**Nocturnes**

**prayerful offerings**

**for times when life is dimmed by affliction**

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**Introduction**

These prayers were written in response to a request. The request was this: *can you develop prayers which a Christian might read when alone, at night, when life is very difficult?*

And so, out of pastoral concern for people who experience harsh times, short prayers were created to fit with these darkened moments. The heart goes out to those who suffer or deal with anxiety and stress. Life can be stern. We are fragile. Strong and hurtful forces are at work in this world, this is bad enough, but when the sun goes down these hurts can be magnified. Still worse, too often when people suffer a kind of darkness descends on them which is born of affliction.

The combination of physical and spiritual and social darkness truly produces a nocturnal time.

These Nocturnes want ask readers be true to their state. We are first off children of God, loved and dear. We live in a difficult and beautiful world. In truth we are held by God even in harsh and dark moments. We are also held eternally. Even so, if Christians are honest, no matter how strong our faith, darkness will take its toll. Not even the presence of the Spirit of the God of Light can fully eliminate the harsh shadows once affliction has set in.

Humanity suffers. It is part of our truth.

God abides in the shadows. It is a large part of our faith.

Please note, these Nocturnes are not general prayers to be used at any time. They are specific to moments when hardship takes a serious toll. In fact, they will likely make little or no sense to someone who reads them straight through when the life is bright and joyful. These Nocturnes are prayers for times when, perhaps a diagnosis, or a broken heart, or troubled relations, weigh heavily on the heart. These prayers are not deigned to lift readers out of the shadows into joy, although they will remind us of how God delights in each one of us. They are prayers designed to remind us that there is a truth about us in the shadows. We will be the poorer if we run from it. But if we rest there, maybe by grace, we will understand ourselves better and taste the company of God.

New vision can be perceived in the dimness.

God moves among the darkened shapes.

Darkness can be a mysterious and sometimes strangely fruitful place.

*At the close of each prayer is a piece of art from the* ***Cat Jeoffry*** *Church School Curriculum prepared by Boarding Homes Ministry (please visit our web page for more details). Our hope is that these original works of art will help the reader towards a greater understanding of self and God.*

*The curriculum illustrates the poem c1760 by Christopher Smart,* ***For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry****. It is a loving, mystical poem in tribute to Smart’s cat which came to live with him when Smart was consigned to the rats and chains of a madhouse. Jeoffry is presented as a worshipful cat, the ideal caregiver, who brings comfort and battles for justice.*

The first six Nocturnes promote a time of stillness in the midst of the dark. They aren’t about *giving up*. They are not a sign of cowardice. They are certainly not self-indulgent sulking. Rather, these prayers encourage people to draw on their bravery, summon their belief in the presence of God, and, on that foundation, engage the darkness.

In speaking of Whistler’s nocturnes (which were the inspiration for this style of prayer) Frances Spalding (*Whistler* Phaedon Press, 1979) points out that Whistler was “attracted to dusk and night because the absence of light caused forms to be simplified…” p. 18. Whistler himself spoke of how “the evening mist clothes the riverside in poetry.” p. 18. Such is the power of dusk and its new, more lyrical, more focused vision, less cluttered, more alive, in which Nocturnes “achieve their effect by omission.” P. 23

Can prayers also achieve their effect by omission?

These nocturnal prayers strive to prune away the distractions of life,

keep things focused and simple, affording the afflicted person

***a moment: in God, honest about the darkness.***

The hope is, *for a short time only*, to draw readers closer to God and self by paring back the language. The language in these prayers is simple. The prayers pull back images into simplified forms. The world around us has many colours and facets to explore, but not now. Now is the darkened moment. Maybe in these nocturnal, simplified expressions of prayer readers might see their lives more clearly, and be moved as the darkness speaks. As in a black and white print the angels and lines stand out more clearly. Perhaps the darkness might heighten awareness.

And so the prayers repeatedly invite the reader to be *‘in the moment’,* to settle into *‘just this time now’,* for *‘my God, we only have this time here and now’*. The prayers go on to present images for darkness. Stay with these images. Claim them. And, importantly, use these prayers only as a model. Develop your own. Invent your own. Find your own words. Express your *personal darkness* in *personal images* that fit just your life.

A prayer is your time of self-expressing in the company

of the God who delights in you. Find your own words.

Each prayer has a space, an open moment, for your own words.

The language in the prayers does not describe particular hardships.

The wording is more general, so that each person who prays

can take that image and insert their own details into it.

Therefore, take your time with each prayer, allow it to

percolate in the mind and become intensely personal.

Be encouraged. You are indeed God’s child, adored, supported, rejoiced over and held in eternity’s hand. What lies ahead in life may be unclear. What does exist is *just the moment now* in which you and your God are gathered in the nocturnal darkness.

And as you spend time with these opening six prayers, be sparing with them. Sprinkle them out in small portions, only one at a time, and one per day. No one should read through these first six nocturnes straight through. That would be overload. Their imagery couldn’t mix with the life of the reader. There wouldn’t be time for honesty about nocturnal times. Please use them slowly, and in moderation.

*If this nocturnal time is especially difficult for you,*

*please consider reading the prayers in the company of a good friend.*

The closing two Nocturnes, numbers seven and eight, explore the language of release. The reader has tasted darkness, and been stilled in the darkness to better find self and God*. Oddly, stillness in the dark might be an essential step in pilgrimage.*

These closing prayers desire to lift the corner of the veil that has drooped over a life. Barring miracle, there won’t be any quick answers. Still the prayers insist on hope. They call on grace and ask that the shackles of affliction be eased.

Let the prayers be an open time of glad connection with God *now,* and a plea for a brighter future.

In these last two prayers you will find this approach: *they plead that the very qualities of God’s character will shape our lives more and more*. These prayers note that our God is love, justice, kindness, healing, peace, joy and freedom. These Nocturnes reverentially ask that these qualities come more and more alive in each of our days.

Hold to your faith. Rely on God. Rely on friends. Trust your courage. Grace attends you.

**Nocturne Number One *A Prayer For Opening Up To The Settling Darkness***

My God of bright, unsurpassed glory – you are here. In love, and in kindness, you are present with me. In faithfulness, you have hunkered down in the flaking gold leaf and poverty of my spirit.

My God of unfailing love, in just the *here and now*, even here, I open myself to your loving gaze. I praise you. I am blessed. I have been immersed in baptism, and drowned into life. I have been fashioned by your careful hands and in this nocturnal moment I incline before you in all my frailty and worth. I bend in worship, and, I also bend under the weight of life.

Darkness has come. Should this darkness cause me to shiver: wrap arms around me. Should these fears and their shadows cause me to curl beneath a blanket: be gracious to your child. Great is your name.

In this darkened time, kindly God, spare me from people who flash ready smiles. My God, keep me safe from all those who would make me find lessons in my hurt. I am already hammered thin. My God, keep me clear of people who offer foolish remedies and quick answers. Keep me from those who try to cheer me and say “It is always darkest before the dawn”; because I know in truth, my God, it was darkest when it dawned upon me that shadows were part of life.

Hear me Lord, as I bring before you my darkened moments**…**

So, dearest Lord, before I take up acts of rebellion against the dark prepare me to face honestly this dimmed time. The dark has crept in. It has taken up residence. Help me to call it my own, for it is - and Lord in some way now - the darkness owns me.

Hear my prayer. Attend me in grace, even as I sit now at an angle, bent in free worship - and bent also under the weight of this life. Great is your name through Jesus Christ. Amen.

In this painting by Sue Miller Jeoffry sits outside that tragic home of poor care and human hurt. The landscape is grim. The house is ill-defined as affliction darkens the landscape. Jeoffry will live here, in a mix of light from the courage and beauty of the residents, and, in harsh shadows of born of trauma. To prepare him, Jeoffry is bathed in God’s light, which encourages him, defines him, and equips him for loving ministry in the dark.

**Nocturne Number Two *Sifting The Darkness***

In this pressing present time, my loving God, I come before you. The two of us are entwined. We are held together in mutual love. I bless you for loving intimacy. And Lord, I pray before you. My life is troubled. Help me face the shadows. Great is your name.

Merciful God, in this darkened moment things burden my mind. Move your Spirit. Move your Spirit gently through all my thoughts. Sift my memories, and my fears. Give me courage to taste their sooty darkness. My God, ease your Holy Spirit through my roiling anxious mind. Love me. And now, just here and now in the worries and shadows, breathe alongside me.

Colours have mostly drained from my life, leaving charcoal smudges. The darkness Lord is nuanced and persistent. Vibrancy is gone. I have trouble *wanting* life*.* I have trouble *seeing* life clearly. My Lord, the geometry of my world is so hard to discern. Is this good or bad?

In the strength of your loving Spirit help me touch the shadows, and feel their shape. In this small hour, so pregnant, and so sparse, help me to *see* in the dark.

I lay before you the innermost voices of my heart**…**

As life presses hard Lord, your love presses strongly. I worship you. You are creator; you are the artist and have crafted me from dust. Even so, my God, the hurts of today also shape me. If my heart is contorted, if affliction warps my joys, if my confidence buckles in the dark: remember me.

My loving God, in this nocturnal time as all my senses are dulled. Help me now to see through spirit and heart. Cradle my heart in Jesus. Amen.

Jeoffry lies at rest in this painting by Erika Baempfer. It is no small spiritual and physical challenge to lie still when so much of life may cause us to pace and squirm. There will be a time for action. But now in this nocturnal moment stillness allows reflection.

**Nocturne Number Three *A Prayer Concerning Personal Identity***

My God, I set apart this time for prayer. Hear me.

As I sit here alone, and the open light of day has left. My life has been hard. Life presses in on me. Images bend and deflate. Shadows pile up. In this nocturnal time Lord the shadows rule. And so, my God, in this moment now, in just this moment together with you, as life is pared back, I wonder, who am I?

Dearest God: who on this wild earth am I, wincing, curled up, and still beautiful in your eye?

Promises are dust, most of them. This place is flint. Friends can drift, and well might. Carefully laid out plans are lost in the fog. When so much of me is darkened, my God, who am I?

I am stilled, and pray before you. Hear the concerns of my heart**…**

Lord, you know that hardships have emptied me. As I move among blurred, puzzling outlines, my very nature seems up for grabs. Many things try to define me. I am chained and liberated, spirit and flesh, here and eternal, confined and maybe someday soaring in praise. I am a living prayer, bundled fears, silent, hanging on in mere seconds, and eternity’s child.

So my God, tired, and dimmed, I lift what prayer I can. Be praised. Be adored. Be with me. And I offer this prayer in the name of Jesus, the One who ate, and trekked long hours, and longed for sleep, and dreamed and came to hunger, and yearned for release, and dripped out life for our salvation. Amen.

Jeoffry bounds forward out of a swirl of the fire and energy of God’s presence. Diane Hutchings captures the energy and the vigor of the poem when it speaks of the fire of God surrounding cats and people. Much of our identity hinges on being able to *mystically see* and *strongly cling to* this loving fire that surrounding us even when almost everything else in life is dimmed.

**Nocturne Number Four *Prayers From A Place Of Confinement***

Loving God, even as light fades around me, the great constellation of your blessings rises. Loving God, you are good. I bless you for the countless enrichments of my life. I delight in redemption’s bright eternal gift. As your thankful child I bend in praise.

Hear me as I plead for this world, both wonderful, and twisted. Dear God, this earth lives free and hemmed in. And even as my own shadows clamp down around me, help me lift a prayer.

This nocturnal time builds a prison yard. Walls are high. My mind paces. Teach me Lord to *move* even within my constraints. The end of my troubles could be far off. Life is pinched.

Great is your name. I lay my innermost thoughts before you**…**

God of freedom, in this narrow moment, is there any way for me to be– strangely, free in your Spirit? The now and the forever are close. Can I be cramped and infinite? Can my weakness and strength both rest in your hands? Life presses down on my chest. Can you teach my spirit to breathe? My God, we are together, now, here and now, we are shackled and free together.

Can you lift the shadows? God of light, God of dazzling beauty, God of bright glory who gathers stars at your feet, can you ease the shadows in my life? Lord, can you?

Love me. Faithfully love me. And Lord, let your name be praised in Jesus. Amen.

The corridor stretches out bleakly in this rendering by Lindsay A. Veh. Jeoffry keeps an eye. He is guardian. But sometimes all he can do is peer down a corridor as the very walls drip affliction. Can there ever be new light? Will the nocturne ever lift? Children of God plead and ask. Indeed, the God of freedom might move back the walls. And still, until that happens, Maybe, in grace, in paradox, light could rise even from walking down brute, dimmed corridors. In the here and now we move in a mix of freedom and confinement; brightness and shadow. May grace accompany those who dare to plead and pray for new freedom in the dark corridors of pilgrimage.

**Nocturne Number Five *A Prayer For Reaching Towards God***

In this nocturnal moment Lord, with half-formed ideas, half-realized fears, in this darkened moment I lift a prayer. Merciful God, some words will be strong, some buckled. Darkness Lord makes my prayer uneven. Still, in the company of your Spirit, I bring what prayer I can.

In this cloying nocturne, there seems no escape. And Lord this darkness has talons. My God, as this darkness grips, hold me tighter. Open me to your presence, now, in this shuttered place. And give me strength to plead for a brighter tomorrow.

Darkness has seeped in. Colours ran away in the gutter. Open me to you even to the charcoal shapes. I bring forward the cares of my heart**…**

Raise my head in hopeful prayer. Lord this nocturnal realm slumps on the back of my neck. If I spend time rewriting my history, be patient with me as I mutter in the darkness. Lord, help me stretch forward. This Spirit-filled, Spirit-rejecting nocturne cramps me. And, Lord, if I wear circles in the carpet, in kindness, show your beloved child a way forward.

Give me courage Lord. Stretch my imagination. Let me believe again in creativity and the dance of life. Turn my longings into new life. I crave new lines and new shapes and sunrises and new outcomes. Help me stretch upwards and outwards towards a new day.

My loving God, let grace move. Trowel back in the colour. Cause my heart to reach towards love and light and a future secure in your care. This night, should sleep be difficult; tenderly, reassure me. I am still yours – your child, your delight, your creation and joy, and you are my future. My God, this earth spins toward an uncertain future.

Be my certainty and my hope, and be praised through Jesus. Amen.

At the start of his day Jeoffry prays, worships and dedicates all his *little cat activities* to God. Here he stretches. All cats do. But in this painting by William Ho and in the poem by Christopher Smart this stretching takes on new meaning. In a tight space, crowded by affliction and neglect, Jeoffry reaches for God.

**Nocturne Number Six *A Prayer When Light And Darkness Are Tightly Bound Together***

Unclear which is best or where best interests lie

My God, I come before you. I present my life before you. Many things need to be considered. Many things are troubling in this nocturnal moment. I lay before you the sad events that press on my life.

Give me courage. Give me courage to breathe. Outside this room life goes on. The world has not ground to a halt on account of my affliction. No one lines up to measure my sorrows. Lord, the world has not put on more lights because my world is dimmed. There is no movement for me here in the darkness. Merciful God I am confined in a place where pilgrim should settle. Light and dark both play on my mind.

My God, you know my concerns. You love me, and you know me. You have counted all the delights in my life, you have graced me with love. I bless you for happy memories. And now there is also darkness. I feel closed in. No exits signs are lit. Dark and light share the same space and vie for my attention.

I sit and pray before you. Let your name be praised.

Lord, in these rounded shouldered moments, the powdery residue of cherished plans drifts about my feet. In this drafty, night-dominated place, shadows bend in the gusts. My heart wavers.

My God, I

pray for myself. Hear my private prayer**…**

As this moment is darkened and unclear, keep me true to this nocturnal moment, and caring God, keep me true to your love.

. Let me know deep down that this nocturnal drudge is not divine retribution. Ground me Lord in unconditional love.

So receive me, your child, still yours. Still and waiting. Still brightly loved. Stilled in the shadows.

My God of liberating humility, a tomorrow of some kind will rise. Amen

Jeoffry is in a harsh space. In this painting by Sue Miller light and dark form patterns and support each other and cram in tightly there is little breathing space here. Surely there are no easy answers. Is Jeoffry friend or foe? Is the harsh light more welcoming than the dark? Both squeeze into a tight space. Nocturnal lighting is never simple. Neither is the life of someone who suffers.

**miller 2**

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**Nocturne Number Seven *Striving For Justice* wisdom in seeking J, wise choices of strategy, people resoiurces**

These last two prayers bring forward the plea that the very qualities of God’s character will shape our lives more and more. These prayers note that God is love, justice, kindness, healing, joy and freedom. These Nocturnes reverentially ask that these qualities come more and more alive in our days.

My God, these small hours are filled with no small things. As the pace and obligations of the day have given way to a richer, slower time, our God, with – maybe – even maybe, in a light spirit, perhaps in some jest and self-mockery, I could remember, my God, I are not the core, I am not the centre indeed of all things, neither is my suffering. I might well writhe before you, yes, and live in a stew of heaviness of and foolishness, silly, blithe and wonderful, grasped by the loving Spirit, and wrapped in fanciful fiction, and still, yet, here I am, God, still, and stilled by the hardness of life; unwilling companions of the dark.

In the fearsome three-fold intimacy of self, and hurt and Divine, remember me.

Give sp insight and sp strength to receive joy

Merciful God, there are teeth in this darkness. It snips off parts of my life. At times our God this can be holy, and we may need it to prune, and at other times, oh our God, many, and many good and holy joyful things are lost in the dark.

If I look around, the terrain is contorted and odd, and maybe even sometimes oddly fruitful. My God, some shapes only make sense when blurred.

As best I could, my God, I have tried to be a child of your love. I have tried to die in order to live; I have striven to give and thereby receive; to gladly throw away my life to find it better. You have called me into love and spread that love to those around me. But now, just right here now, here and now, in this cloaked space there is little else to try but prayer.

**J roars**

**Nocturne Number Eight**

Both: J in cloud, mystic vision, companionship, support of God

 Veh chest of drawers, teach me to live in disordered life in contact with you and song

In the heavy stillness of this time, there are few kindly distractions, just a silence to amplify the strain.

even as the palpable dark soots our face, our God - - accompany.

My God, as we have set aside this moment to sit in each other’s glad company, help me to face the darkness. In this slow time, as hours sag through the darkened air, remain close. My God, hold me through all the cries, and the worries, and the sad turbulence, and hold me still through the beauties of life.

, even with all the racing of my mind,

We simply remain yours, dark, and place before you all the winding down of old dreams, dreams long-held and cherished, that now in this cell of affliction will never come to pass.

In this all too afflicted time, grains of darkness swirl in and drift up around the soul. Our God, in this nerve-jangled, nocturnal cul-de-sac of diminished futures, our God with your strong hand, touch our tears.

I pray now for myself. In time, my God, all the happy revelry of heaven’s banquet will be my home. Some time. Eventually. But here and now my God, in this very tight spot now.