, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*:

At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant’s plate...The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. “Who’s done it?” cried Susan. “What does it mean? Is it more magic?” “Yes!” said a great voice from behind their backs. “It is more magic.” They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. “Oh, Aslan!” cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad... “But what does it all mean?” asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. “It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.” | C S Lewis

This “deeper magic” is an immutable law of consequence, as certain as the law of gravity or the rising of the sun. Jesus has brought life and all those *in him* will live. This gift of grace has been given, the work has been finished and the end

has been written. *“While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, and, further, now that we are reconciled, we will also be saved by his life.”*

In Christ, all will live. This is Paul’s second point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.

The Resurrection: Proof + Promise

One of the great theological truths of the Christian faith, as taught by Paul and, indeed, written into the earliest Christian creeds is the necessary and factual reality of [the resurrection](#), particularly, the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, Paul asserts that resurrection underpins the entire gospel narrative, without which all of Christian life is rendered futile.

*“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even **Christ has been raised**. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” | 1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV*

He actually summarised the gospel by affirming three statements, one of which is a declaration of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus:

“Remember Jesus Christ [the anointed], raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” | 2 Timothy 2:8 | NIV

The Christian faith asserts and teaches that resurrection is a historical reality; Jesus Christ really did live, die, and was raised again to eternal life.

The resurrection is not only relevant to the gospel narrative, it’s essential. Author Craig Blomberg comments, *“As wonderful*

as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity." Embedded in this reality is the proof that what was begun in Jesus, God intends to do for all creation.

"The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly, the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith" – The New Bible Dictionary 1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection".

Jesus didn't just overcome death, his death also made reparation for all the sins of the world. Sin, in its entirety, was dealt with, once and for always** (Romans 6:10). His resurrection was both proof and promise that the war against Sin had been waged and won. Death has lost its power. Those in Christ *will live*, no longer be held by death but merely passing through it. They too, like him, will be raised to life, never again to experience death.

"I assure you: Anyone who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life." | John 5:24

Life, and life abundantly – the same life that Jesus now has [awaits them on the other side](#).

It's no wonder Paul concludes his thoughts on this subject with these inspiring words: *"In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that*

nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord! (Romans 8:7-39, CEV).

This is indeed good, good news!

***apart from Jesus, of course.**

****This, of course, doesn't mean that we don't still struggle with sin – this is the challenging reality of the Christian life – but rather that the penalty that sin inflicts, death, has been absolved for those in Christ (Isaiah 53:6, 1 John 2:2, John 1:29). We eagerly wait, with all of creation, to be completely set free from the bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:22).**

A large part of the inspiration for this article came from the worship song 'This My Soul' By The Gray Havens. It's truly worth a listen and captures Paul's sentiments from Romans 5 and 6 perfectly. This song is one of my personal favourites.