

# 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.

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## **In Him Was Life**

New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege, not a heavy burden and duty.

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## **Crossing Over**

There are many crossings a human will make in a lifetime. Our introduction to life is just the first.

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## **Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow**

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I don't know about you but sometimes I feel bad for not *knowing then what I know now*.

Bad, as in, I wish I'd *known better*, I wish I had *known more*, I wish I had *known sooner* or *responded better* or *chosen differently*.



But here's the thing. We only wish this *because* of what we know now. Which is to say, in all the time that's passed from *then* until *now*, we've learned something, we've grown, we've become more equipped, less reactive, we can make better choices *only because* of what we've experienced in the past, both good and bad.

This is the value of life experience, it's what we often call the beauty of hindsight; those lessons from life that can be seen today *only because* they've been learned from what has been experienced in the past. In order to gain the wisdom needed for our tomorrow, we had to learn from experiences, both positive and negative, in our yesterday.

## **If I'm Honest...**

There are things in my life that I look back on and still blush over. There are things said and unsaid in my past that still cause me regret when I recall them today. There's definitely a sense, at times, that if only I could go back and do *that thing* over, things would be different.

But do you know what? Things probably wouldn't be any different. Because that was *then* and *this is now*. I'm not the same person I was yesterday or the day before that. Life is changing me.

I may face a similar situation in the future and have learned enough from the past in order to do things differently. I perhaps wouldn't make the same choices or mistakes today as I did then, but only because those choices in the past *taught me differently* and *made me different*.

But I can't change the past, no matter how much I wish I could. I can't take today's insights into yesterday's mistakes, I can only use today's insights to grow tomorrow's wisdom.

And perhaps I shouldn't wish to change the past. Maybe I

should be learning to make peace with it. Maybe I should be more thankful for yesterday's mistakes, as strange as that seems, because of the valuable lessons I learned, not just about life but also about myself.

We often look back on our past, our mistakes, or our decisions and hate ourselves for them. And while I'm not for a second suggesting we glory in sin or our mistakes (Romans 6:2), these things can nevertheless be seen from a different perspective – as powerful lessons from life – and what we learn from them can be used for good in the future. We can take the pain or regret or shame that spills over from the past and use it to empower us to do better today, to choose more wisely, and love more deeply.

We do not need to be only the sum of all our mistakes or regrets, we can be so much more than that.

## **Cancel Culture < Grace**

I've been thinking a lot about cancel culture and how it's the antithesis of grace. The current climate seems so quick to cancel others, on account of one mistake, one indiscretion, one ill-formed thought spoken out loud, one ugly sentence spoken out of the season. Yes, those things are disappointing when they happen, and sin is still sin. We ought not to shy away from calling out sin and calling each other to repentance, reparation, and renewal.

But in others, and, specifically in the light of this article, in ourselves, our mistakes only become who we are when we embrace and celebrate them. When we show remorse, or regret, when we apologise and repent, and commit to doing better in the future, our mistakes become valuable building blocks to a better version of ourselves. Grace towards ourselves or others becomes the fertile ground for spiritual renovation and renewal. It is in our weakness that God's power is perfected (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We cannot condemn sin or mistakes or the things in our past that we're ashamed of without also offering ourselves the much-needed balm of grace that dispenses kindness, favour, advocacy, and forgiveness. We hold both in tension; the disappointment of our (or life's) failures with thankfulness for what we learned from these experiences; the grief of sin that stains alongside the healing embrace of grace that cleanses.

I can recall some unthoughtful words I once spoke about someone, a criticism of sorts I suppose. I think about these words often, actually, and still deeply regret speaking them. While I can give all sorts of reasons as to why I said them and argue that *my* underlying feelings were justified, I still wish I hadn't said them. They weren't particularly kind or graceful and, mostly, I can look back now and see that, in that moment, I was a terrible witness for Christ. The way I spoke and acted was so detrimental as an example of discipleship to others and was deeply hurtful to another person.

Although I felt *I* was on the receiving end of critical words, instead of taking a beat, thinking the situation through, and responding with grace, I simply responded in kind. There were a million different ways I could have probably responded but the reality is, at that moment, I didn't. Of course I wish I could do it differently now *but I can't*. I can only apologise (and I have done so), learn from this mistake, and use it as wisdom for tomorrow.

I learned four valuable lessons from that experience, which I have endeavoured to implement today.

## **Words Matter**

Words matter, even when said in the heat of the moment or when we believe our feelings are justified. There's a way to speak truth but do so in love, in a way that isn't harmful or

wounding. Just because we're upset, or feel maligned, criticised, or challenged doesn't mean that the way we speak doesn't matter.

I think we have all been taught to avoid having difficult conversations as a way of securing some kind of false peace. What we really should have been taught is how to have civil conversations with those very different from us, in a way that communicates our feelings or opinions well, without wounding the other.

I learned that words matter. And that I needed to guard my heart for it's out of the heart that the mouth speaks (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45).

The second thing I learned flowed from this:

## **I Belong To Jesus**

I was painfully unaware of just how important other people's opinions and validation were to me. I had long considered myself to be a bit of an island, quite secure in my own company, likably sociable when necessary, and generally unaffected by others' criticisms. But this piece of stray criticism, directed at me in a time of deep upheaval in my personal life, struck like a barb in my soul. I learned at that moment just how affected I actually was by what other people thought of me and how little security I was actually placing in Jesus's opinion of me. It came as a shock and it really rattled me.

I had to seriously rethink where I was getting my validation from. I had to reevaluate what was guarding my heart. Was my validation placed in Jesus, the rock of the ages, or did I have it resting on the unpredictable, shifting sands of popular opinion? Was I living in the freedom of Christ or stifling under the suffocating need to please people?

I needed to get more intimate with Jesus and this was an

invaluable lesson to learn.

## **There Are Consequences**

Every choice, every decision, and every failure has consequences. Sometimes we or others do or say things that have irrevocable consequences in our life. And sometimes those consequences are painful and hard to live with. Other times, those consequences prove to be God moments, times when our focus was redirected or the direction of our life shifted, for good. Sometimes, they're both.

Sometimes that regretful indiscretion spurs a greater commitment to faithfulness in our relationship. Sometimes that reduced income refocuses us on what we really need in life. Sometimes that failed leader redirects our gaze towards the One we should really be following. Sometimes that disappointing verbal exchange convicts us to do better with our words. Sometimes that closed-door signals a new beginning.

And in every choice, in every consequence, Jesus is with us in it all. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, he is the same. He's been with us in our worst moments – yesterday's regrets, he's with us in our current circumstances of fear, doubt, growth, and joy – today's insights, and he'll be with us in our greatest triumphs – tomorrow's wisdom.

## **Don't Beat Yourself Up About The Past**

Choices have consequences and sometimes those consequences are negative, with reverberations that echo down through our and others' lives. You only need to look at the life of King David to realise that one poor decision can cause ripples of pain and fracture in individuals and families for generations. Where we can, we ought to make reparation and we should, rightly, regret our part in consequences that cause pain or injury to others.

But I think we also need to draw a line in the sand. We need

to learn to forgive ourselves, to afford ourselves the same kind of grace that God so willingly offers to those who repent. We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We don't have to stay in that place or be that person.

Jesus' sin-covering sacrifice means that we get to start each day new, means that we are washed clean and made perfect in his righteousness and that, although we are weak and often stumble, God is committed to completing His good work in us (Philippians 1:6). Jesus died for us, not because we weren't at fault but precisely because we were, sinners completely unable to save ourselves. God is not surprised by our weakness or our failure; it was part of the equation in the sending of His Son.

*"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." | 2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV*

*We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again. We face death every day because of Jesus. Our bodies show what his death was like, so his life can also be seen in us. This means that death is working in us, but life is working in you." | 2 Corinthians 4:7-8 CEB*

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# Come Walk With Me

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Come walk with Me.

Imagine we are once again in Eden, walking together in the cool shade of the trees.

Listen to the sound of the great river, flowing through My garden paradise. Hear the rush of its distributaries, flowing north, east, south, and westward out from My garden. Living water springs from this place, refreshing and pure.

Close your eyes and breathe in the rich, loamy scent of this good earth. There is gold here, and precious stones too, hidden in abundance beneath the surface. Catch the sweet scent of resin floating on the crisp, clean air, the call of the mountain eagle soaring up and away from his nest, the whisper of the wind through the pasture grasses.

I am here with you. I am beside you, all around you. I go before you and I come after you; a burning torch and a defensive shield. I am closer than your very own breath. Nothing will hurt you in this place.

Catch your breath. Rest beside the quiet pools where you will find water for your thirsty soul. Rest here in the stillness. Feel My presence and be restored.

I see your weariness, your unsettled and aching heart. I know your questions and feel your pain. I see the heavy burdens that you are carrying.

Have you forgotten what a life walking with Me should be like? Have you forgotten that I am the One who has breathed life into your dry bones, that I know the very heart of you, and that I love you?

I am your refuge, your redeemer, your restorer. Lay your burdens down.

Rest alongside Me now, beside the still water, and let Me remind you of My love.

You are made for life, an abundant, overflowing, God-shaped and God-filled life. Of everything made in the beginning, your kind alone were made in My image, made to reflect My glory. Body and soul, you are marvellously made.

You were made for belonging, with others like yourself but most of all, with Me. You were made good, so, so good.

When catastrophe fell in Eden and a great chasm arose between us, I was not defeated. When darkness fell in your world, My light shone even brighter, a shimmering beacon of hope to bring you home. I had known from the beginning that this would happen and I had already made a way.

I sent My light into your world; the glory of My presence cutting through the darkness and lighting your path back to Me. I called you to Me and you heard the sound of My voice. Like a sheep that had wandered and was lost, you have returned to Me, the great shepherd of your soul.

As you drew close to Me, I drew ever closer to you; can you not feel Me close even now? I have not left you, you are not walking alone.

You feel small and insignificant but I tell you, you are My deeply treasured child. Does your heart not stir within you, as My Spirit testifies to this truth?

You say you are weak but I tell you, My power is made perfect in your weakness. I have put eternity deep within you, like treasure in jars of clay.

You say you feel inadequate and unworthy but I tell you that you have been made white like snow, whole and worthy in My



righteousness. You say you didn't know My saving power could look like this and I tell you, this is *grace*, *My grace*, and it is sufficient for you.

I am the bedrock on which your feet find firm footing, the Alpha and Omega, encircling you in My safety and protection. I will hide you in the shadow of My feathered wings and My faithfulness will be a shield for you throughout all your days.

I have wept for you, fought for you, bled for you, died for you, and I have been made alive again, for you.

There is nothing I wouldn't do for you.

Quiet those voices in your head, clamouring to be heard, telling you that you must earn My favour, that you must do something to deserve My love. I have borne the cost of our reconciling, it is My gift to you. I have secured your passage home and I will walk that path with you.

Quiet those voices around you, telling you that simply being in Me isn't enough. I tell you, I Am leading you and renewing you and transforming you. You need only abide in Me.

The curse of sin is broken. I have broken it and you are free in Me. My life flows into yours, My Spirit breathing its refreshing wind into your heart. Walk with Me and work with Me and you'll recover your life.

Are you feeling burned out, forced into patterns that are ill-fitting and heavy? Are you tired and anxious, carrying burdens too heavy to bear? I say again, lay those burdens down.

Lift up your weary head and take heart. I am still here, I have always been here and I will never leave you nor forsake you. The good work that I've begun in you, I promise faithfully to complete.

Come walk with Me, I'm all you need.

*“So you’ll go out in joy, you’ll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thornbushes, but stately pines—monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God.” | Isaiah 55:12-13, MSG*