

John of the Cross (1542-1591)

Born in Fantiveros, Castile, in Spain, John became a Carmelite monk in 1564. He studied philosophy and theology at the Carmelite college in Salamanca, one of Europe's leading universities. In 1567, the year he was ordained, he met with Teresa of Ávila. Teresa saw great potential in John and put him in charge of the order. She admired his rigorous life-style and leadership ability. She was not disappointed, as John was able to establish several new orders.

It was during this time that he was named "John of the Cross," as a result of his suffering and commitment. He spent the rest of his life in the service of the Catholic Reform through his leadership and many writings. He was eventually arrested and put in confinement by those who opposed the reform. It was in confinement that his most famous work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, was written. It describes the work of God upon the soul – not through joy and light, but through sorrow and darkness. The concept of the "dark night" has become an integral part of understanding the spiritual journey. Though he died four centuries ago, John of the Cross continues to exercise a significant influence on Christian spirituality.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

To Purify the Soul

At a certain point in the spiritual journey God will draw a person from the beginning stage to a more advanced stage. At this stage the person will begin to engage in religious exercises and grow deeper in the spiritual life.

Such souls will likely experience what is called "the dark night of the soul." The "dark night" is when those persons lose all the pleasure that they once experienced in their devotional life. This happens because God wants to purify them and move them on to greater heights.

After a soul has been converted by God, that soul is nurtured and caressed by the Spirit. Like a loving mother, God cares for and comforts the infant soul by feeding it spiritual milk. Such souls will find great delight in this stage. They will begin praying with great urgency and perseverance; they will engage in all kinds of religious activities because of the joy they experience in them.

But there will come a time when God will bid them to grow deeper. He will remove the previous consolation from the soul in order to teach it virtue and prevent it from developing vice. The following sections deal with the seven capital sins. In each of the sins it becomes clear how the soul has begun to misuse its spiritual consolation and why God must take it away in order to purify the soul from these imperfections.

Secret Pride

Beginners in the spiritual life are apt to become very diligent in their exercises. The great danger for them will be to become satisfied with their religious works and with themselves. It is easy for them to develop a kind of secret *pride*, which is the first of the seven capital sins.

Such persons become too spiritual. They like to speak of "spiritual things" all the time. They become content with their growth. They would prefer to teach rather than to be taught. They condemn others who are not as spiritual as they are. They are like the Pharisee who boasted in himself and despised the publican who was not as spiritual as he.

The devil will often inflame their fervor so that their pride will grow even greater. The devil knows that all of their works and virtues will become valueless and, if unchecked, will become vices. For they begin to do these spiritual exercises to be esteemed by others. They want others to realize how spiritual they are. They will also begin to fear confession to

another for it would ruin their image. So they soften their sins when they make confession in order to make them appear less imperfect.

They will beg God to take away their imperfections, but they do this only because they want to find inner peace and not for God's sake. They do not realize that if God were to take away their imperfections from them, they would probably become prouder and more presumptuous still.

But those who are at this time moving in God's way will counter this pride with humility. They will learn to think very little of themselves and their religious works. Instead, they will focus on how great and how deserving God is and how little it is that they can do for him. The Spirit of God dwells in such persons, urging them to keep their treasures secretly within themselves.

Attached to the Feelings

Many of these beginners will also begin to have spiritual *greed*, the second capital sin. They will become discontented with what God gives them because they do not experience the consolation they think they deserve. They begin reading many books and performing many acts of piety in an attempt to gain more and more spiritual consolation.

Their hearts grow attached to the feelings they get from their devotional life. They focus on the affect, and not on the substance of devotion. Quite often these souls will attach themselves to particular religious objects or holy places and begin to value visible things too highly.

But those who are on the right path will set their eyes on God and not on these outward things nor on their inner experiences. They will enter the dark night of the soul and find all of these things removed. They will have all the pleasure taken away so that the soul may be purified. For a soul will never grow until it is able to let go of the tight grasp it has on God

Three Causes

The third sin is spiritual *luxury*. It is from this sin that all of the others proceed, and thus, it is the most important. Here is what happens: a soul which is deep in prayer may experience profound temptations and find itself powerless to prevent them. Sometimes this even happens during holy communion, or when saying confession. This happens from one of three causes.

The first cause is the physical pleasure the body takes in spiritual things. The lower part of our nature, the flesh, is sometimes stirred up during times of devotion. But it cannot

possess and lay hold upon the experience, and so, begins to stir up what it can possess, namely, the impure and the sensual.

The second cause is the devil. In order to disturb and disquiet the soul the devil will try to stir up impurity within the soul, hoping that it will give heed to these temptations. The soul will begin to fear these temptations and become lax in prayer, and if they persist, it may even give up on prayer altogether.

The third cause is an inordinate fear of impure thoughts. Some souls are so tender and frail that they cannot stand such thoughts and live in great fear of them. This fear in itself can cause their downfall. They become agitated at the least disturbance and thus are too easily distracted.

When the soul enters into the dark night, all these things are put under control. The flesh will be quieted, the devil will be silent, and the fear will subside, all because of the fact that God takes away all of the sensory pleasure, and the soul is purified in the absence of it.

Saints in a Day

When the soul begins to enjoy the benefits of the spiritual life and then has them taken away, it becomes angry and embittered. This is the sin of spiritual *wrath*, the fourth capital sin, and it, too, must be purged in the dark night.

When their delight comes to an end, these persons are very anxious and frustrated just as an infant is angry when it is taken away from its mother's breast. There is no sin in this natural disappointment, but if it is left to itself, it may become a dangerous vice. There are some who become angry with themselves at this point, thinking that their loss of joy is a result of something they have done or have neglected to do. They will fuss and fret and do all they can to recover this consolation. They will strive to become saints in a day. They will make all kinds of resolutions to be more spiritual, but the greater the resolution, the greater is the fall.

Their problem is that they lack the patience that waits for whatever God would give them and when God chooses to give them. They must learn spiritual meekness which will come about in the dark night.

Beyond the Limits of Moderation

The fifth sin is spiritual *gluttony*. Many souls become addicted to the spiritual sweetness of the devotional life and strive to obtain more and more of it. They pass beyond the limits of moderation and nearly kill themselves with spiritual exercises.

They will often try to subdue their flesh with great acts of submission, lengthy fasts, and painful penances. But note: these are onesided penances; they do not come from God. Such persons are working their own will, and thus, grow in vice rather than in virtue.

They are not walking in true obedience, but rather, are doing what they want in the time and measure that they have chosen. They do these things not for God but for themselves, and for this reason they will soon grow weary in them. For this reason, it is probably better for these persons to give up their devotions entirely.

The problem is this: when they have received no pleasure for their devotions, they think they have not accomplished anything. This is a grave error, and it judges God unfairly. For the truth is that the feelings we receive from our devotional life are the least of its benefits. The invisible and unfelt grace of God is much greater, and it is beyond our comprehension.

It may be said that through their efforts to obtain consolation such souls actually lose their spirituality. For true spirituality consists in perseverance, patience, and humility. The sin of spiritual gluttony will prompt them to read more books and say more prayers, but God, in his wisdom, will deny them any consolation because he knows that to feed this desire will create an inordinate appetite and breed innumerable evils. The Lord heals such souls through the aridity of the dark night.

Weary with Spiritual Exercises

The last two sins are the vices of spiritual *envy* and spiritual *sloth*. People who fancy themselves as spiritual are quite often not pleased to hear about the spiritual growth of others. Their chief concern is to be praised themselves. They are not pleased that such attention is being given to someone else and would prefer to be thought of as the most spiritual of all. This is contrary to love, which, as Paul says, rejoices in goodness.

Spiritual sloth happens when the pleasure is removed from the spiritual life. Such souls become weary with spiritual exercises because they do not yield any consolation, and thus, they abandon them. They become angry because they are called to do that which does not fit their needs. They begin to lose interest in God for they measure God by themselves and not themselves by God. Such souls are too weak to bear the crosses that are given to us to help us grow, crosses we face in the dark night of the soul

God Works Passively

Let it suffice to say, then, that God perceives the imperfections within us, and because of his love for us, urges us to grow up. His love is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for

this reason he takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all of the pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness.

In doing so he is able to take away all these vices and create virtues within us. Through the dark night pride becomes humility, greed becomes simplicity, wrath becomes contentment, luxury becomes peace, gluttony becomes moderation, envy becomes joy, and sloth becomes strength. No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the dark night.

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalm 42 (NRSV)

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock,
 "Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
 because the enemy oppresses me?"
As with a deadly wound in my body,
 my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
 "Where is your God?"

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my help and my God.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Hope in God ..."

(Exhale) "... I shall again praise Him."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. According to John of the Cross, what is the purpose behind God subjecting an individual to a "dark night of the soul"?
2. If you were to write a letter to the psalmist as John of the Cross, what advice or words of encouragement might you offer in response to the psalmist's cry, "Why have you forgotten me?" (Ps. 42:9)?
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: This week, practice patience with God. In the spirit of John of the Cross, heed his advice not to become anxious, seize control, or overly manage your spiritual journey. Instead, focus on receiving what God has for you in the moment, neither demanding more nor settling for less. Embrace the discipline of gratitude for even the smallest blessings and experiences.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

What John of the Cross calls "the dark night of the soul" is a universal experience for the great writers of devotion. To desire spiritual maturity without the dark night is like an athlete hoping to become a champion without training or an author expecting to produce a great book without thinking.

The results of this work on the soul are altogether good. In the passage you read, John of the Cross shows how the dark night helps us to be free from the "seven capital sins." He could just as well have shown how it operates in developing within us the "seven great virtues," i.e., fortitude, prudence, justice, temperance, faith, hope, and love. The point is that this is one of the key means that God uses to transform the human personality. For us, the crucial issue is our responsiveness to this passive moving of the Holy Spirit.

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