Spiritual Formation: Disciplines from the Heart in the Spirit and Not from the Flesh Part 2
By John Coe

Speaker 1:

Dr. Coe, uh, is the director of the Institute for Spiritual Formation. He'll be speaking tonight. Dr. Coe, uh, actually, like some of you, are students at Biola now. He was a student here at Biola. He has um, a list of degrees like longer than my arm in uh, Bible and theology, studied here at Biola at Talbot School of Theology, the University of Kentucky, and at U.C. uh, Irvine. He has uh, his Ph.D.s in philosophy. His specialty really is, um, he, he's a philosopher theologian in spiritual theology. Maybe you can, I don't know if people know what spiritual theology is.

John Coe:

Another time.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, another time. I'm not sure I know what it is. And I've worked with him for almost eight years, um, which is why it's a particular pleasure for me to have him, because um, what I know is that what Dr. Coe has to talk about tonight comes not only out of academic learning, but out of also his own life experience and his own journey with the Lord. So this is real stuff. Um, Dr. Coe also has um, uh, a wife, Greta, and two lovely daughters that you prob, you'll probably be introduced to in the lecture tonight because he tends to use them as examples. They've been
great, uh, fodder, I know, for his, uh, growth [laughs] so, um, I am really pleased that he is uh, here to talk with us tonight. And I know you all will enjoy it as well. So, Dr. Coe.

Coe:

Thank you.

[applause]

Hey. Well, it's good to be here. You know I, I changed the topic for tonight. Um, what was I going to speak on? I don't remember. I think it was gonna be on the spiritual disciplines and how to do them in the Spirit, and from the heart. You know, I decided to change, uh, what I was gonna talk on. And part of it was, uh, just maybe it was in my own heart what I maybe sensed here and what also I heard the others speak on. And uh, because, you know, right, up to now, this is the fifth time we've heard some really wonderful things. But they're high. You know, with Dallas Willard, it was how to live your, your whole life from the inner man, how, how to continually open to the truth that, that the Spirit of God is within me and that I've been called to live at that place with him. And then uh, just last week, Dr. Wilkins talked about forgiveness from the heart. And I began to think of relations I've had. And uh, and especially with Dr. Mulholland and Dr. Moon, they talked about living this intentional spiritual life. And especially they talked a lot about union with God. Christian mysticism, and what it would be to, like, like we believe theologically that my spirit and the Spirit of God are at union. But what would it be to experience the truth of Ephesians chapter three, where it says that we would come to know the
length and the depth and the height, to know the love of God, and then to be filled with all the fullness of God. And so, these, these, these are high. And I, I don't know if you felt at times kind of like laying on the bottom, looking up, going, wow. That, that's what I want. but wow, that's, that's high. I, I just wonder, I wish I had an X-ray machine to take an X-ray of everybody the night like Mulholland and, and, uh, Dr. Moon were talking about union with God.

And to actually know how many in this room during that time were actually experiencing full union with God, being filled with all the fullness of God. Being filled with the height and the depth of the love of God. And I know where my heart was, and I know where my heart's been. And I know there are times where it, it feels the reverse. It feels like God is, is, is kind of distant. What's going on? And so I want to talk about not just kind of the goal of where we're going, but I want to talk about just where are you right now. So tonight we're going to talk a little, do a little reality testing. Where are you right now, and how is the spirit of God at work in you? And it'll especially be for those who sometimes wonder, God, I, I don't, I don't feel that close to you.

Now, I'll just want to say I'm not talking here to what the ancient spiritual writers used to say were the lukewarm individuals. Now, what they meant by lukewarm, the the ancient writers, they, it was someone who was just turning their back on God, walking away, and doesn't really care anymore. Um, that's a little bit, um, or maybe it's the, the audience, the Dallas Willard and other spiritual writers address. And that's uh, the consumer Christian. And the consumer Christian is the one who, who kind of goes to church like a shopping mall to try to taste and dabble in, well does this, do I like this, do I like this, do I like this? I'm not going to be talking to that kind of person. I, I'm talking tonight to the serious. Uh, in, in fact, I'll call you the dedicated neurotic.
You're, you're the ones who are given to this. I, I don't even have to sell you on this. I don't have to sell you on wanting union with God. How many would like union with God right now? Yes. How many would like to experience the height and the depth, the love of God right now? Absolutely. I don't have to sell you. You desire this. But I want to talk to you because if that's not going on, everything that we've heard so far, if that's not going on in your life right now, we might be in the grips of a great temptation. And that is to try to fake it, or to pretend, or to try to just convince ourself, I, that's where I am. And so one of the great meta virtues in spiritual formation is honesty. Remember Dallas Willard, he gave three keys to the spiritual life, and the first one was never pretend. And so tonight, I, I just want to have time for us to open to what's really going on in our life. I'd like to pray for a moment as we do that. Our Father, we come to you. And Lord, we are all so needy. We come on the basis of Jesus Christ, his death. There is no other basis to come. I do not come because I do spiritual disciplines or because I'm a disciplined person. I don't come even because I love you. I come because my Lord Jesus died for me, and opened a way to come as a failure. To come in my neediness. Just want you to open for a moment, in, in prayer right now, and just ask the Lord, God, where, where am I with you lately? God, do you feel very present to me? Do you feel distant? What's just going on? Just take a moment and open to that. Our Father, we ask that you teach us by your Spirit tonight. Your Spirit is the most reliable teacher, because only he knows what we really need, and only he can love us right in the deep.
So watch over us. Guide us, Lord. And this we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen. I just start with introduction. There are some times in our life, in our, all of our spiritual lives where God has seemed close, where God has felt so present, where our Bible study or, or times in the Word are just so insightful, where prayer is wonderful, worship is exciting. Times when even in our brokenness, God seems so close. These times are, are wonderful. These times taste so good. We would like them to last forever. And perhaps that’s where some of you are right now. And that’s cool. Then there are other times in our spiritual life where God may feel so distant. We haven’t done anything different. We haven’t done anything worse. We haven’t sinned any more than normal. It just, God now seems distant. Have you ever wondered in your deep, God, where are you? God are you there? What is, what’s wrong with you? Or, God, what’s wrong with me? Why, why do you seem so distant? Why do I feel so dry? Why am I so bored with reading the scripture, with prayer? Why do I feel so bored at church? What have I done wrong? What are you doing? What's happened? Have you ever felt those? Those experiences? I want to talk about these times tonight. Or perhaps you’ve asked for God's will, God, what is your will on this? And you're, and as you go into prayer, you just get silence. And you just feel, God, uh, my prayers bouncing off the ceiling. Or, worse, you pray, and it's noisy. You know, when I don't know if you ever heard somebody talk about contemplative prayer of just going into your closet and opening to the deep love of God. And you may go into your closet, have you ever been in prayer and your mind is just wandering all over the room?

Anybody? Yes. You know, when this happens to my seminary students, their temptation is now to turn to studies, to turn to the Word of God, to find light. Now, that's a great thing to do, as long as one doesn’t turn to the Word of God as a way to avoid prayer. Because something is very
powerful going on in that time. Something that I didn't quite understand in my own life. And so if you look at the title, this is what we're going to talk about tonight. We'll see how long we have. It's going to be drawing near to God, drawing near to God, when God seems far away. Or practicing the presence of God, despite feelings. I know something of this experience in my own life. Now I converted, I'll just share a little brief thing. I converted at nineteen. I wasn't raised in a Christian home. I was raised in a very uh, happy-go-lucky liberal Lutheran church. Uh, uh, everybody was kind of a Christian. And then all of a sudden I met a girl, uh, who became my wife, and she began telling me I was a sinner, and uh, I didn't like that initially. I did convert. At nineteen, there was an explosion in my life. And, and at that time at nineteen, I began to experience such friendliness from God, such friendship, such presence of God. It was a wonderful. It was for the next five or six years, I went to a Bible institute, then I came to Biola, and I, I was in 1976, and then I went to Talbot in '79. And there's somewhere around 1980. As I look back on it, I noticed my prayer life began to decrease. As my intellectual life was increasing, my prayer life was decreasing. But I came to love the word of God. But I noticed that now God was not, in fact, I remember seeing myself in seminary, you know, I remember when I first came to the Lord, God seems so close. He seemed so alive.

What's happened? And so I had this incredible time of six years and then I kind of plateaued. And then I went on to more graduate studies. I just fell in love with philosophy and theology, so I went and got another master's degree in humanities and philosophy. Then I got another master's in humanities, and then another, or philosophy, and then a Ph.D. in philosophy. And now I'm teaching at Biola, and Talbot, and then Rosemead School of Psychology. Now, maybe hanging around psychologists explains this,
but I began to experience things about myself and the truth of myself and my own spiritual life. I just, God, where are you. And, where it started like this. And then there was this plateau, then I began to experience, God, you just seem further and further away. What is happening? I am a professor of theology now. What is going on? And it kept getting worse and worse and worse. And to be honest with you, it got to a point where I, I, initially I was praying harder. God, where are the rivers of living water? And then it got to a point of, [sighs] I don't even want to pray. And so you know what I did? I turned to spiritual books. I turned to devotional books. Because I wanted something to ignite the fire again. And so now we're about 1992 or '93, and I'm, what, then thirty-six years old or so. And I was really just, God I can't take this. I remember one time after teaching a theology class, just coming in and throwing my books down [unintelligible] saying, God, I can't take this anymore. I mean I, I'm only thirty-six, I have thirty more years to teach theology. I can't, I can't handle this. Where are you? What is going on in my life? The major question I was asking at that point was where are the rivers of living water? I would ask myself, God, you say that your yoke is easy. That, that I'm supposed to be filled with the spirit. God, it just feels like I'm filled with me. And it feels like I'm doing work. God, where are you? I wasn't just an intellectual. I always had a deep piety in me and I want God, where were you in this? What was he doing? Well, at that point I happened to go on a retreat, and that was a total broadside. I didn't think much about it.
It was a three week retreat that somebody else really arranged for me. And that was going to take me into whole new places of my own falseness, in my own sin, and into whole new places of life in the Spirit that I hadn't known. And as a result of that retreat, coming back, and now these next twelve, thirteen, fourteen years since then, there are some things that are now to me so obvious, not only in my own experience, but then I began a serious reading of the ancient spiritual writers who just illumined to me what was going on during what I would call all those dry, dark years. It was so obvious in hindsight. You know, everything's obvious in hindsight, right? People who go through a divorce, it it, it, it now is getting clearer in hindsight what all happened. The, there's a little story about the obvious. This is about Sherlock Holmes and Watson. They were on a camping trip. And at the end of it, uh, they're climbing into their sleeping bags. And Holmes says to Watson, Watson, look up, what do you see? And Watson looks up and says, see an incredible clear sky with thousands of lights. And Holmes says, Watson, what does that tell you? And Watson says, well, astronomically, it tells me there are billions and billions of galaxies. And anthropologically, it tells me how insignificant we are. And meteorologically, it tells me we're gonna have a great day. Holmes, what does it tell you? Holmes looks up and says, someone has stolen our tent.

[audience laughs]

Now, that's the obvious. And now there are some things that are so obvious to me that have changed my Christian life. But back then, I was looking at something else and I could not see, this is the point that we're gonna, we're gonna try to get to. I could not see the work of God in all the dryness, because I was looking for something else. I was looking for a feeling of God. So
now, begin with A, what is the truth, regardless of what we experience? The truth is, and we want to start there, that God is always present. That is the commitment he has made to us of love, to us as believers. This is first Peter one four, that, that now we have become partakers. We have become partakers of a divine nature. Or First Corinthians six seventeen, here's another text. Where it says those who are joined to the Lord have become one spirit with him. Wow. I am one, see, you may not feel that right now. And you know something? You want to be stark honest about that as we go on. You, you wanted, only the truth is going to set you free. The truth here of what God has done on his part is, he is always present, regardless of my feeling of it. Those who are joined to the Lord have become one spirit with him. Or another text, Colossians one twenty-seven, that Christ is in you the hope of glory. Wow. Christ in me. Romans eight twenty-six. Remember that text where it says that the Spirit is continually praying for us with utterances too deep for words? All last night the Spirit was praying for your spirit. The Spirit, he's living right at the core. He knows all your faults, he knows all your stuff, and he's praying for you. Now, here's a question. If that's so obvious, if that's so, then what's going on down here?

Why doesn't God make his presence more obvious to us? You know, that is a question that I did not ask until I was really about twenty-four, twenty-five. God, why don't you make yourself more known? You know, I have two daughters now, that are, they're both twelve. Anna and Krista. They've been asking that since they were ten. That's a heavy question. That's a heavy, honest question. In fact, my daughters even earlier were saying, you know, Daddy, when we pray at night, why doesn't God just come down and, and kind of, greet us? You know, isn't that an obvious question? If God can do all things logically possible, then why on earth wouldn't God,
every time, I mean, wouldn't you'd like that tomorrow morning in your quiet time? Hello. I am God.

[audience laughs]

I have shown up.

[audience laughs]

How many would like that? What is he doing? The truth is God could provide a theophany every time you have a quiet time, you know, what a theophany is, right? Well theophany is the presence of God in a physical form. Like the presence of God in the burning bush. Imagine if we had the burning podium experience right now. Whoosh! Wow. That would be cool. They'd write about that tomorrow. Do you know we have something better? We have something so much better. It just doesn't always feel better. Now I'm just gonna hint at this but then pass over, you can look at it yourself. Sometime you should read Second Corinthians, chapter three. Second Corinthians chapter three is an incredible chapter where Paul is, is telling us about the weakness of the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant. And he wants to say a couple of things in there. But two primary things he says is this. One, the Torah written on stone, that is the laws written on stone, and we try to follow, that could never transform you. Because we would never have the heart to obey God from the heart. We need something greater. And the second thing he wants to say is theophany can never transform you. Remember that, when, when when Moses would experience the burning bush, or especially when he experienced the give, the giving of the law,
he'd come down with this veil over his face. And, and the Israelites, he'd wear this veil 'cause the glory was so great, and they, whoa, Moses' on fire with God. You know what the text actually says, you know why Moses wore the veil? Because the glory was fading. And he didn't want Israel to see that the glory was fading.

See, the point, Paul is saying is, that neither the Torah written on stone and obedience to that, gotta ponder that, or theophany, the presence of God, where we're excited. They don't transform. They don't transform inwardly. And so a new covenant was given. And Paul sees himself as the apostle of the New Covenant. What's the new covenant? I'm going to put my Spirit in you. And I'm going to put my Spirit in you, and I'm going to write Torah on your heart. But often you're not going to feel that. In fact, the writing of Torah on the heart is scary business, as we're gonna see, because the writing of Torah on the heart means that he, he's going to have to open up like heart surgery for you and I to see what's going on in our life. Well, I'll tell you right now, I'd much rather have a theophany than heart surgery. And so we still wonder, God, okay, your Spirit has come. Why is prayer often so dark? You know, I've often thought, I've been in, because I taught at Rosemead, I was encouraged to go to therapy. They began to see I was nuts.

[audience laughs]

And I had an incredible time there. But it would be like the, the, these times of struggle. It would be like going to a therapist and, you know, paying a hundred and fifty dollars an hour and sitting down, you walk in the door, and there on the chalkboard is a message, and it says, lay down, begin to talk, and trust that I'm here. I want my money back.
I want my money back on that one. No, no, no. You're out golfing. God, are you out golfing? There's a Christian proverb about this dryness experience. It's not in the Bible, but I've heard it. That in those times when God feels distant, it is not God who is moved, but guess who? You. And the implication is that if you were only doing it right, if you were only praying right, if you're only doing the spiritual disciplines right, then God would seem close. As though your acts are the determining factor. I want you to beware of such proverbs because the ancient spiritual writers had a whole different idea, a whole different idea about these times. And I'll just have to say, I went to a Bible Institute, Bible college, and seminary, and I had no idea about this. And this was a time of great struggle. This was a time of great guilt. I had no idea what the spirit was doing. So let's start with B in the, in the handout. What the ancient spiritual writers noticed about the experience of God's presence. Now we're going to talk about the felt experience of this. Now, this is people like, if you've heard these church fathers, Jerome, Augustine, up to Bernard of Clairvaux, to St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila. They all wrote about this. And they discipled hundreds and hundreds of people. And as they discipled others and as they noticed God working in their own life, when it came to the felt experience of God's presence, they noticed certain patterns that began to be developed. And here, let me just, uh, I'll share a little bit of this. They noticed that often, uh, I'll, yeah, okay, I'll start here. They noticed that at, at, at some point, let's say back here is conversion.
But they noticed at some point there was a time, and this they began to call the beginner. And the beginner stage. What they meant by that was when all of a sudden your Christianity took, it just, mmm. God, yes, you're, I'm forgiven, [unintelligible]. Now, for me, that was clearly, and, and it usually is, it's for late converts at their conversion. That's why you see people who have led a, a wanton life and have a conversion, and they have an incredible experience time, of, of experiencing the Lord. So we call this the felt presence of God. And that's an incredible time. Now, some of you didn't, uh, some of you haven't had that. Most have. Now, my daughters, I don't know if they've had it yet. I find for those who are raised in a Christian church, it usually happens around junior high, high school, college, where all of a sudden it's like, wow, this is my faith. It's not my parents'. This is my faith. I'm forgiven. Now let me ask you, how many of you would say that you had this experience of, God is here, prior, uh, to grammar school? How many say prior to grammar school? Let's see your hands. Yeah, just a few. Isn't that, that is so cool. How many of you would you say it was, uh, sometime in grammar school? Right up to sixth grade. Oh. What a bunch of pagans. Were you raised in Christian homes or what? This is fascinating. How many of you would say junior high? Yeah. High school? College? Wow. After college? Yeah. Here's what they noticed. They noticed that often there was this time where there was this, you know, again, there's ups and downs. There's trials through all this time. But they noticed that in their disciples and in their own life, there was this, this time of just God being there, and then, a time of a plateau, where it just kind of seemed to flatten out.

Prayer just wasn't quite as exciting, reading the word, just wasn't the same as it was before. And then, and, and they, they all are reporting this. This is fascinating. Now, this is an example of what we call spiritual theology. Spiritual theology is that discipline where you study spirituality
from the Biblical text, and then you go into human experience to understand, how does this really work? What's really taking place? Well, what they noticed then, they noticed in their disciples as they went on, it actually got worse. It, and they called this, this was the felt absence of God. And this term over here, the felt presence of God, they actually came to give it a name. And I'm going to be using this quite a bit tonight. It's the word consolation. Now, I, I can't write worth a bean, so, you'll just figure it out. And the felt absence of God, they gave another title to it. They called it desolation. And, what, what really fascinated them was that sometime earlier in the life of their disciple, and they saw in their own life too, sometime earlier here, we'll, we'll just call this time twenty, whatever it is in the life of a disciple. There was incredible consolation, God's presence, feeling so close. And then at some later time, we'll just call this time sixty, whatever some later. The individual is feeling the absence of God or just God, where are you? And, and we're not talking about, again, what what John of the Cross would call a lukewarm person. This isn't someone who just walks away. This is someone who is, they're, they're doing the same things, the same disciplines, in fact they're usually in monasteries together.

And here was their, their initial assumption was this. That this person over here who's more characterologically mature, would be experiencing more what? Consolation. Where the younger person would be experiencing more desolation. Yet notice they, they thought it would work like this. Imagine a graph, and let's say this graph has to do the, the horizontal line is character maturity. And this vertical graph represents the experience of God. Well, here's what you would expect. You'd expect, well, the more mature you are, the more of God you'll experience. And the more experience of God you have, the more mature you'll be. The more mature, the more experience of God. And so it would just go up like this. And so, it should be like that. And yet
they saw this over and over, and they began to wonder, Lord? What is going on? What? Because it happened over and over with their disciple and their own life. Well, here's where they develop some hypotheses. And I've written them down for you. This is, this is now, as they're thinking, 'cause, remember, they're, their, their starting point is this. God is always present. Right? He, he will, he has sealed us by the Spirit. He will never leave us. My spirit is joined with him. I'm one spirit with him. What on earth is going on? How could it be that the younger believer had this sense of his presence, and then as the person became more mature, there was this less sense? Well, now there's, there are many issues here. And I'm just going to kind of touch on some of them, and I'm going to leave holes and gaps. And you can do that in your questions. But here are some of the hypotheses. The first one is this.

They said, if, if this is the case, then spiritual feelings do not necessarily correlate with maturity. Ponder that one. Spiritual feelings, the sense of God's presence, does not necessarily correlate with maturity. Right, it, it doesn't look like in real experience, the more mature you are, the more of this consolation you get, the less mature, the less consolation. They saw this working in the reverse, even, at least initially. And so they reason number two, if that is the case, then spiritual feelings of God's presence, consolation, or absence, desolation, are less the result of our actions, and more the gifts of God according to his purposes. Now, when I was going through seminary and into teaching, I didn't believe number two. I believed what they assumed. That as I was getting more mature, God should be here more. He's not, what on earth's wrong? And they said, no, this must be that the feelings of God's presence are not the causal result of my actions, but they're more the gifts of what God wishes to give. Now there are gifts and there are gifts, right? I, I, used to have, uh, she, she died some time ago, but I had an Aunt Ethel. Now Aunt Ethel was
a, a zany lady, and she would give us weird gifts on Christmas. You know, you always, you, you know it's a weird gift when you have, when you're ten years old and you open it up, and you have to go ask your mother what it is.

[audience laughs]

She was the artsy, crafty lady. Now, those were weird gifts. I came to appreciate her later. She was our zany aunt. And we all are going to appreciate consolation. But what about desolation? It might be a gift. All a gift means is somebody gave it. So what about first this gift of consolation? Here's what they reasoned. And this becomes just standard fare. This is standard thought in the history of the spiritual writers, that the gift of consolation, its purpose was to encourage us. It was to encourage us. It was to give us a taste, no matter where we were. I, I just came to the Lord at nineteen, and it was to encourage us, to give a taste of the presence of God. And in my case, at nineteen, it was even ahead of my character. I mean, look what happened to me. I lived basically my own life for nineteen years, not developing a character for the love of God, and all of a sudden at nineteen, for the next years, I felt so much the presence of God. And so here often consolation is even ahead of your character. When you said that time, when that, that beginning state was, whenever it was junior high, high school, college, that was ahead of your character. You had not developed probably a character to love God from the heart. That's gonna be all your life development. And the reason we get this constellation is to reinforce the behaviors we're doing. So when I read the word, I just, God was here. So insightful. I would pray, God, you're here. I, I, when I came to the Lord, I couldn't hear enough of sermons. I used to go Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday evening. Within about seven years, [yawns] No.
[audience laughs]

I might go Sunday morning. And even on Sunday morning, I would hear this magnificent preacher. [yawns] When is he going to be done? He could have said that in twenty minutes. Not fifty-five. Wow. But this time of consolation is so great. It's like the Psalms, the taste and see the goodness of the Lord. These are wonderful times. These are times when the spiritual writers say, you don't even need a spiritual director. God is just directing the whole thing. You just go at it. And when this happens early on in your spiritual life, you know it's ahead of your character. And when this happens later in your spiritual life, when you're older, that means this, there, that means some work has probably been done by the Spirit in your life, where there are pockets of places where you're really filled with the Spirit. And there are times where the Lord wants you to experience those pockets, where you're just filled with him. Those are wonderful times. And so how do we experience, this is number four. How did, how are we to experience these seasons of consolation in our life? Well, the spiritual writers said basically that this is a great time to give yourself to the spiritual disciplines. And I would just say for those of you who are in this time, where, where God is just close, he's just present. This is a time to totally give yourself to the reading of the word, to meditation, to prayer. Just, give yourself to hearing the word be taught. Give yourself to silence. Just read Dallas Willard books. Richard Foster books. Say yeah, let's go at it! Because this is an incredible time of formation where the Lord is trying to encourage and reinforce those kinds of habits. And it will be wonderful fodder for later on. This is a time where, open your heart deeply. This is a time where if you're going to school and you're doing things, soften the focus on everything and really focus on this. Give yourself to this.
If you are discipling people and they're experiencing this, just move them deeply into the spiritual disciplines. It's a wonderful time. But what about the gift of desolation? Number five. Here's what they said unanimously. It just was the chorus of the spiritual writers. The gift of desolation, its purpose was this. It's to mirror. It's a time where spiritual disciplines mirror what is in the heart. This is not a time where God wants to encourage the disciplines so much, it's rather, he's going to use the disciplines to mirror what's inside. To show us what's inside, so that we'll see ourself for what we are. That we'll see parts of our heart that will shock us. Parts of our heart where we discover, I'm bored. Have you ever had a time of prayer where, well, you're, you, you'd started praying, and all of a sudden, your, your mind went over here and your mind went over there and, and all of a sudden you stop. Wait, what am I doing here? Oh, yeah, I'm praying. Or have you ever had a quiet time that became really quiet? [snores] Oh. Have you ever been to church and you've heard a sermon, and you're just bored? You have a quiet time. You're reading the word, and it's just, [sighs]. Well, wrap this up for today. You know, when you're a preacher and you have that, it's really hard. Because you've got to get up tomorrow and say something. Oh, God, give me an insight. Give me a joke. Give me anything.

[audience laughs]

It's dry. These dry times, we often will say, God, what's wrong with me? Our first reaction, and there's a variety of reasons I won't go into now. Our first reaction often is, God, something's wrong with me. It's my fault. Because we think this: If I was doing it right, then God would come. Because God used to come, so I must have been doing it right then. I must be doing
something wrong now. What, what's going on? And again, I am not talking about someone who's just walked away from God. I'm talking to the dedicated neurotic who want God, who are serious about their faith, who are sincere. That's you. That's you. What I did not know, and what they began to hint at as I began to read them, that these dark times, and it never dawned on me this, that this was, in fact an incredible movement of God. It never dawned on me. I kept thinking, God, what's wrong? Where are you? Ah! What am I doing? I don't know if I'm sinning. I don't know what, but it never dawned on me that God was doing something more profound in the heart. That God actually thought I was ready. That he wanted to take away consolation for a moment, and he wanted to work now really deeply, because what he's about to do, he's about to do New Testament transformation. New Covenant transformation. And that's heart surgery. He's, he's about to show me parts of my heart. It's not all of my heart, but in these dry times. It's the spirit showing us parts of our heart that don't love him. In fact, we'd love something else. We're attached to something else. Have you ever wondered why your mind wanders in prayer?

It's because your heart is attached to something else. [gasps] How shocking. You who were born in original sin! You who had all kinds of false attachments. Of course, we're attached everywhere. See, that's why the Old Covenant, you trying to obey the law written on stone, it couldn't do it. You, my heart is too attached falsely to things. And so the new covenant is, I'm gonna put my Spirit in you, and I'm gonna write Torah on your heart. There are times when you need encouragement, and there are times when now I want to do a little heart surgery. You're strong enough, you're ready. [laughs] Kind of like, it's like the police. I'm going to take you down. I'm gonna take you down. I'm gonna show you parts of your heart while you're reading the scripture, by the Spirit now, he's gonna show us parts of our heart. And as we're reading it, we
find it's tasteless. Oh, how good that is to know. How good that is. This is the Spirit drawing near, because he's praying for those pockets of our heart. These are times where it feels like we're going hungry. You know why? Because he wants to develop deeper hunger. This is interesting what he did to the Israelites. Look at Deuteronomy chapter eight. I don't have the, I don't do PowerPoint, I still live in the fourteenth century and thirteenth century, so. But look at Deuteronomy chapter eight for a moment. This is now Moses writing, and he's reminding Israel what God did to them in the wilderness. Deuteronomy chapter eight, verse two and three. And you shall remember all the way with, which the Lord, your God, has led you in the wilderness these forty days. That he might humble you, testing you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

And he humbled you and he let you be hungry. And he fed you with manna, which you did not know. Nor did your fathers know, you didn't create that. So that he might make you understand that man does not live by what he makes. But man lives by everything that precedes out of the mouth of God. Why did God let Israel go hungry? Because he wanted to open their hearts so they could see, what do I really want? Do I want to live a life that is controlled by me? Or do I want to open to what God has to give? Going hungry was to open hearts. This is a gift of desolation. Where God lets his people go hungry. To test them, to humble them, to see what is in their heart. And so number six, and this is just general thoughts as they mused about this. What is going on in this desolation then what is God doing? I'll give you a couple things. First, the Spirit of God wants to make your heart his home. That's, that's the goal of this. That's union with God. The spirit of God wants to make your heart. He wants to write Torah, and fill that, so that his desires, his joys, his hopes, are working through you. That's what he wants to do. But number
two, the vices and the sins of your heart are going to hinder the process. You and I all have certain vices of the heart where the Spirit isn't filling. Why? Because you fill those places. You're filled with yourself. [gasps] How shocking. Yes, you are filled with yourself in pockets of your heart. And the spirit only goes where he is invited. Course, he does an interesting job of inviting himself at times. And so the third point under this, ancient writers said, therefore, if the Lord is going to fill your heart, he's going to have to purge these places.

He's going to have to do heart surgery, and he's going to have to expose them. He's going to have to bring them to your conscious level. You're going to have to experience it. Now, most of us would choose not to do this. If we could get away with this, we would do without. In fact, I'll say this. Most of us would choose consolation over transformation. Think about that one. Most of us would choose consolation over transformation. But the spirit has so much for us. See, this is not God withdrawing. It was interesting. I've read a number of the Puritan writers who, who had read John of the Cross and Teresa, and the ancients who talked about this, and this, some of the Puritans, and up to the present, it was Martin, uh, Martin Lloyd-Jones. He thought of this as God withdrawing to create a hunger. That's not what the ancient writers said. They said, no, no, no. You know what this is? This is God working deeper. He's working more intimately. He's not giving external theophany. He's not just giving spiritual excitation and pleasure. He's actually working kind of from the inside working up. And what he wants to do is he wants to fill certain places. So here [unintelligible], he, he sees pockets that he wants to fill. And so he's going to push that little pocket up to [unintelligible] conscious awareness. And the Spirit's going to say, I want that place. I want that place. What are we going to do together now? This is not God withdrawing. This is only God withdrawing the feeling of consolation. This is rather a time
where God draws near. But he draws near to talk truth. He's going to talk truth with the soul. He's going to take you on a journey. And where he's taking you, he's taking you on a journey into your weakness.

He's going to take you on a journey into more deeply your failure. And you know what? It's funny. That's where we started the Christian life, but for some reason, we don't like to stay there. See, I started the Christian life with recognize, I didn't come to God at nineteen, say, you know, God, I'm a pretty good dude. I, I, think you and me, I think we'll work it out. I think we're going to make salvation work. No. God, I need you. God, I'm a failure at some level. And yet something happens in the Christian life. I don't want to feel my failure. And so something happens where I want to feel that, no, I'm doing good. No. God wants to take us more deeply into the truth of our failure, into the truth of our neediness. 'Cause ultimately he wants to teach us what John fifteen five says, that apart from me, you can do nothing. Something that you and I don't believe. Because everything else has taught me, doggone it, I can do something. I can even make this Christian life work. If I just pray a little more, if I just work a little harder, this Christian life's, I'll get union with God. [chuckles] Not the way it works. Spirit wants to fill us. And he's only going to fill us in those places where we are willing to no longer be full of ourself. Which is totally contrary to the human condition prior to conversion. And there are still, it's totally contrary to the flesh that still is at work in my heart. We're not going to want this because we in our culture don't believe. Here's what we don't believe. We don't believe that power is perfected in weakness. We believe, I believe, that power is perfected in strength. Again, another text to meditate on is Second Corinthians, chapter twelve, verse nine and following, where Paul
says, in Second Corinthians chapter twelve, nine and following, Paul says that he's learned the secret now.

Through all these trials, he's learned that God's power was perfected in weakness. Why? Because in weakness. That's where he discovered the love of God. That's where he discovered the presence, the love and the power of God. And so this desolation, they feel, these times feel so bad. But they are so good for us. I would love us to find a place in our life when they're going on that our response is, mmm, [smacks lips, does Cookie Monster impression] yum. Dry. Good. These are what the ancient spiritual writers called dark nights of the soul. And so I want to talk about that. So we're on C now. Dark nights. And this is what I want to spend the rest of the time talking about it. If you're interested in reading more, this particularly is a writer named John of the Cross. Sixteenth century Carmelite, wrote a book called Dark Night of the Soul. After I read it, after I went on my retreat, that was the first book I read what I came back. That was 1994. And that exploded in my mind and in my heart. It was like God just opening up what he had taken me through in those paths. Those, that darkness. John of the Cross became my spiritual director, guiding me through what had happened, and what had happened on the retreat, and what was now going to take place. So I want to talk about these dark nights. And we're gonna do it just in a very general sense, because we could spend a lot of time here. But let's begin. And then uh, we'll have about fifteen more minutes, then we'll take a break. So number one. Just to know, there are, as, as the ancient spiritual writers talked about it, they talked about two forms of the dark nights. These dark nights are, are seasons of purgation.
Whether they're, they're, they're ways that God's taking you developmentally through time, that's a question. But at least they're seasons. They're times when the Lord is purging. The Lord is doing heart surgery. He's bringing something up. The first dark night, just so you know, is called The Dark Night of the Senses. It's called The Dark Night of the Senses. Now, here's what he had, they had in mind. This was for younger believers. This is a time where God is purging the younger believer, the one who's been a believer ten, fifteen, twenty years. He's purging them of their reliance on spiritual consolation. He's purging them because consolation has felt so good, but now they've become used to relying on it. So that here's what's happened. They've come to measure the presence of God by consolation. They've come to measure the presence of God by the feeling of consolation. That is not a good measuring stick. And so this is a time where God purges them of their reliance on consolation, because he wants to move them to him. Not just to pleasure, to spiritual pleasure, but to move them to him, just God. And if you come to God, God may do all kinds of things in the soul. God isn't there just to give you theophanies and consolation. God is there to transform. And so when God thinks this younger believer's ready, it's called The Dark Night of the Senses, because he, he turns out the light of sensual spirituality. Spirituality where we depend upon the senses to feel his presence. Now there's a second dark night. This is what they call The Dark Night of the Spirit.

This is for older believers who've been on, going on in the faith. This is a different kind of purgation. This is where, here I have a believer who is a good person. This is a person who has good character. There are places in their life where they really love God. They've developed a good theology of their life about what God is doing. But in this latter time purgation, what God is doing is, they say, he is purging the believer's reliance or dependence upon their character. You
see, as we go on in the faith, I'm fifty now. My children, they remind me of this. A couple of weeks ago, they said to me, you know, Dad, you're getting so old. And then Anna said, you know, Dad, it looks like your flesh is falling off your face.

[audience laughs]

This, this was right before I was, I was about to go preach to about four thousand people. It was the night before, you know, Dad, when you go up there, you know, you look really old. Good. And as I'm getting older, you know what my temptation is going to be? Is I will depend upon my good character rather than upon the Spirit of God. I will depend upon my years of disciplining myself, my wisdom, rather than the spirit of God. I will depend upon my doing the spiritual disciplines rather than depend on God. I will depend upon my theology. My world view. Only God is to be depended upon like that. And so during this time, this older believer begins to be purged of this. And the purgation is felt like this. Others will look at you having good character, and you will know inside, oh, God, I need you so much. Other people think I'm so spiritual, oh, God, God, what a wretch I, God, I need you. Oh, God, yes, I teach my theology. But God, that no longer satisfies. God, I hunger for you. I want the living God. This is an incredible time. And what we are, need, is we are going to need pastors who really are assisting our older folk, myself and above, to really enter deeply into this purgation. Because when, when usually in the fifties and sixties, when dryness hits a lot of these mature adults, what they do is they just say, well, I guess it's dryness from here. I'll bite the bullet and I'll be faithful. No, that's just half of it. Because there is a whole new journey inward to have your heart broken again, to open up new rivers of living water. But that's another story. What I want to do because of our time, I'm just
going to blend the two, and I'm going to talk about them kind of in a general sense as dark nights of the soul.

I won't be focusing specifically on the, the little details of each, but I'm just gonna talk about what is really in general going on in these dark nights. Number two. So what is going on in the dark nights? Biblically, the spiritual writers liken this to the stage of wrestling, the young men, the middle aged people of First John, chapter two. I don't know if you recall that text in First John two. He says, I write to you little children, he's talking about spiritual children, because your sins are forgiven and you know the Father. And I write to you old ones because you know him who's been from the beginning. And then he says, I write to you young men, this is this middle age, because you're wrestling You've overcome the evil one, and the word of God abides in you. And they were particularly struck with this wrestling time. And so they tried to associate it with First John and other texts that Paul talks about. In B, what's going on here? God withdraws spiritual consolation. At some point in these dark nights of the soul, Bible reading, hearing sermons, prayer, lose their pleasure dimension. They lose their consolation. For older ones, ministry loses its zest. The sense of our own good character no longer satisfies. And we're left with experiencing parts of our heart that were filled with ourself and not the spirit. And we'll experience our boredom. We'll experience our dryness, and we're going to try to want to get out of there. But the Spirit wants us to stay there. This is God trying to make us hungry. This is God calling from the deep where we're going to have to travel. We're going to have to encounter and open up to what really is driving parts of my heart. This is gonna be so hard. Because it'll be hard for us to let go of consolation.
It'll be hard for us to enter into this experience because it's not going to sometimes feel like God is here. And yet so much more is going on. This is, reminds me a little bit of my daughters when I used to feed them. You know, uh, I, I used to give them when they were little young ones, I would feed them the bottle. They loved the bottle. I'd put 'em down every night, and they would just suck that thing, and then I would, uh, when they were getting younger, like toddlers, you know, they come up, the first word they learned was not dada or mama, it was 'bah', bottle. Bah bah. I give 'em the bah. It looked like they were taking a drug. They'd stick it in their mouth, their eyes would roll back like they're having a drug experience and they'd flop on the couch. This is kind of like a joint.

[audience laughs]

And at some point, I took the bottle away. And I gave them a sippy cup. They hated the sippy cup. See, what they didn't know was, they could have got more milk from the sippy cup. Have you ever tried to suck on a bottle? Oh, my gosh, there's nothing in there. But you know what they liked? They like the sucking sensation. That's what I discovered. They like that more than the milk. Taking the bah away was hard, but they were ready, because they needed more nourishment. This is what happens in dark nights. Consolation is taken away, because you need more nourishment. You need, you need the ministry of the spirit really to focus in and work on the soul and transform, and begin to take you in a little journey of soul surgery. This is a time when God thinks you're, you're ready. This is a time when God thinks you're really ready to learn a little bit more. Just a teeny wit, a bit. That apart from me, you can do nothing. I want to show you things. And the truth here is that God, he has not withdrawn. This is gonna be so hard for
you to believe. He has only withdrawn the consolation. He has actually moved closer. He is so attached and connected to you, he wants all of you. And he knows that if he just gave you the [unintelligible], the bottle, he knows if he just gave you the burning bush every day, you would never know what it is to be filled with the height and the length and the depth of the love of God, and to be filled with all the fullness of God. That's union. God is so present. But here, we're not going to believe it. Here we really need to hunker down, and this is where, we, it really helps to have a spiritual director, to just open, God, you're here. You're here. What are you doing?

And I'm not going to use my senses. I have to retrain my little ears of discernment. I used to use my senses to discern that he was here. I'm going to have to retrain something. We call this discernment. I'm going to have to retrain something to open to his work despite that I don't feel him. This is now the movement into faith. What is the experience gonna be in C. The experiences in the balance of ourself and the spirit working right through our psychological functioning. During these times, we will typically experience dryness, distance from God, frustration, sense of our moral failure, loneliness, spiritual impotence, confusion over what we really love, because you know what this is? These are times where God is giving you an experience of the truth. He's letting you in on parts of your heart. At other times in consolation, he, he, he didn't do that. He was just wanting to encourage your disciplines. Or for those of you who are older, were there parts of your heart that you are filled with the Spirit? There are times with the Spirit directing this whole thing right, he's the, he's the director of this transformation. There are times where he just wants you to experience those place in your heart where you are really filled with him, where your loves have really been set on him. Those are great times. But now in the dark nights, these are times where we're other parts of our heart are being opened up.
And here the experience will feel more psychological than spiritual. That's the problem. It's going to feel psychological. Meaning it's just going to feel like you. And, and your temptation is you're going to try to make it feel spiritual. I'm gonna encourage you later, give that up. We're missing the work of the Spirit. Do not try to make anything feel spiritual. That's the task of the Spirit. What he wants to do. Our task is to open to his work. Now, D. How do you know if you're at a dark night?