

# Drawing Near to God, Part 1

By John Coe

Announcer: John thank you so much. We want to welcome you back. So come on up, let's give them a big Fullerton welcome here.

[Audience clapping]

And tonight, one of my favorite people on staff. This is going to be dangerous to say because then everyone else will say well OK I thought I was your favorite. One of my favorite people on staff is Jenny Kee. And I'm just asking that she come up and pray for John and pray for us tonight as she does so well.

Jenny Kee: Thanks Doug. Will you pray with me please. Father we don't take lightly the privilege of assembling like this on a weeknight in a public forum at a site that's dear to us to think deeply about you and how you gifted us and how you continue to call us and draw us to yourself. Thank you for Dr. Coe. Thank you for the message that he has prepared and for your Holy Spirit that has done the preparation in our hearts as well. For many of us this is a subject we we see some of these hard things, times of feeling distant from you in the rearview mirror. Some of us are in that right now. And all of us who know you and trust you know that it's for us ahead as well. So Father we take you at your word that you conform and transform us through some of those dark nights of the soul. So Father come now, this is a powerful conjoining of your spirit and a great message from John and we thank you for it ahead of time. In the name of Christ, amen.

John Coe: Thank you. This is a topic that is very near and dear to my heart. Although my students find it strange that I would like to talk about dark nights but this is, in some way, this topic is my entrance place, I think, into the real issue of spiritual formation and I'll share a little

more personally about that. What I want to continue to do is I want to talk about what we started last time and that was putting off the old man. This will continue this subject and then next week I'll probably turn to what it is to put on Jesus Christ. But here if you recall we had talked about the text in Ephesians 4 where Paul says that we are a new creation in Christ and yet there is this, this old flesh, this old man residue. He calls it the former manner of life. It's this stuff that whether it was from childhood or preconverted days, it's the stuff that Paul says is still being corrupted by the desires of deceit within the heart. And the point that we had made then was that no amount of putting on Jesus Christ is going to hinder this ongoing corruption that's taking place in the heart. And so we talked the whole time about what it is now with the spirit on the basis of what Christ has done, to enter into that place of our heart, to not be afraid to open up to what really is going on inside, like we had said the crap inside. Now as I think of that, I really liked what Pastor Dale said this last week in his sermon.

Remember him talking about the disciples. He said that we are often clueless and lacking understanding and he said you know how many of you are like that, man my hand just shot right up and it's in this putting off stuff. It's when we begin to enter the heart and see what God is doing and what he's trying to show us about ourselves. This is where things can get really messy. This is where we can become very clueless about, "God, what are you doing. What's going on?" And so last time we talked about how God invites us through all kinds of things.

One was the Word of God. One was trials. Thorns in the flesh. How he uses all circumstances. How he can use other people. How he can use prayer life as a place to invite us into opening the heart. Well I want to talk tonight about a very unusual way that he invites us. In all of our lives we experience external trials, and we know those external trials really open the heart. Well tonight, I want to talk about an unusual kind of trial. It's an internal spiritual trial. And it's something that as I went through Bible Institute and Bible College and Seminary, I didn't even have this in my mind of what God might be doing. And the ancient spiritual writers, they call these dark nights, or dark nights of the soul.

Have you ever wondered in your deep, "God where are you? God, are you there? Lord what is wrong with me. God why do you feel so distant. What is wrong with you God. Why do I feel so dry inside. Lord why is it that I don't seem to care about reading the scriptures like I used to. Lord why is it that sometimes I'm bored when I pray? Lord why is it that sometimes when I pray my mind just starts wandering? Have I done something wrong. Why is it that sometimes I hear sermons and I'm just bored and wondering when will he quit. What has happened Lord? I used to be more excited. Lord I don't understand what is going on." Or perhaps you've had times in your life, seasons where you're asking God for His will and you're trying to seek God what do you desire me to do in this area and as you're praying, it's just silent. You ask the question, "God, what should I do?" Or perhaps even worse, there's just a bunch of noise in your head. And you're wondering, "God where are you in this?"

Now you know what I have found. I've been at Biola for now 17, 18 years. And you know what I find my seminary students do? I find that when this starts happening in their life they begin to pray less and they turn from prayer and they now spend most of their time in the word. Now going to the word is a fine thing. But going to the word as a way to avoid prayer, that is not a good thing. I understand why they do it because that's exactly in part what I began to do when I was in seminary. It's a time we're in prayer. It's not clear what God is doing. But at least I can go to the word. I can get clarity. There's something there that makes sense. And then when I turn inward to my own prayer life and talk to God, it's a little darker. And then for some of you who are leaders and teachers and pastors, there's nothing so difficult then have to give up every week and preach and teach when you're going through these dry times. When you're preparing lessons, you're going, "God, what is going on Lord? Where are you, why don't you feel close?" And then you come and you prepare and you're ready to speak. That's a difficult thing. It's a difficult thing to get up and you know what is also difficult is to then look at your congregation when you're in that state and there, for whatever reason, whether it's dark nights or just tired, they're falling asleep on you. It's really encouraging when you're preaching in dryness and someone's asleep. But the one that I always like is when the whip lash one. When the head whips back. You know when I, when I see those out in the audiences, you know I used to

preach a fair amount. Well you know that's when I when I would see the head nodding back. I would want to raise my voice. How dare you fall asleep on me.

Now, what's really difficult is when you're teaching and you're even starting to get bored with what you say. There is nothing harder. Every teacher who has been doing this a long time. You're speaking words and you know they are dry as dust. The words just drop on the podium. This is a very hard place to be. I'm interested in these times. You know the truth is this. This is the theological truth. This is the reality. God is always here. God is always present. God is always working within my soul. That is a constant. In 1 Peter 1:4 I'm told that I have become a partaker of the divine nature. That's, that's incredible that, that God, His divine nature, I have become a partaker of that by the spirit. I'm told in first Corinthians 6:17 ,that anyone who has joined himself to the Lord is now one spirit with him. His spirit and my spirit are joined so the truth is, the spirit is always here. In Colossians 1:27 we talk about Christ in us, the hope of glory. Then this is the question. Why does God sometimes feel absent? What would possibly be the explanation. How how could this be? Do you know the question I ask is, God, you can do all things logically possible. Why don't you make yourself known all the time to me? When I ask you, I mean, if my children ask me a question, if I was silent that would be rather strange. Dad what's wrong. Silence.

It would be kind of like going to a therapist. I have these analogies in my head because I worked around psychologists. It would be like going to a therapist and you walk in the room and there on the chalkboard the therapist says lay down on the couch, start talking, and believe I'm here. Yeah, what lunch date is he at? And yet sometimes in prayer, that's what it feels like. I mean every moment of the day God could give us, if he wanted to, he could give us a theophany. You know what a theophany is? It's the manifestation of the presence of God in some physical form. He could give us, right now if he wanted to, he could give us the burning podium experience, wouldn't that be cool. I mean, we would all love it. Every time you have a quiet time he could give you the burning quiet time experience. And the question that the spiritual writers asked was why doesn't he. Why are there times of this felt absence of God.

This became very acute in my life. I had converted at 19. And for the next seven, eight years, the Lord I mean there were ups and downs but but in general I had such a sense of God being with me. I had such a sense of his presence in prayer reading the word, going to church, couldn't get enough of that. I loved it. And then, during the seminary period, this began to plateau for me. I began to experience more dryness in my own spiritual life. And it starts peeking out as I go to graduate school and then down even more when I'm teaching at Biola, when I'm teaching theology. It got to a point where I was so dry inside I would teach theology and sometimes I would come in and I would throw down my books and I would say Lord I cannot do this for 25 more years. God what is going on. You seem so close to me fifteen years ago when I came to the Lord. What is going on? And I would share this with my students. And my students were going through dry times and they thought that was very profound. "Oh Dr. Coe sharing his dryness. Oh that's deep." You know it sounds profound for a while. But after a while it's not profound. After a while it's a real question. God what are you doing. What is going on.

And to me, it hit bottom about 1994, and in 1994, that is now what 12 years ago, I was just asking the question every day everyday, "God, where are the rivers of living water? Why is it that you don't come. What is going on in my relationship to you. At that point I went on a retreat. And some things happened that opened up a whole new way in my own life of thinking and I just want to say this now. There are some things that are so obvious to me now in hindsight. There are some things that are so crystal clear but like most things in life when we're in the middle of them we don't know what's going on. That's exactly what Pastor Dale said. You know I love that. We are clueless and we often don't get what's going on. But later on, in looking back, it becomes crystal clear. You know there's a story about this. This is Holmes and Watson. They were on a camping trip and after they come back at the end of the day, they're climbing in their sleeping bags and Holmes says to Watson, "Watson, look up, what do you see?" And Watson says, "I see an incredible, incredible sky. Beautiful sky, night sky with all these lights." Holmes says "What does that tell you?" "Well, astronomically it tells me there are billions of galaxies and meteorologically it tells me we are going to have a great day tomorrow. Holmes, what does it tell you?" Holmes says, "Someone has stolen our tent."

Now that's the obvious. You know the person in counseling after divorce.

It is crystal clear, it is crystal clear why their spouse left them.

It all makes sense. "You know I didn't spend time with them, I didn't. I was giving myself to other things."

Everything is clear, but while we're right in the middle of it, things don't make sense because we're looking at some other things. Before I actually dive into this material, let me just give you in general, just so that we get to the point, what the spiritual writers thought about this. Because they gave themselves to really thinking what is this. So let me just give you a general point. This isn't in your notes. But they said this is what they noticed from Augustan, Jerome, all the way to St. John of the cross, that's the person I'm going to talk about today. A 16th century monk who wrote on this. But all of these individuals who began thinking about the spiritual life as they were discipling hundreds of people, here's what they noticed. They noticed at some point in this process that a person becomes what they're going to call a beginner. At some point they become this beginner, and what they meant by a beginner was when spirituality took, when all of a sudden you said yes this is my faith, this isn't my parent's, this is mine. And what they noticed as they disciplined hundreds and hundreds of people. And they began to write books on it and talk to one another and see this pattern, they notice that oftentimes there was a great period where there was a sense of the presence of God in that person's life. And they came to give this a name. They came to call it consolation.

Consolation is this felt presence of God. And then they noticed, and they just, they saw it in their own life and they saw disciple after disciple, they noticed a period of real plateauing,

where they noticed that the people engaged in the prayer, spiritual disciplines, reading the word, hearing sermons, it wasn't as exciting. And then as this went on, they noticed actually there was a downturn where it actually is the felt absence of God. The person at some point in their spiritual life becomes more and more aware. I don't feel his presence, what's going on. And often they start looking back to earlier times. God you just seemed so present then. And they came to call this desolation. That's a nice word. Desolation. The felt absence of God. And then what really intrigued them was this. They said isn't it fascinating that this person, whoever it is, at some point, isn't it interesting that they were less mature than they were down here. Right. This might be four years later. We'll call this some much later time and they say isn't that fascinating that the person who is less mature got consolation and the person who is more mature is experiencing the absence of God. How how can this be.

I mean, wouldn't we normally think kind of like this, if this is another graph, if this vertical line represents the experience of God, and this horizontal line represents kind of character maturity, wouldn't you think that the more mature we get, also the greater the experience of God would be. The greater the experience of God the more mature we'd be.

And so it would just be up up up up up! Wouldn't that be cool. Would anybody want that? But they noticed this pattern and what was so fascinating, people, you know, all around the Christian world at this time, from Rome to Israel to Egypt, they're writing about this stuff. And here's what they begin to say about this. I'll just give you some theses. The first one is this. They saw that spiritual consolation often comes to individuals when they're less mature and the second thing they noticed is that often spiritual desolation often comes to more mature believers.

Now we're talking about individuals who are not what they called lukewarm and what they meant by lukewarm was someone who is just turning their back on the faith and walking away. We're talking about people like ourselves. Right. The dedicated neurotic who are given to this.

We're not running away. And they said that's fascinating. That the less mature often get consolation and individuals who are more mature often experience this desolation.

And so then they realize, or this is what they reasoned at least, that the felt presence of God, now just let me ponder this, the felt presence of God, is not based upon your maturity, per se. It can't be, because this person is quite a bit more mature a character logically, and they're not feeling the felt presence of God. So they say well then it can't be based on that. Well then the fourth thesis was this. Then consolation and desolation must be less based on what we're doing and more based on what God is doing.

Consolation and desolation are gifts of God. Now like I said before there are gifts and there are gifts. How many want this gift. That's quite a gift. This caused them to think deeply. What's the purpose of these. And so they began to reason this way. Consolation. God must be giving this felt presence of himself for the purpose to encourage individuals to, to reinforce their pursuits of prayer. I mean wouldn't it have been terrible if all of your life, every time you pick up the Bible it was dead. No inside. Boring. It would be have terrible. But then they queried. What is the point of desolation? And I'll just tip the hand here. The desolation must be to mirror what is going on in the heart. Desolation per se is not to encourage and reinforce behaviors. Desolation, rather, is to expose behaviors. And so in all of this they began to contemplate what came to be known as a developmental spirituality. Now this is something when I went to seminary, I had no idea, I never read the spiritual writers on this stuff. Because the way I was trained is there is a universal set of principles that governs how the spirit of God is at work in anybody's soul at any time. And my interest was to discover those universal principles from the scripture. And what these individuals began to reason was you know just like there's a developmental psychology that children go to toddlers right into young, you know, adolescence and on. There are different psychological developmental processes and hurdles they go through. They thought maybe it's the same with spirituality maybe there is something that is going on in a developmental sense that the spirit of God is doing differently because then they notice also this continued. There are different kinds of seasons about this. And so

Augustan is one of the first, he and Jerome, who begin to write developmental spiritualities. They begin to think isn't this interesting. We come into the world and there's a kind of a development. At some point, conversion takes place, many of them thought that was baptism, and there's a whole new developmental process. And so they began to write this. And they began to write these different schemes and they began to look into the scripture. Is there anything in the scripture that gives us some indication of this developmental process that maybe the spirit of God is working in different ways at different times.

And so now we're in the notes finally. So that was that was the introduction. And they came to first John chapter 2. Now there's other places, but this was one that they all landed on. They all commented on this because something so clear is going on, but even in the clarity that something's going on, still not clear what it's trying to say. John the Apostle is the writer. He had been a pastor, an elder at this church. This is probably written to the Church of Ephesus. And John is now writing. He's been away for some time. And so he writes to them on a basis of familiarity.

And he says this. "I'm writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name sake. And I'm writing to you fathers because you know him who's been from the beginning. I'm writing to you young men because you've overcome the evil one." Now he repeats himself. "I've written to you children because you know the father. I have written to you fathers because you know him who has been from the beginning. And I've written to young men because you are strong and the Word of God abides in you and you have overcome the evil one." And what they all recognize here is there seemed to be three kinds of stages and we don't, I mean, here we would love another paragraph or a page of John to give us a commentary. "Now tell us more about this." This is all he says. But we, we get some sense of the bookends, right. On the one hand are the spiritual children. And if you look at the text, what are they characterized by? They're characterized by a sense of forgiveness of sin and they are characterized by a sense of they know the father. This is kind of the awakening. Now I converted at 19. What did I say when I converted at 19? I immediately said "God! I know God!

I'm forgiven." And in fact what I would tell my friends, I alienated every single one of them. But my message to them was "Christianity isn't a religion! It's a relationship!" Boy that just comes right out of our heads. Of course, some of us, 15 years later kind of wonder where's the relationship, but that's how this felt.

And so the writers who said there's something about the spiritual child, there's awakening of forgiveness of sin, awakening of I know God. And then the other end, spiritual maturity. Right. This is very cryptic, but at some sense you know God who is from the beginning. Most of the writers when they talked about this or even present commentators say this is something about the old seasoned believer who, who knows God is the sovereign one. They've lived long enough. They've seen their spouse die. They've seen wars. They've seen their children die. They have all kinds of things, and now God is the big one. They know God who is over all things. God who's from the beginning. What the spiritual writers were mostly interested it was the middle stage because they were mostly interested in this stage here of desolation. They wanted to understand what, what is God doing here? Why doesn't God just make it like this? Why isn't it all consolation? If, if I draw near to God, why doesn't God draw near to me?

And so what fascinated them was this middle stage that John talks about. It's characterized by a sense of struggling and wrestling with evil. The word of God abides in you. You've wrestled with the evil one. You've struggled. You've overcome. And so what all of us spiritual writers recognize is there's some kind of, that the Apostle John recognized there's some kind of movement of growth. There's something that takes place as we move. But they were especially interested in this middle stage. And what I want to talk to you about is that middle stage, because as they continue to write over 15 centuries, they begin to coalesce into a theory. And I'm not going to give you this whole theory tonight, but I'm going to present to the first three stages. Now, as I go through this, you will just have to, with your own lights, decide if this is true. How does this square with the text? Should we understand this linearly? Is it is it chronologically or is it maybe just seasons in your life? And so you think as we go through this.

I want to start, and this is on your notes, with the beginner. Now I'm going to take in part this schema from a writer named St. John of the cross. And he wrote a book called *The Dark Night of the Soul*. And here he's going to talk about all that he is doing in the 16th century when he's writing. It's right during the time of the Reformation just starting. He is trying to coalesce a whole now, you know, many years, centuries of people writing about this. And so let's start with a beginner. And what they said about this first stage, the beginner, they call it the love of God for pleasures sake. They're going to see the movement of, of, of growth as a movement of different kind of loves in our lives. The first love, the baby love, is loving God for pleasures sake. And we're going to see that we're going to move on to a different kind of love as we grow.

Now when we talk about the beginner, what these spiritual writers had in mind was not someone who is necessarily when you converted. Like my daughter was converted at five. But I wouldn't put them in the category of being a beginner. What a beginner meant for them was when finally Christianity took. When it finally was, "Yes this is my faith. Yeah, I'm excited. I'm forgiven. God, I know God, this is cool." Now that happens usually to later converts right at their conversion. I've given this talk of some kind. Probably hundreds of times now. To students, to churches, retreats, all kinds of environments. And I find those who had a later conversion oftentimes there was an explosion right then of "I'm forgiven. God is alive. This is great." Now for those who were raised in the church, I find it usually didn't happen till a little later on. Like maybe junior high, high school. Let me just kind of get a sense in this audience here. How many of you would say that, that you had this time where your faith really took, it was yours, you felt forgiven. How many of you say this happened from sixth grade or earlier. How many of you did that happen to.

Yeah. So it's just a handful. How many of you say this happened during junior high? How many happened at a high school? Yeah, college? How many of you it was after college? OK. There you are, oldies. How many of you were raised in the church? Well this is the beginner. The

beginner is when this thing takes. And I'm just going to read this and then kind of talk about it and explain it.

They said that this stage corresponds to children, spiritual children whose sins are forgiven. They have a relationship with God. It's when it finally took and it's characterized, they said, by spiritual pleasure. As a mother gives milk to an infant, so God feeds us a spiritual baby's right where we are at in our love of pleasure. Now let me read the notes and then we'll talk about this. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17 we're a new creature. And as a new creature we have an affection at the core of our heart, right where the Spirit of God is. And for the sake of growth there is this affection at the core, but the character hasn't been developed yet. They're just a young believe. And so for the sake of growth God gives the believer the bottle of spiritual pleasure. Now he actually says the breast of spiritual pleasure. But I kinda cleaned this up a little. Partly because I write it on the chalkboard and then it gets really weird, so I can't do that. So, so I write a bottle. It's the bottle of spiritual pleasure. And what's key here is it's without any labor on our part. God is doing this. Now, God gives spiritual pleasure by means, you have to ponder this now, by means of the same psychological structures as in one's childhood or non Christian days. The only difference is there are new objects of pleasure.

Now what's going on here. Well you know if you want to, you can take out the, the article that I wrote, because I'll talk about those charts in the article. I can put that there. Yeah. And this is on page 297. This is the scheme John of the Cross is working with. By this time John of the cross had been a student at the University of Salamanca and so he was trained in the theology of the day, which is Thomistic theology of the person St. Thomas Aquinas. And here's the psychology he has in mind of what's going on. This is, this is his view. This is, at this time in the church, this how they understood what was going on in the pre-convert experience. In the pre-convert experience we're born in original sin. And part of being born in original sin means this. I should have been born with the Holy Spirit had there been no sin. But I'm not born that way. I'm born rather with a relational hole at the center of my person. I was born to know another person inside. But I don't have that. And the result, there are two fundamental sins that drive the non

Christian according to this theology. Augustan had started this, and Calvin and Luther are going to pick it up.

The first sin is what they call pride and what pride just means is this. It means that we're full of ourselves. It doesn't mean arrogance. Theological pride does not mean you're necessarily arrogant, it just means that you're living life in the power of yourself. You're full of yourself. Well, well, who else could you be full of? And so if these are our psychological capacities for joy, for hope, for desire, for love, for anger, and these are the objects we can pursue: food, sex, parenting, friends, education, whatever it is. One of the most fundamental sins of the self, and this happened to me for the first 19 years of my life, is I'm full of myself. That's my anger. It's not the spirits'. Right. The new covenant is going to be, the Spirit is going to come and he's going to begin to want to join his desires, his hopes, his loves right into mine. But I'm born full of myself. And the second thing that I'm born, is I'm born with a heart that is at least to some degree habituated by pleasure. So that even if I sacrifice for my children, to some degree I want some feedback back to it. Because why. Because the human heart has a need to be filled. And Augustan was the first one who reasons it, that, that what the human heart is trying to be filled with ultimately is this deep pleasure to feel full.

Now this had an old name, if you're interested in church history, it was called concupiscence. It was the lust of the flesh, the pursuit of pleasure. So for the non-believer, they might be nice people, partially virtuous, Hells Angels whatever. But what they do all share in common is they're full of themselves and they're pursuing pleasure at some level to fill this hole. Well what happens at conversion then. You can turn the page, it's on 298.

At conversion, this is the way John of the Cross and these spiritual writers began to reason, the Holy Spirit comes in. We're a new creature. And the Holy Spirit begins to fill us, but the filling of the spirit, the ongoing characterological filling, that's for the long haul. That's where his joys slowly become our joys as we have more and more union with the spirit. His desires begin to

emerge. But here for the young believer, I'll think of myself at 19, or some of you a junior high, high school, whenever the beginner stage was, we're still, the truth is, we're still quite full of ourselves. It's still my joys, my hopes, I'm habituated that way. Characterologically, that's just the truth. And the heart is still habituated by certain pleasures. There hasn't been time yet for a real transformation of character in the spirit. But here's what God wants to do. God wants to begin to move us into new objects of pursuit. He wants to now move us into places where we desire to read the word, we desire to pray, we desire to fellowship, etc. etc. And yet we don't have the character for it yet. And so what does God do. He gives us the bottle of spiritual pleasure. He gives us what we might call spiritual infant grace. So he takes Little Johnny Coe. Johnny Coe loved football. He loved girls. He loved making out with Gretta. Before we were married. He loved pizza. He loved a lot of things. And so the Lord takes little Johnny, "Eee little baby, oh you're so cute!" And you know he does. He puts in that bottle the same stuff that motivated me earlier. And it's going to be a bottle of consolation. He's going to take, he's going to look at the same psychological structures that drove John, that reinforced John to pursue girls, football, education, and he says "I'm going to pack it with the same stuff because, you know John, I want you to begin to pursue this. I want you to fall in love with this. And right now, John, you do not have the character of love just within yourself. You haven't learned how to depend on me so that my love can fill you, so that you will just love like that out of yourself."

And so I would go to hear the scriptures taught and I'd "Oh my gosh! This is so cool!" Now, what I do find is this, converts usually get a bigger bottle. They get a bigger bottle and they look more mature because they have a bigger bottle. You know I think of when I came to the Lords in the 70's, 1974, this was at the tail end of the Jesus movement, the 60's and 70's, think of that generation. Some of you came to the Lord then. What was that generation doing. It was drinking from the hose of pleasure. You know I think of my parents, you know my parents, you know, they're in their 90's they were raised during the Depression, and I mean, it's incredible when I think of their lives. My dad ate bologna sandwiches every day of his life for lunch. It's like "Well dad, why don't you have a little variety?" "Well, bologna is good enough." That's impossible for me. That's impossible. That could not happen. And my dad, they thought in the 1950's, when they had us, they, in their 40's, my older brothers, they thought for sure that "You

know, if we give everything to our children they will rise up and call us blessed, and they will become virtuous people." That's not what happened. We drank from the hose of pleasure and we rose up and what did we say. "More! Give me more Dad!" Well, that explains in part why the Jesus movement was such an explosion in people's lives for consolation. Because they were drinking from this bottle, this hose, and now God as he's taking these individuals, he's giving them like a hose of consolation. And you know what was different? It was different for some of those who were raised in the church. I see this with my daughters. When I came to Lord at 19 it was, "Woah! Mom, I am alive! You are going to hell!" You know my daughter's experience, what I would call, the grey days of the spirit. You know why that is. I used to have friends, when I came to the Lord, when I came and I started going to church, huge very conservative church. I had friends there who said, "John I wish I had your conversion experience. God, you're so alive." They didn't know what they were talking about.

You see, you know what the truth was, those people and my children, they do not need as big a bottle because, as we're going to see, God is ultimately not interested in keeping you on the bottle. Because, you know, there's a funny thing about this bottle. This bottle won't do the transformation work, that we've been talking about, of putting off. The truth is, as long as there's a bottle in your mouth, you will give a rip about looking at yourself. Because why? "It's feeling good. God's good! This is cool! We're moving we're good!" My daughters are already, I notice, Gretta and I talk about this all the way, Gretta and I were the first converts in our family. Our daughters are already more healthy at their core than Gretta and I. I know that. Gretta and I are, this is the great thing about parenting, even though Gretta and I are all messed up, we really can, you can parent, this is the hope for you all, you can parent beyond yourself. Because something is beginning to happen good. And I already see in my daughters. There is there is a healthier structure. Sometimes I predict how they will experience something and I'm totally wrong. There is already more sturdiness and structure. They don't need this bottle. I know they're going to get it though, because at some point in their spiritual life, God is going to have to encourage them. At some point, and it's going to probably be junior high or high school, they're going to get hooked up to some, you know, high school leader or whatever, high school group, and all of a sudden, God's going to say, "Anna, now is your time, because you know

what I've got to do. I need to just give you a little reinforcement here because I really want to hook into the Bible. I really want to hook you into prayer. I really want to hook you into fellowship." He could do that right now. But he's chosen not to. Because for Anna, Anna is already, and Krista, are already dealing with deep questions about you know, "Daddy, when I pray, why doesn't God come? Now daddy we've been praying for this to happen, that he would not die and he died. Why does this happen?" Those are already great questions for their soul to begin to deal with that you can't have God on your own terms.

Well there's a lot more to say about this, but this is an incredible time when it does happen. You feel alive. And notice how good God is. He's, he responds like a good mother to her child. God meets the child. Right where they're at characterologically. Because characterologically, at 19, when I came to the Lord, I didn't have the stuff yet to love God from the heart. I'm just beginning. The spirit is just beginning to start moving within the deep and so he gives me this bottle.

I actually, for my daughters, you know when they got on the bottle we called it the "bah". Do you remember when your daughters, you know during breast time, them going to the "bah", the "bah" was incredible. You know my daughters would go "bah bah bah" and I'd give them this bottle and you know they do, they'd stick it in their mouth. Well, you know, we have the bottles where they have the little, those little sacks in it, so they don't even have to use gravity they can just walk around the whole day like this. And when they would get the bah I would watch, especially Anna, she would get the bah and she would tumble back into the bed and her eyes would roll up and she was in Nirvana! She's having a trip. She loved it! She loved it! "Bah bah."

This is a time where the spiritual disciplines are felt as good. This is where the time that it's not, it's no labor on your part. It's "Oh, God's here, this prayers is great." By the way, this is for you who disciple and train. When you have your disciples , you direct these disciples in this state of

life, this is the time where you immerse them in the spiritual disciplines. This is a time where you immerse them in meditating on scripture, memorizing scripture, Bible studies, fellowship time, because God, he's reinforcing it all. It's feeling so good. It's so wonderful, and it's going to be great fodder for later on.

The church that I came to the Lord in, again this is a very conservative bible teaching church, it was an incredible place for the word of God being taught. And during that time, my, my discipler, he just immersed me in the scripture. I memorized probably within the first three years of my Christian life about seven to nine books in the New Testament. I loved it. It was an incredible time for the Lord and he was going to use it so much later on. Thus during this beginner's state the soul is moved to spiritual things but much due to the consolation of pleasure that we get from them. It's great, but we're moved to it because of the consolation that's there. And so I thank God that he condescends to our level, lest we wouldn't even be moved at all. I wouldn't even, I wouldn't love the text. I wouldn't love reading the script. But again, at this place, the way that these spiritual writers were thinking, we're seeking these new spiritual objects because of the pleasure that we get from it and not just for the sake of God's glory, because we're not, we're not characterologically you know structured yet for that. And this pursuing God and the disciplines for pleasure is exactly what is going to be addressed in the dark nights that are going to come, because what is going to start developing here is this. We are going to unconsciously, it's not something you know we're wanting to do, but we're going to begin slowly, and now think about this, we're going to begin slowly to measure the presence of God by how it feels. We're going to slowly measure the presence of God by the consolation. And if consolation is here then God's here. Things are well. If I'm not feeling God's presence, something's wrong. Really going to miss something here.

Going on in the outline. So during this time of the beginner, some spiritual strength begins. As I converted at 19, there were trials, there were thorns, there all kinds of stuff. I'm hearing the word, I'm being encouraged. There is strength. But the pre-converted vices or the childhood vices take on a religious dimension. You see, wouldn't it have been cool at conversion if my

whole character had been transformed. Well then there would be no putting off. It's not that way. I dragged, you know, it's like a little child dragging a teddy bear. I dragged the old man right into conversion. It's not the core of me, but it's a residue. And sometimes it's a huge residue. And so this led to the second stage called the sins of the beginner. This is where our former sins come right into the spiritual life. They actually enter right into the way in the manner in which I do the disciplines. For those of us who teach, they come right into my teaching. And so for me I was a football player. Fortitude. A little bit of arrogance, but not too much. When you're a lineman, you can't have too much of that. But definitely pride. And wanting to be observed and seen. And as I became a teacher. Oh I loved it. I loved being seen. I love being noticed. I love people coming out and saying, "John, that's very insightful." And so whatever your sins were, they come right into the faith. And the spiritual change deludes us to think that the self had made the change. The bottle of consolation can, can delude us to think that I was making those changes in the first place. No, it was God's gift of consolation.

You know what also happens to the beginner. They mistaken consolation for character change. Those of you who disciple, just remember that, that converts, or people who are on this beginner place, they mistaken this consolation for true character change. I remember my mom and I had this ongoing discussion. I'd say, "Mom, I'm a new member in Christ. I've changed. I'm together. And you're going to hell." And you know what my mom used to say back to me. "You know John, you're the same arrogant little kid." Oh that bugged me. I'd get a bit defensive. "No I'm not!"

You know, she was right and I was right. What she could not see, she converted now, you know, like 15 years later. But at that point she could not see that there was a new affection at the core. There was a new affective love of God at the core of me and I was getting consolation in this. But she was also right that character change wasn't fast. A lot of my same character was there. And so our spiritual change deludes us even to think that we were making the change. And secondly our appetite for pleasure still has as its goal to feel good in our spirituality. And so John of the cross and these other writers they developed a list of, it was from the medieval

period, it was called the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride, you don't need to get these here, you can read the article. Pride, gluttony, envy, wrath, sloth, laziness, greed. And they said you know what these do? They come right into the spiritual life. They come into spirituality. Now I'm going to give you just a taste of three. But before I do I just have to ask you question.

Has there ever been a time in your spiritual life, as you look back, some of you have been in the Lord quite a while, but was there ever a period of time, or even now, seasons, where you've noticed a shift that is, you noticed earlier on, "You know, I was lovin the Lord, I was reading the scripture, I couldn't get enough of it. I love hearing the preaching. I was just so excited. Loved to be around fellowship and prayer." And then, you don't know when the change took place but you just noticed, "You know, I'm not quite as excited as I used to be. I don't I'm not terribly excited about having my quiet time. It's feeling a little bit more like duty." Or you know prayer. I mean have you ever been in prayer and your mind's wandering. All over the universe sometimes. How many of you you'd say there's been a time in your life where you've had a season where you notice some, something like that, raise your hand. Yeah, here's, here's, let me give you a couple of these spiritual sins and a test for it. The first one is spiritual gluttony. Spiritual gluttony is when our drive to do spiritual disciplines like prayer, reading the word, hearing sermons, fellowship is more for spiritual pleasure than for purity.

Now here's a test for that. It's a very simple test. Think back to that time I just talked about when you noticed you really enjoyed this and now you don't know why you're not, you're just kind of bored with your quiet time whatever. And if your response to that time was to do the discipline less or to do it with less intensity. Maybe not even to get up, then you know you're a spiritual glutton. How shocking you spiritual glutton! No, it couldn't be another way. Because you were born in original sin governed by pleasure at some place at the core. And the father in heaven, in his kind and gracious way, when you were a beginner, had to give you the bottle of spiritual pleasure. And now the bottle is withdrawn. And now I'm doing it less. Well, it's very simple. That's because I wasn't doing it just to get truth and purity. I was going at these things

in great part because I was hooked on the bottle. I wanted the bottle. It couldn't be any other way. It was a kind gift. And now we're going to have to grow up.

Another, another sin is called spiritual pride. This is the deep belief that in some way we are making our spiritual life work. Now most of us wouldn't say that. Most of us wouldn't say "Oh, well think I'm doing pretty good in this thing. I'm making work!" Now here's a simple test, it's very simple. Go back to that time, the transition time where you are not as excited as you were, something's changed, and you notice it. And now this is for the person who's done nothing different their life. I'm not talking about a lukewarm person who said you know I'm out of the faith. I'm talking about, you know, the dedicated. We're just sinning the same way we normally do and trying to do the good as in the same way we're normally doing, you haven't changed. And now the disciplines don't seem to work. It's not the same. And if your response is to feel guilty that it's your fault, if your response is this, "You know God, there's something wrong with me. I mean if, I can remember when I used to pray. You know I just really thought your close and now something must be wrong because this is so dry. I'm not, just not going to the word hard enough. I'm not reading. And so you work harder, or you just feel guilty that you are to blame. Then you know you suffer from spiritual pride, because you think that your actions were responsible for the consolation. It's very simple.

That is you thought, "Well look, when I do ABC, read the Bible, Fellowship, and pray, God came! And God continued to reinforce and reinforce that, reinforced that." Well now we're like, you know B.F. Skinner's pigeons, we're looking for the reinforcer, we're doing the discipline the reinforcers not there. Our first response is this. I'm not doing it right. Because we thought we were doing it in the first place. Now again, how shocking! Of course! You and I are full of ourselves! That's just it. You know, this is what leads the spiritual writers to talk about this. They say that during the beginner stage we develop two fundamental deep beliefs about spirituality that God is going to have to correct. And the first one what we call a spirituality of causality.

And secondly is a spirituality, and there's many names for this. Luther called it the spirituality of glory. It's also called the spirituality of ascent. Here's what the spirituality of causality is. It's the deep belief that says if I do ABC, then God will respond XYZ. That's what, that's what a spirituality of causality is. If I do ABC, then God is going to respond.

Something's going to happen. That wasn't it at all. It was not a spirituality causality.

It was a spirituality. See, that that's what we thought was going on. It's actually a spirituality of relationality. I did A, B and C really filled with myself just, I was a young believer, just fulfilled myself, I'm just reading the Bible, trying to make life work. And God responded by giving consolation. Not causally because I did it, but because he knew that's what I needed. It wasn't me causing this to happen at all. But I cannot help as a beginner to think of a spirituality of causality and that's why when, when it doesn't seem God is responding, what is my first thought going to be?

I'm doing something wrong. I must not be doing A, B and C right because if I was, then God would be responding X, Y and Z.

The other one is called the spirituality of glory by Luther. The earlier writers call it spirituality of ascent. And this is the view:, if I do spiritual disciplines ABC and I pray, and read the word.

I'm going to feel closer and closer to God. It's going to be an upward feeling, it's going to be up, up, up. Anybody want the up up up? I do. And of course.

That's only because God gave consolation. Luther says no, what we hold in this life is a spirituality of the Cross. Spirituality begins even at conversion, in a descent, it's a descent into humility, it's a descent into brokenness.

It's a descent into the truth of the self. and when, and then there is going to be growth right? there is going to be a general upward but all kinds of stuff in the middle because why? God has so much to teach us. He has so much that he needs to put off in this process. But we can't help it because the bottle gave us that sense of it. and so God now wants to cure us of this. Here's a third one, this is just, again there are seven of them and I've written stuff on this much longer about these, these vices and how they work in our life.

But this is spiritual greed or spiritual avarice. This is the deep belief of discontent with the spirituality that God has given us. We become bugged and often disquieted in our soul that we no longer have the consolation we once did when we prayed and when we were in the word. We're bugged at this, and we tried to. And then here's the spiritual greed. And so we try to squeeze something out of it.

You know what I think about? you know my brothers used to listen to, what were they called? the Righteous Brothers. Remember that guy with the deep voice? He had a song called Bring back that loving feeling. That's what we want.

Bring back that loving feeling. And then "now it's gone, gone, gone, gone, whoah".

And I want as I'm praying, "God bring back that loving feeling."

And I might work harder. This went on for years for me, years, where I was reading all kinds of books trying to squeeze out of some good. God come.

You know what I had? I was a spiritual glutton, spiritual adverse. I had on my shelf, you know where I sleep, I had a row of books. I had Calvin, Gusten, Thomas Merton, Henry Nouen, there were like eight of them you know, and I would go on at night and just pick out one and you know I'm looking for? Now I look back on it, I'm looking for a spiritual high. You know, I used to in high school, Gretta told me "John you better not ever be high in front of my presence." But I used to smoke marijuana. Well you know, I think that's what I was doing. One night take out Calvin. "God gimme something." [rasp, cough]. Ugh, raspy, Calvin can be raspy.

Let's try Murton. [rasp], ugh not tonight, not tonight Thomas. Let's try Auguston tonight. [rasp] Oh Yeah ok. I would literally be midsentence in Calvin and I'd put it down. Because it was dry as dust. And I'd pick up my other one in the same place.

God is so gracious. I didn't know then that I was so deeply measuring the presence of God by the feeling of consolation. and desolation, I did not know then that it was going to be my greatest friend. It was going to be my greatest friend to usher me into the truth of who I was. And I resisted that because it did not feel like the presence of God. And it never dawned on me. It never dawned on me during that time that this dryness was not because of me.

It never dawned on me that maybe God was doing something more profound in the heart. I was convinced something was wrong with me. Got to do something else. And you know and so I would work, I would struggle. And then I would get very frustrated.

And then you know, there were times when I was teaching systematic theology. My quiet times just shrunk. And I would spend all my time studying, because at least I didn't have to deal with the confusion and the darkness and the feeling of God's distance, because at least I might get some insight here, because I loved, I loved ideas. I didn't know what God was doing, that God was taking me into a dark night of the senses. Let me just start with this and then we'll take a break in about three or four minutes.

So this is, I don't know what is on your outline. Maybe number three? The dark night of the senses. What is this? This first dark night. Is it three on your outline? Good.

This is a period where we're really seeing the goals of God in our life and the real goal is that God wants to make your heart his home.

That's what all the New Covenant is about. The New Covenant is not about giving you an excitation so that you or I will feel good about what we're doing. The New Covenant is what, God: I want to come inside of you and I want my desires, my hopes, my joys, my love to move right on through yours.

But boy, we've got a lot of work to do. Because what is in the way is the old manner of life. What is in the way of the filling of the spirit is, I still have like we talked last week, I still have pockets of, of the flesh, pockets of the old man, of the old way of life. And that stuff is still me. It's still my stuff alone and so what God does in such a gracious kind way, gentle way, is he turns off the light of baby's sensual spirituality.

He turns off the light and he's going to begin to take the bottle away. But of course I'm Whaaa Want the bottle back! You know what God is going to do during this time?

He's, he's going to move us into a different kind of love. The beginner state was the love of God for pleasure's sake. We are moving now to a different love. It's what they called the love of God for Love's sake. Now there's even going to be a deeper love. But that will be for another time.

But the love of God for love's sake is a, is a deep love. I want you to think of the difference between the beginner and as we're moving on, it's like the difference between romance and marriage. You know, romance, isn't that a great time in our lives? Everything is wonderful. Romance is kind of a little bit like self-love.

Hey babe, you know, here's the person I'm dating, "hey babe how you doing, hey, looking good tonight and I'm looking good. I think we're going to have a good time."

That's kind of like loving yourself. And if the date's not going so well, you know what you can do?

"Ehh, I think we'll call it quits, babe." You know, in marriage you can't go home.

You're already home.

And so in marriage you look at the person in the morning and go, that's what I married? And you look at them when their crap is kind of out "That's what I married?" And of course they can return the favor. "That's what I married?"

You know what marriage is built on? It's built on truth, it's built on truth. Simple as that. It's built on seeing what you really are and you want to stay with the other person, given what you see.

I think every marriage is always going, it faces this point at some place and it's, here's the question that every marriage faces: what do you want? do you want the pleasure of the relationship?

Or do you want the relationship. What do you want? Do you want the pleasure that, that accompanied this relationship potentially with Gretta or do you want Gretta? Because if you want Gretta and if Gretta wants John, you get the whole enchilada, crap and all.

And I think it's now, it's the same place with our spiritual life. When God begins to try to wrestle the bottle from your mouth, you know what he's really saying? He's saying John, what do you want?

Do you want that pleasure that's derived in your relation to me, or do you want me? Do you want me to fill you? Do you want me, the Living God, to begin to work through your stuff? Well, if you do John, then I'm going to take you on a journey of a lifetime.

I'm gonna take you down because I'm going to have to peel your heart.

## Coe – Drawing Near to God, Part 1

You see John, I cannot go anywhere that you are not open to me going. Your vices and your natural virtues and the power of yourself, those are your pockets. And John, I'm going to have to now take you on a journey into those pockets.

That's a very simple question.

And God knows this: God knows this, that you and I would settle for the bottle of consolation over the transformation of our crap. Why? Because this is going to be painful. This is going to be frustrating. This is going to make you feel like a failure.

This is going to make you feel like you cannot do it on your own. This is going to make you feel like you cannot make it work. And that's the greatest gift God can give you.

And so when God begins to take the bottle away, that's a sign where he says this: John, you're strong enough now. I don't need to give you the bottle. Because John, I, I've got a journey for you. It will be the journey of a lifetime. Tell you what. Why don't we take a break here and we'll come back and now carry on in the dark night. So what time. Oh yeah that's right, you're the bunch that loves over there. So at like 25 to, we'll try to come back.