

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.

Keeping The Faith

The question isn't "do you truly believe" but, "who do you trust"?

Leaving

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Leaving is never because of just one thing. Not really.

It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference.

For me, the eventual leaving of the religious community I grew up in began as a tiny question fluttering at the back of my mind.

Back then, I'd never met a question I didn't want to take apart, examine, rearrange and then carefully reassemble, perfectly ordered, and satisfactorily answered.

I'm, by nature, a lover of straight lines and exact dimensions. I find predictable angles strangely comforting, the even length and width of squares reassuring. Curved, irregular edges and uneven portions, I had decided, are one of

life's great menaces. Questions without answers were anathema.

Questions + Answers

However, this question-with-no-answer was an uncomfortable and irregular shape, one that I could not find a corresponding answer to in my existing theology. It was like a jigsaw piece that had been accidentally caught up from another puzzle, and no matter how I turned it around in my mind, I could not make it fit into my existing framework.

I was possessed with an uncomfortable sensation that something didn't add up, that what I had been told no longer carried sufficient weight or authority. It was an inconsistency I could not overlook nor satisfactorily explain, an unexpected bump in an otherwise smooth spiritual life.

But back then, it was just *one thing*. It stood alone in its irregularity and I let it sit, like a bothersome pebble in my shoe, not fitting, never resolved. This question wasn't the explosion, merely the spark; but when I cast my mind back to all the *one things* that finally resulted in my departure, I get no further back than this question.

This is a difficult article to write in many respects. I have many friends and family still within the community that I have left. The thoughts I share are entirely my own and are not intended to imply any lack of conviction or sincerity in any one of them, or indeed anyone else from within that community. I hope I am able to write about my experiences with respectful thoughtfulness for the many loving and good people who remain there still.

Yet I am also aware that I cannot be alone in my uncomfortable questioning. There must be others who have asked, if not the same questions, ones that are very similar and who have then sat with the same unsatisfactory answers, ones that simply won't fit.

What are we to make of such inconsistencies? Does faith ask us to suspend our questions or does faith ask us to push deeper into them, despite the challenges, despite the possibility we may need to admit another answer is not only possible but probable and necessary?

You may be wondering what the question was. Well, it was hardly earth-shattering. It was a question of *when and where a woman ought to wear a head covering*. Yes. I grew up in a head-covering church.

Principles + Applications

(I would like to make a brief comment at this point; if you are a woman – particularly one who I know personally – who believes head coverings for women are a biblical principle that should be applied in perpetuity and therefore choose to cover your head, I deeply respect your conviction. I am not seeking to change your conscience on this issue. But I can bet you have questions, particularly if the application of this principle in your church looks anything like it did for me...)

The religious community I grew up in wore head coverings for church services, Bible classes, and Sunday school, but not fellowship meals or family Bible readings. We wore them at church preaching meetings, but not during community hall cleaning or evangelistic neighborhood visits. We would wear them for youth activities, more specifically, the formal part of the event but we wouldn't wear them for the supper and games that followed, nor at church picnics or community outings.

We would wear them during formal preaching and Bible exposition but not during informal discussion group activities. We would wear them for church worship (although a woman wasn't able to 'pray or prophesy', despite the scriptural prerequisite of 'a covered head' being satisfied), and remove them immediately afterward.

Head coverings denoted submission we were told, yet submission, strangely, didn't seem to be required in the home, on trips to the beach, or when we were doing the grocery shopping. Little discussion was given to the biblical principle of submitting *one to another* and what that might possibly mean.

Finally, head coverings were required for a church meeting of business, which was neither an act of worship nor a church service of any kind. The question took shape in my mind and refused to be dismissed – *why?*

Why did we wear head coverings anyway? What was their purpose then or now? Are they even required now? What is submission really? Women had clearly prayed and prophesied in public worship then, why no longer? Or why, even with the required head covering in place did women 'remain silent'? Why on earth did we wear head coverings to a business meeting?

Did we have it all completely wrong?

I'm not proposing to suggest an answer in this article to the questions this particular subject raises (if such an answer exists) or that the questions I've noted form a comprehensive list of all the relevant points of discussion. I'm simply highlighting the moment, for me, that scriptural principle and practical application suddenly appeared to be inconsistently applied and self-contradictory.

Just one question. One little spark.

Piles Upon Piles

Time passed. Over the years, the questions gathered in untidy piles in my mind.

Why did we bemoan the state of the world yet we seemed to do very little by way of community engagement or civic involvement to fix it?

Why did we seem to know a great deal about the end times and prophecy yet precious little about the here and now; the practicalities of Christian witness; paying our taxes, saving our marriages, stewarding our lives and finances well?

Why didn't more of us recycle?

Why could we eat lunch with our non-believing co-workers but not socialise with them over dinner?

Why was taking communion at church – *common union* – such a solitary and miserable affair, hemmed in on either side by silence and woeful introspection?

Why, if we were a people saved and redeemed and made new, did we sing such mournful hymns of lament?

Why, if woman was created to stand alongside man, equal partners in the great mission of God to fill the earth with His glory, were the women I saw all around me prohibited from contributing in meaningful ways within the church; in teaching; evangelising, praying, and leading the congregation with wisdom and grace?

Why did I see power posturing and spiritual manipulation manifesting themselves in a community born out of the sacrificial heart of Jesus, *who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*? Why did *nobody* do anything about it?

Why, when we were meant to celebrate *grace*, did we seem to reward *intelligence*, beginning at a young age?

Yearly examinations to determine biblical knowledge were undertaken each year by Sunday School students. The questions were often difficult and, it seemed, purposely disorientating. The premise seemed clear: the more you knew, the more spiritual you were and the closer to God you got. We all received prizes at an end-of-year award ceremony, for what

exactly I'm still not really sure, but 'first in exam' and 'first in class' always got a mention and an additional prize.

I don't recall any mentions for *character development*, *personal growth*, *kindness*, or *showing Jesus to others*.

The motivation may have been sincere but the subliminal messaging was flawed. We were taught to compete against each other, not run alongside each other. We were taught that what we knew was more important than who we were being.

It often seemed to me that the word of God was something to be sermonised from, bored by, afraid of, or wielded, weapon-like at others, but never the spirit-breathed and living words of Heaven's Creator, active and able to deeply transform our hearts and lives, shaping us for His purpose.

Compliance seemed more relevant than character, uniformity more desirable than unity and, in the end, what I could *explain about Jesus* significantly more important than whether I actually loved Jesus and was following him (or at least trying to).

The Spark Ignites

All the things I've mentioned, the questions I've shared (and the many I've left out) can most likely be found in many other churches or religious communities, to a greater or lesser degree. And no church is perfect or has it all sorted, this I am willing to admit.

None of these things, alone, were enough to cause a leaving.

But I did resolve to do something about my questions, to seek opportunity and space to ask them, to give voice to my doubts, to challenge my perception of Christian life, and, if necessary, to adjust and reorient my direction.

To let scripture speak to me, unfiltered, and be confident

that the Spirit would lead me in all truth. To allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continued to grow and deepen, built on the solid rock of faith in Christ.

To believe that the important things God wished me to know, He would make known.

I can't say for sure whether, in the end, it was I who left or whether I was the one who was left; perhaps it's more accurate to say that I was simply a strange shape that no longer fitted into a space that could not change.

Like the question that started this journey of deconstruction, I was now an uncomfortable and irregular part, a puzzle piece that no longer worked with the whole. The posture I had adopted and the resulting reorientation were now incompatible with my existing religious community.

Officially, I was ex-communicated, an ecclesiastical term weighted with censure and disapproval. *We can no longer affirm you as a Christian.*

It implied I had not measured up to the expectation of Christian living, and this judgment sits uncomfortably with me. I have no glaring moral issue or unrepented sin that would give cause for such action. The seeming dismissal of the authenticity of my faith was painful and difficult to understand.

This only resulted in further questions. What happened to *come and let us reason together*? Who decides whether another Christian's life of faith is lacking?

What really is the purpose of ex-communication in scripture? How much power, if any, should Christians wield over each other in spiritual matters?

What makes a Christian *Christian* anyway? Is it what I know or

Who I trust?

Why does the church gather? How is unity in Christ really achieved?

Where did I belong?

I did not deserve ex-communication. And yet here I am, on the other side of something that, at one time, seemed the most scandalous thing that could happen to any Christian.

I find that I belong nowhere and everywhere. That a leaving is also a beginning. And that, when Jesus said *you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*, he really meant it.

I have not been ex-communicated by God.

Still Asking Why

Why did I feel the need to write about this?

Well, firstly, I don't think I am alone, in my questions or my sense of something not quite fitting right. I am certain that there are others out there, people I know well and people who may be strangers, who are *asking questions*.

And I want to tell you, it is okay to ask those questions; don't be deterred in your asking. *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.*

The true function of Christian theology is faith that seeks understanding; to not just know more about God, but to *know God*. We start with what we do know – and Abraham, the great father of faith is given as the classic example – *that God exists and He is a faithful rewarder of those who seek Him*. And then we keep searching, and asking, and growing, and learning, and building our life on this certainty, all with the intent to *know God more*.

Our questions aren't just interesting, they're vital to an informed, robust faith that will last us a lifetime of Christian journeying.

Secondly, you may be afraid to ask your questions. I want you to know that I understand your fear and your hesitancy; your desire to avoid similar censure. And yet I would say to you, *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.*

You are God's beloved child and He is not afraid of your questions. If you commit your heart in faith to Him, He will lead you in all truth. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

And finally, to those who would feel the need to censure such questioning, I would urge you to pause and reconsider. The Christian faith is not defined by all the things we could possibly know or articulate. None of us would dare to claim we have all knowledge or fully understand all there is to know about God.

The Christian life is not an academic exercise.

The Christian life is built upon the simple premise: *This Jesus, who was crucified, God has raised again to life and he is both Lord and Christ.* Those who confess this truth are God's children, adopted into the household of faith by God's grace.

The question then becomes not *what do I know but who am I being?* Are our lives demonstrating the fruit of a walk guided by the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control? Jesus told

us by their fruit you will recognise them; that these are the markers that will distinguish a true follower from one who is a follower in name only.

The local church does have a corporate responsibility in the moral matters of each Christian's life (another day, another blog), but *the people are the church*, we are *all responsible to each other* to encourage, disciple, equip, and, if necessary, admonish in our Christian walk.

And how can we grow, make mistakes, experience grace, or mature in our discipleship if we cannot ask questions and, if needed readjust, no matter how uncomfortable?

This is the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way.

Leaving is never because of just one thing. It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference. Every question I had ever had, every answer I had been given, and every answer I hadn't found brought me to the painful realisation that this was a religious community in which I no longer fitted.

In the end, leaving was inevitable.

As I have written this article, I have endeavoured to share my thoughts and experiences in an accurate and factual way, as they relate to me personally, summarising many aspects for brevity. For some of you reading this, my words may have deeply resonated with you and your experience closely mirrors my own.

Others reading this may be confused, disappointed, angry, or offended by what I've shared and may have received this article as critical or directed personally at them or someone they know. It is true that I have written in such a way that gives a critique of sorts. However, I would respectfully remind my readers that criticism is simply an evaluative or corrective exercise that can be applied to any area of human life, and is perhaps at its most relevant in the evaluation of our spiritual lives. Critique, while uncomfortable, can be the catalyst for much-needed reinvigoration, renewal, and revival.

No part of this article is intended to be received as criticism of any one individual, or offensive or divisive in nature.