

The Dark Night of the *What!?*

A self-reflection

By

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One day as summer was approaching a couple of years ago, I made a mistake. I don't mean the kind of mistake where you've done something wrong and now you've got to face a consequence, because it wasn't like that. No, this is one of those mistakes any seriously spiritual person, honestly seeking after God, will eventually make—and we make it because we are either ignorant or naïve. I think I was a little bit of both, with a dash of the old Janzen arrogance thrown in for good measure. Looking back now, I realize that Jesus wanted me to make the mistake, and thus did little to warn me...sigh...such is love.

The tale begins in a church—as such things ought to—where I sat enjoying the teaching of one of my favourite prophetic teachers. It was Jon Paul Jackson for those who must know, though what he said at the time has little to do with my story. I was minding my own business, paying attention, when Holy Spirit rudely interrupted. He brought to mind a frustration that had been growing in me for quite a while and seemed to pour a little extra energy into it. I sat there squirming in my seat trying to ignore him, but as you can imagine that only made things worse. He began to speak. I'll reproduce the conversation below...the Holy Spirit will be in Italics and I will be in normal:

“What is that frustration you've been feeling in your spirit?”

“You know what it is, Lord.”

“Are you going to talk to me about it?”

“Sure. I've been feeling confused and getting angry at all the different voices out there telling me what Jesus is like, and who he is, and what he cares about, when it seems like nobody can agree on the answers to those questions. I want everyone to just shut up and quit telling me what to believe.”

Silence, but not that silence which is empty...it was that silence he uses to draw you into the next moment, the moment where he lets you take a step that you have to freely take, because He will never coerce us.

“You know what I want, Lord? I want you to tell me about who you are and what you're like. I want to really know you. So...I invite you to come and sit with me at a table with two chairs, somewhere private. All I want is you, Lord. I just want to hear from you what you say about yourself.”

“Very well”

“Amen?”

And that was it. I'd made the mistake. I'd crossed a threshold I couldn't turn away from and I felt it, though I couldn't understand why I was feeling a mixture of excitement and unease. I think the excitement was God's and the unease was coming from my own heart. Some part of me realized I'd just taken my first steps onto the road of the dark night of the soul, what some call the desert, and my soul was shaken, trembling with trepidation. Yet, as I mentioned above, I was largely ignorant of the path I'd begun. If I had any inkling, I was naïve enough to think it wouldn't be that bad—and the Good Lord knows my ego would just give a high-five and a cheer to my naïveté with some kind of bold, yet stupid comment like “Bah, we can handle it!” Of course, such bravado is one of the first illusions stripped away in the dark night along with many others. Like the passing of a season, it would take some time before I realized what had happened—and by then I was so far down the

road there was no way but forward. My mistake had become the journey God intended all along—this was a plan and not a mistake at all.

In the early days, when the dark night was perhaps still the dark evening, I faithfully prayed the prayer I'd committed to. My faith in God had reached a vital frontier at this time. I'd finally grown out of a complacent season, a time where I was content to kind of coast along. Something had sparked a passion in my heart and I was happy to find it there. Out of my frustration over wanting to know God on his own terms, I had grown thirsty once more, hungry for Him. I thought this was an excellent sign of spiritual maturity and I have to admit I was expecting a far quicker answer to the thirst and hunger than was to come. Self-righteous arrogance is another illusion we lose in the dark night along with all of its tendencies towards fast food delivery spirituality—amen good riddance.

For the next two months, I prayed daily and nightly, asking Jesus to simply meet with me at a table with two chairs in a private place. There were a few brief moments of conversation between us, and they were good as it is always good when Jesus speaks with us, but there was nothing earth shattering about those exchanges—or so I thought. Mainly, Jesus would tell me in some way that he loved me. The simplest of truths, yet always the most difficult for us to truly hear, and I was no exception.

Then on a mid-summer night I fell asleep and awoke in a vision, which I recorded in my journal:

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I was dreaming that I was hiking up a mountain. It was very dry, arid as I imagine a desert would be. I was on a dirt road, sunny day etc.... I came to a small town on the mountain and there were people milling about. I became aware I was dreaming when I saw my brother walking with his twin brother. This is impossible since he doesn't have a twin brother!

"I am dreaming and in a vision," I said. The twins approached me and I said to them, "I know I'm dreaming and in a vision, so tell me what you represent."

One of the twins transformed immediately into a gift box floating in mid-air before me and I reached out to take the gift box. It transformed into a handful of coins in my hand. "I get it," I said. "Change—you represent change."

Then the town and everyone disappeared. I continued to be quite aware and began walking further up the mountain. I called out, "Jesus, I know you don't have to, but can you show me how much you love me?"

Out of the corner of my eye I immediately saw a very bright light flash and when I turned to look at it I saw him. I saw Jesus standing there clear as day. He was smiling and held his arms out to me. I ran to him and embraced him and began to cry. It was incredible, for I could feel him physically—just as real as though I were awake. I held onto his arms and could feel them in my hands.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me," I said. "Thank you for saving me."

I looked into his face and he was smiling and crying as well.

"Thank you for saving me," I said again.

"I proved you wrong," he replied.

"Thank you for saving me," I said once more.

"I proved you wrong," he replied again.

Then I asked him what this place was and he said "Miranda."

I looked around and saw that we were standing at the top of the mountain. There were objects resting here, but what really grabbed my attention was this: there was a small cave with a table and two chairs in it.

Then I woke up.

Aside from this being one of the most incredible experiences I've ever had, seeing Jesus face to face like that (an encounter I've prayed for, for such a long time) I am confused by what he said. I don't know what to make of his response "I proved you wrong."

"Miranda" is a name that means 'worthy of admiration'.

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It's funny to look back at journal entries sometimes. I laugh when I read this one and get to the line 'Then I woke up.' It was more like bolting straight up, breathing like I'd been swimming underwater, and blinking my eyes rapidly trying to orient myself. There is a lot that could be said about the experience of this kind of vision, but such considerations aren't really pertinent to the story, except to stress that I was fully aware of what was going on in the vision and I can't express in words how real it all was, you'll just have to try and imagine it. The vision left me shaken. I walked about in a daze the whole next day; it was difficult to concentrate on regular life. I kept revisiting the scenes of the vision, pondering what it might mean. And then I did something I rarely do: I drafted an email and sent out the vision to several trusted friends. I needed help. *I needed help*. Now, of course, needing help is nothing extraordinary, but my asking for help is. I don't like to do it. I like to figure things out on my own and do things on my own. But God had blinded my eyes and before I really got the point, I had hit 'send.' Self-sufficiency is another bad habit that gets torn down as you walk in the dark night. Heads up: that's a tough one.

Let's break down the vision a bit.

There was some of the vision that was straightforward. In the first part my brother turns into a gift box that turns into change: okay, Lord you are about to cause some kind of change in my life and it is a gift. Then there is the location: a mountain top...okay, Lord you like to use mountaintops for significant spiritual encounters with your people, which this vision certainly was for me. But note: the mountain is a desert mountain and I know enough to equate that with the dark night of the soul...now I'm a little nervous about the change that he is 'gifting' me. Then we hit the portion I don't get at all at first: *I proved you wrong*. What does he mean by that? Why did he say it more than once? Second: why is the mountaintop called 'Miranda'? But one of the most amazing things about the vision was seeing the table and two chairs in the cave. This was the place that I'd been praying for! The place I had been inviting him to meet me in. Now, if I could just understand what He was saying there it would really be incredible.

Then a friend replied to my email. He wrote: "Miranda is probably what he proved you wrong about. I.e., part of you does not believe you are worthy of admiration. That sense is what sometimes puts you in the dry climb and is what needs to change. Saving you and visiting you in your dream both prove you wrong. This special visit says something about how special you are to him."

I read his response to my email several times and could feel God's presence surrounding me, as though to say "*Pay attention, Eric.*" My friend had seen what I couldn't on my own. With his help, I was able to see how Jesus had chosen to respond to my request and at the heart of what he wanted to tell me was that he loves me. He loves me in the way that I only dare wish for...that he would meet with me face to face. Another friend pointed out to me in another email response that to 'mirandize' someone is to tell them what their rights are, as police do when they arrest someone. Jesus was showing me that it was my right to meet with him, to know who he is, and what he's really like.

As with all great heights of spiritual experience, I had to descend from the mountain. Jesus had planted the seed, prophetically showing me the end of a journey I hadn't yet completed. The dark evening was ending and the dark night was about to fall.

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This is not the kind of spiritual journey you wish on anyone. Nor is it the kind of story that will inspire people to seek a deeper relationship with God. No, if they see the dark night for what it is

really like, they may wisely dig a hole where they are, set up a nice tent, and remain there. Many do, I imagine. However, I must confess some of my negative commentary is not to be taken to heart...too much. The point is this: the dark night of the soul, or the desert season, isn't something to be taken lightly. It is hard. I can recall many conversations in which someone has commented, 'I've been in the desert for three weeks...finally coming out of it.' No. That wasn't the desert. The dark night lasts much longer than three weeks or three months. It is a long haul that takes us into a deep valley where darkness lingers and every step presents a challenge. This is the valley of honesty, the valley of relentless pressure pushing in on the soul. As you descend into this valley, your heart skips a beat, your breath catches in your throat, and you have to dig into your courage to take the steps forward. As I did this, I kept the treasure of my vision of Jesus close to my heart. It was a prophetic promise for me to hold on to. It gave me an anchor of truth to call upon when the valley sought to claim me. Jesus loves me. I am worthy of his love...even his admiration. And it is my right to know him and be loved by him.

As I have journeyed through the dark night I have struggled in ways I never thought I'd have to. I've learned what Paul meant when he wrote of groaning as prayer in Romans 8. When spiritual frustration has been so overwhelming that I have no more words to express how stuck I feel. This is one of the first recognizable characteristics of the dark night, or it was for me. You feel like your strength and energy are being sapped, your feet mired in unmovable ground. Straining every muscle to try and move forward becomes exhausting and maddening. In those moments I've prayed, "Why? Why are you keeping me here? Stuck like a statue?" It turns out that this is an excellent question to ask in the dark night. *Why?* is the point isn't it? Jesus didn't lead me into the dark night to grant me the next warm and fuzzy spiritual experience. He'd led me there to find him. I had willingly entered because I wanted to know God on his terms. The dark night is about removing the obstacles to that goal...but the mystery is how much we learn about God as we endure that dark night. I've asked the question why many times during my desert sojourn. Each time I was finally able to face the answer, I found myself having to deal with a serious heart issue, and some of them were quite surprising to me. This was the light of Jesus shining on the most uncomfortable recesses of my heart and he was showing me things I wasn't even aware of. This is another mark of the dark night. We begin to experience emotions and attitudes and sin in our lives that take us by surprise. I won't go into detail about everything...as that would be too humiliating. I will speak of a few though.

The first alarming area that Jesus relentlessly delved into was my anger. Anger? Those who know me might find that surprising. I know I did. The dark night of my soul revealed a deep well of not only anger in my heart, but what I would even call—at times—rage. I was angry, but I wasn't sure why. It was there, bubbling like a pool of lava beneath the earth...smoldering away and only emerging in brief flashes before being hidden away again. Well, God had a plan to unleash that well of anger, pushing buttons to elicit some temper tantrums that were, apparently, long overdue. I recall leaving an evening session at a conference I was attending. The teaching had been good—the worship time even better. I was feeling pretty good. I got on the freeway, heading for my favourite coffee shop to visit with some friends. Traffic grew thick...my heart began to sink...red tail lights could be seen ahead at a standstill for as far as the eye could see. As I slowed down and joined the stalled traffic, I could feel my well of anger stirring.

"Keep calm," I told myself. "It's not that big of a deal."

However, forty-five minutes later, no cars had moved at all. I was trying so hard to be reasonable, not to let my frustration boil over, but abruptly I felt my carefully measured self-control crumble. I was seething. I was truly angry. My analytical brain whispered from some distant place that I was overreacting, but the rest of me didn't care. I lost it. I won't share the colorful language that escaped my lips, but I vented like you wouldn't believe. The lava flowed up and out, boiling over and filled

my car with its raw heat. By the time I calmed down, I felt like I'd been running...and I was ashamed. Then, for the first time in a while, God spoke to me.

"That was me."

"What?" I said.

"That was me. I prodded at your heart to release all that anger."

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?" (You ought to imagine a flabbergasted and whiny tone in those words.)

"Your anger has been building for most of your life. You have stowed away years of hurt and it became a well of anger in your soul. Left unchecked, your anger would eventually lead to some very serious issues in both your spiritual life and your most important relationships. That is not what I want for you. I want your anger so that I can fill that place in your heart with my Presence."

This made me pause. Most of my life? What was he talking about? As I sat there looking out my window at the red brake lights shimmering in the night, they began to blur. My anger spent, now it was time for the pain I'd been harbouring to emerge. I began to cry...and I cried for a long time. There are no words for this moment. As I look back now, I can see Jesus sitting in the car with me, just being with me, his hand on my shoulder. He wasn't there to help me stop crying, he was there to make sure those tears flowed and kept flowing...I realize now he was healing many hurts all at once. When that moment finally subsided, I blew my nose and leaned back. I felt like I'd been running again, but this time it felt like I'd passed a finish line. Then he spoke once more: *"I have a question for you. Why do you feel ashamed if you express your anger when someone hurts you?"*

"I don't know," I replied.

And that was it. He'd given me something very important to think about and it took me a long time to figure it out. At the root of my particular issue was (and is) a strong dislike for conflict. Most of you would probably say you feel the same way. After all, conflict is unpleasant. My problem was that I so disliked and feared conflict, I would simply refuse to engage in it. If someone hurt me, I would work very hard to bury that hurt and forget about it. I wasn't one to confront someone and share with them how they hurt me, let alone attempt to reconcile that hurt. Oh what an ugly realization this has been. It is still a challenge for me. But, I have changed the ways in which I respond to being hurt. In the Gospel I have found an important key to ensuring that well of anger doesn't reoccur within my heart. I have discovered that genuine mercy and forgiveness are powerful weapons against bitterness and anger. I've learned to walk through hurts with Jesus before they can be bottled and stored away to become a future problem. Not always an easy process, but after what Jesus took me through that night, I've learned to remain committed to his Way of dealing with hurt and not my old way.

One more example of Jesus' relentless surgery on my soul is probably needed. This one is an area that I'm sure many can identify with: Anxiety. I can't say for sure, but I'm fairly certain I was born anxious. I have always been a shy, introverted person. I used to struggle with this, but as an adult one of my greatest victories was accepting that this was part of how God created me. Perhaps that's another story though. However, my anxiety problems often arise from my shy nature. There may be some that read this and recall awkward one on one conversations they've had with me and now can know the reason why. If I don't know someone well, it is difficult for me to speak with them, though I always do my best. My anxiety goes well beyond a social anxiety though. Throughout my marriage, my poor wife has often had the following conversation with me:

"What's wrong?" she asks, for she is astute and knows when something isn't right with me.

"I'm anxious. I'm worried," I reply.

"About what?"

"I don't know," I respond.

That's tough for her. How do you help someone who can't give you a reason for what they are feeling? Now, I've learned over the years that as a burden bearer some of my anxiety level is often not even my own, but a burden I have been carrying on behalf of others who are worried and anxious about things in their own lives. But not all of my anxiety could be explained by this. Simply put, I find it difficult to be at peace in my heart. In fact, Jesus himself has had to endure the very same conversation with me as my wife has. He, though, is able to take things a little deeper. As I have travelled along the valley road through the dark night of the soul, Jesus has returned to this area of my spirit again and again. He has been challenging my anxiety issue head on and with good reason. Repeatedly, in the Gospels, Jesus makes some very strong promises about peace and freedom from worry and being anxious. It clearly is not his desire for me to live life hunched over, feeling stressed out about things I can't even name, let alone the real concerns of daily life. No, he wants me to experience the peace of his Presence in real or imagined situations that cause me anxiety. He is the answer for my worrying soul. In the midst of the dark night this was very hard for me. Already feeling stuck and spiritually dry, trying to overcome anxiety seemed like an impossible feat. But this was a journey with different stops along the way and at each, though I couldn't 'feel' the healing, Jesus was working within my heart to make a place for his peace to rest...to abide.

One night, not so long ago, I finally saw evidence of this. My pattern—for years—has been to go to bed, lay my head down on the pillow, and do two things. First, I review my day. I think about all the things that happened, the things I may have said or done. What was good about my day? What was bad? What could I have done differently and what did I do well? And what is there to be concerned about? What will tomorrow bring? And the next day? Oh and next week I will have to...on and on it can go. You can see what happens. I quickly descend in a spiral looking for the things I need to put on my worry list. Needless to say, this is not a good habit, but it is a long standing one. The second thing I do is pray. I talk God's ear off in the early morning hours. I don't sleep well...never have, so I spend that time talking to God. On this night I began my ritual and had to pause. Something was wrong...well different might be a better word. I realized that I had gone the entire day without feeling anxious. I hadn't worried about anything. It was so striking that I lay there blinking to make sure I was awake. There was an unfamiliar lightness in my spirit and now that I was in bed in the silence of the night, I recognized it. Peace. My heart was peaceful. I remember thinking to myself, "So this is what that feels like."

I then began my nightly prayer time.

"Lord, did you know that I went a whole entire day without feeling anxious?"

"Yes."

"I don't how that could have happened."

"I've been working deep within your heart for a long time now. I want you to know my peace. Today there was little for you to worry about, but my peace is meant to rise up in you even on the days when there are very real worries that arise in your life. When your spirit becomes anxious you have forgotten my promise that I will never leave you nor forsake you. I stand at your side in all things. I am teaching your spirit to embrace my peace instead of becoming anxious. I want you to come to a place in your heart where leaning on my peace becomes your first response in all things, instead of reacting to them with anxiety."

I took a moment to take these words in and something dawned on me. This progress had taken a long time. "This is a major issue isn't it?" I stated more than asked.

"Oh yes, Eric. Your anxiety was rooted so deeply in your heart that I had to take time and gently heal it. Today you have experienced the fruit of what I have been doing...and there is more to come."

More to come. It may be difficult for some to understand just how amazed I was at that time. It was the first time I could remember in my life that I had been inwardly peaceful for an entire day. The mystery in all of this is that I hadn't *done* anything. In fact in this area, I was my own worst enemy. I can't sit here and write out some detailed system for how to be a little more spiritual or

give advice on how to overcome anxiety. This was God's work. This was the light shining in the darkness of the long night. This was God's mercy at work in my heart because he loves me.

It was after this prayer time with Jesus that something shifted in my life. A light appeared in the distance. I peered ahead and wondered, "Could that be the end of this valley? Is my time in the dark night of the soul finally nearing its end?"

Not quite. Something else was about to happen that has had a profound effect on me to this day. And in the end, it was a bit of a no-brainer.

3

In the midst of the dark night of the soul I clung to scripture like a man thrown overboard into the sea might cling to a piece of driftwood. During this time I became anchored—or stuck—in Paul's letter to the Romans at a familiar point: Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 is not for the faint of heart. Here Paul launches into a complex and sometimes confusing discussion of the law, sin, death, and the twists and turns of the human heart in relation to them all. I won't pretend to try and discuss this as well as real scholars might, but I have to talk about it in light of the harrowing tale I'm relating here.

One of the surest signs that we are in the dark night of the soul is our confrontation with Sin. It isn't that sin becomes worse in your life. What becomes worse is your awareness of your sin. It becomes overwhelming as you begin to see it more clearly, perceiving it more acutely. As this happens your own desire to overcome Sin grows sharply, but the spiritual strength to do so simply isn't there. In the dark night of the soul, weakness marks you as surely as a tattoo marks skin. In this place of awareness and weakness occurs something only Jesus can do. He begins to transform you, because the truth is this: Jesus has overcome Sin; he has overcome the spiritual rot and death that Sin causes. It is only as we turn to him that we find strength outside of our weakened selves that can help us in the face of this brutal power named Sin.

Yet, we must be willing to do this one thing. We must turn to him. We can choose not to and proceed to bash our fists into the face of an enemy we can't defeat alone. In the end this is nothing but an exhausting battle that leaves us spent, frustrated, and despairing. In the dark night of the soul we become aware of our fallen humanity. The wise become humbled by their shortcomings and *embrace their need for mercy*. Here in this place we learn one of the most important things about being Christians: just as we receive mercy we become merciful. We don't just learn about mercy, we become those who truly understand what it is like to receive it, and out of that humbling experience, we become able to show and give it to others. In the dark night we discover Christ's generosity towards us, an ever present outstretched hand of mercy and forgiveness that refuses to abandon us even when we aren't even sure if he is there. This struggle with Sin in the dark night comes at what seems like the worst possible time. In the dark night we are already at our most vulnerable, feeling weak, frustrated, stuck, doubtful, empty, and often alone. What a perfect time to learn just how much we need Jesus.

Of course, it is easier to look back on a struggle and reflect on it than it is to reflect on the struggle when you are angrily walking through it. I was in a very deep hole as I faced Sin. I felt at times that I was dying inside. What made it all the harder was that I couldn't talk about it with anybody. I didn't know how to articulate what I was going through. I found comfort in the Jesus Prayer and daily began turning to the mercy of Jesus. I read Romans 7 and 8 almost every day, because the second half of chapter 7 seemed to put words to what I was feeling and going through and chapter 8 was where I wanted to go. Here are some highlights.

In Romans 7:13 Paul answers a question about regarding whether the law itself, being good, could have caused such a negative outcome as death. Listen to his words instead of me:

“Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”

I began to see what Paul was trying to say when I was feeling like sin was killing me on the inside. It truly does choke out the life within our spirits. I was recognizing sin in a far more profound way than I ever had before. So, the law is good in that in its light, sin becomes fully exposed for the incredibly destructive power it is. Paul goes on in that chapter to describe a very familiar pattern of failing to do what in our hearts we want to do and doing the very thing we do not want to do. I like these verses because they don't take the fight with Sin lightly. This is an honest description of what the inward life looks like when the battle is on. I found that Sin gives rise to an inner conflict between the true desire in my heart to be like Jesus and to satisfy sinful desires—whatever those may be. Sometimes I felt like I was two people, though I well knew I wasn't. I had come to understand that sin was more than a wrong act or something that kept me separate from God. Sin was a power...like a cloud of gas surrounding me, seeking to destroy me. I often echoed Paul's cry at the end of chapter 7 in verse 24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue from this body of death?”

You can't stop there. I camped in that spot for too long, in my own opinion. I looked across a chasm at Romans 8, wondering how to get over there. A question began to occupy my thoughts: What is the bridge from the struggle described in Romans 7 and the life and freedom described in Romans 8? I began to slip this question into conversations when the opportunity arose. I was looking for something to spark a real answer. I ignored the platitudes and the self-righteous responses. One evening as I sat having coffee with a close friend, I asked him what he thought. It was a good conversation, but the kernel my spirit was seeking wasn't there. Then, a couple of weeks later I saw him again and he told me that he had been considering my question and had asked a few others what they thought. One friend of his, an older (and wiser) woman had told him that the answer was right there in the very next verse.

“Really?” I said

“Yes,” he replied. “She said the bridge is in gratitude.”

I hummed. I hawed. “Seems too simple,” I said.

He grinned at me. “I think she's right.”

“I'll let you know,” I told him. Though I was skeptical, I had most certainly felt a spark in my heart at the word ‘gratitude’. There was something very important here.

Romans 7:25 responds to the question in verse 24 with: “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” followed by the simple confession of our reality: “So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

I decided to attempt a spiritual experiment. I was going to—no matter how contrary to my mood—begin to thank God for things. At this point in the dark night I was ready to try anything to move a step forward, even if it didn't ‘feel’ like much. So, I began a very silly process. I thanked God when I woke up in the morning that I had woken up. I thanked him that I had a job on days when I sure didn't feel thankful for my job. I thanked him for mundane things like green lights at an intersection or a good cup of coffee. You get the idea. I was going through the motions...the kind of faith true seekers like to look down upon. But it was all I had at that point. Then as you may have already guessed something really strange began to happen. Actual gratitude began to come out of my heart. In this dark night of the soul where everything seemed heavy and miserable, I began to really be grateful for some things. In particular, one night, I was praying for my daughters. I began to reflect on life before them and life since them. Life since has been so much richer. I was overtaken by gratitude flowing from my spirit. “Thank you, Father for giving me my kids. They've really changed my life and blessed me,” I prayed. This moment of true gratitude opened the gate for me. I

began to thank God for things in a real way. I still thanked him for green lights at times—but I meant it! Gratitude melted something very hard in my heart. Being grateful is so much more than saying ‘thank you’. Gratitude is the weapon we need to fight off some serious foes. One of those is selfishness. When you begin to be grateful in your heart you begin to see just how much God does for you, how generous he is in all things. This made me aware of my own selfishness and as I saw it, I did not like it. It allowed me to begin changing that part of my heart that wanted to focus solely on me. Gratitude also shines light on our lives and brings things into a better focus. Without gratitude, I would inflate the things in my life that I saw as negatives until they were so monstrous that they not only angered me, but scared me. I would never have linked gratitude to helping me in this way, but I found that as I was genuinely grateful for things, these negatives deflated to a more realistic status. I was able to look at them and realize that though they were real, they were perhaps not as insurmountable as I had thought. Why does being grateful to God have such an effect on the human heart? I think one reason it is so profound is because at the core of gratitude is one of the most important powers known in the universe: love. We acknowledge God’s love for us when we thank him and as we acknowledge that love and realize how deep it is, we are transformed by the immensity of how all-encompassing it is. One of the most powerful moments of gratitude is when in our struggle with Sin we turn to God and say, “Thank you for your mercy.” Sin cannot stand against Jesus. When it comes up against him it loses...it deflates. Its power must lessen as Christ’s presence increases within our hearts. If you don’t want to be grateful, at least be grateful to Jesus for his mercy and forgiveness. This one ‘thank you’ is enough to change our hearts and minds in incredible ways, leading us to a fuller life wherein we walk in the peace and freedom promised to us by Jesus.

In hard times it can be difficult to be grateful. As I walked in the dark night, that is certainly how I felt, but I persisted. I had become determined to follow Jesus out of this valley and I was certain that in gratitude I’d found a way to begin moving that way. I was looking at part of the bridge I’d been seeking from Romans 7 over to 8. There was yet one more element to that bridge and it turned out it had a lot to do with where I’d begun my journey into the dark night of the soul.

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I own many books. I love to read, and much to my wife’s chagrin, I like to keep the books that I’ve read. Sometimes I peruse my many books and recall how much I enjoyed particular ones. One day as I passed by a stack of books (yes there are spots in my little townhouse where there are simply piles of books resting atop one another) my eye was drawn to one. The title seemed to jump out at me: Paul, the Church and the Spirit of God by Gordon Fee. I’d read it quite some years ago now and I recalled how much I’d enjoyed it. I know enough these days to recognize when God is tapping me on the shoulder. So, I picked it up and over the next week or so I reread the book. If you are looking for a book to read about the Holy Spirit that has some solid theology and sheds light on Paul, then I recommend Fee’s book. Reading this book caused a major shift within me. For the first time in a long while I began to experience a new thirst for God’s presence. In the dark night of the soul we often feel spiritually hungry and thirsty, but find it very difficult to find any satisfaction. This thirst was different. I could sense that there was something here for me that would satisfy my thirst. I spent some time reflecting on this and soon I realized what it was that I desired in my heart.

“Lord,” I prayed. “I want to keep this simple. I want to know Holy Spirit for who he is.”

I contemplated this further and decided that I needed the simplest prayer possible. Believe it or not it took me two days to come to a wording that I was happy with (if you haven’t guessed, I tend to overthink things sometimes). I began to simply pray this prayer: “Holy Spirit, I pray that you would show me your Presence.” I didn’t know what to expect and that was the point of it. I was ready to set aside my preconceived ideas and my previous experiences with him. It was time to clear

the stage and give him the freedom to show me who he was in the ways that he wanted to. This was very important to me. There were many good points in Fee's book, but the one that had struck me the most at this time was that Holy Spirit is given to us as a guarantee of the life to come. His presence is a sign that points to Jesus continually. He is the evidence within us that testifies to the reality of Jesus and all that Jesus has accomplished through the cross and the resurrection. What's more, as Fee points out repeatedly in his book, Paul would be completely confused by a Christian living their life without experiencing the Spirit's presence. For him it was so much a part of the Christian life and experience that anything less would have seemed extremely odd. Those who know me well know that I am not unacquainted with the Holy Spirit, but I had reached a new point in my spiritual life that seemed to require a fresh start in my relationship with him. Call it going deeper or moving to a new level if you want, but for me it was time to allow him to reveal himself to me completely on his terms. I had come full circle it seemed. As you will recall, at the outset of this self-reflection my journey into the dark night of the soul began with exactly this same desire and intention, only my focus was on the person of Jesus. Let me quote from above so you don't have to go back: "You know what I want, Lord? I want you to tell me about who you are and what you're like. I want to really know you. So...I invite you to come and sit with me at a table with two chairs, somewhere private. All I want is you, Lord. I just want to hear from you what you say about yourself." Now I was echoing that same desire regarding Holy Spirit. When this began I hadn't yet begun to write this story out, so it wasn't until months later that I saw the connection. There was more than two years between the start of this dark night and my new found thirst to know Holy Spirit in the same way that I had wanted to know Jesus.

Days flowed into weeks as I faithfully prayed my short, crafted prayer. I prayed it as often as I thought of it. Every time I said the words a hint of anticipation would arise in my heart. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I was beginning to feel life in my spirit. I went back to Romans 7 and 8 and I thought I could see the bridge clearly now. Gratitude was like a key opening the gate and allowing Holy Spirit the freedom to do what he wanted within me on his terms and according to who he is was the bridge into the spiritual life Paul describes that I had been longing for. There were no visions, no heavenly visitations, and no supernatural experiences to wow the imagination. Instead small things began to occur within my heart that took me some time to recognize. I would get to the end of a day and upon reflection realize that I had become more patient. "Well how did that happen?" I'd wonder. Holy Spirit would whisper to me, "*That's me. My presence within you.*" Another day I'd realize how much my heart had softened. *That's me. My presence within you.* I began to experience what seemed like random moments of inner peace for which I could give no explanation. *That's me. My presence within you.* Times of joy that were entirely new to me. *That's me. My presence within you.* The ability to show love when before I would give way to anger and frustration. *That's me. My presence within you.* You get the idea I'm sure. Galatians 5 speaks of the fruit of the Spirit and I realized that he was quietly working within me and the evidence was in these fruits. It was remarkable to me. For example, I wasn't trying to be more patient, but because of his presence, I was becoming more patient.

I continue to pray this prayer daily and I just might keep it up for the rest of my life. I am learning that Holy Spirit's presence is not only vital to my spiritual life and transformation, but that he takes great joy in his role. My relationship with him has grown in a way that I didn't expect. He is always present with me. I need only turn my heart towards him and I find him immediately there within me, welcoming and full of love. His presence is always full of comfort and strength. He is always at work within me, tinkering away at my heart, poking and prodding at the places there that still need his changing touch. I have grown to trust him more than I did before the dark night began. To use familiar language, I've begun to know him both as friend and counsellor. I realize that there is so much for me to learn about who he is and in some ways I feel like my relationship with him has only

just begun. When I was younger, I experienced the presence of Holy Spirit in amazing ways. Now, I am beginning to know him and it leaves me in awe of him.

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I believe my journey through the dark night of the soul is coming to an end. I'm not quite out of the valley yet, but I'm certainly not down in the mire of the lowest point of the valley anymore. Signs of life have been appearing and I can only hope that as I emerge from the dark night, I will have learned all that Jesus wanted to teach me during this time and that I've been changed in the ways that he has sought to transform me. It may seem odd, but I'm nervous. I've been in the dark night for quite a long time, and though it has been a hard road, it has become home in some ways. Where will my spiritual life go to once Jesus leads me out of the dark night? I have no idea. However, I trust him more now than I did before this road began and I will follow him wherever he wishes to lead me, for I've learned that God loves me. I have no way to tell you how deep that statement goes into my being now. It is the most powerful knowledge in the universe. Nothing can overcome that love.

In closing, I would like to share a concern that has arisen in my heart. When I realized that I'd entered this spiritual season of the dark night, or desert, I had an understanding of what was happening. I've read books that speak of it. I know people that have gone through it. I had the knowledge to at least understand that I'd entered a long process meant to accomplish something. But how many believers aren't aware? How many have felt plunged into this difficult season without knowing what was happening to them? When everything that used to fill them with spiritual energy lost its potency, was their faith seriously wounded? I suspect there are many Christians out there who've entered the dark night of the soul without knowing much about it and have gotten lost there to such a degree that they've given up on their spirituality and are as dry as tinderboxes in their hearts and souls. In the dark night it is easy to feel alone and even abandoned by God, though this isn't the case at all. But if you've never heard of or been taught about what the dark night looks like, you could easily feel that somehow everything had been cut off from you. It is for these people that I share the story of what has happened to me over the last few years. I can only hope that some will stumble upon it and realize that God loves them and has never abandoned them. In fact, he is calling them to a deeper faith, a faith rooted in who he is. I learned during the dark night of the soul that God is never actually silent. I know some of the classics on this topic might disagree with me, but what I learned was that the ways in which he was speaking had changed. The ways that I was used to hearing him no longer seemed to happen, and that was initially very difficult for me. But slowly I began to hear him anew in ways that were different. I found that in times of deep silence, I would look back and he would show me how he had indeed been speaking, but it was in a place so deep in my heart that I couldn't hear in the ways I was used to.

The dark night of the soul is a hard road to walk. I won't try and make it sound better than it is. However, as I begin my slow ascent out of the valley towards a new season, I want to let you know that it was worth every agonizing step.

eric h janzen