

The Way of the Thorn

by David Tremontozzi

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There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, For my power is made perfect in weakness."

II CORINTHIANS 12:7-9

CHAPTER ONE

THE JOURNEY

Walking aimlessly down Center Street during his lunch hour, Jack Avery looked like the epitome of success—unless you happened to peer more closely at his face. Something there didn't quite match the snappy suit and expensive loafers that he wore.

Stopping at a storefront window in order to kill time, Jack's eyes lit up when he saw the freshly cut bouquet of exquisite roses with droplets of water still clinging to their petals. "Absolutely beautiful!" he exclaimed to no one in particular.

As he stood quietly staring at the lush, red flowers, his smile slowly faded.

Why does a beautiful flower have to endure such an ugly nuisance like thorns on its stem? he wondered. *Why did God create it that way... surely He could have left out the thorns.*

Despite his melancholic musings, the roses attracted him in a way he couldn't explain. As he entered the old-

fashioned store, the little bell jingled in a friendly way.

"Hello," came the muffled voice of a man from behind the glass cases. "I'll be right with you."

Jack turned from the well-worn counter and walked over to the window display to get a closer look at the roses.

A gray-haired man finally appeared with a basket of daisies that he set on a display. "Sorry to keep you waiting. How can I help you, sir?"

"These must be the most beautiful roses I've ever seen," Jack said, turning around to face the storeowner.

The old man was slightly bent over and wore a protective apron that accentuated his protruding middle. He looked as though he had put in many years of long workdays, yet his eyes still twinkled with joy.

"I grow them myself. You are looking at the product of 50 years of experimenting. How many would you like?" he explained as he began to reach for a pair of gardening gloves.

"Oh, none today. I just came in to get a closer look. I always enjoy looking at beautiful things, and I must say that I've never seen any roses as nice as these. I will definitely be back!"

The store owner beamed. "By the way, we have a special Valentine's Day sale beginning next week."

"I'll be sure to get some then...you can count on it!" Jack said as he left the store.

Walking toward his car on the other side of the street, he mused, *Valentine's Day...already one year...* It had been one year since he first met his fiancée Julie. Engaged just three weeks ago, they were now beginning to plan their summer wedding, and he was excited although somewhat nervous.

As he opened the car door, Jack's right eye began to twitch, and an excruciating pain suddenly pierced his side. "Augggh!" wailed Jack as he violently gripped his side and just managed to collapse into the leather bucket seat.

Slow, slow, easy, breathe, breathe...that's better. Relax, breathe, relax...ok, easy, easy now. Jack coached himself through the awful recurring pain he had recently begun to experience just below his heart.

Over the last month, these sudden, dagger-like assaults in his side had sent him to the doctor. Where the pains came from, neither he nor a number of other specialists could figure out. The only diagnosis they could give him was "too much stress," and with it the old suggestion to "slow down." He had been told the same thing periodically by his parents and friends for the last two years. He could still hear their voices in his head: "Slow down, Jack. Slow down. You live like you're running from something!" Each time, these voices would trigger a mental response within him: *Running from something? You'd better believe I'm running from something. I'm running from missing life and letting it pass me by. Everybody wants to just sit around and expect life to somehow happen. Well, I know better.*

Jack hunched over the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white from gripping it so tightly. After a few minutes the pain disappeared, only to be replaced by another recurring and unwelcomed feeling—an eerie restlessness that always followed this painful experience for just a brief moment. Once the pain subsided today, however, the lingering cloud of anxiousness remained over him.

Jack looked up and stared deeply into his rearview mirror.

What's wrong with you, Jack? What's going on in there? He stared into his eyes as though trying to see something deep down in his soul. *What's wrong?*

Jack knew something in him was being unearthed, something that made him uncomfortable, and it was beginning to disrupt his life. Jack, who had always been seen as "Mr. Together," was becoming unable to effectively cope with his life.

Well liked by all those around him, Jack was especially known for his kind, well-meaning, and easy-going demeanor. After graduating from college several years ago, Jack had taken a position as a youth minister at a small church in a neighboring town close to where he had grown up. The job changed his life. During the course of the years he spent there, Jack discovered that he wanted to devote the rest of his life to serving God as a minister. Yet, in spite of this tremendous discovery, Jack began to feel a nagging weight of heaviness with increased feelings of sadness and sorrow.

The last six years of Jack's life had become intensely busy, even frantic at times. The tension build-up from his lifestyle had become so severe that two years ago it had finally taken its toll. Something inside of him broke or snapped. Jack had no idea what exactly happened, but he was certain it had to do with his soul, and he was convinced that he desperately needed help. Jack felt frustration begin to mount because no matter how much he prayed, his situation stayed the same. It seemed to him that as far as God was concerned, Jack's door of communication with Him was firmly shut.

No longer was Jack so sure of his ministerial aspirations. He took a leave of absence from his position as youth pastor and began to work as a salesman for a large

insurance firm. Jack began to ignore his despondent feelings in order to appear happy and confident for his customers, co-workers, and boss. Eventually Jack became so adept at ignoring his inner war that he had nearly convinced himself that he was fine, at least until the jabbing pain began to appear. Each recurrence was a little more fierce than the last, reminding him that he was not well and that he still needed help.

To family, friends, and co-workers, his life seemed all that it should be. He had a successful job in sales, a close group of friends, a loving family, and a wonderful fiancée. Everyone looked up to Jack; he was successful on the outside but falling apart inside. Jack felt tired all day long and drank more coffee than was good for him just to keep him going at his usual pace. He had even developed a nervous stomach, so his appetite was barely what it used to be.

Jack also had a mysterious visual malady. At times, his eyes were strangely unfocused and, though he could still see, something about his vision seemed strangely out of focus. During these times, he would feel disassociated from his surroundings—physically present but emotionally absent. With this disassociation came a keen sense of despair, though Jack could never isolate the reason for it.

These problems had grown worse over the last few weeks perhaps because life had recently become even more stressful with his wedding plans and all the responsibilities that a wife and future family would represent.

Driving home after work, Jack was unable to shake this last onslaught of eerie restlessness.

Jack swerved over to the side of the road and jerked to a stop. Staring straight ahead with his hands still

locked tightly on the steering wheel, he wrestled with admitting his problem. Finally as if releasing a dammed up river, he lifted his head and burst forth, "Help me, God! I'm a mess!" As he dropped his head onto the steering wheel, quiet tears began to roll. It had probably been five years since Jack last remembered shedding a tear, and that was at his grandfather's funeral.

Silence seeped into the car, and he began to feel a weight lifting.

In the strangest way, a cool, refreshing breeze began to blow over Jack, from the top of his head, over his shoulders and down his back, leaving in its wake the sensation of freedom and peace. Deep down he knew that at last the power of denial had finally been broken.

Suddenly he had an intense yearning for the outdoors. *I need space. I need air. I need the mountains.*

Inside his heart he felt a rising sense of hope. Jack felt good for the first time in weeks.

Yes, a weekend away. I'll go to the mountains. Fresh air and natural beauty. That's it, a weekend hike.

At home Jack was able to eat more than he had in awhile. Charged with excitement, he spent the evening rounding up his gear and packing supplies. He gave Julie a quick call to let her know what he was doing. She had been planning on shopping for her wedding gown with her mother, so she was not too disappointed in missing their Saturday date.

Finally he crawled into bed and surprisingly fell asleep right away. Early the next morning, with backpack and gear carefully stowed in his trunk, Jack drove off to his mountain weekend.

Not too far down the road, it happened once more. "Augggh! Not again!" Jack cried out with familiar pain as he gripped his side.

With one hand on the steering wheel, Jack determinedly kept driving down the highway.

He slowly breathed in and out, in and out, until the pain left.

I'm not improving. Oh God, help me!

Keeping his eyes focused on the road ahead, he began to force happy memories of hiking and camping into his mind. *I'm sure the fresh air and scenery will help...* Slowly the pain subsided, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief.

After three hours of uneventful driving, Jack arrived at the roadside parking lot next to the hiking trail entrance. Strapping on his backpack, Jack made his way toward the trail. Looking down at his watch, he began to determine how long the hike would take him.

Let's see it's 10:30...I think it's about 20 miles. That should bring me back here at the end of the trail's loop tomorrow afternoon about two or three. Yeah, there's the sign over there. What does it say?

He walked closer, *New Heights Trail: 25 miles... uh-h-h-h... Whoa, w-w-what's h-happening?*

Jack's legs were suddenly weak, and his vision began to blur. He rubbed his eyes as the sign before him began to ripple in a disturbing wave-like fashion. Then the words on the sign began to squirm like white worms against a brown backdrop as they mysteriously reshaped themselves. Suddenly everything about him became foggy. Overwhelmed with dizziness, Jack fell to his hands and knees. In a few moments, the dizziness passed, and what was previously a blurry gray mass focused into a gravel pathway, and what felt like a vague discomfort on his hands and knees likewise came into focus as rocks and pebbles jabbing his kneecaps and hands. Jack gathered himself together and stood up.