

The following originally appeared at the end of *From Insanity to Responsibility* article, but it made the article too long to keep on one page for jail distribution.

My horror of great darkness: Genesis 15

One of the “fires” I lit led to a life-altering decision. God had recently set me free from many years of depression through a revelation of the glorious liberty we have in Christ through grace. Now with no restraint from my former bondage to the law, I abused my liberty and resigned the church I pastored in 1978, too impatient to listen to God’s warning to “wait.” That led to the lowest pit in my life and I ended up living in a church basement with my wife and three small kids. (Gal. 5:13)

I knew if I didn’t do it right this time, I’d end up in even *greater sorrow!* So in desperation I “prepared” myself by reading and recording an hour-long cassette tape of Bible verses that kept me trusting and hoping in God. (Lam. 3:22-32)

For weeks I listened to that tape every waking minute I was not working on my job. Still I hit bottom so hard I ended up screaming and gnashing my teeth in terror, feeling God Himself had abandoned me, like the “outer darkness” the unfaithful servant found himself in (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Perhaps I experienced what Abraham went through when God “cut covenant” with him in Genesis 15. Abraham needed assurance that God would keep his promise to multiply his offspring, when he had none in his old age. And God needed Abraham’s faith because *that’s what He uses to justify His working in our lives.* It’s part of our training; otherwise He does everything and we do—and learn—nothing! (Hab. 2:4; Heb. 11)

So He instructed Abraham to cut in half a heifer, a goat, a ram, and set them out along with a dove and pigeon. These animals represented the various types of sacrifices substituted for the sinner who offered them to die in his place, setting him free of guilt so he could enjoy or continue to enjoy fellowship with God and mature in his faith.

The covenant was an agreement which binds both parties to keep the terms of it. The one who breaks it will suffer the consequences—like the horrible death of those animals, explained in detail later in Leviticus one through seven.

But after Abraham laid out the bloody animals, expecting further instructions from God about “ratifying” the covenant (passing between the pieces to seal the agreement), God didn’t show up the rest of the day. Meanwhile the vultures tried to eat the carcasses, which kept Abraham busy driving them away.

It would have been quite discouraging to someone with a reason to give up on God, which is why God had chosen Abraham to pioneer this walk of faith. But the worst lay ahead. “Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.” (15:12)

First God doesn’t show up, leaving Abraham wondering. Next, the vultures. Then the sun goes down, still with no answer from God. Then he goes into a deep sleep; now there’s no way he can do his part of the covenant, walking between the pieces. And then the “horror and great darkness.” (Ps. 22; 38-40; 88, Lam. 3:1-42, 1 Cor. 4:9-13, 2 Cor. 4:7-12)

God finally speaks, but what? That Abraham’s *promised* descendants will go through a much longer period of darkness—slavery in a “strange land” (Egypt) 400 years! (Remember the woman Jesus insulted?) (Compare Gen. 36:31 w/ 1 Ki. 22:47)

No! No! No! What kind of covenant-keeper is this God who can abandon us for so long? How can anyone keep holding on without getting bitter toward everything and everybody and giving up in anger toward God? (Heb. 12:15-17, Rev. 3:11)

But look: in the darkness “there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.” It was God Himself, *alone* ratifying the covenant while Abraham was horribly out of commission. “On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.’” (Gen. 15:17-18)

It’s the “billion dollar inheritance” after the harsh training period. This covenant, with its fulfillment in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, is now the basis of inheriting the whole universe, along with heaven and knowing God intimately! Is it worth a little darkness? (Pr. 25:2-3, Is. 8:17, Jn. 13:7; 16:20-24, Rom. 8:19-39; 11:33-34, 2 Cor. 4:18, Php. 2:5-8; 3:10)

If we can hold on in faith through the testing period, like Abraham driving away the vultures—distractions, temptations, demons, offenses—and not give up even in the horror and darkness, God will birth in us something so entirely of Him that we’ll no longer need to depend on our own strength. It’s like something in us *dies*—

the habitual need to *see* for ourselves, to *know* what’s going on, to *feel* God’s presence or be encouraged and assured by some outward sign. (Jn. 20:29)

God does use these things to help us grow, but His goal is to wean us from outward evidence while He trains us to walk by faith—without seeing (Hab. 2:4; 3:17-19, 2 Cor. 5:7).

“I will bring the *blind* by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, And crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them.” (Is. 42:16)

Keep the vultures away!

Looking back to that night of terror in 1978, I now realize God allowed me to experience the “end of all flesh,” the “deceitful” and “desperately wicked” condition of my own selfish heart in the absence of His grace. (Gen. 6:13, Jer. 17:9)

But I could never have held on through the long “dark night of the soul” that led to that last night of horror had I not kept my focus on those scriptures I’d recorded to keep away the vultures of depression, fear, and torment. I compare Abraham’s staring at those sacrifices while he protected them to the shutter of a camera staying open long enough for the lighted image outside to imprint itself on the film inside. Those who’ve developed film from these older cameras know they have to be developed in pitch darkness (or infra-red light).

The imprint of the Word in us must “die” like a seed planted in the ground’s darkness so it will arise and bear its own fruit, disconnected from our striving, our “willing and running,” but be “of God who shows mercy.” Otherwise I’ll take a little of the glory and look at others with judgment instead of mercy. (Jn. 12:24, 1 Cor. 15:36, Rom. 9:16, Eph. 2:9, James 2:13)

Yet I admit my other choices were much more terrifying: running again—where? I did run to my pastor and his wife and opened up to them, but it caused them to lose confidence in me and they advised my wife to divorce me. After my breakthrough I knew *God* had sovereignly led them to reject me, removing my last hope in what I could see and feel—something *human* to hold on to. “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the *Lord* will take care of me.” (Ps. 27:10; 38:9-15; 88:8)

The next day at work it all came together in a flash of revelation: I suddenly saw my “old man,” this selfish, sniveling, snotty-nose baby of a “man” crying desperately for love from God or anyone, when in fact I was no less than a “new creation in Christ,” perfect and “complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power”! (2 Cor. 5:17, Col. 1:27-28; 2:10)

I didn’t need love from anyone, not even the need to feel God’s love, for He lived *in me* loving others through me! I felt overwhelmed with His glory, like being in heaven (Jn. 11:40).

The following day at work, in my rejoicing I got a little too slap-happy with the table saw and suddenly saw the end of my left thumb stuck to the ceiling in bloody pieces. But that became my wake-up call when I knew I had disobeyed God and needed to take my family back to where I’d run from and start over.

When I did, the doors that had closed where I had fled, miraculously opened up when I returned. We ended up living in a beautiful two-story home, like a dream. And then God gave further direction to come to Florida, where I am now, undergoing more years of trying and testing—and teaching inmates what I learn in the process . . . and the darkness.

And learning from theirs.

As long as we keep the *vultures* away, we can wait out those periods of darkness (like *photoperiodism* in plant-growing, and quite necessary for their health, for *they* need “periods” of light *and* darkness too!); there God confirms His covenant again, building our faith and keeping us separated from that *sniveling child* in us that now and then rises from the dead and wants to do something insanely stupid. (Rom. 6:1-11; 8:10, Col. 3:1-3)

Doing it God’s way can turn even the worst failure into a learning experience if we truly humble ourselves and listen to His wisdom. But don’t forget: we still pay the consequences, which in some ways I’m *still paying!* It causes me to cling to Him more than ever, making me more willing to “count the cost” of “*learning from Him*” the easy way instead of the hard!

Because He who will never leave or forsake us promised, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Mt. 11:29-30; 28:20, Heb. 13:5, Ps. 139)