

Going on with God in Dark Nights: Part 1

By: John Coe

Announcer:

Heavenly Father, I come before you, and we come before you tonight, realizing that there could be hundreds of different reasons, many, many different things that would distract us from what you, as our master teacher have for us here tonight. So Father, we know that you're here and you're dwelling within us and you are ready to massage our hearts and to stimulate our thinking and to draw us closer to you in love. And yet Father, some of us have experienced difficult days at work. Some of us are tired and sleepy. Others have had conflicts even in the home and perhaps even in the car on the way here tonight.

And Father, it could be that even the enemy would be bothering some people tonight to keep them from focusing on what you have for them. So, we bind Satan in the name of Jesus tonight, that he may not have dominion here in our thinking or in our hearts. And Father we pray for John that he might be able to think clearly, that he might be able to be sensitive to what the Spirit is saying to him, that he might be able to convey it freely and openly and clearly to us. And we pray this in the name of Christ, amen.

Let's welcome John.

John Coe:

Thanks. Yeah, we had one of those conversations in the car tonight. You ever had one of those on the way to church? That's called purgation. And you know, that's really good. In fact, for a while I was getting bugged by what was going on. We were just rushing, getting in the car like, "Oh my gosh, my children, they've ruined my sanctification for the night." No, it was like "God, this is good. This is good."

Well, last week, given what I talked about, dark nights and many enema stories actually, Greta asked me to promise that I would not tell another enema story.

Well maybe one more.

No.

You know, this is just a scientific fact the doctors say. Now you gotta think about this one. Do you know that you can hold up to 25 to 35 pounds of fecal material in your colon at any one time? That is amazing. 25 to 35. Now you know, just to give you a little anatomy. Remember we have what's called an ascending colon and then the transverse colon and then the descending colon? Well the transverse colon. When that gets filled and it's only supposed to be about that big, well it gets like this. That's when you see it in men, the drop belly. Anybody ever seen a drop belly. I used to have a real drop belly, you know the thing here. That's a lot of stuff. That's a lot of stuff. And the doctors actually say that it results in auto toxicity. That that material went when you can carry 25 to 35 pounds of that, it actually really circulates into the system. That's amazing. So, I'm sure there is a Christian version of the dropped belly. And I decided that I was going to take the topic that I was supposed to do tonight and I'm going to do that next week. I decided that I wanted to continue to discuss this work of the dark nights of the soul. The times that we look into the mirror of reality. These are times I want to dwell on just a little bit more in order to clarify perhaps in our mind what these are. To explore them a little more deeply and maybe to also give you a chance to ask questions. Now, I'm really going to try to stop tonight, if that's possible. Although after I put together these notes I thought, "Oh my gosh, we've got eight pages to go through."

But I want to also demystify dark nights. And I don't want to give us the impression that dark nights are something that we want to kind of get through and then kind of get on. I

remember I was doing an interview for KKLA Live, and the person who talked to me, we were talking about dark nights.

And after we went through it a bit, he said, "Well John, this is just great, this stuff about dark nights. That's wonderful. Now tell me, how do we get through the dark night? What's going on after that?"

Well, the point about the dark nights that we talked about last time is you don't per-say get through them or out of them.

You're actually entering more deeply into a relationship with the Spirit.

Now that doesn't mean that it will always be dark. In fact, as time goes on there may be quite a bit of light and consolation. But dark nights are really traveling through our soul to the Lord.

That's what these are.

And so you can join me in the notes. I put together a fair amount of notes for you. Theresa of Avila says, "The greatest struggle in our prayer life is going to be those times when God feels silent." You know, during times of consolation that we talked about last time, things go quite well. In fact, despite your vices, despite your problems, it doesn't even matter. You might not even focus on them. You don't even care about them during times of consolation. But it's in times of desolation. That's the concern of the spiritual writers throughout history because during that time when our stuff's coming up and we're faced with it, they recognize that we do the craziest things.

Sometimes we work harder. Sometimes we try to answer our own prayers. Have you ever prayed when you want an answer from God and you actually ask God a question and you wait and if you wait more than three seconds you may try to answer it for yourself. That's how I

prayed quite a bit through seminary and beyond. Because sitting there in silence I've asked God a question. "God, what do you think about this? Should I do this? Is this where we should go? Is this what's going on?"

I couldn't stay in the silence because the silence was mirroring things to me that I didn't like.

And so I would sit there for two seconds and then I would try to go to the word to find an answer. Now, that's not bad, going to the word to find an answer. But if I'm leaving prayer because I don't want to stay there with Him, that's not good. We might despair during a dark night of working harder. We might try to get the loving feeling back. We might resign ourselves to dry bones. We might try to fix ourselves. We might think well there's just nothing more.

There's all kinds of stuff that we think when we're going through these dry periods. Now my real concern for tonight, that I decided, and this is my concern for those of you especially who are leaders or those of you who are leaders who are going to train other leaders and develop and work with them. My real concern tonight is for the ongoing maturing of the saints. What's the ongoing process? And so tonight what I want to address, it's going to be for those who have been a believer a good while of time.

I'm thinking of that person who has heard a lot. They have heard much. They have read books. They've heard many sermons. They're committed to the Lord and they've developed a pretty good character through this. They are pretty disciplined person. They have been in church for maybe twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. There are some of you here who have been in the church all your lives. Some sixty, seventy years. And you're faithful. But this is what you might secretly wonder in your deep.

Now last time, the wondering in the deep that we talked about was, God, where are you? Why do you seem so distant? That's not what I want to talk exactly about tonight. I want to talk about some other kind of dark nights. And here's the question that the older person may ask who's been in that pew a long time.

And the question is, is this all there is? Is this all there is? You might be thinking in your mind at times while you're sitting hearing sermons, "You know I'm not getting anything new from my sermons, Lord. I'm not getting anything new from my quiet times. Lord I know there are still struggles in my life, but Lord these struggles are generally contained. But God I don't seem to love you and my neighbor from the heart as I could imagine it. I act in love but I don't necessarily experience this deeply in my heart. And Lord I don't know if I really know the rivers of living water. I want them. I love you. But it just doesn't flow out of my heart as I can imagine."

This is the person who has a good character. Who has now developed a long time in the church and has been around for a while. Twenty, thirty years more. And they're an ok, pretty together person. And they're wondering is this all there is. Or for those of you who are leaders, you teach and you speak good words and you speak good words to your children and they're good words and are good intentions, and yet sometimes you recognize, "You know Lord, my words aren't exactly matching what's going on inside."

And so the question tonight is for those who are saying, "God, is this all there is." So if you've asked this question then what I'm going to say to you tonight is for you. And those where maybe this isn't your question, just file it away. The older saints, and again I don't even know how to even define older. All I do know is this, that by the time that you get capable of parenting you're probably ready to die. That I do know.

It will take you all your life to gain the wisdom to really parent. That's the joke from God. We parent were so unwise. So I don't know how to define older. But it's when you have heard so much and now you are asking the question, "God is there more." You might be in the grips of a temptation. And in the notes I say for some here's what the temptation is. This is not the temptation I'm going to talk about tonight. For some the temptation is as you get older in life. I'm 50 now. I'd like a vacation. I'd like to retire. I understand this temptation. You can become concerned with your own life. You become concerned with yourself. You become concerned with your families. I have two children now. We fit into that middle age and there is enough in life just there. We even become concerned with our pleasures, our bank accounts, our jobs, our retirement. And I think there is a temptation to kind of hunker down and say well I guess this is the Christian life, and now I'm just going to kind of ride it out and enjoy it, have good fellowship and good recreation.

Now that's a certain kind of temptation. But that's not the one I want to talk about. This is going to be a kind of unusual temptation for the dedicated. This is what I will call a ministerial temptation. What do I mean by that? Ministerial temptation. This is the temptation where individuals who now have heard the message so much, of the Gospel and of growth, that now they have turned from the task and the call of growth. They have turned away from the task of putting off the old self, hungering for God, being open to dark nights, and they have turned to the task of ministry. This is a kind of unconscious way of bypassing the dark nights. Or maybe it's to misinterpret still the darkness and the struggles that one might have for the absence of God and not to believe he's present there so I'm not going there.

This may be the temptation to avoid this journey in the deep. This may be the temptation to think that introspection is not a good thing.

Possibly you heard me speak over the last couple of weeks and maybe you've said that in your mind, "Well, that's okay for Dr. Coe. He's kind of a weird guy anyways." No, I don't think this is for me. This introspective stuff that's for the introspective, the melancholic type. Or for people who have real problems.

And this is the person now who has come to resign himself or herself to say, "You know, I've grown. I'm not sure there's a lot more, really. I mean there's always more to grow, but this is what it is. And I guess really now I'm to give myself to ministry. I guess that's really what the life of maturity is about." Maybe you've even been told that. Maybe you've been told by other leaders saying those of you who are older, it is now time for you to give back.

And now I think it's 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.

And so the title that I have given this is, "Going on with God in Dark Nights: Maturing the Saints by Spiritual Hunger and Love." The ancient spiritual writers, they noticed that most saints they were around never kind of move through the dark nights. Never even really kind of enter into because it's an uncomfortable, painful place, and it doesn't seem like that's where God wants me to go. It doesn't feel like God's there. And so what happens is they hit this wall and this wall is the movement where God's saying "I want to take you down."

And so the believer, they say, keeps hitting the wall and then coming back. And when they're coming back, what they're tempted to do is they're tempted to make the spiritual life work. They're tempted to fix themselves. They're tempted to hunker down in the spiritual disciplines and try to just do the same ol' that they've been doing. And this just keeps going on and on and on and on.

And they say what begins to develop then is a church that is proliferated with what you might call mature beginners. And the worst thing is, the temptation in doing that is to refuse to admit that the dark nights are there.

It's the refusal to admit to see what's really going on in my life. It's refusing to ask the question, "Do I really like to pray. I do my quiet times. Do I like this? Is this what I want to do?" It's the refusal to open up. It's the refusal to hear the sermon. Say the pastor's talking about being filled with the spirit and to ask the question, "God, am I really filled with the spirit?" But it's more to go on and almost pretend to the self that it's OK and this is what it is.

I'm not sure what the more is. And then to give myself to ministry. Because otherwise, you would probably have to stop and say God what is going on. Here's my hunch. That next bullet. I've thought about this much. I've talked to Doug Haig about this few times. My hunch is that those who are in their 40s, that there is a group of people in the church, a huge group in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s in which there is a storehouse of potential growth that could release itself in such love, in such an experience of brokenness and humility if these individuals would be willing to take this journey into the heart. Willing to keep on the journey of, "God I want to enter in wherever you want to take me."

Because these are the ages where you've accumulated so much of life. You've hit so many walls in your life that your heart is a huge cauldron for so much learning. God is wanting to take you into places to learn new humility, new love, new brokenness, new neediness, new open to him, in ways that, again, a 20 year old can't because they haven't accumulated enough life yet. And so I think that what's happening is this is being swapped.

This journey is being swapped for a pottage, a soup, of ministry in dry bones.

I cannot tell you how many people I have heard tell me some who go to this church, some who go to a number of very good evangelical churches, that they no longer get that much out of the sermons. That they no longer get much what's going on Sunday.

And they say, "Well, I'm kind of where I am, and now I guess it's my turn to turn around and give." And there's hardly a vision for growth at this point. I think church ministries have also fostered this by often ministering to beginners. Because we tend to minister to the lowest common denominator. That's just the way things are.

If you have a party of people you tend to have to relate to the lowest common denominator. You don't want to be a click and do your little thing here. But this is going to be a key challenge for the church. Because this would be to miss all the richness that could come to bear in human lives and could come to bear in ministry.

Again I think of my hunches that there's this huge population where there is a powder keg of growth and explosion potential of love and entering into depth places that we haven't imagined. So I want to talk about dark nights then.

Just a reminder. What is the purpose of the dark nights in general? Just to reiterate some of these things. Two things. The first one is the development of a spiritual hunger and a purging of the heart. If you would, look with me to Deuteronomy chapter 8. In Deuteronomy 8 verses 1 to 5. This is actually the text that Jesus quotes when he's being tempted. The first temptation by the devil. I'll start reading in verse two. "And you shall remember all the way in which the Lord your God is lead you in the wilderness these forty years, that he might humble you." Testing you. This is why I lead you into the desert. Because I wanted to humble you and test you.

I wanted to know what was in your heart. Whether you would keep his commandments or not. And notice verse three. "And he humbled you and he let you be hungry and he fed you with manna.

Right the people didn't like manna after a while right. "Eh, what's this white stuff?" "This manna which you did not know (meaning you didn't make it) nor did your father know, that he might make you understand, that man does not live by bread alone." Meaning, we do not live by what we make and do, but we live by everything that proceeds from God.

And so as I think what is the purpose of dark nights, and why does God send us into deserts. It says right here that God lets his people go hungry. He lets us go hungry for the purpose of testing us, humbling us. These are times to show us what is in your heart. Those of us who are in our 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. What do you love? What really do you love? Don't you want to know what you love? Don't you want to be tested? Dark Nights are times when we're going to allow to be hungry.

In fact, dark nights are times where the self is hungry and it may not even know it until it opens up to that hunger and then we might find that we are starving. We're so hungry.

These dark nights are the times when God wishes to purge away the vices. He wishes to show us what's going on in our heart. He wishes to get us used to seeing our self in truth and what's really going on in our life.

You know just as another side point here. These are what the lament psalms in the Bible are. Let me just give you a couple of them. This is Psalm 22. This says "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Yes, Jesus is going to say that, but that's what the psalmist is saying. Psalm 77, Psalm 13, Psalm 102, Psalm 55. These are some of them. I want to read to you one. This is Psalm 88. If you turn the Bible, just look at Psalm 88 with me.

I want to give you a taste of this psalm. I'm not going to teach it, but I want to give you what these laments psalms are. You know what they are is they are places in the scripture that reflect this hunger. That reflect this drought in our life. That reflect the wilderness. The travail of heart. They try to open us to how we feel.

Pastor Dale this last week said something very wise. He said, "Feelings are lousy leaders." That's right. That's very good. Feelings are lousy leaders. I don't follow feelings. But you know what feelings are? They are excellent. Windows. Now you think about that. Feelings are lousy leaders, but they are excellent windows. They are windows into the truth of our heart if we're willing to look into them. They're windows that tell us what's really going on in my heart. As I'm singing a hymn, "God, the real question is what is going on in my heart God", with that hymn.

And so the psalms, these laments psalms are trying to open up windows into the heart. You know what the psalms were? The psalms, this is the hymnal book that the people would come to and sing hymns. These are almost all put to music. This was their hymnal when they came together, they would engage in congregational worship. The Psalms were not read individually like we do. We go home and in my quiet time I read Psalms. In the Old Testament, this is what they brought for congregational singing. Meaning the Psalms were rhythms of the congregation. They were rhythms of worship and lament psalms were rhythms.

Now look at Psalm 88. I'll just say here in this historical note it says a song, a Psalm of the sons of Korah, for the choir director. What was all that about? Well probably we think this is pretty good history. This is probably in the original text. You know what a song was? A song with something that the people knew by heart. They often sang it without music. A Psalm was

something that somebody composed music to, and when we find a few Psalms where there's songs in psalms, here's what they were.

These were very popular tunes that people now have been singing in their head. And now somebody has put it to music. These become some of the most popular psalms of all. This is a psalm of the sons of Kora. You know who the sons of Kora are? That's the first choir. When David is getting this temple thing going, he selects the sons of kora to be the choir people. And it's for the choir director. Who's that? Well it's the guy who wrote the Psalm. Heman the Ezrahite. You know who Heman is? Heman in First Kings is said to be one of the wisest men in the land next to Solomon, and in the Chronicles Heman is chosen, he actually has a nickname, Heman the singer. He's the most beautiful singer at this time in Israel, and he is chosen to be the number one choir director of the temple singers. So when they would come together for temple worship this is the guy who's a super sage, a super wise man. He's leading the choir and it says according to Mahallath (now that's probably a Hebrew instrument) and Leonoth means affliction or sorrow, meaning these were instruments that were to be gotten together to play a dirge, affliction, sorrow.

And it's a mass skill, meaning it's a wise saying. What you're about to hear is a wise saying psalm that everyone knew in their head, that was part of the congregational worship. It was part of the the rhythms of their own spiritual life.

Listen to this song.

It starts out with a confession of faith and then persistence in prayer. "Oh Lord the God of my salvation. I have cried out by day and night before you. Lord let my prayers come before you. Incline your ear to my cry." This is a guy who's saved. This guy who's not just saved, he's a great wisdom leader. He's the choir director and he's praying and he's praying and he's coming to

the Lord. And now here's what's going on in his soul. And he wants us to sing this. "For my soul has had many and enough troubles and my life has been drawn near to Sheol. I'm reckoned among those who go down to the pit. I've become like a man without strength. Forsaken among the dead like the slain who lies in the grave." Now imagine singing this. Does this sound like one of our praise choruses today? "Whom thou does remember no more and they are cut off from the hand. You have put me in the lowest pit in dark places in the depths."

The guy's saying , "God I'm in the pits. And I think you put me there! God I'm in the pit. I don't know what's going on. I feel like I can't take it anymore. I have no strength. I feel like the dead, totally listless." You know I don't feel that way right now. But he wants me to feel that way.

And then he even says, "God, your wrath, (Now this is a believer, so this is the anger of God towards even a believer and he doesn't know if this is really God's wrath or how he's feeling it) has rested on me and you've afflicted me with all your ways. God I'm going under, Selah." You know what Selah means probably? It's musical interlude. It means change the instruments. And so now they've just sung the first chorus and they're changing the instruments. "Oh God, you have removed my acquaintances far from me. You've made me an object of loathing to men. I'm shut out and cannot go out (meaning I'm so out of it my friends don't even want to be around me). My eye has wasted away because of affliction. I've called on you every day, oh Lord. I've spread out my hands to you." God what's going on? And so he says, "God are you just performing wonders for the dead? Will the departed spirits rise and praise you?" You know God why don't you do something for the living? Are you just acting on behalf of the dead? Ah, musical change.

"Will your loving kindness be declared in the grave? Your faithfulness in the place of destruction? Will your wonders be known and only in the land of darkness and righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?" It's like God, only the dead seem to know you sometimes! Now we're waiting for like where's the resolve. Come on where's the resolve. "But I, oh lord, I've cried to thee for help. And in the morning my prayer comes." This guy is persistent in a dark night. This is a dude who's not afraid. He knows his God. The God of his salvation. And he's waiting and he's waiting and he's waiting and he's waiting. And you know what he's doing? He's telling the truth.

He has looked inside and said this is the truth. And God, you want me. You don't want to mucked up false self, that's trying to present and be good before you. You want me. Well here's me God. And this is the best of dudes in Israel. And here he really comes. Verse 14. "Oh Lord, why do you reject my soul?" Now this is not the rejection of salvation. He knows this is the God of his salvation and he's praying to Him. He's had a whole life of this. He's the choir director. Think of your choir director experiencing this or think of the choir director before this one. That was so well loved and respected for years. That's the kind of person we have in mind here. The leader of Israel's choir. "Lord, why do you reject my soul. Why do you hide your face from me? I was afflicted and about to die for my youth. I suffer thy terrors. I'm overcome." There are some longtime problems that he recognizes that he wants to share with God. "Your anger is passed over me. Your terrors have destroyed me." He doesn't know what to call these. God, what are you doing with me? "They have surrounded me like water all day long. They have encompassed me altogether. You have removed lover and friend far from me. My acquaintances are in darkness." Wow.

That's called a wisdom psalm. Again I don't hear many songs like that today, do you? I don't even know how to put that to words. I don't know what kind of what kind of music. This is the greatest choir director Israel ever knew. He was the singer of singers.

Why? Why should you sing those things? I'll tell you why. This is why Israel did. There are so many of these laments psalms. There are so many enemies' psalms where David is so bugged his enemies are around them he can't take it anymore. When you were to sing that song you want to think of David's enemies, right? The Psalms were written for temple worship. What were you to think of? Your enemies! If you're honest. And so why sing these things? Well for some, this is their heart and they know it.

There are some people even here, and I'll bet on Sunday morning, in an audience of 1000 people, there are a number of people where that reflects some of the things they feel about life. And for some, why do we sing it? For some it's right where their heart is and they know it. For others it's in their heart and they don't know it, and the goal of singing this hymn is so that as they sing it they'll be able to cash in on, "Oh my gosh, that's in my soul. Oh God."

And now they'll have a real prayer time. And it will be in the heart of others at some point. And for those that it's not in the heart right now, it gives them an opportunity to relate to those who are. It gives them an opportunity to relate to the downcast, to the depressed.

And so I think this is my experience now of evangelicalism right now. I think dark nights are so mysterious to us. When I have taught on dark night's people often say this is bizarre I've never thought or ever heard of this. I think dark nights are so mysterious because they're such a lament kind of psalm. This way of thinking of my spiritual life is so unpopular. It's not part of my spirituality. It's not part of our congregational rhythms. It doesn't mean that every hymn that

we sing, every song that we sing is a funeral dirge psychologically. But it means it's part because it has something to teach me.

And so the purpose of these dark nights is to open up the heart and truth and develop spiritual hunger. And number two, it's not just that though. It's to lead me ultimately to union in God in love. That's where all of this is going. And for a moment just turn to Ephesians chapter 3. The kingdom of God in its fullest will not be a dark night. Are you happy about that? Amen. In the Kingdom of God will be the fullness of love. So I read in Ephesians 3 Verse 17, Paul prays, "so that Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints. What is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." That's where all this is going.

It's so that I and you would come to know all the length and the depth of the love of God to be filled up to his fullness. In fact, that is what transformation is. That's what it is to be filled with the spirit. That's what it is to be conformed to Christ, is that his life would actually move through us. And so you know are dark nights fit here? They prepare your heart to be his home. There are places to purge your heart so that your heart can be his place where this can go on.

And so what are the kinds of dark nights? Well we talked about this one the whole time last time. The initial dark nights. The initial dark nights, remember, we talked about the beginner state. The beginner's state was this wonderful time of consolation where God, whether it was your conversion or your junior high, high school experience where all of a sudden you became alive to God. And God was so gracious, remember he gave you the bottle of spiritual consolation. Remember the little baby. What a wonderful time. What a wonderful time where God met us, and this was a time where the spiritual disciplines were reinforced by consolation.

This is where we started to build our character and our growth where I enjoyed reading the scripture, hearing sermons, praying. This was all so good.

But this is also where our vices come into the spiritual life and one of the vices in particular is this: that I start wanting God for the pleasures sake. I want God for how it feels and I begin to measure the presence of God by how it feels. And so God begins to turn the light out in this baby spirituality. This is the time where we no longer feel the presence of God. This is remember what he calls purgative contemplation. This is where the spirit begins to move up and fill us at the level we can be filled with, without that pleasure element. It won't feel like a filling of the spirit, but you are going to be filled to the level that he can fill you in purging you.

And sometimes these stages go from dark to pitch black. Sometimes these become extremely intense, where you're not even going to want to pray because God feels so, so distant. We said last time that if you're willing to stay in the weeds, if you're willing to open up to the truth to yourself, if you're willing to watch for God, if you're willing to stay there, the Lord can begin doing that work. And that's where the spiritual writers would say faith begins to kind of break forth in our life. "You know God, I'm not afraid of staying here anymore. I'm not afraid of seeing myself. In fact God, I don't know how I know it but I know you're here. That's what will begin to happen as you stay there. Now I want to talk much more about that. That's for another time. I want to now go on to number two and this is really the rest of the night.

I want to talk about ongoing dark nights. What are the other purposes of dark nights? What other kinds of dark nights are going to take place in my life? When God thinks that you are ready for more growth, that you're ready to open up to him other places, new kinds of dark nights will begin to cycle in your life. Let me talk about one of these. This is what the ancient spiritual writers called the dark night of the spirit. The first one was the dark night of the senses where

God turns off sensual spirituality. But this dark night is a little different. This is the one that's going to last the longest, and it's going to come in in little cycles. This is where God's target is your person. He wants to begin to deal with your character in a certain way. And so I say here that the ongoing dark nights are a further transition or movement in love.

Remember we talked about these movements of love. The first one was the love of God for pleasure sake. And as we move through this we begin to realize we just don't want God for pleasure. We begin to have a real relationship. And this becomes the love of God for love's sake. Where we want a real relationship with Him. I'm willing to open to what's going on in my life. I'm willing for him to see this and I'm willing to stay with him in this.

But now we move on to another kind of love, and this is the love of God for God's sake. Now what's going on in this one? Well, in the love of God for love's sake, those of us who've been in the faith a while, and we're not in it just for the pleasure, we were willing to just open up and let Him see what's going on in our life. What we still tend to want is we want the love of God. We want to experience love. We want to continue to experience, "God, I want, I want you, I don't want just pleasure in you, I want you but I want you!" And, to use another diagram, in that sense, the self is still somewhat the center. So that even God, family, church, children, these are still constellations that revolve around because what the self still wants is to grow and to love. I want the love of God. The self is still somewhat the center.

The real Copernican Revolution in the Christian life is this movement. It's the love of God for God's sake. And this will take all of my life for myself to be so loved by God that all of a sudden it's going to get displaced so that God will be my center. And that I, the church, the family, we're all constellations to Him. That's the greatest Copernican Revolution. You know who really experienced this? This was Jesus at Gethsemane. Jesus at Gethsemane was always

held up as the dark night of dark nights. Because you know what Jesus is being asked there? Jesus is being asked this very simple question. Jesus you have experience. This is the Father asking Jesus. Jesus you have experienced full union and fellowship with me from eternity. We have known love forever. And you said to your disciples that your meat and drink is to do my will.

And now Jesus, will you, for love's sake, let go of the experience of love. That's the incredible thing. Jesus what do you want? Do you want to carry on the experience of love with me or are you willing because this is what my will is for you even to let that go? Jesus becomes the example of one where really my love, my deepest love is, "God whatever you want."

Now I've got a long way to go on that. I've got a long way to go on that. I want love. I want to grow. And I know this is somewhat of a selfish desire even because my desire to grow is in part I don't want to have these hassles of my vices anymore. I want the monkey of even guilt and shame off my back for this. One day I'll be here and the experience there will be, "God, it doesn't matter. All that matters is you." Now those are easy words, but that will take all of my life to experience such love to displace that. I don't know much about this, but the Lord is beginning to teach me about this dark night.

What is the nature of this ongoing dark night? What's going on here? Well here's what the spirit does. The spirit is going to cycle in things that he knows exactly that you need. There are going to be times in your life that you will have seasons of consolation. And those seasons of consolation are there to encourage you, to give you a sense of God is here, I'm loved, this is good. And then there are going to be seasons and they're just going to keep coming in and cycle, where you'll have little dark nights of the senses. And in those little dark nights, you'll just wonder, "God, where are you now. God, I'm not as excited reading the word." That is a great

time to open up again. "God what are you doing. What are you trying to teach me. God open me to what you want to show me here." But then there are other kind of dark nights. And these dark nights I want to talk about here. You know what they're really made for? They're to take you into your character. They're to take you in to really see at a deep level what's really driving you in life. Because oftentimes we don't know what's driving us. Our heart's so opaque.

And so number two, these deep purging's here, this is just the ongoing deserts of life where God is going to purge our character and he's going to purge it in two ways. He's going to purge us of our vices. In every one of us there are pockets. And I don't know all of yours. Envy, jealousy, excess anger, lust, wrath, selfishness, pride. There are pockets here and the Lord wants to make your heart his home. And as long as those vices continue to leak out, that can't happen.

And so he's constantly inviting you to invite Him in there. Let's go on a journey. But now what he's also going to do during these dark nights. He's not only going to purge us of our vices. He's going to purge us of the virtues that we have developed in the power of our self from our pre-Christian life and even into our Christian life. You see, by the time that we are of spiritual middle age, we've been in the faith 20, 30, 40 years. We have now many good traits. We're kind, we're loving, we're generous, we give to people, we sacrifice, we're responsible, we've taken care of our children, we've done so much, we've read the word, we have good habits, and others are blessed by those things. But you know the truth is this. That some of this is the fruit of the spirit. But if we're honest, much of it was really the fruit of our own fortitude. Much of it was the fruit of our own energy because we were just beginners. We were just young Christians and all we knew what to do was how just to pick up the Bible in the power myself, read, try to raise my children, try to do whatever. I wasn't born knowing how to depend upon the Holy Spirit. How to depend upon another person, and how to let that person live through me.

And so the truth is, much of our virtues by the time we reach middle age, these are virtues that are good and people have benefited from them. You're benefiting from them right now. You couples have been benefiting from one another. But these were not necessarily virtues developed in the power of the spirit. And this dark night is a call. It's a call for you to even begin to look closely at your virtues. To begin to look closely at your goodness and say, "God, what really is motivating this?" Apart from the vine. I can do nothing Remember in John 16, Jesus says to the disciples, "You know, it's to your advantage that I go away because if I don't go away I can't send the comforter. And the spirit is going to be the one who's going to transform you. Remember in the book of Acts, Acts 1 and 2, when Jesus is leaving, and Jesus tells them they're not ready to do anything yet. "You go to the upper room and you pray. Because Pentecost is coming and I'm going to send the spirit and the spirit is the one who's going to begin to do the transforming work in the church." And this is what I want to be open to.

Now number three, this is in particular. This is what the ancient spiritual writers have said and I've interacted my own life with this. And I just kind of want to share this with you. This is what they said. In particular, these ongoing dark nights throughout our life, for those of us who are spiritually middle aged, what is going to happen? It's going to be a stripping of the psychological faculties to open them to the Spirit of God. He's going to take your faculties, your intellect, your character, and your will. And here's what the general thing is going to be. Your character and your mind and your will. If you've gone, I'm not talking about someone who's just kind of bailed out of the faith. I'm talking about someone who's stuck dedicated, has been in the church 30 years, has an OK marriage, somewhat together life, these faculties of yours have served you well. You have trained them well and they have served others. And you've developed virtues. But now these things hinder you.

These hinder you because in your mature years here's what your temptation is going to be. I'm 50. So now here's my temptation. I am going to begin to trust in my character. I'm going to begin to trust in all those disciplines that I've developed. I'm going to be able to trust in the fact that, well you know, Greta and I have worked through a lot. I'm going to trust in that I've worked through a lot with my children. I know how to study the word. I've got a lot here in my head. I'm going to trust in all of this and I'm going to hope that life will go pretty well because of all that, rather than trust in God. This to me is the major issue, the major issue that middle aged Christians are going to hit. And the question is, are you going to trust the good character that you have developed as the roadmap that you're going to appeal to to live your life or are you going to say, God I want to go to another journey. I want to trust you. I want to open to you. And they say in these dark nights, these ongoing dark nights, this is when God is going to begin to dry up parts of your life.

During this time others will still be blessed by your good character, but you won't, because you're going to begin to wonder God, is this all there is. And you're going to begin to see stuff in yourself even though others say, "What a good man that is! Doug Haig, what a good guy!" Doug knows parts of his soul that none of you see that the Lord wants to begin to expose. Why? Because he's got a journey for Doug beyond his wildest imaginations. And if he's asking God if this is all there is, and if you're asking is this all there is, no. We've got a journey. We have the real journey of a lifetime. This is where the power of the church could be, because these are the ones, the middle aged believers, who have already developed so much, and now the Lord really wants to take them down. This is where the power of transformation and the church alive could be.

So let's start. The darkness in the intellect. Well, what does this mean? That God, during these dark nights, will try to provide you darkness in the intellect. Wow, what's this? Well for beginners, here's what goes on for the beginner. Just think when you were a young believer. Good theology and the development of Christian world view that was food for your soul. When you were a beginner and you were hearing the word, you were taking it in. You know what you were doing? You were developing what I call a mind map to what the Christian life was.

This was food for you. This was a necessity. This is where it began and as you develop this mind map you began to see. I remember coming to the Lord at 19. "Wow. That's the way God works. Wow, that's what God does. That's what he did for me. Wow! That's where I can count on. That's great. Wow look at that. This is what I should do! This is what I'm called to do!" And you know while you were taking all that in, this mind map, it was all working. Do you remember during that part of your life, in those seasons of your life where it was just so good! It was just so good as you were developing this Christian mind.

But in the dark nights, as these ongoing dark nights, God wants to then begin to bring darkness to the intellect. Now what does that mean? That's their words. Here's what it is. God wants to bring darkness to your mind map. That mind map that you have that has helped you and guided you in understanding God and understanding how to live and respond to God. God is now going to begin to bring a little darkness in that because what he wants to move you is this. He wants to move you from depending upon that theological mind map to depending on Him. The Christian life is not about depending upon a set of theological principles. It's about depending upon the very person of God. And so you know what happens during these times as you grow up? You begin to see God is bigger than your mind map. Have you ever experienced things in

life where your question is "God, what are you doing? What is going on?" The sovereignty of God begins to push the boundaries of your mind map.

Job's mind was blown, with a shotgun. And that's why a job at the end of the book, you know what he says. "God, now I know that you can do all things." That's like Aslan right? My daughters and I are reading the Chronicles of Narnia. He's good but he's not tame. Boom. My theology of the pocket is too small. My theology of even the Christian life becomes too causal. See, I cried for an answer from God, and you know, I didn't always get an answer. I asked God to answer this prayer. I didn't always get that answer. And all of a sudden, "God where are you." That's beginning to stretch. I guess God doesn't work like a genie after all. You see because my theology of the pocket, you know what really that is? As a beginner, it was very causal.

If I do this, God responds. This is good! I can count on this. And as we mature God is taking us on a journey. My actions don't always produce the results. I pray and I don't get the answers. You know what's going on in this darkness in the intellect as we grow up? God is moving us now from trusting in our intellect, trusting in this map that we have developed about what God is going to do and what he's not going to do, to God, I need to trust you. You are good but you are not tame.

See this does not mean I throw away my theology. No, that's that's the ground. But I'm a theologian, and I'll tell you right now, theologians are not to trust in their theology. They're to trust in God. It's the person of God.

Because if you don't as a theologian, you will dry up. And so I want to trust in Him. And that's going to in fact expand my theology of what God can and can't do in my life.

The second thing they say happens is emptiness or vanity in the memory. Wow, what is that? Emptiness or vanity in the memory. And what the ancients meant by memory was the

character. The character of a person. See, our memory is in part what really we have become. It's the storehouse of all that we've experienced. And now this is my character. And now for the beginner, think back to when you were a beginner in the faith. This was an incredible time where God was training your mind and your character. Where you were becoming a kind person. You were growing. You weren't just selfishly acting in your own ways in your marriage. You were beginning to open up to the other person and caring for them. Wives respecting, husbands loving. You do this with your children. You did it with spiritual disciplines. And you know what this character became? It became like a roadmap for you. See we had a mind map and that's cool. "Wow this is the way God is! This is the way I am to be. God this is great!" But now I'm developing a road map, and this road map is my accumulated wisdom. And this roadmap is something that I appeal to when I'm in a pinch and something's going on. When my kids are having problems. I have this character I can appeal to, to enter into this fray and to try to love them and teach them. Something's going on with Greta. Well I've got a character that I can bring to bear in this.

Character is such a wonderful and beautiful thing. But these road maps were often much the result of our fortitude. We saw principles in the Bible we said, "God I want to obey it!" But we didn't know yet what it was to participate in the vine; to open all that to the spirit. These are wonderful road maps but much of it was just in our power.

That's just the honest developmental truth. And now here's the temptation; this is to me the greatest temptation you will have in middle age. You will come to trust your roadmap. You will trust in your character. You will trust in your character to give you the set of answers. You know while I was coming here tonight, my wife and I were in the car with the girls and they were having a little thing about, you know, working out some problem. My wife wanted to do it

a certain way and the girl said, "No, I think we do it this way." And you know what my first response was, it was to interrupt the conversation with my good character.

"You know, I tell you what girls, you know what we'll do, is when we get home tonight we'll work it out and we'll talk about it and we'll do the blah blah blah blah blah."

And I caught myself.

I said you know John, you would do that if you were an non-Christian, because John, you have developed a character that's pretty good. And you trust in this thing, and you know what I've come to do too, I become the hope in my character. You give John Coe a problem and John Coe's character can appeal to enough wisdom here to figure out the problem and we'll solve that. I just said, "You know Lord, before I get in to it, (because it was a little bit of conflict going on, and I wanted to resolve the conflict by the power of my character and the Lord just caught me for a moment), Lord, I don't want to anymore. I want you. I want the first move in this middle life of John Coe, the first move is to find you. And on that ground, fine, then I'll move to character and I'll appeal to this stuff but God I want to find you in this. I want to live with you. I want to learn what it is to abide in the vine in this. I am filled with trusting my character to work out problems.

People at work think of me as a person of very good character and I can trust that and appeal to that in working out problems. And this also gives me hope that I can work out things in the future. Well here's what the ongoing dark night is. God begins to bring emptiness or vanity to your roadmaps. God begins to open up your road maps and they begin to feel vain.

Now what's going on here? Well, others are still going to be blessed by it. My kids will still be blessed by me, Greta to some degree. She knows me better, so I don't bless her that much. But the case is this; when God wants to move you, you won't be blessed by your character anymore. You'll know that your character is good, but here's what you're going to become aware

of. "Lord, my character is not a source of the rivers of living water. I've got a good character, but during these dark nights you begin to be aware as a middle aged believer you know, I'm a nice person but my niceness it's not stemming from the rivers of living water." That's a call. That is a call to another journey.

"You know God, I'm a good businessman. I take care of my work. But you know, it's not stemming from the rivers of living water. It's not stemming from this deep love of you in prayer and openness to you. It's just what I've become." And the tendency in our falseness would say, "Come on John. Work harder on your prayer life." No, it's to open up to the truth and to say, "You know God, so much of my good character has been chiseled in the kind power of myself and my fortitude. I didn't try to do it out of disobedience but that's the only obedience I could offer as a scriptural beginner and child. And so God thank you. Thank you that you are now beginning to open up the vanity of trusting in this. You might begin and no one else will see this. You middle aged folk out there to the old age, in the faith.

You might begin to see the vanity of your own egoism behind it all. You might begin to see right through your good character the deep vices that are way down there. Or deep selfishness or deep pride or deep hardness. No one else can see that, but you are beginning to have a suspicion. All is not well in Denmark, something's stinking there. And God there are not these rivers of living water."

Wow. This is an incredible time. We might even begin to question God how mature we really are. If you have any of these questions in middle age faith, how wonderful, how wonderful a gift what the Spirit is calling us to. This is opening to the new virtues by the spirit. You know what God's goal is. God's goal is to move you. Now for those of you who are younger, you need to get better character! But even now you can begin to open this to the spirit. But God's goal in

us is to move us from trusting our character to trusting him alone for the road map of my life.

That is life in the vine. And so if my daughters are having a problem in working it out, here is the first move. The first psychological move of life in the vine. "God what are you trying to do in my life? God I want to open to you in this. God I want to see you. I wanna invite you. I don't want to be alone in this. I'm not just going to move in good character and work out the problem." That is a waste of a Christian life.

And so God is moving us so that he will become the map. And here's where the question becomes real. "God what do you want me to do?" Rather than, "Well, I already know what to do." I want to open to him. This is where God is moving me from trusting myself, my good character to trusting him. This is where God is moving me away from natural hope. I don't want to hope that I'll fix it. I want to hope in you God. I say this is a relational Christianity. I want to hope in you. I want to learn that new habit of heart. What a journey this can be.

The dryness in the will. The third thing in these dark nights as they cycle in and come in, they just may be for a moment, just a part of a day. Who knows what this is. But this dryness in the will. What's going on here? Well for the beginner, our will and our emotions are conditioned to the joy and the pleasure of God. As a beginner our will and our emotions and our affect are, "Ah I love God! I love him, this is good!" And they are conditioned by this pleasure element. And even as I grow, I come to realize, oh it's not just for pleasure, God. It's love, and I'm experiencing more of your love. I'm open to this. But you know what I can get hooked on here? I can get hooked on religious experience. You know, so many books right now written in spiritual formation are mostly about how to experience God. That's pretty bizarre. That's not the question Jesus was asked at Gethsemane. Jesus was not being asked, "Jesus you need to experience me,

the father, in horror." No, the question was, "Jesus, are you willing to take anything that I give you because you want my will and I'll be the center."

And so in these ongoing dark nights, this will be a continuing work of God to dizzy our reliance on spiritual experience to trusting Him. Even in darkness. In whatever is going on. At times the spiritual disciplines will just be tasteless. They'll feel like a desert. You just stay there. You just be willing to stay there. And pretty soon you'll be hungering in the desert. New places of real spirituality and hunger and longings will emerge, that you can't imagine. And so opening to this new virtue, the spirit here is moving us to a deeper love, the love of God for God's sake. This is real charity love. You know what this is, this will this will fully happen when you die.

You know what's going to happen when you die? You will finally experience such thorough love that you will be totally free. Totally free so that you're no longer the issue. You will be totally free of, "God I want to experience you more. God I want to grow more." You will be totally free of those questions, because at that point all that will matter is God. Now that is not won by words. I wish I could just say that. "John, let God be God. Let God have you on his terms." My soul didn't change. That's going to be a whole, long life of being loved and being stretched in deserts until when love has reached this maximal point and the deserts come together. Then God, I don't matter.

Now I hear some people coming to Rosemead counseling sessions and when they start looking at some of their stuff with their parents, they say, "You know, I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be in this counseling session. All that matters is God. I don't matter." Well, that's what I call a defense. They're using a good theology to not look at the truth. Because for this to take place it's going to be an incredible journey into God.

When we come back after the break I'm going to want to talk about what's the experience of this, what's the temptation and what do you do in these things. So why don't we take a break.