

# Spiritual Formation: Disciplines From the Heart in the Spirit and not from the Flesh Part 1

By John Coe

John Coe:

I'd like to pray again, just to open our hearts together. Father, by your Spirit, again, we come.

And Lord, we desire to be taught by you, and so teach us how to again hear one another with one ear, and uh, to open to you with the other. Father, in your believers, you are present. You're always drawing near. So we want to open our heart to you to teach us tonight, Lord. You're always at work in our soul, and so we bless you. We bless you, Father, Son and the Spirit. Amen.

Um, you know, let me just, before I answer, how do you know if you're in a dark night of a kind, let me just, um, answer something that might be pondering in your in your mind, and it would be the question are dark nights necessary? Does everybody go through these? And I'll just say quickly, if you want to talk about it more, we can. Dark nights aren't necessary. What is necessary is the purging of the soul, purging of the places where we're filled with ourself, to be opened up to God so that he can take us into deeper places in our life in neediness, brokenness. Now, you know what does that, that I saw very clearly in my life, that's trials. Trials do that. And so I can imagine clearly a person who just in God's sovereignty experiences so many trials that that becomes an incredible place and opportunity for opening our expectations, our desires, our false hopes and attachments, and taking us into greater neediness. In fact, as the spiritual writers looked back at the early church, that's what they thought of the early church.

They thought that the early church probably didn't experience so many of these dark nights, because they experienced such a tumultuous life of trial that it constantly opened the heart. It

constantly opened them to what they were anxious about and what they desire and their false desires, they wish they didn't have to trust God they wish they had a, you know, an easier life, wish the Romans weren't attacking them, whatever. But the spiritual writers noticed when the church hit a time of peace and safety. There was much more now the reporting and the experience of these dark nights, because it was a time of peace and prosperity. And you know what you and I do in times of peace and prosperity? We depend on ourselves. And so the Spirit, he, he is, I don't know what to call it, but one, one author said that he's the hound of heaven. He, he desires your spirit so much. Okay. To the handout. D. How does one know if they are in a dark night? Well, there's three signs that the spiritual writers kind of agreed upon. And the first one was this is that during this time it is very difficult to pray or meditate or to stay focused on spiritual disciplines. During these dark nights, another way of putting it, you just feel you can't pray. You do it, maybe, but as you're doing it, you find that your mind's wandering. You find that you're, you're trying to listen to the sermon, and you just, you're bored. You're trying to make something good of your quiet time and it's just, it's dry. You're, you don't, what can you do?

This is a time when the Holy Spirit is choosing to give you an experience of a part of your heart that will not love doing spiritual disciplines because it's, it's attached to something else. I mean, I know what it's like, uh, you know, with with my daughters. Now, there's some changes going on in my daughters' life. But I know in the past when I said to them, [unintelligible], it's time to uh, go to church. Okay dad. And then that, [coughs] Dad I think I'm sick today. Well, if I said to them, hey, girls, tell you what, scrap church. Let's go to Disneyland. [yells] They go crazy! Now it's Orlando Bloom.

[audience laughs]

Orlando's everywhere, I, "Girls Orlando!" "Where, where, where!" they love Orlando Bloom because Orlando Bloom is in their heart, just like Disneyland is in their heart. And so I bring up church [makes snoring sound]. I bring up Orlando Bloom and the eyes light up, because that's in their heart. Now there is change. I have to report this, in this last month, I've just seen some really cool things come from my daughter's heart in relation to the Lord. But it's the same in my life. I've experienced these times where the prayer time is so dry I just want to wrap it up, but I would stay and be faithful in it. There's a real purpose for that, but I didn't know what was going on then. But if my wife would come in and say, Well, John, you got ten minutes and the Rams game's come. Whoa. Okay. Pray real fast. The Rams are in my heart. See if, if sometimes you're not excited about these things it's because something else is in your heart, and now God is, see God accepts you. There's no condemnation. And so God is just saying, I just want to show you a piece of your heart that I want. I, I want that. I want to fill you there. And I'm going to have to open you to it. And if you and I hunker down and work harder to try to get consolation back, we've totally missed where the spirit's taking you. No, the quest now is, God, why is it, I don't give a rip about you right now. That's the question. Right now, I'm bored in my prayer time. Now I have something to talk to God about. Why are you, why am I bored with you? What am I really excited about? What's really going on in my heart?

Now I have a real conversation. So the first one is you just, you can't stay focused on the spiritual disciplines because the Spirit is moving you to places of your heart. Your consciousness cannot help but attend now, by the Spirit, to these places. A second thing is you don't want to meditate.

You don't even want to pray, or you pray less. Your quiet time shrinks. You don't go to church every time the doors are open. Because it's becoming painful to see what's really going on in your soul. You don't want to sit there in the dryness. And so you wrap up your prayer time, and you start avoiding it. Again, at seminary, the standard thing that we see, is students spend less time in prayer and more time in the Word, because prayer is dark. It's confusing. But then there's a third, there's the third one and the third one needs to be there, because if it's not, then it, it might be with A and B, you know, you're just lukewarm walking away from the faith. The third is necessary, they say, and the third one is that you're worried about the state of your soul. You're anxious, you're worried about it. You're wondering what's wrong with me, gosh I, I used to love praying, I used to love this stuff---what's going on? Is something wrong with my soul? That's an indication that there is at the core a love for the Spirit. There is at the core love for God, but now you're questioning your loves because you're seeing other parts of your heart. Now E. Temptations in the dark night. This is very important.

Teresa of Avila, when she comments on this, she says that these dark night times, they're the hardest time in the spiritual life. They're the hardest time in the spiritual life, because we will tend to close down our prayer life. Well, let me give you four things under this temptation. Four things I think that happen in temptation that, that the spiritual writers said, and that I saw in my own life. The first one is this. When a dark night begins, number one, there will be a temptation to think that I'm doing something wrong. There will be a temptation to think, I'm doing something wrong, and if I only did it right, then I wouldn't be feeling this way. If I was just praying with more fervency, if I just loved God more. Well, yes, that's true. If you just love God more. But there's nothing you're gonna do to muster that up, because the Spirit right now is doing

soul surgery. See, this is causal thinking. This is now not relational personal thinking that God is a person, this is causal thinking. I used to do A, B and C, and then I experienced X, Y, Z. Well, I'm not experiencing X, Y, Z, therefore I must not be doing A, B and C, right. I need to do it right. And so number two, the temptation is, in the beginning, to work harder. It's to pray harder, and it's to, to try to even generate a spiritual feeling. It's to try to muster something up. I can't help it but when I go to, uh, you know, I used to go to chapel at undergrad. Now, you know, I, graduate, but undergrad or, a thing called Singspiration. And sometimes people would hold their hands, I'm just wondering if some of them are just trying to get that lovin' feeling back.

You know, it's true that if you squeeze hard enough on your eyeballs, it'll put pressure on the back of the retina and it could imitate a kind of religious experience. And I just want to say, this is not where the spirit's, working. Remember that, that song, now there's, some of you are too young, but remember the Righteous Brothers? that lovin', [singing] bring back that love and feelin, right? Well, that love and feelin. Now it's gone, gone, gone. Whoa.

[audience laughs]

Well, you know, I remember when I was teaching at seminary and at Rosemead school of psychology, theology, I was going through this dark time, and I, I, prayer was dark. And so I had on my, on my, you know, nightstand back here a list of spiritual books that I would read every night because I was trying to get that lovin' feeling back. I remember, you know, I just, I would pick up one and, seriously, I read it for a while, and if it wasn't doing it, I'd shove it back, and I'd grab another one. Well, you know, you know what it reminds me of? In high school, before I was

a Christian, I used to get high on marijuana. That's what it was like, you know, I would, I would take a book, here's Augustine, the Confessions. [sucks air between teeth] No, no good tonight.

[audience laughs]

No, no. Let's try Thomas Merton. He's a Catholic. [sucks air between teeth] Hmm, [unintelligible], no, no. Calvin. Calvin. [sucks air between teeth] Yeah,

[audience laughs]

yeah, it's good. I'll stay here. You know, I can't tell you, she would, think I was nuts. I'd have twenty books stacked back here, twenty books. Well, I was looking to get high. I was looking to get that loving feeling back. Like taking a joint. Or toking, as they used to say. So the temptation will be to work harder. But then here's the third thing. When it doesn't work, because I'll tell you right now, it won't work, because if that's not where the spirit is, it's not going to work. The temptation will be, thirdly, to just stop doing the disciplines, just do them less now. You just don't do it a whole lot. And then there are times you hear a sermon and this, the preacher says, [in deep voice] Do you pray as you ought? [in whiny voice] No Oh, God, I'm going to, okay, I'm going to pray. So you give yourself to this. Monday, you start, and by Wednesday it's dry again, and by Thursday, you just don't get up. [snores] And now we're just doing it less. Now, here's the fourth temptation. This is the real problem. It's when we silently despair that God will ever come. We just silently despair. My real concern is, I'm 50 now. I'm concerned about the 40 and the 50 year old and the 60 year old plumber, and executive, especially the men, who were on fire for

God. That's the word they'll use when they were in college. And now they've been married twenty or thirty years and it's flat and dry, and they're thinking, the preacher looks excited, he gets up. He understands it, I don't get it. And inside, they're really despairing. They become what Kirkegaard called the 'gentle Christian'. You know what the gentle Christian is?

The gentle Christian is the person who has become good and moral and truly believes in God, but has substituted a life for the pursuit of God because of unrequited love. They've substituted, they've given up on it, they've despaired it. And they've substituted a life of being moral. A life of being a good man. A good woman. And so when the pastor says, after the end of the sermon, let's pray, they bow and they pray. But inside they're going, God, where are you? What's going on in my life? And what they should have done is they should have raised their hand at the end of the sermon, said Pastor, I don't get it. But if they do that, Kierkegaard said, it'll raise up too much dust. Better just let the dust lie, and they become a gentle man. Now, I'm really worried about, about men. You know, women. I'm sorry, but this is my view of it. Women, you're just more neurotic than men, because you're used to cleaning up messes after little boys and then after your husband. And so you women will work hard till you die. But you know, guys don't. A lot of guys have already despaired, and yet they still go to good evangelical churches each week. I'm really worried about them. F. Remember, remember this, God is now working so close. This dryness is a new, more profound work of God in our deep, in order to have a true and honest relationship. The Spirit is attempting to reveal the truth of ourself in our neediness, to help us despair of ourselves and our independence, and to declare more dependence upon the spirit.

This is what the ancients called purgative contemplation. See, when we think of contemplation, we usually think of consolation. All contemplation meant was to be open to the work of God as he works in your life, to be open to the ministry of the indwelling Spirit as he works. Sometimes it will be wonderful consolation, and other times it will be purgative. As you open to the Spirit, it will be dry as dust. Good, Lord. Show me what I really am. Show me how little I love. God, this is so good. See, this is what it is to be filled with the Spirit to the level that one can be at this stage where they're still quite filled with themselves. That's what it is, we, we don't think of it. We think of a filling of the spirit always as a constellation. No, the filling of the spirit is wherever he's moving. He's trying to fill that place. We're quite filled with our own hopes, our own desires, our own wants, our own joys, our own hatreds, our own sorrows, and the spirit now wants to purge these. He wants to bring them to our conscious level, so that he can take us, he can break our heart. And in the experience, God, I need you. He can come in just a little more. That's how growth is. The growth of the spirit is just a little more. This purgative and negative feeling experience is a profound work of the spirit to open us up to a deeper love, because this is a love that is based on the truth of you. It's not how good you're doing now. It's in fact your falseness, your sin. And the Spirit wants to love you right in that place. Just for a moment, look at a Ephesians chapter four, because the Spirit is going to help us put off this former manner of life, this old man, this, this stuff, these vices of the heart.

Ephesians chapter four, verse twenty-two. He says this: that in reference to your former manner of life, the, the habituated part of your, your heart, what Paul will call the flesh, that in reference to that stuff, you, you lay it aside, and you lay aside the old self, which is presently, this is now in the Greek present tense, which is presently being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of

deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind. Put on the new self. Here's what I discovered in my evangelical training. Most of my focus was putting on the new self. What to do. I, I heard sermons about, this is what I should become. This is what I should do. Those are great goals. But you know something? There's a whole other part of the heart that has to be put off. And the truth is, I don't want to go there. Anybody want to see their crap tonight? I don't. And you can just see it. Just go, go home and ask, you know, if you're married, just, honey, would you tell me about my crap? Oh, they could talk for hours,

[audience laughs]

and we'll usually say at about five minutes. That's enough. Well, the Spirit, he is so desirous of our spirit that he is going to help us to put off the old. He is going to take us on a journey. This is an incredible time where you need a spiritual friend, a sage, a wise person, a spiritual director, a therapist, someone who can begin to open up and take you into contours of the soul that will shock you, that will break your heart. God, I need you. And someone who will be wise in the life of the Spirit to guide you into how to open to the Spirit in this. God knows that I think we would settle for a life of consolation over a life of transformation. But the Spirit, he knows and desires more. He desires all your soul. You know what this purgation is a little bit like? It's a little bit like going from dating to marriage. Remember dating? Dating was that wonderful time, I've been married thirty-two years now. You know, when I dated Greta, that was so cool. You know, here's Greta, hey babe, how you doing, have a good day today, oh yeah yeah, I love you, I love me, whatever. Dating, you're not sure who you love in dating, by the way. Could be you or could be them, not sure. Because if you have a bad night, you go home early. So we're not sure, but dating

is a, is an incredible time. But marriage, different. Marriage is based on reality. It's based on truth. You know, you, you wake in marriage, and one day it hits. Oh, my gosh, I married that. And she can say and I married that? Marriage is about truth, and can I love a person in the truth of them. You know something? God can. And God wants to, if you are willing to open up to the truth and experience this.

You know, every marriage I think comes to a point, uh, where it hits this question, and the question is, do I want the pleasure and the consolation of the relationship or do I want the relationship? Think about that. Do I want the pleasure of this relationship? Or do I just want Greta? Well, I understand why fifty percent of the population are choosing the pleasure, because there's just ugly stuff in really embracing Greta, and Greta embracing me. You know what's cool in marriage, is when you learn to be with your spouse on a heavy night. You know, most of us like nice nights, but sometimes you have a heavy night. And I can always tell when Greta says, you know, John, there's some things I want to talk about tonight. Oh Greta, it's a Friday night let, let's just be superficial. [laughs]

Let's just,

[audience laughs]

no, no. Um, how can I be with Greta on a heavy night? How can I be with her? She's just as much there as when she feels good. It's the same with God. What do you want? It's a question. Do you want the consolation of your relation with God, or do you want God? What do you want?

Cause if you want God, God lives and abides in truth. He fills you in truth. And so he is going to have to open up pockets in truth, and take us on the journey of a lifetime. Do you know this is also this purgation, it's also a little bit like an enema.

[audience laughs]

Have any of you had an enema before? I'm serious. How many of you've had an enema? En-e-ma?

[audience laughs]

Not many. This younger generation. You know, you ever seen a hot water bottle? Well, on a hot water bottle, there's a tube attached to the hot water bottle. Now, my children, now they do know what it's for. Because what you do with that, what you do with that tube is it goes up the rear end. And you know what they do is they flush water into the colon. And the purpose is to cleanse the colon. Well, I was raised in a Norwegian community in North Dakota, farm community. And my parents, they didn't use conventional medicine. We used the enema.

[audience laughs]

So if John, Bob or Norm were a little sick, it was, it's part of this ancient philosophy of, well, you know, have you ever been sick and you can't go to the bathroom? Well, the philosophy was, you get them, get their, you know, bowels moving, cleanse out the toxins cleans out the person, get

them on their way. Well, that's what my dad would do. So in my home, uh, I mean, there was ten feet of snow, it was 50 degrees out, and we had to walk three miles. And in my home, when my dad said, anyone feeling sick around here? No, dad, no, going to school. I could have pneumonia. Going to school! No problem.

[audience laughs]

If my dad, Johnny, he was Norwegian. [in Norwegian accent] Johnny, I sense there's a little snuffle. No, no, no snuffle dad, [sniffles] nope! Ya, enema time. Oh lord.

[audience laughs]

We, we had a bathroom set up for an enema. And so he was very loving and very kind. He would turn me over on my, you know, and he would, now my father, you know, those fleet bottles? Those fleet bottle, I, those are for parakeets.

[audience laughs]

That's not for humans. My dad would put two, two, water bottles in my tummy, and I would, I thought my brain was going to burst. And my dad's rubbing my stomach the whole time, because he wants to loosen the facial material. That's the goal. So he's rubbing my tummy and he's going, [in Norwegian accent] hold it. Hold it. Well, when you've got two gallons of water in your

bowel, you're, you're ready to let it go. And then finally, my brothers would usually be in there giggling,

[audience laughs]

in the crack. And then finally, my dad would say, okay, go and you'd go, well. It was like a horse. And the, in my house, the only thing you wanted after one of these was my dad not to look in the toilet and go, [in Norwegian accent] Johnny, I think we need to do it again.

[audience laughs]

Well, purgation. That is the metaphor. It's a purging. It's a purging of the crap. It's what I call, you'll like this one, too. Bottom up spirituality.

[audience laughs]

It's the spirit of God working from the deep,

[audience laughs]

and he's pushing up stuff. Now, the goal of this purge is everything that Moon and Mulholland talked about. Union with God. It's everything Willard talked about, how to live in the inner man, how to open up to what really is the inner man. No lie, no pretend, no fake, because God knows

all, he's praying for all, he wants to fill us with himself. And this purging is to make space for the spirit of God to fill us. Now what to do? Gee, what to do, or how to experience these times of desolation. And I, I just will say in general here, before I get to the, the things. It's not so much what we do. It's more going to be a response to a person. Dark nights, it, that is a call from God to respond to a person. To respond to a person he's calling. So let me just give you some things. There will be a whole list of ways to think about this and open to this. First one is this. When you're going through this time of dryness, just be open to the fact that this may not be because you're not doing it right, but this may be a sign of God working inwardly now. I want to, first thing, as you're going through this, if you're in a time of dryness or darkness, just be open to the fact that this might be a work of God calling us inwardly. You know, that never dawned on me. I remember when I shared this, oh, probably ten years ago at a dorm. I remember talking about this, and this undergrad just laid out a scream. [yells] I was like what? I, I can't believe, you mean, God might be doing this? Yeah, so he came up later and he said, you know, I might, these last year and a half, I have just been filled with so much guilt. Something's wrong with me.

It never dawned on me, God might be doing something. Just be open to that. Second thing. In a time of a dark night, spiritual disciplines have changed in terms of their purpose. Remember, in a dark night, prayer, meditation, etc., they've changed in terms of their purpose. It's gone from being felt nourishment to being a mirror of reality. The disciplines will feel different now. It'll feel like you're just experiencing the truth of yourself. How good. What a great teaching time. Third thing, the dark night is about a person on the inside, calling you to listen. The dark night is about a person on the inside calling you to listen and to watch, because he's doing some things. And I want to begin to now learn how to watch. This is what the ancients called discernment, I

want to watch, what is the Spirit teaching me now? What is he showing me? I want to go where he's going. Fourth. In a dark night, there is a need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix yourself. In a dark night, there is the need to resist the temptation to spiritually fix yourself. To try to make it all work, to try to change yourself. This is actually what The dark night is trying to cure you of. It's trying to show you, so you know what dark nights do? They dizzy you in your spiritual life. They dizzy you--well what used to work, my prayer life used to work, my reading the scriptures used to work, my quiet time, my sharing Christ. It all worked. And now, nothing seems to work. What a wonderful time. You're becoming spiritually dizzy. This is vertigo.

Because the Lord is trying to lead you to, "you need me, John. You need me afresh. You need to learn to depend on me. I am the rivers of living water. Not you, not your character. Not what you've done. Not your ministry. Fifth, believers in a dark night should expect and want nothing from God except what he has to give. Believers in a Dark Knight should expect and want nothing from God except what he has to give. In dark nights, we see our desires coming out. We see that we really want God on our terms. I want to feel a certain way, I want God to come a certain way. This is a time where a, a little bit of a Copernican revolution is starting to take place, where God is coming and saying, no, no, John, I, I want you on my terms. I've let you have me on your terms, but now we're gonna make the switch. I have so much to teach you. Now, there's, there's a concern because there are people who write books about desiring God, and Christian hedonism, and taking pleasure in God. And I, I understand the emphasis of that. There is a place for that. However, if God is doing another work, then I don't want to supplant the work of God because I have some desire that he should work in a certain way towards me. My task is to follow the Spirit, to be open to where that's going, and not try to lead this. Six, believers in a dark night

must resist the temptation to use spiritual disciplines to generate a spiritual feeling. Believers in a dark night must resist the temptation to use spiritual disciplines: prayer, singing, worship, to generate a spiritual feeling, to make something happen. That is the worst. It's like faking it, but it's trying to muscle it up.

No, let it be. I remember when I was, uh, leading, uh, I, I led a retreat for a small church, couple hundred were at the retreat, and uh, I was the oldest person there. And I remember the music was movin' man. I'd never heard A Mighty Fortress sung like this before. [unintelligible] Well, okay, I'm in a different place. And my daughters were, Dad, is this Christian music? Well, as this was going on, I mean, we, we worshiped for about an hour in song. And I remember there's this guy sitting right here, and he had his hands raised the whole time while he was worshipping, but he was doing this as he was singing songs. He was looking from side to side. And I kept thinking, what is going on in his mind? This is maybe what's going on his mind. I'd like to put my hands down because I'm really not into this so much, but if I put my hands down, you'll know I'm not into this, so I can't put my hands down, so I have to keep my hands up. I'm really concerned of people in a dark night trying to generate a spiritual feel. Talk about New Age spirituality. That's insane, to use disciplines to generate something. All the disciplines are supposed to do is to open you to his working presence. And if it's consolation, let it be. If it's desolation, let it be. It's just to open to his work. Let it be. Seven. Leaders in the church. Leaders in the church, those who counsel, those who preach, teach. Especially those who lead congregational worship. Leaders in the church need to resist the temptation to generate an experience for their people. They need to resist that temptation.

I understand the motivation. You know, when you're leading music on Sunday morning and the people in the audience, you know, I've I used to preach a fair amount. It's really exciting when I'm preaching and there's someone in the pew doing this [snores]. That used to bug me. In fact, when I would see that person do it, [in a loud voice] I would raise my voice.

[audience laughs]

And really, what was going on in my soul is, how dare you fall asleep on me! Dang you! Well, I remember praying before services with worship teams, and I just sense the anxiety in all of us, because we're the show. And if we don't make it work, it doesn't work. Oh, gosh, the spirit of God is here. Our task as leaders is to help assist people to open to wherever the spirit of God is. My task is not to generate an experience. My task is to help people, if they're in consolation, just to open to that and go with it. And those in desolation to open to what the Spirit's trying to do. We have too much of what I would call ministries of consolation, where we're trying to generate experiences. When I see on Sunday morning they call it a celebration, I think, wow, is that it? What about all the lament psalms? What about people who are who are crying, who are in dark nights, who are in trials? I remember I was at a church in Minneapolis. I was asked to come there to, to help them develop spiritual formation in their church. Was an excellent church, it was booming, about 4,000 people. And the pastor, just a, a good teacher, loves the Lord, and um, he was teaching on, on the filling of the Spirit. And then he started talking about practicing the presence of God. That's Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite lay monk in the 16th century, Brother Lawrence of the resurrection. He wrote these set of letters about how to practice the presence of

God while washing dishes. And all of a sudden it became now a book in the 20th century. Well, he, he preached this sermon and it was excellent.

And then he said at the end of the sermon, for the next ten minutes, we are going to practice the presence and the power of God. Let's pray. And I knew right then, oh, gosh. Thirty five percent to fifty percent of these listeners are going to die that much more, because that is a consolation comment, that we are going to practice his presence, and power, and love. I told [unintelligible], said, you know, I'm, I'm just going to come watch. I said that, it was a huge auditorium, there were about three thousand in that service, twenty-five hundred. And I watched, and up in the front, I saw people just given to this. And no doubt many of them were experiencing consolation, probably a handful of neurotic women. [in nasally voice] Oh God, help my husband. He's so out of it God. As I move back in the auditorium, the next third, it was really funny. I saw women praying, and you know I saw men, heads going back and forth, heads bobbing, you know like those little dolls on your, you know, on your dashboards. They're bobbing back and forth, and I'm sure they're thinking this, I'm not experiencing the presence and the power of God, but if I lift up my head and quit praying, everyone will know it. So I must stay here, but I'm looking to see when they're done. And I was sitting in the back third. Women were praying. Here's what the men were doing. [makes a thumping noise] They're just doing this. You see, that comment was a setup for consolation. And the people who didn't experience the power and the presence and the love of God, they died a little bit more.

I only wish some Braveheart would have raised his hand and said, [in a loud voice] Pastor Dave, I don't get it. I'm not practicing the presence of anything. What's going on? Wow, that would've

broke up the house. I can't imagine what would happen. Somebody should have done that, because you know what, I think a lot of men were saying, and women, Pastor Dave gets it. He gets it. He knows, he understands it. He's, he's getting the power and the presence I guess. He wouldn't fake it. I guess I'm not. Wow. See, what leaders need to do is they need to frame the experience. That's what you, those of you who lead. You need to frame the experience for your people. All he had to do is said something like this. By the way, some of you here are going to experience such love. Such power. That's going to be wonderful. Just go with. That's so cool. Some of you here are going to experience dryness, God's distance. You're going to wonder, God, where are you? What's going on? If that's going on, [makes a noise] yum. Because God thinks you are in a place where you're ready to open up another pocket, if you're willing to go there with him. And so if this is going on in your life, this is now the Spirit calling you to enter into, God, what is going on in my soul. God, this is so good. Why is it that right now I don't really care about you? I'm not, I'm not experiencing you, I'm, I'm attached to other things. What are those, Lord? Everyone could have been engaged in the journey, but at that time, I think for many, they thought, I don't get it.

Number eight. Those who are in a dark night need to be faithful to continue to do the spiritual disciplines, to continue to give yourself to prayer, to reading the Word. You, to continue to give because what, what those become are opportunities for truthing it in relation to your soul. You need to give yourself to that. It's so easy to just now, I don't wanna do it. Now I will say, but this can be for another time, when, when the spiritual writer said You hit three o'clock dark night, three in the morning, three a.m. and it's really dark. And just, this, that is a time to let go of the spiritual disciplines and to engage in one. And it's what we have come to call contemplative

prayer. It's just gently opening to, God, you're here, you're here, you're here. But that's another story. The last thing, I just want to say, believers in a, in a dark night need to consider that this spiritual dryness or boredom is an invitation. It's an invitation to now journey inward in love. It is an invitation to enter the truth of your heart, to enter the purging, to enter what's going on and just ask the Spirit, teach me. It is such a cool thing when in our spiritual life we begin to let go of desires that we want God in a certain way, and to just open to, God, whatever you want to give me. I want to be open to cause you're always here. I want to close. At the end of that retreat that I went on twelve years ago, God took me down into such depths of my own soul, depths of my own sin.

And it was there that I experienced the presence of the Spirit that I never knew. I experienced the spirit not only externally but internally in love, in ways I, I did not imagine. And it was in the context of experiencing so much of my own sinfulness, that I really thought at that moment, I am without help and weeping, and crying over what I had become. I discovered the Spirit was always loving me there. I, I discovered that the Spirit only loves my actual self. He doesn't love my pretend, he doesn't love my false self. Only a actual self can be loved. And so in prayer, in dark nights especially, the task is this: Can I just be who I am with the God who is? That's the issue. Can I just experience what I really am, with God who is? Because he can handle it. Look back at the beginning, the, the first page, and I'll close with this quote, and then we'll take some questions. Have ten minutes. This is from Thomas Merton. In fact, it was Thomas Merton who asked, can, who said, can I be who I am, to God who is? This is something he wrote in *No Man is an Island*. He said, God, who is everywhere never leaves us. That's a theological truth. Yet he seems sometimes to be present and sometimes absent. If we do not know him well, if we do not

know him well, we do not realize that he may be more present to us, than, and I'll add, when he seems absent, than when he seems present. If we don't know him well, we may not realize that he actually may be more present working in us during those times when he feels absent than when he was feeling present. God, give us grace in this.

Father, open our hearts, open our hearts to you. We need you so much. Lord, I love consolation, but I am learning to love you. And there's a part of me that longs for you. I know there are parts of me that don't. But, Father, I, I entrust them to you. Watch over us here, watch over all these individuals. We need you. In Jesus' name. Amen. We have about ten minutes. We can do some questions and thoughts. Questions or comments, thoughts, whatever. Yeah, go ahead.

Audience Member 1:

Dr. Coe, I really appreciate your presentation this evening. Um, my question is this. You talked about um, the two forms of dark nights.

John Coe:

Yes.

Audience Member 1:

I was wondering, um, can an individual be stuck in the first dark night at the senses, without going to the next one?

John Coe:

Yeah. You know, in general, uh, you know, I'd say this, that uh, here's what, here's what the spiritual writers said. Dark nights, you know they're, they're like trials. Uh, see if I have my pen here. Um, they're like trials, and they become like walls. And so they, what they thought was, often people do not get past the beginner state. The the, the desire for consolation is what hooks them for life. And so they become mature beginners. So they, so they hit these walls. You know, so here, here's a person and he's going on and everything's fine. But then they start hitting the wall. The wall may be a trial, wall may be dark nights, whatever that is. And what they do is they just keep on trying to rehearse how they've understood that God comes to them. And so they never get past that, because they don't open to the fact that God would ever take them on a journey inward into the stuff of their heart. That is, they thought, you know, I, God doesn't want to take me on that journey. He doesn't want me to see all that stuff. I don't I don't see any point for seeing all that stuff. Well, that's how our salvation began, is we saw some of that stuff and we repented, and it broke our heart and we opened our, in neediness to him, and now, the ongoing truth of the gospel is he's only going to take us deeper into that, until finally all the parts of my heart finally realize, apart from him, I can do nothing. So, yes, some people, they can get stuck here for a long time unless they're willing to take that journey. But, you know, God is so gracious. He'll use trials. He'll use all kinds of things that are gonna take us in the same place. But the spiritual writers who said let's cooperate with the process rather than resist it. Yeah.

Audience Member 2:

How can you distinguish, um, and I know you gave the three points, but between a true dark night of a soul, and a, a sense of separation or distance from God that is either caused or contributed to by other factors such as personal sin or psychological illness or anything like that.

John Coe:

Yeah. Well, you know, I, when it comes to personal sin, well, at one level, it is sin that is the cause of, of the dark night in the sense that if I had never sinned, if I, you know, if Adam and Eve never sinned, we would have been just filled with the Spirit all the time, then I would never experience dark nights. So the state of sin is the cause of it. But I want to get away from the ideal, idea that it's a particular sin that created it. That is, when I'm being a good boy, well, then God always comes. And now if I'm sinning, well then God doesn't come. No, isn't it amazing that while I was yet a sinner, Christ died for me? See, God never forsakes me. God is always drawing near. When we say that sin separates us from God, that's true for the unbeliever. You know that's not true for you and me. My sin does not separate me from God at all. That's the whole commitment of the new covenant. He actually comes closer. Now, the concern that you raise is a concern of what the ancient writers would say is the lukewarm person, and that's the person who's just walking away. So the person who's just walking away has no interest in spirituality. Then we would say, well, that's not a, you know, necessarily a dark night. That's a person now who has no interest in God, and so, now the response to that person's different. It's,

it's the passages of Hebrews that warns them about are they really, are they really saved in the first place? Right. Now, when it comes to, uh, clinical issues like depression, there is a difference between depression and dark nights, um, just, just on the surface, it's gonna be something like this.

Clinical depression is this diffused feeling we have about all of life. It's, it's about our relationships with our spouse, it's about entertainment, everything, it's just flat. A dark night at least begins not in this diffused sense about everything. A dark night is very specific. It's when you're engaging in spiritual disciplines in particular, that's when you feel this dryness. But in a dark night, you might love watching TV, love watching movies, love spending time with, you know, all kinds of stuff, but it's just when I come to prayer, I'd rather not. Now, what does happen over time as we travel dark nights. Clinical depression can wet itself with this, because as many areas of the heart begin to be purged, this can begin to overwhelm the person, unless they're with a wise person, who can begin to, in a nice process, open these places up to the Lord. So depression often does wet itself over time with dark nights. Another question. Yes.

Audience Member 3:

Uh, on that chart that you used with the conversion process, um, and the felt presence. My, my thought was that a lot of conversion today is based upon a felt need, which could be not true, because they never become conscious of sin. Is it, could it be that when they start moving up to that plateau area and they go into the felt absence, is that where they could possibly be considering the fact that they're a sinner for the first time?

John Coe:

Well, you know, you never know. You, you never know what might be going on, especially today, you know, I mean, I'm thinking of, I suppose that may be possible if you're going to a church that doesn't even ever talk about sin. That's, that's a sad thing to me. I mean, I understand why some churches have, have, you know, talk about sin less because they don't know how to talk about it that help people find grace. And so the only way to find grace is to not talk about sin. Well, that's kind of the opposite of the scriptures is that no sin, the door of opening to our sin is the door of opening to grace, because that's where we're always loved, in our being a failure. And so I suppose what you said is possible for someone who goes to a church where their, their, their failure, their sin is never addressed, and they're just having a good old time. And so it may be that when they, uh, God has to take them on a different journey. But I'm just thinking of a, you know, standard evangelical church someone's going to where they're hinting, hearing about sin, about repentance, about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And uh, that here we do see this at some point, as I've, as I've taught students here at Biola, oftentimes it's junior high, high school, college where they have this real time of God is here, God is present, and they experience this great consolation, but then, something happens later.

Audience Member 3:

I guess what I'm trying to get at is, you know, the seeker-friendly concept, the, the seeker friendly church. That philosophy that the, seeker friendly, yeah seeker sensitive, in that, you

know, the, the goal, at least what I've been able to read is the goal is to be, feel good when you walk out. Yeah. And if we're, if our churches, especially a lot of the megachurches are, are geared toward making a person feel good when they walk out, they're actually promoting this whole philosophy constantly.

John Coe:

Yes, I, I guess, I'll just hook on that one, that is a concern of mine. That, that's a concern if that's really all the church, what they really want to do is after every sermon, after every service, if the goal is to experience consolation, um, that's going to be wonderful for a lot of people, but it will not prepare them for those times with the Spirit's doing something else. And so what we do see, I think in some of those churches is when people go through that place, they end up leaving, and they're trying to find something else, because whatever had seemed like it worked early on, it's not working now. So I, I agree with that concern. Yeah.

Audience Member 4:

Uh, Dr. Coe, over here. Like, Where's Waldo? Um, my question was, thank you for your message, by the way. Um, but my question had to do with, um, how might the dark night of the soul going on in an individual look in a community, like a small group or a congregation, especially, uh, bearing in mind that a lot of churches don't seem to be prepared to handle someone coming out with their junk, you know what I mean? But, maybe you could just speak to that.

John Coe:

Yeah, I, I agree. I, I have been with some churches where they've asked me to come and talk with them and uh, where they were going through this. And the temptation, I saw in this elder board, I saw in this one senior pastor in another situation. The temptation is always when, because I do, I think churches go through this. I think the temptation is to look back at the good old days and say, you know, now that, when that pastor was here, he preached and we were moving and, something's gone wrong, what we need. Now, when a church gets in that place, sometimes a pastor, rather than opening to the spirit of, God, where are you taking me? What are you doing? He can be tempted to try to get a program going to move the church out of the dark night. Oh, that's death. And I saw it at this one church where this pastor said, you know, I don't know what's going on. I think we're just getting really lazy and it's dull, I think we need to, to get an evangelism program going again to pull us up. I, I really think uh, this is death. And uh, this is also when elder boards start looking for a new pastor. And you know what they end up usually getting? A rancher that, you know, there's a, there's, they've written about this difference between a rancher and a shepherd, and they get a rancher. You know what a rancher is, [in southern accent] yeehaw, we're going, we're gonna go, we're movin'. Yeah, that's what we, we need to get going, woo! And then after two years with the rancher, they realize nothing's changed. And that rancher is riding roughshod. And he's really not a shepherd. He's not a lover. We need shepherds. We don't need ranchers. We are sheep, not cattle. That means we're little stupider,

[audience laughs]

because some shepherd is going to have to shepherd the heart, and take us down. Blessed is the church. Who's ready for that? Really, it's going to take quite an elder board. It's going to take quite a leader who's willing to go in those places. And uh, that would be hard. But we've come to our end. Let me close in prayer. Our father we, we bless you. Lord we, we need you. But you desire us more than we even desire you. Lord, I just pray you'd continue to teach us, open our soul. Lord, I just pray that you would here, just in this group, you, you've brought them here for a reason, that you would you would raise up individuals here who really want to open deeply to you. Lord, um, just encourage their heart wherever they're at. Father, again, you are the lover of our soul. Just open to him. He's here. Darkness and light, consolation or not. God, we need you. Teach us how to watch your work. In Jesus' name, amen.