

What is the Dark Night of the Soul?¹

1. St. John of the Cross on the Two Nights:
 - a. Dark Night of the Senses: entry into the Illuminative Way (Spiritual Adolescence)
 - b. Dark Night of the Spirit: entry into the Unitive Way (Spiritual Adulthood)
2. What the Nights are not:
 - a. Ordinary Sufferings of Human Life: Mental/Emotional Problems
 - b. Spiritual Sloth (*Acedia*) proceeding from “sin, weakness, or lukewarmness.”

1. The Dark Night of the Senses**Who Experiences the First Dark Night?**

The night of sense is common, and the lot of many; these are the beginners... The soul began to set out on the way of the spirit, the way of proficients, which is also called the illuminative way, or the way of infused contemplation, wherein God himself teaches and refreshes the soul without meditation or any active efforts that itself may deliberately make. (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1:8, 14)²

When Does the First Dark Night Happen?

Not much time ordinarily passes after the initial stages of their spiritual life before beginners start to enter this night of sense. And the majority of them do enter it, for it is common to see them suffer these aridities. (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1:8:4).

How Long Does the Dark Night of the Senses Last?

1. Varies from Person to Person: Three Factors (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 166)
 - a. Amount of imperfections to be burned away
 - b. Degree of love to which God wishes to raise the person
 - c. Generosity with which one responds to God’s action in the soul

Why is the Dark Night of Senses Necessary?

1. Purification of Spiritual Pride: judging yourself a master; judging others
2. Purification of Spiritual Sloth: impatience and disgust for hard work of spiritual life
3. Purification of Spiritual Gluttony: disordered desire for sensible consolations

What are the Three Signs of the Dark Night of the Senses?

1. First Sign: *Dryness in Prayer*
 - a. No consolations in the things of God or created things (Ecclesiastes 1-12!)
 - b. Prayers is “dry and unsatisfying; little or no delight in it” (Dubay, *Fire Within* 165)
 - d. Infused gift of Knowledge: soul realizes the vanity of all created things
2. Second Sign: *Habitual Desire to Serve God, but Little Pleasure in Doing So*
 - a. Hunger for righteousness and fear of sin grows;
 - b. Yet the soul feels like it is ‘backsliding’
 - c. Infused gifts of Fear and Fortitude: ability to resist temptations; strength in trials

¹ See Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 159-175.

² See *Complete Works of John of the Cross* (3 vols.; trans. E. Allison Peers; Westminster: Newman, 1952).

3. Third Sign: *Great difficulty in Meditating*
 - a. Difficulty in Discursive Meditation (e.g., Lectio Divina)
 - b. Attraction to the Prayer of the Simple Gaze (Infused Contemplation)
 - c. Infused gift of Understanding: begin to penetrate the depths of the mysteries

Such contemplation is secret and hidden from the very person that experiences it; and ordinarily, together with dryness and emptiness which it causes in the senses, *it gives the soul an inclination and desire to be alone and in quietness, without being able to think of any particular thing or having the desire to do so*. If those souls to whom this comes to pass knew how to be quiet at this time, and troubled not about performing any kind of action, whether inward or outward, neither had any anxiety about doing anything, then they would delicately experience this inward refreshment in that ease and freedom from care. So delicate is this refreshment that ordinarily, if a man desire or care to experience it, he experiences it not; for, as I say, it does its work when the soul is most at ease and freest from care... (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1:9:6).

What do I do during the Dark Night of the Senses?

1. Do not stop praying or abbreviate prayer time (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 168)
2. Do not force yourself to keep meditating; “this is not the time for it.” (St. John)

If [those in the Dark Night of the Senses] meet with no one who understands the matter, these persons fall away and abandon the right road; or they become weak, or at least put hindrances in the way of their further advancement, because of the great efforts they make to proceed in their former way of meditation, fatiguing their natural powers beyond measure. (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, I.10.2)

How Do I Enter into the Dark Night of the Senses?

“First, let him have an habitual desire to imitate Christ in everything that he does, conforming himself to His life; *upon which life he must meditate* so that he may know how to imitate it, and to behave in all things as Christ would behave. Secondly, in order that he may be able to do this well, *every pleasure that presents itself to the senses, if it be not purely for the honor and glory of God, must be renounced and completely rejected for the love of Jesus Christ*... And similarly with respect to all the senses, in so far as he can fairly avoid the pleasure in question; if he cannot, it suffices that although these things may be present to his senses, he desire not to have this pleasure. In this way he will be able to mortify and void his senses of such pleasure and leave them, as it were, in darkness.” (St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.13.3-11)

The Israelites Despise the Manna in the Desert (Numbers 11)

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving; and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, “O that we had meat to eat! *We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at*.” Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, and ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, and boiled it in pots, and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When

the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, every man at the door of his tent; and the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. (Numbers 11:4-10)

St. John of the Cross: the Wilderness Generation and the Dark Night (Numbers 11)

*These souls whom God is beginning to lead through these solitary places of the wilderness are like the children of Israel; to whom in the wilderness God began to give food from Heaven, containing within itself all sweetness, and, as is there said, it turned to the savor which each one of them desired. But withal the children of Israel felt the lack of the pleasures and delights of the flesh and the onions which they had eaten aforetime in Egypt, the more so because their palate was accustomed to these and took delight in them, rather than in the delicate sweetness of the angelic manna; and they wept and sighed for the fleshpots even in the midst of the food of Heaven [Numbers 9:5-6]. To such depths does the vileness of our desires descend that it makes us long for our own wretched food and to be nauseated by the indescribable blessings of Heaven. (St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book I.9.5)*

Psalm 73: The Transformation of King David's Desires

For my heart hath been inflamed, and my reins [=desires] have been changed: And I am brought to nothing, and I knew not. I am become as a beast before thee: and I am always with thee. Thou hast held me by my right hand; and by thy will thou hast conducted me, and with thy glory thou hast received me. For what have I in heaven? and besides thee what do I desire upon earth? For thee my flesh and my heart hath fainted away: thou art the God of my heart, and the God that is my portion for ever. (Psalm 72:21-26, Douay-Rheims [=Psalm 73:21-26, RSV])

St. John of the Cross: King David and the Dark Night of Sense (Psalms 73 and 42)

Sometimes, nevertheless, there soon begins to make itself felt a certain yearning toward God; and the more this increases, the more the soul is affectioned and enkindled in love toward God, without knowing or understanding how and whence this love and affection come to it, but from time to time seeing this flame and this enkindling grow so greatly within it that it desire God with yearning of love; *even as David, when he was in this dark night, said of himself in these words, namely: "Because my heart was enkindled" (that is to say, in love of contemplation), "my reins also were changed" (Psalm 73:21): that is, my desires for sensual affections were changed, namely from the way of sense to the way of the spirit, which is the aridity and cessation from all these things whereof we are speaking. "And I," he says, "was dissolved in nothing and annihilated, and I knew not" (Psalm 73:22); for, as we have said, without knowing the way whereby it goes, the soul finds itself annihilated with respect to all things above and below which were accustomed to please it; and it finds itself enamoured, without knowing how. And because at times the enkindling of love in the spirit grows greater, the yearnings for God become so great in the soul that the very bones seem to be dried up by this thirst, and the natural powers to be fading away, and their warmth and strength to be perishing through the intensity of the thirst of love, for the soul feels that this thirst of love is a living thirst. This thirst David had and felt, when he said: "My soul thirsted for the living God" (Psalm 42:2). (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, I.11.2)*

2. The Dark Night of the Spirit

What is the Dark Night of the Spirit?

This night, which... is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons *two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man's nature*—namely, the *sensual* and the *spiritual*... The night of sense is common and comes to many; these are the beginners... *The night of the spirit is the portion of very few, and these are they that are already practiced and proficient*... The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to sense... The second bears no comparison with it, for it is *horrible and awful* to the spirit... (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 8.1; trans. E. A. Peers)

When Does the Dark Night of the Spirit Happen?

1. It does not begin immediately after the first Dark Night (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 169)
2. Usually, a soul spends “many years” in the illuminative way (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 169)

How Long Does the Dark Night of the Spirit Last?

The trial did not last merely a few days or weeks; *it went on for months, and I am still waiting to be delivered from it*. It is impossible to explain what I feel. I only wish I could. *I am in a dark tunnel*, and you would have to go through it yourself to understand how dark it is...” (St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Chapter 10)

What Happens during the Dark Night of the Spirit? (St. Thérèse of Lisieux)

1. The soul feels *rejected* and *abandoned* by God
2. Prayer seems impossible; reassurance from a spiritual director does not help
3. The soul is beset by grave *temptations against faith, hope, and love*:

Then *suddenly the fog about me seems to enter my very soul* and fill it to such an extent that I cannot even find the lovely picture I had formed of my homeland [i.e., Heaven]; everything has disappeared! When, weary of being enveloped by nothing but darkness, I try to comfort and encourage myself with the thought of eternal life to come, it only makes matters worse. *The very darkness seems to echo the voices of those who do not believe and mocks at me: “You dream of light and of a fragrant land; you dream that the Creator of this loveliness will be your own for all eternity; you dream of escaping one day from these mists in which you languish! Dream on, welcome death; it will not bring you what you hope; it will bring an even darker night, the night of nothingness!...*

When I sing of Heaven’s happiness, of what it is to possess God forever, I feel no joy; I simply sing of *what I want to believe*. Now and then, I must admit, a gleam of light shines through the dark night to bring a moment’s respite, but afterwards, its memory, instead of consoling me, only makes my night darker than ever... How sweet and merciful the Lord really is, for He did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it... (St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Chapter 10; cf. J. Clarke, p. 214)

What do I do during the Dark Night of the Spirit?

1. What you are “least inclined to do”: accept it generously (Dubay, *Fire Within*, 173)
2. Abandonment to divine Providence: “Not my will but thine be done” (Mark 14:36)
3. Consent to “abide in the night of faith” with Jesus in his Agony (CCC 2731)

Psalm 88: the Dark Night of the Spirit

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, my God, I call for help by day; *I cry out in the night before thee*. Let my prayer come before thee, incline thy ear to my cry! For *my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom thou dost remember no more, for they are cut off from thy hand*. Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. Thy wrath lies heavy upon me, and thou dost overwhelm me with all thy waves... Thou hast caused my companions to shun me; thou hast made me a thing of horror to them... Every day I call upon thee, O LORD; I spread out my hands to thee... *But I, O LORD, cry to thee; in the morning my prayer comes before thee. O LORD, why dost thou cast me off? Why dost thou hide thy face from me?* Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless. Thy wrath has swept over me; thy dread assaults destroy me... They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in upon me together. Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me; *my only friend is darkness*. (Psalm 88:1-18; RSVCE, slightly adapted)

St. John of the Cross: David's Night of Spirit (Psalm 88)

What the sorrowful soul feels most in this condition is its clear perception, as *it thinks, that God has abandoned it, and, in His abhorrence of it, has flung it into darkness*; it is a grave and piteous grief for it to believe that God has forsaken it. *It is this that David also felt so much in a like case, saying, "After the manner wherein the wounded are dead in the sepulchers... even so have they set me in the deepest and lowest lake, in dark places and in the shadow of death..."* (Psalm 88:5-7). For indeed, when this purgative contemplation is most severe, *the soul feels very keenly the shadow of death and the lamentations of death and the pains of hell, which consist in its feeling itself to be without God, and chastised and cast out, and unworthy of Him*; and it feels that he is wroth with it. All this is felt by the soul in this condition—yea, and more, for it believes that it is so with it for ever. (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II.6.2)

The Dark Night of the Soul: Purgatory on Earth (Psalm 51:10; Matthew 5:8)

This *dark night of loving fire*, as it purges in the darkness, so also in the darkness enkindles the soul... *Even as spirits are purged in the next life with dark material fire, so in this life they are purged and cleansed with the dark spiritual fire of love. The difference is that in the next life they are cleansed with fire, while here below they are cleansed and illumined with love only*. It was this love that David entreated, when he said: "Create in me a clean heart, O God..." (Psalm 51:10) (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II.11.1)

These souls, who are few, enter not into purgatory, since they have already been wholly purged by love. Of these St. Matthew says: "Blessed are the *pure in heart*, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8) (St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II.20)