

# Going on with God in Dark Nights: Maturing the Saints by Spiritual Hunger and Love

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“God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.”  
Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

## Introduction

- Teresa of Avila says that our greatest struggle in prayer is when God feels silent. (1) In consolation, the Christian life works despite the vices and “stuff” in the heart. Go with the flow. (2) But in times of desolation, our “stuff” comes out, we are faced with it and *we do the craziest things*: we work harder, answer our own prayers, despair of working harder, try to get back the loving feelings, resign ourself to dry bones, try to fix ourselves, or think that this is no more to the Christian life than what we have experienced.
- **My real concern in this talk is for the “maturing of the saints.”** It is for those who have been a believer a good while, have heard so much, are committed to the Lord and have developed a general good character and good disciplines, have been churching for 20, 30, 40, 50 years and are faithful, but secretly wonder in their deep: “Is this all there is?”
- The older saints may not know that perhaps they are in the grips of a great temptation. **The Ministerial Temptation:** the temptation to turn *from* the task and call of growth, putting off the old self, and hungering for God *and turn to* the task of ministry, to bypass the dark nights, to misinterpret the darkness for the absence of God and believe that God is not present in the darkness, to avoid the journey into the deep, to think that introspection is not a good thing and to resign the self to ministry as what the life of maturity is about. Now it is a good thing to minister to others, especially as we get older in the faith. However, ministry is not to become a *defense* against the pursuit of God.
- **My hunch: in those who are in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70’s there is a storehouse of potential for growth if they are willing to journey into the cauldron of the sins of the heart to discover a deep love beyond what we can imagine or think. However, this journey is being swapped for a pottage of ministry in dry bones!**

### A. Reminder: Purpose or Goal of Dark Nights in General is twofold:

1. **Development of Spiritual Hunger and Purging of the Heart (Deut. 8:1-5)**  
God let his people go hungry for the purpose of testing them, humbling them, to see what was in their heart (if they love the world or God). They were fed manna (God’s food and not their own) to see whether they would depend upon God or self.
2. **Union with God in love as the power for change in the spiritual life (Eph. 3:16-19)**

The telos or goal of the Xian life is not a dark night but full love, being full of the presence of God right in our psychological structures. This is not just the goal but it is what transformation is all about, how we are transformed into the image of Christ by being filled entirely with His Spirit.

## **B. Kinds of Dark Nights for the Sake of Developing Hunger and Love**

### **1. Initial Dark Nights**

- Recall the beginner stage: a Wonderful time of consolation – God so gracious
- Meets us right in our need (could be something other than pleasure: safety, security etc.)
- This was more a time for spiritual disciplines to be encouraged and reinforced than true transformation of the deep.
- Thus, sins of the former manner of life come right into our spiritual life, the doing of disciplines and spirituality much in the power of the self.

As a result:

- God turns out the light on the sensual spirituality to begin the work of filling us with the Holy Spirit – result is a “purgative filling of the Spirit” to the degree one can at that place.
- Stages go from dark to pitch black (“3:00 a.m. dark nights” in which spiritual disciplines are almost painful to do).
- But if one will stay in the weeds, watch for God, continue to resist fixing oneself and enter truth of oneself with Him, something may begin to happen -- a new sense that God is here despite the lack of felt presence.

### **2. Ongoing Dark Nights (our present topic)**

When God thinks I am ready for more growth, for receiving more of him and for more purging for this purpose, then new types of dark nights will begin to cycle in and out of my life.

#### **a. Ongoing Dark Nights are a Further Transition or Movement in Love by the Spirit:**

The movement here is from the love of God for love’s sake to the love of God for God’s sake.

#### **b. The Nature of Ongoing Dark Nights:**

##### **1. Ongoing seasons and process of purgation:**

- The Spirit continues cycles of seasons of consolation to encourage, then cycles of seasons of dark nights to purge us initially of our sensual spirituality, to let go of relying upon feelings of spirituality to measure the presence of God, to open to love and the filling of the Spirit in darkness
- Further movement to dark nights that take us deeper into purgation that open us to look into the whole of character – even to purge us of good character done in the power of the self – to move us from the fruit of the self to the fruit of the Spirit.

2. **Deep purging of beginner's natural character (vices and *virtues*) to develop fruit of the Spirit: (to deal with our "consciousness of goodness")**

The Spirit thinks we are ready for a deeper purging of the former manner of life in terms of the vices - impatience, envy, excess anger, jealousy, wrath, selfishness, pride etc.

Importantly, the Spirit will not only purge us of our vices but the *virtues* that we developed as unbelievers and as young Christians that was much in the power of the self.

3. **This involves a "stripping away" of our dependence upon *our* training of the psychological faculties in order to open them to the work of the Spirit of God:**

**(a) Darkness in the Intellect:**

**For Beginners:**

**Ongoing Dark Nights**

**New Virtues**

**(b) Emptiness in the Memory-Character:**

**For Beginners:**

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

(c) Dryness in the Will:

For Beginners:

Ongoing Dark Nights

New Virtues

**c. The Experience and Signs of being in Ongoing Dark Nights:**

- (1) Deep sense of one's own inadequacy of character.
- (2) Lack of zest from one's character and former accomplishments and even future endeavors.
- (3) A distrust in life's promises that seek to satisfy the heart, a new sense that this life is an inadequate home.

- (4) A renewed sense of loneliness as a result of your good character.
- (5) Ministry may be good and functional for the sake of others, but it does not satisfy the soul, it does not provide the rivers of living water.
- (6) A deep dissatisfaction in theological knowledge alone as well as our general knowledge and wisdom-base for life.
- (7) A sense that you will not be loved in awareness of the truth of oneself – a feeling that one is unacceptable.
- (8) A deep knowledge in my will that I am more filled with myself than God.

**d. Temptations in Ongoing Dark Nights:**

The issue has to do with knowledge, character and our treasures in the will and heart. Perhaps at the bottom is the deep belief that I will not be loved in the truth of myself, that dark nights will end in rejection and abandonment. It is this deep rejection point that keeps us from dark nights – we will be tempted to show and experience our good alone to be loved. This reflects the deep belief that there is no one down at the core of the self, that we will only be alone in the truth of our self = a major problem.

- (1) to hold onto our goodness and character.
- (2) to despair of the Rivers of Living Water and do the spiritual disciplines without openness to the heart and Spirit.
- (3) to defend against opening to the heart's desire for the rivers of living water and spiritual hunger due to unrequited love.
- (4) to resist entering dark nights by giving oneself to ministry as a defense against introspection and painful self-awareness.
- (5) to create Ministries of Consolation and Strength:

**e. How to Experience/What to Do in Ongoing Dark Nights:**

**Regarding Early Dark Nights (reminder)**

- (1) First, be open to fact that the spiritual dryness may be a sign of God working inwardly in a dark night of the senses and not merely the causal result of one's own sin.
- (2) The spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose or function in the believer's life during a dark night *from* being "felt" nourishment *to* that of a mirror into the reality of one's sinfulness and deepening need for the Cross.

- (3) In a dark night, there is a need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix oneself in the power of the self, which is *precisely what the dark night is trying to cure one of*.
- (4) Believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God (particularly a feeling) in doing spiritual disciplines except what He has to give.
- (5) Believers in a dark night must resist the temptation to use spiritual disciplines to generate a spiritual feeling, to “make something happen” or to make more of their religious experience than it is.
- (6) Leaders in the church (those who counsel, preach, teach and lead congregational worship) need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people, but only assist others in being open to the truth of themselves in relationship to God, in being open to what God has for them.
- (7) Those in a dark night need to be faithful to present themselves in doing the spiritual disciplines despite the fact that practice of them may feel spiritually painful and lonely (Rom. 6:13, 12:1-2).
- (8) Believers in a dark night need to consider that their spiritual dryness and boredom may be God’s way of getting their attention inwardly in love, to attend less to a feeling and more to what the Spirit is praying for and attempting to transform by teaching them (Romans 8:26-30).

#### **Regarding Ongoing Dark Nights**

- (1) Learn to sit amongst the weeds with God as Gardener, not the self – open the heart to the truth of oneself relationally to God. Matt. 11:28ff.
- (2) Let go of one’s goodness, let go of one’s integrity, otherwise this creates such fragile believers. Begin to open to the freedom to be a failure in oneself to find oneself in Jesus.
- (3) Let go of one’s character as the road map you trust in for getting around in the world. Open to being “spiritually dizzy,” to seeing through the sham of trusting oneself and open to wanting to trust God.
- (4) Continue to be diligent to present oneself for obedience and the spiritual disciplines, to do one’s duty but from the heart and not as a way to “bite the bullet” in being good as a way to perfect oneself in the power of the self.
- (5) Be willing to open to a new power for ministry – reliance upon the Holy Spirit, to wait, to listen.
- (6) Resist ministries of consolation, resist “falling asleep” to what really is going on in one’s soul versus what one believes and teaches, lest you deceive yourself and others that your words are easily and readily true in your life. In this case, others will not be helped.

- (7) Join together with others who are willing to go on this journey together into the darkness, our cluelessness, the truth of ourselves in His love and acceptance.

**f. Concerns and Qualifications about ongoing Dark Nights:**

- (1) Depression distinguished from Dark Nights = important.
- (a) From an objective standpoint, the dark night is a movement of the Spirit on behalf of the believer, whereas clinical depression has a more historical and/or biological etiology.
- (b) From the subjective viewpoint, clinical depression may involve no particular object or focus other than a diffused sense of loss of pleasure, a difficulty in sleep, and a generally depressed mood with a physiological edge resulting in overall energy loss. On the contrary, the dark night has a more fine *focus*, namely, upon one's relationship with God, which is particularly brought into view in the practice of the spiritual disciplines (prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship, hearing preaching, worship etc.). That is, the individual may not experience any of the symptoms of clinical depression in general, and only experiences depression, loss of energy, anxiety, guilt and a general sense of uneasiness when one is consciously aware of God and the religious life. If there is a diffused depressed mood or uneasiness while in a dark night, it can be brought into fine focus by attending consciously to one's spiritual life. In fact, the believer in a dark night may feel quite energized in life's activities in general and, as a result, repress the religious dimension in light of the fact that this is the objective focus of the internal turmoil. It is helpful for a spiritual mentor and therapist at least to be alert to these issues.
- (2) Dark Nights and the need to have a mentor:
- (3) Remember: Dark Nights are what it is go be filled with the Spirit to the degree that we can experience this and to the degree God wishes us to experience his work in the depths of our heart and vices.
- (4) Caution: Beware of thinking that sin separates you from God and His holiness and that this is the explanation of dark nights – so that if you confess sin, you will experience consolation again.
- (5) The Demonic and Dark Nights: No doubt the demons will be involved in dark nights, but their goal is quite different to God.
- Demonic goals are to get you to work harder to deal with your guilt, get you to strive for spiritual feelings over truth and God, to move you to despair.
  - God's goals are transformation and love: to move you into true self-awareness of the former manner of life in the presence of the cross, your neediness and His love.
- (6) Dark Nights versus external trials:

(7) When Dark Nights and trials are very painful:

**g. Results or Fruits of Ongoing Dark Nights**

(1) Greater freedom from grandiosity in ministry and attachment to our being successful.

(2) Greater freedom from arrogance in spiritual life and attachment to our goodness.

(3) Greater freedom from domination by emotions.

(4) Purification of our infantile idea of God.

(5) Development of the theological virtues in the Spirit:

(a) Moving from theological knowledge to Faith in God

(b) Moving from hope-trust in character to hope-trust in God

(c) Moving from the love of loving God (as experiencing God) to loving God as God (despite my experience) – letting God be the center and not my need-to-experience-God as the center of my life.

**Conclusion:**

What will keep us from opening to God in a dark night? The deep belief that I if I enter into the truth of myself, that I will be alone, that I will not be loved, that I will lose something. However, the truth is that God is here: what I have learned in life is that nothing can separate me from the love of God.

The journey is, first, to be who you are in his presence, and from there to become all you can be in Him. We will lose much in the journey into the dark nights (*our* sense of goodness, *our* faithfulness, *our* ability to love), but we have so much to gain in the Spirit – and we cannot lose His love.