

September 2013: Finding Your Way in the Dark

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It was one o'clock in the morning and I was awake. Frankly, I had to go to the bathroom, and I would not be able to go back to sleep until I first did what I needed to do and then came back to bed. So I crawled out of bed, still a bit groggy. It was pitch black. There was no moon and the clouds had obscured what light might have entered the room from the stars and the town nine miles away. I stood up, took a few steps to the end of the bed and one step further. I took a left turn, walked down the hallway and took my first right at the door. Once again, a few steps forward and then an angle to the left, making sure not to bump into the door. It was easy. I returned to bed without disturbing anyone. The fact is I have lived in this house so long that I can find my way around in the dark.

Actually, I can do a lot of things in the dark. I can fill our water tank, I can check the doors on the chicken coop, I can walk across our canyon to my place of prayer. After seventeen years of living in the same place and doing the same things, you get to the place where you can “do it with your eyes closed.” Indeed, that is part of what experience is all about: learning to navigate our way around things even when it’s not all that clear.

Having said this I would like to share a prayer that I have used to begin my morning devotions for many years: It is a bit long and in “Evan language”, so stay with me:

I choose to pray today, Lord, in spite of my own ambiguities. Intellectually, I simply can't figure all this out. I have no certain foundation to build upon – no starting point. But then, for this reason perhaps every point is now a starting point. Although I have experienced You in many different ways, I have no affective-existential place to call home. Similarly, I can't seem to find my way into a felt sense of ordinary Christian motives, even a sense of acting out of “the love of God,” although I am moved by a vision of Your Character and Your Kingdom. I choose self-examination in the midst of complex imperfections and mere approximations of discernment. I have learned to practice many methods of prayer, but none “works” with any degree of regularity, although I do receive periodic drops of Your grace. In my best moments I realize that any and every type of prayer is an open conduit for Your presence. Some of my most heartfelt prayers have remained unanswered, and I have no idea how much I am to blame for this. My mind is such that I am not very good at recollection or at practicing Your presence.

Nevertheless, I choose to pray, Lord. I choose to give myself to a ministry of prayer, as best I can. I invest myself into prayer, attempting to to make more time for prayer in quantity, and (by Your grace) to completely re-orient my sense of calling and identity through prayer qualitatively. I choose to do this – today, NOW – because You have commanded prayer, and because You have called me to prayer, both for my sake and the sake of Your kingdom. I pray in my freedom and weakness to You who are both sovereign and responsive, in the midst of a

complex, interconnected world. I choose to pray here and now, when and where I can: in my cell, in my office, in my bed, throughout the day as I am able. I permit myself this time to set my mind on You and on the things of Your heart in these various ways, in Your presence.

I realize that I may pray in much confusion at times. I realize that I may experience very little. I realize that any “answers” to prayer may be hidden within subtle, interconnected secondary causes. I realize that I may constantly face a personal problem of evil when I pray, believing that You can intervene and yet never knowing why You choose to intervene here and not there, there and not here.

And yet, in the midst of all this I hear You calling, saying to me, “That’s OK, just pray anyway.”

And so I choose to pray.

Let me share a principle of spiritual growth I think God wants to teach me: Mature spirituality involves learning to find our way around in the dark. Some of us come to faith through a powerful conversion. The amazing grace of God enters our lives and we are transformed from darkness into light. “I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see.” Others tiptoe (or stumble) into relationship with God more slowly, guided by a glimmer of something here, or a patch of grey-white over there. We navigate our way guided by the light of the Gospel. But sooner or later, most of us – perhaps nearly all of us – will experience seasons of darkness in our spiritual life. Furthermore, I have a suspicion that we discover a measure of maturity in our faith when we can persevere through that darkness.

Some of us encounter darkness when we discover questions that we can’t answer. Once we thought we had it all figured out and now we’re not so sure. Where once we had a certain starting point from which to think about God, sometimes our intellectual foundations slip away from us and we can’t figure out how to begin again. Perhaps we have read something in Scripture, and one simple question about that passage has now led us into waters nearly over our heads. Perhaps a conversation with a friend has opened a door and now we have no idea how to make sense of the room we have found ourselves in. Like the apostle Paul in Romans 11, we plunge the depths of some theological issue and in the end find ourselves proclaiming “How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord?”

Others experience darkness in the changes of our spiritual feelings. For years and years we have sensed the presence of God when we sing these songs, pray in this manner, meet with these people. And then – whether suddenly or gradually – we lose that felt sense of God’s presence. Things just seem dry, or dark. We step forward to worship or serve God – and we can reason out why it is that we love God – but the felt sense of motive is gone. It feels like we are doing our devotions (or attending church, or volunteering at the soup kitchen) simply because we did it last week. Sometimes the Father who has led us by the hand teaches us to walk by letting go, and it just doesn’t feel the same.

Still others experience a darkness of their spiritual practices. It is not just that the presence of God is not felt, but that those practices that once drew our thoughts to God, or steered us away from sin, or empowered our fruitful service, now seem to accomplish nothing. It seems like our Christian life is weak and powerless no matter what we do.

Like one of the sons of Korah in Psalm 44, we put our trust in the God who “crushed the peoples” and “give us victories over our enemies” only to discover that “you have rejected us and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies.”

We cry out with the Korah’s son, “Awake Lord! Why do you sleep?”

And then there is the experience of unanswered prayers. “I cry out by day, but you do not answer,” we read in Psalm 22:2, “by night, but I find no rest.” Sometimes we lift up a dear one to God for healing and no healing comes. We ask God to bring a holy transformation to a local congregation and we witness an ugly church split. We plead for our own growth in holiness only to find ourselves years later stuck in the same old patterns. Despite all the teaching in Scripture on answered and unanswered prayer, experiences like this have been known to trigger crises of faith.

For one reason or another (and I can’t go into all the reasons why God might permit darkness in our lives) Christians encounter seasons when it is hard to find our way around our relationship with God. Our darkness can appear in any area of our lives: loss of intellectual confidence, diminishing experience of God’s presence, unfruitful spiritual practices, unanswered prayer, fractured relationships and more. We can no more avoid these seasons than we can avoid the earthly seasons. Winter comes whether we like it or not.

Nonetheless, while darkness can be disorienting for a while, in time we learn how to have faith in God even when things are not clear. As we mature we learn to trust in the All-knowing God more than we trust in our capacity to comprehend God. And with Paul in Romans 11, we joyfully confess that “from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!”

As we mature we decide that we do not need to experience God in this or that way, instead expecting that God will manifest his presence to us however it is best for his own glory (and through this, we learn to be sensitive to God’s presence in all kinds of ways). In time we learn to trust the face of the Lord, even when we cannot feel the hand of the Lord. When things do not work we join with Ethan the Ezrahite in Psalm 89, beginning our prayers by complaining about how God does not seem to be keeping them, but closing our prayers with a courageous, “Praise be to the Lord forever!”

As we mature we find that we can keep our habits of prayer — perhaps with slight adjustments — even when we do not see answers. Theologian Karl Barth urges us to persevere in prayer not because of the confidence we have in our prayers, but in God. He writes that “perhaps we doubt the sincerity of our prayer and the worth of our request. But one thing is beyond doubt: it is the answer that God gives. Our prayers are weak and poor. Nevertheless, what matters is not that our prayers be forceful, but that God listens to them. That is why we pray.” (Karl Barth,

Prayer, 13). We choose into prayer in spite of the seeming fruitlessness of the exercise.

In short, as we mature we learn to find our way around in the dark.

Some of you may not relate to all this talk about darkness. But for me it is important. I am learning that at some seasons of life faith means choosing to press through what seems to be impenetrable darkness. I am learning that it is OK for me to be confused and empty, and to just go ahead anyway. I know that for some of you this kind of advice is actually counter-productive. Perhaps you are one who needs to find those means of grace which minister the tangible love of God for you, and then to relish in them. But there are some of us who, by the grace of God, are learning to find our way around in the dark. If you share in my plight, I just ask you this: what attitudes, what practices, what relationships might help you through this season? How can you learn to find your way around in the dark?

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.