

# The Dark Night of the Soul

Recently I have passed  
through six of the most  
extraordinary weeks  
in my whole life



BY ROY LAWRENCE

**It** all began when I went into hospital for an eye-operation. This was a delicate procedure and it had to be followed by ten days during which time I was required to remain in a face-down position. But I went in with high hopes. Literally hundreds of people had promised that they would pray for me. We covered a complete wall in our home with their cards and messages. So I expected that I would feel supported by their prayers and that all would go well.

## How wrong you can sometimes be!

The first night spent lying face down stirred up an old back problem. So that was a pain - quite literally so. Then on the second day I started with a totally unexpected attack of shingles of the head, which was made all the worse by the fact that initially nobody in the hospital would take it seriously. Then my waterworks became completely blocked, a problem soon aggravated by a condition known as haematuria, in which urine becomes blood-red. This eventually required a second operation. In all, I had to be admitted to hospital three times during the course of those six weeks.

However my worst experience was not a physical one at all. In addition to the original operation, the shingles and the waterworks blockage, I found myself assailed by a spiritual problem of soul-shattering dimensions. ***Suddenly and unaccountably all my faith deserted me. I found myself in a state of complete spiritual darkness.*** All awareness of the presence of God was taken from me. The only scriptural text which had any reality for me was 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'<sup>1</sup> In fact the very concept of God now seemed alien to me. Suddenly my whole life and ministry seemed a fraud, a pointless and empty concoction of one delusion after another. All the services I had ever led, all the sermons I had ever preached, all the books and articles I had ever written - all of this and much more now seemed a ghastly exercise in deception. I felt I had deceived myself and everyone else.

## Anguish

In the annals of Christian devotional theology there is a name for what I was experiencing. It is known as the 'Dark Night of the Soul.' St John of the Cross and other Christian mystics have written about it in some detail.

In the New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies (SPCK) Archbishop Rowan Williams describes it as a state in which 'the very thought of God makes no sense whatsoever and one's sense of security and self-worth seems to disappear. This is when darkness reaches right into the depths of the spirit.' □

In theory this was a phenomenon about which I knew well. I had been told about it at Theological College. I knew that some of the greatest saints had experienced it. I knew in fact that to undergo it is in some ways regarded as a privilege. However this knowledge was of no use to me whatsoever. It was, I think, the worst fortnight of my life, and my wife, Eira, on whom I poured out all these feelings, said it was the worst fortnight of hers too.

The anguish of this experience defies both understanding and description. Whilst, within it, I found myself totally unable to help myself. However, having said that, there were some factors in the situation which were helpful. Even though I no longer believed in God or in prayer, yet it was strangely good to know that so many people were praying for me. I felt that at a purely human level it was better to have good and caring thoughts projected towards me than to be without them. Also perversely I could not stop talking to the God in whom I no longer believed. I poured out my sense of anger and abandonment onto whatever there might be behind the God who was now non-existent as far as I was concerned. And there were people who allowed me the privilege of doing the same thing to them, people who found time just to listen. I shall never cease to be grateful to three listeners who gave me the hospitality of their time and attention in a totally non-judgemental way. One was my wife, Eira, and the other two were the hospital chaplain and a wonderful night nurse, who spent an hour with me at a time when my spiritual darkness was deepest.

#### **Fighting back**

Ultimately I managed to claw my way out of that place of horror and back to a sort of faith. It was a slow and agonizing process and involved rediscovering some of the basic reasons why, many years ago as a teenager, I started to be a committed Christian.

By the time I went into hospital for my second operation, the dark night experience had become a thing of the past. By then a sense of the presence, the peace and the protection of God had come back to me. I now felt supported physically, emotionally and spiritually. Darkness had now been replaced by light, and I found it almost impossible to pray in any other mode than that of thanksgiving.

Most readers are probably finding this article very puzzling because I guess that the great majority of Christians have no personal experience to compare with it. If this is true of you, then God bless you and shield you from ever having to explore it at a personal level. However, it may well be that for just a few, the things I have written will be frighteningly familiar and to some of you they will become so at some point in the future. So it has been suggested to me by various people whose opinions I value that I should write about this experience whilst the anguish of it is still fresh in my mind and soul. Here then, for what they may be worth, are a handful of thoughts and conclusions for you to consider.

It is not easy to find adequate words to express them. St John of the Cross clearly struggles with his own powers of description and comprehension when he writes,

'what the sorrowful soul feels most in this condition is its clear perception, as it thinks that God has abandoned it and in his abhorrence of it has flung it into darkness.' He says, 'the soul feels very keenly the shadow of death and the pains of hell' and that 'it is so with it for ever.'

These words which used to sound so strange to me now have a terrible resonance. The Dark Night is like nothing else in the whole of mental and spiritual experience. It is neither a state of intellectual difficulty blocking the way to belief nor is it a form of emotional depression. It is a sort of vision and yet it is the very opposite of what we generally mean by a vision.

Usually we think of a vision as having a positive content, as in the case of a vision of God, or, vision of light or a vision of our calling in life. But here, by contrast, is a vision of darkness, a vision of godlessness, of dereliction and desolation, of emptiness and purposelessness. Why a good God should allow it, is beyond understanding, whilst it endures. Yet, as I now look back upon it, I can see, just as St John of the Cross did, that many positive things can be said about it. John sees it in terms of purgation. He writes that it is not 'till the spirit is humbled, softened and purified and grows keen and delicate and pure that it can become one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love which his mercy is pleased to grant it.'

#### What did I learn?

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What then are my own positive perceptions about this experience? I am a firm believer both in the power of prayer and in the Church's calling to exercise the ministry of Christian Healing. But it has always been my conviction that we must never be glib about either of these things. That conviction has been deepened and strengthened by my experience of the dark night of the soul. Before I went into hospital a clergyman of my acquaintance patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Don't worry, you'll have no problems. Everything will be just fine. I know it.' Of course, he knew no such thing! This sort of glibness is a betrayal both of life's reality and of gospel truth. False comfort is no comfort. God, save us from glib clerics. They are as of little use as glib politicians.

Yet, having said that, there is a real sense in which even really bad things can have good consequences for us, if we have anything of the love of God in us. St Paul teaches this very strongly. He writes, 'In all things God works for the good of those who love him'<sup>2</sup> I think I would have hit anyone who said that to me whilst I was deep within the darkness. Yet I can now bear witness that even in that dreadful place the healing power of God can be at work. When I emerged from it I discovered that a number of profound inner fears and temptations, things with which I had wrestled for many years, seemed no longer to have a place within me. Mysteriously I had been moved on in my spiritual journey.

#### New depth of meaning

Also, I am now doubly sure of the importance of many of life's positive things. I learned afresh just how precious real practical help can be when life is at its most difficult. Friends and neighbours who made themselves freely available to us were such a blessing. I saw

new depth and meaning in the old rhyme, 'Life is mainly froth and bubble, two things stand like stone, kindness in another's trouble, courage in your own'. Indeed I found new depth and meaning in many things. Perhaps, before I end these thoughts, I may share just a couple of them with you.

My time of spiritual darkness happened to coincide with the end of Lent, and I found that Holy Week had an extraordinary personal relevance for me. Good Friday came to life for me in a specially unique way. Till then, I was not free from pain, but on Good Friday the pain ceased. To me it seemed that Christ had taken my own pain into himself as he hung upon the cross. The text 'By his wounds you have been healed'<sup>3</sup> had never seemed so literally true.

Also the day after Good Friday, sometimes known as 'Holy Saturday', has come to have a new significance for me. It is the day when we consider the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell.<sup>4</sup> This has never meant much to me in the past, but, because experiencing the dark night of the soul can seem rather like being in hell, suddenly it was very important to believe that, when I had no means of finding Jesus in the darkness, he could still find me. And indeed it proved to be true that from Holy Saturday onwards, as Lent turned into Easter, faith gradually returned to me. As I struggled out of that state of dereliction, increasingly I saw that no matter how deep and dense spiritual darkness may be, ultimately it cannot resist the light of Christ. I should have known it of course from the mighty prologue to St John's Gospel which assures us that whenever the light of Christ has invaded the darkness which is all too characteristic of our world then, in the words of the Good News Bible, 'the darkness has never put it out!'

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:28

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 3,19

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