



A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension Between Belief and Experience

A.J. Swoboda

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On Thursday as they ate the Passover meal with Jesus, the disciples believed that the kingdom was coming and they were on the front end of a revolution. Then came the tragedy of Friday and, somehow even worse, the silence of Saturday. They ran. They doubted. They despaired. Yet, within the grave, God's power was still flowing like a mighty river beneath the ice of winter. And then there was Sunday morning.

Real, raw, and achingly honest, "A Glorious Dark" meets readers in the ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty we feel when our beliefs about the world don't match up to reality. Tackling tough questions like "Why is faith so hard? Why do I doubt? Why does God allow me to suffer?" and "Is God really with me in the midst of my pain?" A. J. Swoboda puts into sharp focus a faith that is greater than our personal comfort or fulfilment. He invites readers to develop a faith that embraces the tension between what we believe and what we experience, showing that the very tension we seek to eliminate is where God meets us.

A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension Between Belief and Experience Details

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From Reader Review *A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension Between Belief and Experience* for online ebook

Chelsi says

There were definitely some parts of this book that were quite good. For instance, the portion about how we must wait in the tomb on Saturday, hopeless and scared. There were other bits that I quite liked as well. But, the overwhelming majority of the book seemed like it was unfocused thoughts that were pieced together from blogs or sermons. I had trouble relating ideas back to the point of the chapter or section. The tone was also somewhat irritating, although I don't fault the author for his personality. I think this book had potential but could have been largely improved with a great deal more editing.

Curtis says

A Glorious Dark offers readers a series of reflections on faith and life based on the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the Easter weekend. Laid out this way, I found it helpful to spend time considering what each day brings to the Christian life. As the author says, we so often jump from Friday to Sunday without much thought of how this first Easter weekend would have played out. The underlying message is one of hope in God's presence in the midst of confusion and doubt. God is always with us, despite how we might feel. And while this may sound cliché, the author brings a depth of understanding to it. The reflections from each day do not always appear to clearly connect with the day being considered but are nonetheless thought provoking. I'll be coming back to a number of sections for further reflection.

I'm thankful to Baker Books Bloggers for providing me the opportunity to explore this work.

Laurie says

Meaning-packed and prose-delightful. I enjoyed the intellectual and spiritual experience of reading Swoboda's look at the powerful implications of the events and pauses during three day: Good Friday through Resurrection Sunday.

Key quotes:

The religious system of Christianity or church is not the only way to God. Jesus Christ himself is the only way to God. I'm not a keeper of the way; I'm just a journeyer on the

Another struggle people have with Christian faith is the guilt associated with it. Guilt is viewed in our culture as the antithesis of good and mature spirituality, and having guilt is seen as nothing more than the burden of religious authoritarianism and oppression. I was quickly overwhelmed by a great deal of guilt over my sin—the death in the marrow of my bones—after becoming a Christian. It was, in fact, the first time I felt real guilt.

Because it's inclined to reject any form of guilt, our culture has gone to great lengths to try to stop all forms

of judging. But we can't do that. By condemning and judging all forms of judgment, we undermine our authority to speak boldly against murder, poverty, rape, or greed. Jesus said that you'd be judged as you judge.² Jesus judged and permitted judgment, although he judged with great grace. I think people today reject all expressions of judgment because if they make a judgment, they would themselves have to be judged. You can only judge if your own hands are clean. And because none of our hands are clean, we've ceased and banned all judgment. But that isn't good. We need judgment.

The Bible nails it. I agree that Christianity assumes a rather dark view of humanity—that we're sinners, hopeless in and of ourselves. That we are, well, powerless. But boy do we need that kind of honesty. In the end, we need that dose of reality. Perhaps the Bible is simply trying to do what nobody else down here wants to do—be honest about who we really are.

Lewis soon began spending less time writing nonfiction theology, and he began writing imaginative fiction, books like the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Perelandra*. Why a change? Many Lewis scholars have theorized that he eventually came to believe that the primary way to change a person was not by changing their beliefs alone but by changing their imagination. In a telling letter to a magazine, Lewis explains why he shifted to writing fictional accounts in his later years: My thought and talent (such as they are) now flow in different . . . channels, and I do not think I am at all likely to write more directly theological pieces. The last work of that sort which I attempted had to be abandoned. If I am now good for anything it is for catching the reader unaware—thro' fiction and symbol. I have done what I could in the way of frontal attacks . . . now [I] feel quite sure those days are over.⁴

Repentance is a word meaning to change one's mind. Repentance is a kind of "good grief" that occurs when we've drawn near to God, to borrow from the prophet Charlie Brown. It's a deep and lasting change within our minds, hearts, and imaginations when we touch God's terribly deep mercy. Be careful: repentance is not what some religious people have supposed. Repentance does not, as they suggest, bring us closer to God. Rather, repentance is a by-product of being drawn near to God.

No human opinion, my own included, carries the knowledge or authority to populate heaven or hell.

One literary scholar by the name of Erving Goffman gave his life to studying the complex dynamics of drama, theater, and acting. At the time, his ideas were quite radical. His most widely read work was a book entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman theorized that people essentially live as actors in front of a world that they believe is watching them as an audience. Goffman believed we all perceive the world around us as one big audience that either boos or applauds all we do. And because the audience can often be quite fickle—booing, clapping, bravoing—we'll be naturally inclined to cover over our insecurities and fears and replace them with costumes and masks as an actor would. In life, we'll present ourselves with particular behaviors, patterns, and attitudes in order to make impressions of success and confidence upon others to protect our true inner brokenness. Goffman's nerded-out academic title for this theory was "the dramaturgical conception of self."¹⁴ We live as actors, not as we actually are. Turns out, Goffman was a bit of a prophet. Modern people often pantomime their way through their insecurities and fears, painting on a smiley façade, keeping their audience believing they know their lines and everything is fine.

All the sin, and shame, and narcissism in the world are wrapped up in the next verse in the Bible—"They realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."¹⁶ The human response to sin is to put something on. Their first action was not to go to God their Father; it was to put something on. They covered themselves. Now, you don't have to be a Christian or Jew to get what is going on here. The atheist existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote on this moment in human history. He said, "Adam and Eve realized after the fall that they were naked because the naked body

symbolized our brute objectivity.”¹⁷ This brute objectivity, Sartre said, is that moment when we realize who we really, really, really are inside. And we’ll do anything to hide ourselves from it. If Luther could see God in the grain, we can learn to see God in our broken lives.

What did Jesus have that we don’t? Jesus was fulfilled in the sheer love of God. Concluding his most brilliant book, *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton briefly discusses what Jesus did when he went to the wilderness with God early in the morning.²⁰ In the wilderness, Jesus prayed to his Father. We might often imagine Jesus going into the wilderness sort of white-knuckling his relationship with the Father. How, before coffee, Jesus begrudgingly went up to force himself to pray. But, Chesterton says, that’s not what it would’ve been like if we saw Jesus up in the wilderness praying. Chesterton says that if we could have hid behind a tree and watched Jesus in the wilderness with his Father, we would’ve seen something that would surprise us all. We would have seen Jesus laughing as he danced through the trees.

Therein lies the importance of the Bible and the church. In the Bible, we find a book reporting to us the things God has spoken in the past to others. And since God does not go back on what he’s said, we can compare all we think to those words because of God’s faithfulness. This is exactly why discerning God’s voice is best done in the context of a community holding its feet to the Bible, a book that has the ability to tell us if we’re being idiots or not.

There’s a kind of holiness, of redemption, in not receiving everything we ask for in prayer. Even Jesus knew what it was like not to get what he wanted. I’m reminded of C. S. Lewis’s words: “If God had granted all the silly prayers I’ve made in my life, where should I be now?”

The fact that Jesus had been captured caused a disciple to run in fear. In the brilliant words of New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, “Those who had left everything to follow him have now left everything to get away from him.”⁹ It was in his death that even his disciples distanced themselves from him. Jesus was killed as a lonely madman.

It’s interesting to consider all the hands involved in Jesus’s death: those at his trial, the crowds, a giant mob. It’s even more fascinating to consider who did nothing to stop his crucifixion. The theologians stood by and approved.

I don’t want to be premature, but could it be possible that God doesn’t just speak in red lights and green lights but with yellow lights too? And by that I mean that God sometimes says yes, other times no, but sometimes remains silent. When God is silent, he isn’t saying nothing; he’s saying everything—kind of like, “Hey, I’m with you. I’ll go with you where you go.”

Discerning God’s will is like that—the map isn’t clear until the journey is finished. Then we can look back and see God was walking every step of it with us. Most maps are written as we walk. If we embrace the fact that following Jesus is a gyrovagus, a ceaseless pilgrimage, we can embrace the excruciating silence.

Immaturity sometimes shows itself in needing a personal word every day. One sign of maturity, however, is learning to be faithful to God without a constant call, to be faithful with tireless passion to the few words God seems to have spoken.

Because God knows that if we walk in our darkness long enough, we’ll have to trip into his arms.

He’s got a tough gig. Jesus, the one we worship, was a man acquainted with sorrows.⁴ It must be virtually impossible to keep the attention of your followers when they’re a people acquainted with adrenaline and

lights and smoke machines and a desire to be endlessly entertained. How hard it must be to sell the cross to a people who sit there, popcorn in hand, wanting to be entertained by God.

the geography of the Old Testament is full of places with really honest names—God Judged, Israel Sinned, We Wept Bitterly. What a unique precedent. The Jewish people wrote the details of their mistakes—drew their tragedies—on their maps.

Our maps are more pristine than those of the ancients in the Bible. But parents being honest with their kids about their sin is a gift.

The Trinity is confusing because it's truthful. If you are looking for something to make sense, then stop believing in the Trinity. The Trinity is truth. It isn't rational. And truth is like a flower whose beauty isn't improved by dissection.³

A Christ-follower is like that. We choose to let our hurts and pains make us more generous and gracious than mean and malevolent. Jesus was like that. When Jesus hung on the cross dying at the end of a period of deep suffering, he offered forgiveness. Next to him were two unnamed criminals. One of those criminals hung on his cross only to hurl biting insults upon the God of the universe. Jesus offered him paradise. Just before his death, that was what came out of him. Which is what we're called to do to those who have truly hurt us. Reconciliation isn't extra credit—it's the whole course.

Fishing is faith. Faith, the kind exemplified by the star-studded cast of Scripture, is the holy act of casting one's line in the water for the millionth time even if the past nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine times before turned up nothing. Faith is standing at the river's edge, waiting, trusting, and hoping something will bite. Still, we misunderstand what faith is. Faith isn't effort. Faith isn't what makes Jesus rise from the grave. Faith is what postures us to catch fish, to see the empty tomb, to receive what's hidden below. Faith and waiting are bedmates. Faith practices the stubborn optimism and persistence that fly-fishermen endure anytime they walk to the river. Again and again, Jesus's disciples throw the line of their lives in the water no matter how long they've stood there—keeping at it, over and over, day after day, year after year, eternally hoping for a divine nibble. Jesus called us to be fishers of men. That means that following Christ requires us to be as endlessly hopeful about what God's kingdom is doing in others as we are about what God is doing in us. Fishers of men wait, try, and are stubbornly optimistic about the oft tiny and indiscernible work of God in the most un-Christlike of people. A fisher of men chooses to enter into hard, broken, even painful relationships over and over and over again in hopes of the potential of grace. It's only in the daring act of loving those who don't act like Jesus that we can hope to look like Jesus ourselves.

God is best understood by those who've experienced the death of their greatest desire. Every other view is from the back row. God is so close to those who know what loss is like. I once heard someone say that the pope was not God's primary representative on earth—the poor were.⁴ I think that the poor can see God from the front row because they literally, every day, every moment, rely on God's love for their next breath.

The Bible does not distinguish between believing and trying. They're the same thing. Biblical belief implies a kind of trying. And if this is true, then many hold dear a catastrophic misunderstanding of the nature of faith. Many envision faith as a kind of hall pass for laziness, excusing them from a life of action, doing, and working hard. Faith like this lulls one to passively recline, let go, and let God do everything. While admiring anyone's intention to take a deep breath and relax, I fear that this false view of faith lets us off the responsibility of life, making us believe that we don't have to apply for that job, don't have to work hard in that marriage, don't have to pay those bills—all these in the name of "faith." That's not faith; that's entitlement. Faith isn't letting go and letting God. Faith is grabbing hold and letting God. Faith is working

one's heart out yet leaning on grace the whole time for the miracle. Faith is running to the tomb only to find Jesus has already been resurrected. How dangerous false faith can be! Our God-given responsibility to act in this life should never be undermined by our view of a powerful God. It is that powerful God who gives us his power to act. If life were simply about God populating heaven, then why would God have us do the whole life part? Why not just create us in heaven? God creates us to live life. And living requires faith. Life is that place here and now where we freely risk what God has given us in love for him. The philosopher Pascal once said that faith is like gambling. A disciple bets their whole life—all their action, all their work—on the resurrected Jesus. Faith is a risk. Faith is doing something with the life God gave you and letting God worry about the results. Action, therefore, is an essential part of faith.

Faith, rather, is a radical response to God's love. What if we lived as if we believe that? That would mean that faith and belief are not some sacrifice we throw before God to make him love us. That would mean that faith and belief are our response to God's already promised present love in Jesus.

The precise moment Jesus was affirmed by his Father is of utmost importance. It wasn't after three years of healings, after feeding the poor, after preaching sermons, after he died on the cross. Look at when Jesus was affirmed. Jesus was loved before any of those good and powerful acts. I think had God affirmed Jesus after he'd died on the cross, then we'd all believe God only affirms us after we've done a life of great stuff. But that isn't how real love works. God's love is ascribed, never achieved.

Martin Luther once said that when a Christian wakes up in the morning, they should wash their face and remember their baptism. I get what Luther meant. Salvation is having all our history, all our stories, all our mistakes swept up in the free-flowing river of grace that we were once dunked in. The waters still flow. I haven't stopped sinning, but it's on my list of things to do. I want to be done. Until then, I rely on grace. And there's little chance anything will change soon. Faith is drowning in a torrent of God's love.

Martin Luther said Saturday was the day that God himself lay cold in the grave. Friday was death, Sunday was hope, but Saturday was that seemingly ignored middle day between them when God occupied a dirty grave in a little garden outside Jerusalem. Saturday is about waiting, about uncertainty, about not knowing what'll happen. Saturday is ambiguity. It's about, as one theologian put it, "muddling through" when the future isn't clear.² So much of Christian faith is Saturday faith.

faith is something that you cling to when understanding and reason lay dead. We don't believe once we understand it—we believe in order to understand it. Saturday's like that: offering a day of waiting, a day of ambiguity, a day when God is sovereign even if our ideas and theologies and expectations about him are not. It is the day that our ignorance is our witness and our proclamation. Truth is, our intellect will always be one step behind in our love of God. We don't love God once we understand him; we love God in order to understand him.

Our modern world feeds on what I call self-selected content—what we want when we want it. Our music is self-selected—we listen to what we want to listen to when we want to (and skip to the next track when we're unhappy). This didn't used to be the case. Gone are the days we'd listen to the radio for that off chance of hearing our favorite tune. Driving down the road, running, studying, we click on the self-selected music in our self-selected locations on our self-selected computers. We watch self-selected shows, read self-selected books, have self-selected friends. Through the process of self-selection, we rarely if ever are forced to encounter individuals, groups, things, or ideas we're not into. Because in this therapeutic, feel-good culture of ours, we're used to having the things we want to medicate the boredom of now. We believe self-selected ideas. We surround ourselves with what we want to hear, reading books we agree with, taking classes we want, having friends who tell us what we want them to, embracing forms of spirituality that make us feel

better about ourselves and tell us what we want to hear about what we already believe. Truth and reality must cater to our own individual needs and wants. Which makes me extremely uncomfortable. Because if we're telling ourselves only the things we want to hear and believe only the things we want to believe, what if we're all wrong? Self-selected living is killing us.

In a self-selected world, we dictate where we're willing to receive truth. Which is why I'm increasingly suspicious of people who claim they don't need church to find God. These people can find God in the woods with the birds and the animals and the moss. Listen, I love the God of the woods. Walking through the lush Oregon coniferous forests with the sun beaming on my face between tall trees, I know God's there. But I find the parts of God that I want out there—the Creator God, the beautiful God. If I want all of God, then I've got to embrace the parts of God I don't like, not just the parts I do. Sitting my stubborn backside down in an uncomfortable church pew alongside really cantankerous religious folks on Sunday forces me to face the parts of God that I don't like. For the person who says that church is useless and they can worship going on a hike, frankly, why not just replace church with going to a movie, a trip to Hawaii, or hot-tubbing? Say what it is. That's not us trying to find truth—that's us trying to find a convenient God whose sole purpose is our happiness.

I was talking to a Jewish friend about that story of the guy who tried to keep the ark from falling and was killed by God. I asked her what Jews say about that story. She said that God took the man's life for one simple reason: to set a precedent. God did that, she said, so people would never again begin to think that they could save God from falling, or losing, or becoming irrelevant. God doesn't need us to save him. We need God to save us. God is okay. We're not. It's not our job to save God. It's our job to follow God. Glory has not fallen and does not need our help getting up. Which means our profundity isn't God's key to having a comeback tour in his created world. We can learn something from that. We should probably be wary of trying to be too profound, because God came as a baby.

Reading the Bible is really hard without knowing the Voice behind it.

...and many more!

Bob says

Summary: An exploration of living in the tension of the glorious hope of Christian faith and the dark, unsettling realities of our lives through reflections grouped around the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the Triduum of Holy Week. A great book to read reflectively during Holy Week.

A. J. Swoboda opens this book with the image of a frozen river, apparently dead and still on the surface, but beneath the ice, flowing and alive—"a glorious dark", he calls it, which he sees as an image for our faith, lived in the tension between our surprising and glorious hope and the struggles and questions and failures of our own lives.

The book is organized around the three days of the Triduum: Good Friday, Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Friday is the time when we are faced with the reality that "the monster at the end of the book" (reprising his childhood hero Scooby Doo) is us. He explores our struggles with God's "Fatherhood" and how Jesus discloses something of the kind of Father we have in God. He explores how God journeys with us in life, making the map as we go. Perhaps the most striking chapter in the Friday section is titled "Numb" where he describes his own struggle with alcoholism and the striking moment where Jesus refuses to numb the pain of

the cross with alcohol and myrrh. And he concludes with the striking moment where God seems to forsake God on the cross.

Saturday is about waiting in uncertainty. We want to move right from suffering to triumph. In some sense, our whole lives right now are lived between Good Friday and Easter in Holy Saturday and it is there we must sit. Saturday tells us we can't pick and choose our life in some kind of "faith boutique". We must learn to rest in this day which for the Jews is "sabbath" before the Sunday of new creation.

And then there is Sunday—beginning for Swoboda with the amazing vindication of Mother Mary in the Resurrection—the woman who as a pregnant teen, claimed she was yet a virgin, visited only by an angel of the Lord. If resurrection is true, then all the other incredible things in the narratives of Jesus beginning with this virgin conception make sense and Mary can say, "told you so!" It confronts us with surprise, a different kind of super-hero, and gives us a community that eats together, even as Jesus ate with his disciples on the shore of Galilee before being taken from them.

What I so appreciated about Swoboda was his ability to "tell it slant" (in the words of Emily Dickinson)—to help us see afresh the surprising and wonderful character of the Christian story as it breaks into our flawed and sometimes dark existence. In place of stories that have become routine and seem not to have the power to keep us awake let alone raise the dead and transform life, his writing helps capture the startling character of what we call "the good news". One example of this comes early in the book when he writes:

"Certainly God is holy—holy beyond all perceivable knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. But Hosea throws us a curveball in our understanding of how a holy God deals with unholiness. Perhaps in other religions the deities deal with evil through finger-pointing, shouting matches, or even the silencing of a perpetrator. But in Hosea, God not only looks upon evil—God takes evil on a honeymoon. How does God deal with evil?"

He puts a ring on it" (pp. 19-20).

I found myself pausing again and again in thankful wonder at the glory that pierces our darkness that Swoboda explores in these reflections. It has helped prepare my heart for Holy Week and I wanted to post this review today so that others might find this resource for their own Holy Week reflections.

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the publisher. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

James says

A. J. Swoboda wrote *A Glorious Dark* about three days. The Friday we call good when Jesus died on the cross, Sunday when Jesus surprised everyone by refusing to be dead and the Saturday in between ('awkward Saturday')--a day of silence when defeat appears complete and we are full of doubt and questions. The fancy-shmancy word for these days is Triduum, the last three days of Holy Week. Many denominations and spiritualities major in one of these three days. Friday people enter into suffering and loss. Saturday people

allow space for doubt, questions and deconstruction. Sunday people are the clappy, happy people who emphasize blessing. Swoboda sees a problem when Christians treating any one day as though it is the total Christian vision and experience, "We need both Friday and Sunday, not just one or the other. Some want to suffer with Jesus; others want to be resurrected with Jesus. Few Desire both. We can't prefer one day and reject the rest" (5).

So instead Swoboda takes these three days, the last three days of Holy Week, and treats them as a comprehensive vision (though not exhaustive) of Christian spirituality. The book's fifteen chapters are organized under the broad headings of the days (Friday, Saturday, Sunday), each giving a 'glimpse of that day.' On Friday, we reflect on Christ's cross and in it see both God's great love for us, and our own need with greater clarity. The cross confronts our sinfulness, our personal need for a Father, our addictions and apathy. In its place we see God's lavish love and welcome. We also see Jesus so identify with the struggles of humanity that for the briefest of moments on the cross, he looks like an atheist. Awkward Saturday is a day of silence and rest and questioning. It is a day for 'sitting, waiting and hoping.' On that day what Jesus built on earth and what we've done ourselves for God, seems very insignificant. There are reasons to question everything. Yet the questions and doubts are part of the waiting, so in the tomb we wait. Sunday is a day of surprises The same Jesus who came born of a sixteen-year-old Virgin, shocked everyone by coming out the tomb. Through Jesus' resurrection over the grave he secured for us the victory over every power and strong hold that held us captive and He invites us to share in his life, becoming part of his resurrection community.

Swoboda weaves his theological reflections with personal narrative, pop-cultural references, and stories from his church. He is a pastor of an urban church in Portland and talks about his vocation and context throughout. He is also funny, bookish and insightful. I enjoyed these reflections and think they are appropriate not only for Holy Week (which is when I read this book), but throughout the Christian year. We are Easter people and the truths that Swoboda explores are constantly relevant. While this book is organized around the three-day-theme, it is also more like a conversation than a tightly written treatise. The conversational tone makes it an engaging read but it also occasional made me impatient for 'the point' of a chapter (or kept me wondering how it related to the overall theme). But I'm not sure I'd like a pared down version of this. Swoboda is engaging (it makes me want to pull his previous book, Messy, off my shelf and actually read it). I give this book 4.5 stars.

Notice of material connection: I reviewed this book from Baker Books in exchange for my honest review.

Ruthline Ignacio-Capriles says

This gave me much peace!

So honest and real! Bold! He says what he thinks and feels. Few people can do this. It helps tremendously.

Jennifer Pickwell says

It wasn't until I was well into the first chapter...somewhere around Scooby-Doo...that I realized it wasn't an old theologian speaking, but a young man's voice I was reading. Author A. J. Swoboda is a Pastor and Professor from Portland, Oregon who was unknown to me before I read A Glorious Dark. The title and cover piqued my interest as I am someone who sometimes struggles with, "...the tension between belief and

experience.”

From the back cover:

On Thursday as they ate the Passover meal with Jesus, the disciples believed that the kingdom was coming and they were on the front end of a revolution. Then came the tragedy of Friday and the silence of Saturday. They ran. They doubted. They disappeared. From their perspective, all was lost. Yet, within the grave, God’s power was still flowing like a mighty river beneath the ice of winter. And there was a Sunday morning.

In *A Glorious Dark*, Swoboda reflects on three Holy Days and how Christians walk out their faith in reference to each day. In Part I, he speaks to Friday Christianity which he describes as the, “...religion of those who’ve chosen to find their identity in a spirituality of defeat, death, and loss.” Swoboda addresses the Saturday Christian in Part II. He suggests this is, “for those of us who’ve come to consider doubt and ambiguity as final destination rather than conduits through which we actually enter into resurrection.” Lastly, in Part III, Swoboda address Sunday Christianity. This is a very popular Christian walk at this moment in time. It is the victory and prosperity walk.

I have lived a little as a Friday Christian as I walked through a similar situation with infertility as Swoboda shares in Part I. My husband and I had to go to great lengths to have children and it was a dark time in our lives. Although it has been many years, reading his account brought back memories of how miserable life can be.

I also enjoyed Swoboda’s thoughts on “resurrection community,” and the need for Christians to belong to a body of believers. With so many churches offering online service opportunities, many people opt to watch from home and never attend in person and in turn, miss out on becoming part of a community of believers.

In the end, I appreciate the overall message of this book. The idea that the Christian life is meant to be lived in and through all three Holy Days. This is a book I will pass along to a friend with confidence it will be enjoyed, dog-eared, and highlighted. I was given a complimentary copy of this book by its publisher in exchange for an honest review. All opinions are my own and I have not been compensated.

John Lussier says

The river might be frozen, but there's something underneath it that is alive and moving. *A glorious dark*, says Swoboda. He compares this glorious living dark to God and Christian belief in the midst of doubt. The book is a reflection on the end of Holy Week, and the death, doubt, and resurrection we experience there. As a pastor and theologian Swoboda is a wonderful writing partner to help us reflect on moments of suffering, hopelessness, and joy.

Douglas Graves says

The content of this book is absolutely brilliant! Swoboda presents both common and uncommon themes of the Easter season. I highly recommend this book for during the Lent season to prepare for a celebration of

the resurrection but wouldn't want to discourage anyone from reading it ASAP!

The only qualm I have with this book is Swaboda's tendency to chase rabbits (no pun intended!). From time to time Swaboda will include an illustration that doesn't seem to quite fit, and occasionally seems off topic. Sometimes the chapters feel like lazily written journal entries, but the content around the rabbit trails are very much worth the read!

Create With Joy says

If you are a Christian, what happens when your intellectual and experiential faith don't quite align?

What happens when your beliefs about life and the world around you seem to be at odds?

How do you reconcile darkness and light, goodness and evil, death and life?

These are deep theological questions – and some of things you'll find yourself contemplating as you work your way through the pages of *A Glorious Dark* by A.J. Swoboda.

A Glorious Dark – Finding Hope In The Tension Between Belief And Experience is a fascinating book that explores Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday as a metaphor for the Christian faith.

A.J. believes that Christians tend to live out their faith focusing on one of three aspects of Christianity which he correlates with the spiritual themes of Holy Week.

A.J. writes that this approach to faith is problematic, however, because:

*We can't prefer one day and reject the rest. Christianity isn't a religion of preference...
Christian faith is the whole weekend and (we) must enter all days...*

Jesus is our Lord to the degree our preferences aren't.

A Glorious Dark is a beautifully written book that challenges you to think about your beliefs and how you live out your Christian life. It's a book to highlight – to ponder over – to discuss with your friends.

To read this review in its entirety, visit [Create With Joy](#).

Disclosure: I received a copy of this book from the publisher for review purposes. However, the opinions expressed in this review are entirely my own.

Rebekah says

When I read a book, be it fiction or nonfiction, and I come across something that strikes me—a turn of phrase or an important point—I fold the corner of the page over, marking that spot. Then, when I'm finished with the book, I go back to that page, reread it, and see if something strikes me again. If it does, I must have really meant it, and I underline it.

In *A Glorious Dark*, I had 23 pages folded over. In a 15-chapter book. And I almost skipped the folding over and went straight to the underlining.

A.J. Swoboda has a way with words. He mixes humor with heartfelt vulnerability and thought-provoking seriousness, and he does it all against a backdrop of Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and the in-between Saturday.

It has been said, “It’s Friday, but Sunday is coming.” That is almost always spoken to move us quickly from the trauma, the sadness, the fear of Jesus’ death and into the celebration of His resurrection. And Swoboda does start with Good Friday. He starts with Jesus’ death, and he asks us to sit there in the numbness of it. But then he doesn’t rush from that into the joy and celebration. He calls us to pause and fully enter in to Saturday first. Saturday, when Jesus had been killed and was dead in the tomb. Saturday, when nobody knew Sunday was coming. Saturday, when it seems like my life is falling apart, and I can’t even find a friend let alone God. Saturday, where we live a good portion of our lives. Saturday, where Jesus may have lain dead in a tomb but, just like a river in the winter, there is a glorious dark underneath.

I have truly never read a book like this. It is with regret that I can only recommend *A Glorious Dark* to anyone who reads this review, and I can’t actually go out and buy a copy for every one of my friends, my family members, and people I don’t even know very well.

Disclosure: I received this book free from Baker Books through the Baker Books Bloggers www.bakerbooks.com/bakerbooksbloggers program. The opinions I have expressed are my own, and I was not required to write a positive review. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s 16 CFR, Part 255 <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/wa...>

Rob McFarren says

It was a little to scattered in its composition through the chapters, particularly with the created structure of Friday-Saturday-Sunday the author lays out. I often got to the end of a chapter with maybe a few nice quotes, phrases, or anecdotes but without really understanding what the author was getting at. It really turned more into a format that let him move from big topic to big topic and not have to dive deep into any of them but rather stay glued to his stories and anecdotes. Some good take-aways...it wasn't bad, but I had much higher hopes based on the description. The subtitle is really hardly addressed at all other than just going over the basic big points. Just no arc of narrative linking chapters & sections within them to any major point the author was trying to make. Not compelling in that regard.

Michele Morin says

For years I celebrated Easter as if it were a stand-alone holiday, singing “Up from the Grave He Arose” without giving much thought to the horror of the Dying or the silence of the Dead. Providentially, my early efforts to incarnate and to enliven an invisible God in the hearts of four sweet boys found a way into the obtuse heart of their mother as well. Therefore, this Lenten season, I will be re-reading *A Glorious Dark*, a book about believing which confronts the loss and defeat of Friday and the awkward silence of Saturday with Sunday morning resurrection truth. Where memoir meets theological pondering, author A.J. Swoboda’s story

winds through his faith journey, with the bonus of startling spotlight quotes which he aims at himself and at all of us who say that we believe. Here's one of the dozen or more: "Many envision faith as a kind of hall pass for laziness, excusing them from a life of action, doing, and working hard." Ouch and amen.

What we believe about one weekend in history, the three days' journey from Golgotha to the garden tomb, impacts our whole experience of the Christian life. A Glorious Dark challenges the reader to enter into Friday, to "own up to our part of the evil in the world." This involves trusting for the lavish grace to have our emptiness filled, our requests denied, and our fatherlessness remedied by the Father. On Friday, we turn our faces away from our "sponge" of choice and embrace our identity as pilgrims, lifelong seekers of the will and the voice of God.

With candor, Swoboda describes the bleak-hearted rising of post-crucifixion Saturday, and because much of the Christian life is lived under Saturday-like conditions, it is helpful to hear that we must "sit in Saturday;" we must "squat in the tomb" in order to enter into the grief and disappointment of the original disciples. Saturday is our opportunity to remember our own mortality, to remember that we live with Jesus in his death. On Saturday, we evict ourselves from the center of the universe by "embracing the gift of waiting," and by mourning our failure to see others and their grief.

Resurrection Sunday not only verifies all that Jesus claimed, but it points to his future coming, the ultimate surprise which will serve to further verify all that we hold true. As the church meets to celebrate the resurrection every Sunday, we also reenact the resurrection, celebrating the mystery with "people we normally wouldn't love, [who] breathe down our necks, [but who] hold our feet to the fire of our beliefs." Sunday faith perseveres when my theology cannot account for the chaos I see around me.

A Glorious Dark reveals a God who "stand[s] tall" above human history and invites (rather than scorns) the questioning heart. After all, of the thirty-one questions Jesus posed in the Gospels, He answered only three. When God does not break into history to rectify the list of problems set forth in my latest memorandum/prayer, it will be helpful to remember the messy way in which that one weekend in history played out for those who were on the scene. Once again, the life of Jesus will be made manifest, a glorious life emerging from a glorious dark.

This book was provided by Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, in exchange for my unbiased review.

Travis Heystek says

I'll start by saying that A Glorious Dark wasn't what I expected it to be. That turns out to be both good and bad. But first I want to talk about the layout a bit briefly.

The cover design is both engaging and consistent with the theme of the book, one that enticed me to read the book in the first place. The book's layout is smooth and easy to follow. There are very few subtitles, which can be a breath of fresh air, as each chapter seems to flow seamlessly from start to finish. On the other hand there are natural break points throughout each chapter which makes this a book that is easy to set down and pick back up again, making it easy to read among the business of many of our modern schedules.

That being said, I do have some complaints. The questions posed on its back cover are; Why is faith so

hard? Why do I doubt? Why does God allow me to suffer? Is God really with me in the midst of my pain? I didn't feel that the book did a great job adequately addressing each of those questions. This could be because of the very personal narrative style of the book or it could be due to the lack of scriptural backing. As a pastor reading a pastor's work I expected there to be deep exposition and high scripture content in order to delve into some of life's toughest questions, but instead got an experience based answer. Although I don't disagree whole-heartedly with anything the author says, the lack of scripture also provides what I consider to be the book's lack of authority. I can tell that many of the conclusions the author comes to are based on scripture. Even the overall layout of the book (following the death and resurrection of Jesus; Friday-Sunday) speaks to that of scriptural knowledge. There was also support in the notes at the end of the book so show support for a minimal use of scripture, but due to the lack of exposition and explanations within each chapter, as a reader I'm forced to take what the author says at face-value rather than being able to explore the topic for myself. For someone at an entry level Christian "maturity" this may be ok, but for someone who is wrestling with questions and wants to answer them for him/herself, it becomes very difficult to read this book with conviction. My one other complaint, and this is minimal, is his use of the word "ass" instead of donkey/colt. I understand that "ass" is a word that grabs your attention, however because of the connotation it carries in the English language, donkey or colt would be more appropriate.

Those were my primary negatives/concerns about the book, but I also think there were some positives to the book.

A.J. Swoboda seems to speak with a strong conviction based on personal experience, which makes things very believable. He doesn't come from the stereotypical "I grew up in the church, and struggled to figure out who I was" mind set. He came from a background in which all-paths or no-paths led to eternal life. Finding and admitting to one path was something that cost him. He has also experienced deep pains in life and, from my own experience, the more experience you have with a topic the better you get at speaking to it. He doesn't seem to speak with too much anger or withheld emotion. He seems to be a "you get what you see" type of person. I especially appreciated the way he spoke of the shootings in Portland. He made you feel as if you were there experiencing it with him. He had no problem pulling me in.

He was also very quotable. I found myself underlining and taking notes as I read, indicating that it was thought provoking and convicting. I'm sure that the reading of this book will contribute to the way I approach Holy Week this year, especially preparation for our Good Friday service.

Overall, I would rate this book well. At first I was inclined to give it a mediocre rating like 2.5. This book didn't directly address me as a person, where I am in my walk with Christ. However, I can see how it would speak into the lives of others. With his smooth style and provocative use of the English language the book is engaging. Because it doesn't have a lot of visible biblical support I can't give it higher than a four. So I'm going to give this book a 3.0-3.5 out of 5. It isn't a book that I will read annually or recommend to everyone looking to read a good Christian book, but I would recommend based on someone's life circumstances.

This book was provided by Baker Book Bloggers, and the review is written in accordance with their regulations. Visit www.BakerBooks.com/BakerBooksBloggers for more information in how you can be involved.

Joan says

This book is a collection of stories and the author's thoughts. They are loosely organized under the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of Easter weekend. His writing style was hard for me to follow. It was almost like stream of consciousness, jumping from one story to another, one thought to another. The author generally takes an illustration from modern culture (a person, movie, or event) and likens God to it. I am used to taken truth from the Bible and working out to culture, not the other way around. Sometimes he has great insights. At other times I just did not get his illustrations. I am giving him the benefit of the doubt, believing he is writing for a younger generation with a short attention span and very little knowledge of the Bible. You can see my complete review at <http://bit.ly/1BNOY6P>.

I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher for the purpose of an independent and honest review.
