

Let God Make Your Dark Place Enjoyable

I have discovered that as we seek the Lord our most difficult periods can be transformed into wonderful breakthroughs into God's love. For me, one such season occurred during the years 1979 to 1981.

The association of churches with which I was aligned had fallen under spiritual deception. Not only were its core doctrines increasingly seeded with New Age influences, but also immorality crept in, and key leaders began leaving their wives for other women.

I could no longer remain silent. I left my congregation in Detroit, where I had served as pastor, and traveled to the organization's regional headquarters in Iowa. I went to plead for repentance. However, after meeting with the senior leaders, I was asked to leave the group.

You can imagine the situation that left my family and me in. We had left our church, we had no money, and we had four little children. We couldn't afford even basic housing. Desperate for almost any type of shelter, we finally found an old farmhouse in rural Washington, Iowa. The home was more than 100 years old, but it actually looked much older. After negotiating with the landlord, we were given a year of free rent provided I did work around the house such as cleaning and painting.

Even so, the house needed more than I could provide. The furnace did not work well, so we installed a wood-burning stove in the kitchen. That first winter, it turned out, was one of the coldest in Iowa's history. Frost formed on the inside walls, spreading a foot or two around each window, and wind chills dropped to 60 below—lower than that on several

occasions.

To keep warm each night, the whole family cuddled tightly on one large mattress on the dining room floor, about 18 feet from the stove in the kitchen. A fan behind the stove nudged warm air in our direction. My nightly project, of course, was to build enough heat in the stove to keep us warm until morning.

While I worked the fire, I also prayed and sought God. The wood burner became a kind of altar to me, for each night as I prayed, I offered to God my unfulfilled dreams and the pain of my spiritual isolation.

As the seasons came and went, the little area around the wood burner continued to be a hallowed place for me. Even in the summer, I would sit on the chair next to the stove and pray and worship.

I would like to say I found the joy of the Lord during this time, but in truth, though I gradually adjusted to my situation, I felt an abiding misery in my soul. Our deep poverty was an issue (I earned barely \$6,000 a year), but more than that, I felt as if I had missed the Lord. My continual prayer was, "Lord, what do You want of me?"

Three years of seeking God passed, and I still carried an emptiness inside. What was God's will for me? I had started a couple of Bible studies and spoken a few times in churches, but I so identified with being a pastor that, until I was engaged again in full-time ministry, I feared I had lost touch with God's call on my life.

Despite this inner emptiness about ministry, I was growing spiritually, especially in areas that were previously untilled. I had unconsciously defined a successful ministry as something born of my performance. During this time, however, the Lord reduced me to being simply a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Rising to the top of my focus was a passion to be a true follower of Jesus Christ—to obey His teachings and approach life not as a critic but as an encourager. I also found myself increasingly free to enjoy and learn from Christians from other streams and perspectives.

These changes, though deep and lasting, occurred slowly, almost imperceptibly. They were happening quietly in my heart, and only in hindsight did I see what the Lord had done. Throughout this time, I was preoccupied with feelings of detachment from God's will. My prayer to know the Lord's plan for me continued daily.

One day as I stood in the kitchen pantry, I repeated again my abiding prayer: "Lord, what do You want of me?" In a sudden flash of illumination, the Lord answered. Speaking directly to my heart, He said, "Love Me where you're at."

In this time and season, I was a TV television repairman doing odd jobs on the side to provide for my family. I hated what I was doing.

In my previous church I had taught against TV, and now I was "laying hands" on sets and raising them from the dead! The Lord's answer cut straight to my heart. I was awed at its simplicity!

I asked: "Love You where I am at? Lord, is that all You want of me?" He replied, "This is all I will ever require of you."

In that divine moment peace flooded my soul and I was released from the false expectation of ministry-driven service. God was not looking at what I did *for* Him but who I became *to* Him in love. The issue in His heart was not whether I pastored but whether I loved Him. To love the Lord in whatever station I found myself—even as a television repairman—this I could do!

A deep and remarkable transformation occurred in me. My identity was no longer in being a pastor but in becoming a

true lover of God. Amazingly, a few days after having settled my priorities, I was invited to pastor a church in Marion, Iowa.

In spite of all my previous anxiety about returning to ministry, I did not jump at the opportunity because I had learned what the Lord truly desired of me. Though I eventually accepted this call, my focus was not merely on leading a church but on loving God.

God seeks our love before our ministry. His greatest commandment is that we love Him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength. If we do, we will fulfill all He requires of us (see John 14:15). It is as we love Him that He causes all things to work together for our good (see Rom. 8:28).

Beloved, loving God is not hard. We can fulfill any assignment—auto mechanic or housewife, doctor or college student—and still give great pleasure to our heavenly Father. We do not need ministry titles to love the Lord. Indeed, God measures the value of our lives by the depth of our love. This is what He requires of all true God-seekers: to love Him where we are.

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BIBLICALLY CONTENT

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