

The Priory Ministry

The way of thorns



Jim Smith

It has not been easy to chart a path through these many revelations. I must leave that to each reader. But two symbols have been used to help.



This symbol is found at the head of each new section of the way.



So far

This symbol marks a pause, where I have added some comments and thoughts for explanation.

Other material

There is material on intercession which might be useful to read in support of the thorns. Download “Into the heart” from the PRAYER OF MYSTIC INTERCESSION page of www.serving-africa.org

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You called
and my heart said "Yes."
until I saw the thorns
Then I doubted my strength
to carry on
"Look" he said
and turning I saw
the pain of creation
My heart broke
I looked back to him
but he had gone
down the path.
I followed



Background

Once, when I was praying, the Lord spoke this to me:-

Call out in the streets. Proclaim in the market place.

“The Lord is looking for his own, for hearts broken by the shame and guilt of the land, hearts grieving for the spoiling, for the destruction of the good things I gave, hearts breaking in repentance, hearts longing for my return.

**These hearts, shining like lamps in dark places, are the ones who will prepare the way for my return. But where are they?
I call for them, but I hear no reply. I am searching but I cannot find them.
The sorrow in my heart is so great it almost crushes me.”**

So I set out around Europe, to share this, as part of the wider message for Europe. I went to every country, and I expected to find people – intercessors mostly - who would listen and respond. I found very few.

Fifteen years have passed, and now I have the thorns in my heart, and they need to be shared. The last time I called very few listened to me. I even changed the image, and spoke of the need for intercessors, like lamps, to shine. Still only a few listened.

Now fifteen years have passed, and I am setting out again. The message is the same although more urgent and more painful. The situation has become desperate. But I have a worry, and this is it:-

When I call, no one will come. Then when I ask the Lord why no one has come, he does not say “Son they are not listening” as he did last time, but “Son they have not answered because they are not there.”

The path the Lord is calling us to - the way of thorns – is described in the material that follows. The Lord is looking to his intercessors for a new commitment to the path of suffering, before it is too late - if it is not too late already.



The gate

“The gate” marks the entry to the path of thorns. No one is forced to walk this way. We have to make a free choice. I put the gate here to remind us that there is a decision to be made. My suggestion is that Intercessors read the material that follows before entering this path. My hope is that as Intercessors read, some will say “I am already in that path” and others will say “That’s what I have always wanted. Let me begin.”

I saw a path - a narrow path, covered with thorns.
As I looked, in the distance I saw a figure walking.
His feet were broken and cut by the thorns, but still he walked on.

I was filled with longing, and I cried out “Who are you?
Why do you walk this way? Why do you carry on?”

He turned, and I heard his voice.

“Love”

I wanted to follow, but I was afraid of the thorns and the pain and the sacrifice and the cost. I wanted to follow, but if I started, could I carry on?
I didn’t have his courage, but I could hear his voice.

Love - could I love enough to walk on pain? Did I love enough to make the sacrifice, and keep making it?



The invitation

No one needs an invitation to enter way of thorns. The path is always open. The problem is that our longing for Jesus is overcome by our ties with the world. This shows itself when we say “First let me go and...”

Once this gets hold of us, the “let me go’s” pile up. “Let me go and say good bye, let me go and bury my father, let me put my affairs in order, let me complete my career, let me bring up my family, let me, let me let me.” Pure love aches only to be where he is, whatever the cost. Pure love consumes us, urging, longing, aching, yielding to the call of his love. We can only find any fulfilment of this urge by uniting with his love, because only then can we be complete.

We have to understand - and it’s very challenging - that the love we have in us is his love, put there by him, offered to us by him. That’s why the urge to join with him is so strong - stronger than even the urge of women for children.

Love seeks love, seeking its return to its Creator, seeking unity, fullness, completeness. Until we reach the level of saying “Let me be consumed by your love, in me and in you, united to you, subsumed, absorbed, drowned in you,” we will always be exposed to “Let me first.”

But the cost of that consummation is unbelievably high. The thorns which cut our feet will be as nothing to the depths of agony we will have to drown in. But his love lies beyond that agony. His love lies beyond the cross, through it, not round it.

The way of the thorns calls, because it is the only way to our total fulfilment. Only with that can we bear the pain of humanity, bearing it before the throne of His majesty.



The cost - courage

To embrace the way of the thorns means to embrace every kind of destruction, with no hope of resolution. It means the tearing up of our created nature, as a broken road is torn up by a machine, crushed and discarded. Hopes and expectations dissolve away, corroded by the acid of hate and utter spite.

And there is no respite. The relentless way of the cross has no end, except to be brought to the point of murderous darkness, as he was.

All we can hope for is that he is there beside us, suffering with, because of and through us. As love is his to create, so suffering is his to place, in hearts that are willing to suffer.

This is a dark place to come to, but at the point of destruction, we are totally exposed - to the pain of the creation he has made, which is in such pain, and the compassion in his heart which knows no limit, which hurts and hurts and goes on hurting beyond all hurt, and then still hurts.

Hurt which reaches the point where we cry in agony “Stop”, for we grieve to see the destruction of his heart, yet in response to our call, he does not stop, but bears the sorrows of the world to his Father, to his cross, to his own lonely Calvary where all hurt can be absorbed, dissolved, recompensed, and made of value.

This takes a great deal of courage to enter into willingly. The thorns beneath our feet are the least of our agonies.



So far

The first thing we have glimpsed from the “Gate” to this point is the cost. This will come as no surprise to Intercessors, but even so we still have to face it daily. Just a glimpse down the path shows us the price we will be called on to pay, if we choose to accept the deeper call. Deeper call to what? Deeper call why? Deeper call how? As we move on, these questions will be reflected back to us. As we face them, we have to realise that the world situation is exceedingly bleak. In the Middle East, Christianity is under intense pressure, and is falling back. How much longer we can hope to survive is now a real question.

The real struggle however is not in the Middle East, but in Europe. The enemy has seen the opportunity to tear the heart out of the Christian heritage, He sees the chance to rob, steal and kill. The Judeo-Christian heritage, which has carried us this far, and is a vital source of spiritual hope and strength for other lands is under threat. This is why I believe the Lord is making one last “deeper call” to his intercessors. One last call to pay a higher price than ever in sharing the sorrows of his heart, that we might see the victory he so longs for, but which, from human point of view, looks so far away, and is getting further away every day.



Sacrificial

To enter the thorny path demands sacrifice, but not of the physical. To enter this path, we must stand aside, and let the One who has and can walk it reach through us and meet his creation. This seems a simple task. Like introducing two people to each other, and then withdrawing that they might converse.

It is simple, yet our self clings ruthlessly and relentlessly to us, like the mouth of a shark when it has got its prey. "I must be in this. I am the centre of me; I am part of God meeting his creation. I must be, so that he can work."

The great sacrifice which the Lord asks is for us to let self die in us. Then he can take full loving ownership of us, can move to touch those of his creation who have crossed our paths. This is the decision we have to make - to live, as "I" or to die as "Him". If we choose to live as "I" then we will never never never know any fullness or any completeness, for that can only come as he is able to move through us, undistorted and unshaped by our opinions.

We become the container of his love. We become the mirror of his passion for his creation. We became death, that his creatures who do not know him might have life. In this process, we become more fully human than we could ever imagine possible, vibrating in tune with his perfection. The self can never see this, longing only for assertion, for wholeness in this world, for recognition, for honour, for certainties and guarantees. But being empty so that all we contain is his love - this is an experience the soul longs for with every part of its existence. This is fulfilment which the self can never know.

We have to choose to make the sacrifice of surrendering self. Other sacrifices follow, but not until this supreme surrender is made.



So far

Sacrifice! Sacrifice! Sacrifice! This is the constant theme of the way of thorns. Here, it is the sacrifice of the self. The constant pressure of self drives a wedge between us and following the Selfless One. Constantly rising up, self demands access, involvement, action. All these attributes benefit our daily living, but damage our walk on the way of thorns.

Attention can only be on Jesus. Otherwise, like Peter on the water, we will sink and never rise. It's war - constantly holding the self at a distance, so that Jesus can fill us. When we suffer, self screams out "I am hurting!" That's natural, and in the physical it is essential. Such cries guard us from harm, and get us the help we need. But in the spiritual, such cries destroy our resolve.

As we move deeper into the way, self must be conquered. But how? Lay it on the Altar, light the fire and let it be consumed as a holocaust offering to the Lord.

No one ever said this was going to be easy.



Few

Why is the way of the thorns so empty? Because the stomachs of those who should be walking it have become full of wealth, comfort and plenty. Their eyes have become full of success, achievement and progress. These attributes are thieves. They have stolen the hearts of those who should be walking the path of thorns. These thieves destroy. Their work is filth, and they have released filth into the hearts of those who should have been the vessels of glory.

Now the crisis comes, and the Lord calls for his people to walk the path of thorns, so that he can destroy their self, and fill them with himself. Only then can he break the strongholds, and release the blood of his triumph. Only through us. But when he calls, there is no response, or a muted one, where God's people decide whether they are willing to accept the pain.

This is an insult beyond words to the One who accepted all pain for our freedom. This insult, perpetrated by millions, and by thousands of leaders, will have to be paid for. God forgive us.



The Lord invites. “Enter in”

The only hope for us, the only way to begin to walk the path of thorns, the only way ahead is to enter in to Christ. He invites us in, to share his hurt, his heart, his sacrifice. He says:-

“You must join me on the cross. You must share my pain, make it your pain, suffer with me. Then together, we can turn to my creation, and allow its agony to become ours.

For the suffering we must suffer. For the broken we must break, for the crushed we must be crushed, for the angry we must release love, for the arrogant we must yield humility, for the desperate we must hope, for the sick we must release healing, for the dying we must die.

For the confusion of the world we must share the confusion. For the violence of the world, we must absorb, for the spite of the world we must sooth, for the prisoners we must offer release.

The agony of the cross will be our healing balm, but only if we are able to face and absorb creation’s agony.

This is what I invite you into. This is the path of thorns.

There are other ways offered to you, but they will fail you. Only by entering in to what I have endured, only by sharing it with me can hope flower again.

This is the invitation – the invitation to crucifixion.

Few take it.”



So far

There are painful things said here. The Lord judges so many who have not seen the path, or who have chosen success and satisfaction as their world-changing concepts. There is a plain judgment on these - "filth." Strong words, but it seems to me that the Lord has been calling gently for too long. His every entreaty to join him on the way has been brushed aside. Now it is time for straight talking.

But there is another group who are not on the way - those who have been broken beyond mending. I once had this vision. I saw a desert. The wind began to blow, and the sand parted to reveal a large fissure. I looked in and saw hundreds of lamps. Some were broken, some had gone out, and some were ready to be ignited.

I saw this as a picture of the Intercessors of the world. Many have got buried under an avalanche of indifference, unbelief, rejection and ridicule. So after many decades of praying against the wind, they gave up. At the time of this vision, I believed that many of them could be mended, and could burn brightly again.

Now, as I reflect on this vision in the light of the thorny path, I see that many of those who should have been in this way are among the broken and damaged lamps I saw in the ground. Once I believed that they could be rescued. Now I believe that for many it is too late. They are gone. Time has passed. They weren't mended, and now they are gone.

So the way is almost empty. The "filthy ones" and the broken ones are not here. But still the Lord calls, because he aches for his people to be with him in the way. He lays down an agonizing challenge - an invitation to crucifixion. Why would anyone choose to accept such an invitation. The answer is to be found in the character of the Intercessor. We know that we can only intercede in power by being close to the Lord.

We long for this more than for anything else in the world. It is our very purpose for existing, and we will go to any lengths to reach that point of real surrender, closeness and absorption. If it means crucifixion, then so be it.

We have come to a door, and choices must be made. If as a reader, you do not long for the crucifixion, then you can go no further. The rest of us can carry on, but there are even harder decisions to come.

*Transformed by the Glory
into glory
filled with glory
overflowing
I cascade into
the depths of his love.
Endless hope
ceaseless longing
eternal praise.*

*From this ocean of delight
I fill my soul with joy*



The entry

Love called so strongly, that I entered the path of thorns. I tried to step carefully, to avoid the big spikes, but it was impossible. Pain filled me, and I wanted to turn back. How could this be of any help to the broken world? What is the point of this - how could I pray and move the heart of God when filled with such pain? Then the Lord spoke:

Many set out to follow me, but they only want roses.

But when I tell them that roses cannot heal the wounds in my heart, they are sad, and they turn back.



So far

We seem to be back at the gate again, but we have matured since we first saw it. Now it is time to make that decision, and the way in is, as it has always been, love. This is not always easy to understand. We enter this path not through duty, or the desire to serve. We enter by, through and because of love. We do it, because the Lord calls so strongly, and his loving call resonates so deeply within us, that we want more of it. We so much want more that, despite the pain and the all too real cost, we enter. What will we find?



The darkness

The darkness which is coming on us is something we have never seen before. It is a spiteful, aggressive, living darkness. It has only one function - to steal and kill and destroy. It is a battalion of darkness - well disciplined, strategic and ruthless. It will not stop when it is attacked. It will suffer losses - huge losses - and still march against goodness. It has a name – “rape.” It comes to demean, despoil and destroy. It has no remorse. It will cut down all that is good. Hopelessness and paralysis march before it - its vanguard.

But it cannot hurt those on the path of thorns. We have already prepared for this struggle - even to sacrificing our lives. If we can take this stand, bear this burden, pay this price, empty ourselves, then the sacrifice of the cross can break this darkness.

The Lord calls us into the path of thorns to confront this darkness, that he can release his blood for the salvation of creation. The unborn babies are depending on his salvation. He is depending on our sacrifice. Only the weak, the fragile, the small accept his invitation.



Entering the darkness

Whoever walks in the path of thorns must be prepared to experience very great darkness. To bring us victory, the Lord had to move into the darkness, that he might break it. For those who walk this path, we too must enter this same darkness.

Here, in this sad place, we have no defense except the sacrifice of the Lord. We have no security except his victory. We have no friends except him, no future except in him, no life except in him, no hope except in him.

The enemy will rage against us, hurling accusations, because we remind him of his defeat. The burden of the assault will be intense. Physically and spiritually we will be beaten and bowed. Blood will flow.

And in this darkness there is only one way - forward into it. Turning back, even under extreme provocation, is not a possibility.

Our only hope is that in this darkness, we will hear his voice calling, and drawing our strength from him, endure to the end.



So far

So now we know. The first endurance is to bear the agony and brutality of the darkness which is the hallmark of the enemy. This darkness is the darkness of the bitter defeat of the enemy. He knows his loss, and so he takes whatever revenge he can on God's children.

He takes particular revenge on Intercessors, because he knows what a severe threat we are to him. He remembers that a small stone brought down his colossal arrogance called Goliath. He remembers that the faith of three men, even in the flames, broke the golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar. He remembers that the sacrifice of one man on a cross destroyed his position, and hope of kingship forever.

He fights. The darkness invades us as it did the Lord. We have somehow to find the strength to stand, and to move forward. For the Lord is in the darkness, so salvation is to move into the darkness, not away from it.



Alone

I moved along the path of thorns, and loneliness swept in like a tide. It invaded me, leaving me so bereft. How can this be? Am I not moving nearer the Lord and his sufferings?

**The loneliness of the cross is one of the hardest things to bear.
Facing nothing but destruction, and knowing that I had to face it alone.
I tried to share this burden, but no one would share it with me.
So I trod the winepress alone.**

Lord, I have little strength to stand and little strength to give. But if this lonely place is where I have to be, then I offer it to you.

Heaviness

There is great heaviness of spirit in the path of thorns. Hopes are dimmed, the future unclear, the strains heavy, the provision small.

Comfort is withdrawn. Security is insecure, and the voice of God often dimmed or distant.

With such weight we have to walk forward, knowing that the weight will get heavier not lighter, the strain greater not lesser, and the outcome a very tough struggle to overcome the enemy and enjoy the bliss of victory - the reunion with the Lord and the glory of heaven.

This is a spiritual heaviness, but it touches our humanity - our health, our work, our daily life, our view of the future.

But this is what we chose when we set out. These thorns hurt.



So far

As we move into the darkness, so two other experiences come on us – the same ones which Jesus experienced in Gethsemane. First we feel alone – and we are. This is one of the unusual things about very deep intercession – we always feel alone. Even though there are others on the path with us, it comes down to a very solitary struggle, as it did for Jesus. This appears to be the way it is at these depths. Second, we are so burdened with the calling that we are almost crushed. Jesus said that he was “overwhelmed with sorrow”, and that is exactly how it will be for us.

The struggle is so hard, the weight so heavy that it touches us physically, our bodies, our families, our marriages, our work, our finances, our children, our friends. Everything we love is used against us, and this just increases the burden. Tough path. These thorns hurt.



Barren ways

Along the edge of the path of thorns there are no trees. There is nothing to break up the bleakness of this path. There is no fruit to pick, no place of refuge out of the burning sun. There is no hiding place.

Everything looks grey, and on the edges of grey - black.

There is no fruit to bear, no hopes to realise, no joys to offer. This is the problem - most Christians live for fruit, hope, joys. Most of God's people live expecting to get something out of their faith.

Some know that we have to give as well as take. Few can walk in a way which gives nothing except the privilege of obedience, and the fruit of suffering.

That's why so few enter this path. Some never find it - they have no conception of the way of the cross. Some look and don't believe that they would be asked to walk such a path. Some set out, with unreal expectations - about the hardness, the length of the journey, the depth of the suffering. They have never looked into the Saviour's heart, and through that heart they have never looked at the damaged womb. (See later) They turn back.

Some are crushed by the burden of this path, because they cannot allow their self to be removed. They cling on to self, and that is a sure way to defeat, because the enemy can manipulate self.

Only those who have abandoned self, and are filled with the love of the Lord can begin this terrible path. For us, there is no guarantee that we will be able to endure, that we will survive. This attitude is the only one which can lead us through. We are totally exposed, naked, helpless, broken and bewildered. But we still believe that the suffering of the cross can redeem broken humanity, if it is released. We believe that this creative suffering can only be released through us by the Lord. We believe that only by walking in the footsteps of his sorrows can such release take place.

Even so, we are unsure of the path, full of doubt, often pressed down beyond our ability to continue. Many times we sink, almost without trace, crying "Lord save us!" But even in that cry we know that it might be his will not to save us. That we have to sink down and die, as a testimony and prophecy. These thorns cut deep.

Separation

The way of thorns is a way of separation. We are separated from the world, because we are moving to a position where we have to bear the sufferings of the world.

We are separated from family and friends, because bearing suffering is something we have to do alone, in the presence of the Lord alone. We are separated from all our human hopes and desires, because they can have no place here.

The human spirit was never designed to bear such a burden, and so the struggle in the flesh is very intense. Our humanity is constantly tugging us back to the world, to friendship, to personal ambition and need. The spirit is calling us to that spiritual lonely place where we can share and bear. There is huge friction in this struggle to be separate. Choosing the wilderness looks like a noble ambition, but the wilderness is a demeaning barren and hopeless place in which to live and move.

The challenge is not only to accept this separation, but to desire it. We have to teach our spirit “This separation is your fulfillment, your satisfaction your ultimate function and purpose in the Lord’s service. Only by being separate, and being exposed to the agony of separation can you unite with the Lord in his sorrows, and be complete.”



So far

What begins to emerge here is the true heart of the intercessor. The things we are reading we already know and if we didn’t, they come as no surprise. The barrenness, the separation - these are the tools of our ministry. These are the tools we handle daily as we seek to feel the suffering, so that we can bring it to the Lord, and find, in his heart that same suffering to a vastly greater intensity.

The only way to endure the way of thorns is to desire it, because only then can we be united with the Lord, in his sorrows, and be complete. This, for us is pure joy. And as this joy is ignited in us and him, the potential for the sorrow to be transfigured into glory becomes present. At that moment, healing can flow through him, through us, to the world.

What so many fail to appreciate is that the way of thorns, is not gloomy and hopeless. This is not a path of the doom sayers. This is the path to total identification, and that path leads to the release of healing, which can purity, rebuild, illuminate, set free and deliver the suffering world in a way that is beyond our comprehension.

The world was released by a cross, not by a crusade or a download. This set the pattern for all subsequent releases. The key to this release is Intercessors bearing the burden to the throne of the Lord, and pleading his blood. This is the path of joy. This is the way of restoration.



Place of intercession

The disciple is very exposed in the service of the suffering Lord. What is this exposure? There are the natural doubts and reserves of the human spirit, although the experienced servant should be well used to these. There are the attacks of the enemy, and these can be tough. There can be no hiding from them, and they are relentless - like the ever moving sea. The experienced servant has to learn to live with their background hostility, just as those who live by the sea get used to the sound of the waves.

There is the misunderstanding of friends, family the church. These are either concerned for us, or trying to defeat us. But there can be little understating or support. After all, "I have trodden the winepress alone" is our mission statement, so we cannot, nor should we, expect any. But like every other human being, we long for comfort, encouragement and affirmation. There isn't any to be had from human sources. Our sensitive spirits naturally recoil from such isolation.

The truth is that we are exposed and vulnerable, just as Jesus was and is. It is only by standing in this position, striped of all our human needs and hopes, dependent alone on the Lord, that we can hear the cry and hurt of creation.

Being exposed is, for the intercessor, hard but joyful. Only then can we truly reflect the heart of the hurting creation to the Lord, and the heart of the hurting and hoping Lord to his creation. It is not an easy place to stand. For effective intercession, it is the only place to stand.

*Alone in the dark
the thorns cut deep
My soul cries in agony
“Help me!”
A voice ahead
“Do not fear
I am here.”*

*Strength flows
and courage.*



The depths of the way of thorns. The womb of creation

In the early hours of one morning, I had a most disturbing experience. It's tough to write. I saw the womb of a woman who had been raped. I cried out to the Lord in fear – "Take this picture away. It is too hard for me." Then he spoke to me about his creation, and what has happened. It was, and remains deeply disturbing, but it is a terrifying challenge to intercessors. This is where the world is, and we are being called to walk the way of thorns for this situation. It warns of the depths of the challenge, the frightening cost we will be asked to pay, and the ultimate meaning of the sacrifice of the cross which we will have to embrace.



So far

The womb vision is the heart of the way of thorns. It is why we have been called into it. There are other ways of describing our burden, but this one is painful enough. Those who have chosen the way of thorns - this is what we are to bear, and this is what we are to do. How we do it, only God knows. Somehow we must find the strength.

Womb

**The womb of creation has been violated.
Violence penetrated into the very centre of what was pure and good.
This has produced issue of the devil.
Despair and darkness in the inner places.
From this has come hate, spite, aggression, destruction.
Tears fall over the waste.
How can this ever be undone?**

I enter deeper, and holding the womb, heal.
The thorns dig deep into me.



Finally

The thorns do not shake us or burn us. The thorns brand us with the mark of the cross. Then we can walk – humbled, branded, damaged - marked as those who hope. Then we are safe.

“O Saviour of the world, who by thy cross and precious blood has redeemed us. Save us and help us we humbly beseech thee O Lord.”