



# Christian Book Summaries

Volume 3, Issue 48  
December 2007

CLASSICS

## Dark Night of the Soul

by St. John of the Cross  
Public Domain  
From the Classics Collection

A Quick Focus

### COUNCIL OF REFERENCE

- Dr. Richard Averbeck
- Rev. D. Stuart Briscoe
- Dr. Paul Cedar
- Mr. Dave Coleman
- Dr. & Mrs. Larry Crabb
- Mr. Roger Cross
- Dr. Kenneth O. Gangel
- Rev. & Mrs. Lud Golz
- Dr. Howard G. Hendricks
- Mr. Olan Hendrix
- Dr. David Jeremiah
- Rev. Knute Larson
- Dr. John C. Maxwell
- Dr. Bruce McNicol
- Mr. Dean Merrill
- Mrs. Elisa Morgan
- Dr. Luis Palau
- Dr. Gilbert A. Peterson
- Rev. Wes Roberts
- Rev. & Mrs. Jamie Rasmussen
- Mr. Jim Warren
- Dr. Rick Warren

### Publishers

Catherine & David Martin

### Editors

Cheryl & Michael Chiapperino

### The Book's Purpose

- ▶ Explain how God's direct intervention is necessary to purge the soul of sin in preparation for the perfect union of love with Him
- ▶ Show that believers struggle with various manifestations of the seven capital sins
- ▶ Demonstrate that "beginners" suffer the dark night of the senses and then become "progressives" and suffer the dark night of the spirit
- ▶ Conclude that the result is perfect unity with Divine Love

### The Book's Message

In *Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John of the Cross presents a principle of dogmatic theology: on his own and with God's ordinary aid of grace, man is unable to be purified to the degree necessary for his transformation in God. To accomplish this requires God's direct intervention.

*"However greatly the soul itself labours," writes the Saint, "it cannot actively purify itself so as to be in the least degree prepared for the Divine union of perfection of love, if God takes not its hand and purges it not in the dark fire."*

### Four Main Points

○ God's Direct Intervention .....	2
○ The Seven Capital Sins .....	2
○ The Dark Night of the Senses and the Dark Night of the Spirit .....	4
○ Perfect Unity with Divine Love .....	7

# God's direct intervention

“The light guided me  
More surely than the light of noontday  
To the place where he (well I knew who!)  
was waiting for me  
A place where none appeared.

...Stanzas of the Soul, No. 4

Great happiness is found in journeying to God through His dark night, a night in which the three enemies~the world, devil, and flesh~cannot hinder success. This journey starts when God draws forth a soul from the state of a beginner (one who meditates on the spiritual road) and passes it to that of a progressive (one who is contemplative). The goal is to arrive at the state of perfection~the state of divine union of the soul with God.

To better understand the dark night through which the soul passes, you must understand certain characteristics of beginners. This is a state of weakness wherein the soul is spiritually nurtured by God. The soul is like a small child whose mother swaddles and feeds it. Then, like the aforementioned mother who strengthens and prepares the child for the future by setting it down to walk upon its own two feet, God's grace strengthens and prepares the soul during the dark night through which the soul is cleansed and purified of imperfections.

CBS

## the seven capital sins

### Pride

Beginners are diligent in their spiritual exercises and activities, and they fall victim to a secret pride; they are pleased with their works and themselves. This leads to vain behaviors such as speaking of spiritual things in the presence of others, teaching spiritual things before learning these things themselves, and passing judgment and condemning others in their hearts~behavior reminiscent of the Pharisee.

The devil often increases this fervor so much that these works and activities become vices. Ultimately, in order to protect their own “high standing,” they slander others to make themselves appear better. When their spiritual advisors express their disapproval, beginners assume that they are misunderstood and that the advisors are not themselves spiritual. They flee in search of others who will praise and esteem them for all they do.

Into the dark night, God leads these souls in order to be purified of these imperfections, resulting in souls, mature in God, who exhibit great tranquility and humility. They desire to be taught. They rejoice when others are praised. They have no desire to speak of the things they do. They see themselves as very small. In short, they demonstrate characteristics of simplicity, purity, and authenticity. The wise Spirit of God dwells in these humble souls.

### Avarice (greed in the spiritual sense)

Beginners can be discontented with the spirituality that God gives them. They find little consolation in these spiritual things and there-

## THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS

continued from page 2

fore search for more. They are never satiated by embracing counsel and learning spiritual precepts, so they possess and read many books, burden themselves with images and rosaries, and adorn themselves with relics and tokens. Here I condemn the affections and attachment of the heart to such things. The heart must be truly devoted only to spiritual things.

Those who make spiritual progress do not attach themselves to visible instruments. They set their eyes only on being right with God and on pleasing Him. They covet only God and therefore find great joy in generosity~giving all they have to the needy. Through the dark night God leads souls to bring them to just such a state.

### Luxury

In the midst of spiritual exercises, beginners, by no fault of their own, fall victim to the sensual part of the soul that asserts impure acts and motions~sometimes even when the soul is deep in prayer. These are not within the power of the beginner; they grow out of three root causes.

First, they proceed from the pleasure that humans take in spiritual things. When the spirit and the senses are pleased, the entire man is moved to pleasure. Since both parts are combined in one individual, both participate in what one receives.

The second cause of these rebellions is from the devil who, in order to distract and disturb the soul, stirs up motions of impurity in its nature.

The third is the person's fear of impure representations and motions.

Souls of this tender state are often beset of this spirit of luxury immediately upon beginning prayer. They are overcome and inebriated by their sensual nature and are plunged into enjoyment of this sin. Being frail, they are stirred up, and their blood is excited at the least disturbance. Sometimes there arises within these persons a certain vigor and bravado, accompanied by complacency in the will. The love within friendships formed with others of the same state are based on luxury and not on spirituality. While the love of God grows within friendships that are purely spiritual, the love of God decreases within friendships based on sensuality.

**“When the soul enters the dark night, it brings these kinds of love under control. It strengthens and purifies the one, namely that which is according to God; and the other it removes and brings to an end....”**

### Wrath

Beginners frequently experience delight and pleasure in spiritual things. Then, when this initial surge of pleasant consolation subsides, they become embittered and bear the lack of sweetness with very bad grace. They become irritated by the smallest thing to the point that others cannot tolerate them. Sometimes they are irritated by the sins of others, and they keep watch on them with inappropriate zeal. Other times they become upset with themselves over their own imperfections and respond with extreme impatience that is not humility but is contrary to spiritual meekness. It can only be remedied by the purgation of the dark night.

### Gluttony

Sometimes, lured by the delight and sweetness of spiritual exercises, beginners strive for more spiritual sweetness rather than for spiritual purity and discretion. This causes them to go to extremes rather than stay within the boundaries of moderation. They hurt themselves with penances and weaken themselves through fasting~performing more than their frailty can bear. These extremes are vicious and are manifestations of working their own will rather than walking in obedience. They strive to acquire sweetness and pleasure instead of humbly giving praise within themselves to God. Only He can bring healing through the purgation of the dark night.

### Envy and Sloth

In envy, many beginners find displeasure in the spiritual good in others. They are grieved by feeling outperformed by others. They do not want to hear others praised, they are displeased at other's virtues, and they contradict what is said in praise of others because the same is not said of them.

Slothful individuals flee the things that are most spiritual because these things are incompatible with sensual pleasure. They have no tolerance of things that do not give them sensual pleasure. They do not find the sweetness they want in prayer so they abandon it for the pleasure and sweetness of their own will. They run away from everything difficult and take offense at the Cross.

When those who are bound into envy and sloth **“seek to go about spiritual matters with complete freedom and according to the inclination of their will, it causes them great sorrow and repugnance to enter upon the narrow way, which, says Christ, is the way of life.”**

# the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit

## Purging These Imperfections

Only God can bring these souls into His Divine light. He brings them into the dark night and gives to them aridities and inward darkness, takes their irrelevances and puerilities, and causes these souls to win virtues. This He accomplishes through the *dark night of the soul*.

There are two sides to man's nature~sensual and spiritual. The dark night produces two kinds of purgation: sensual, in which the soul is purged according to sense, and spiritual, in which the soul is purged according to the spirit and prepared for the union of love with God.

To accomplish this purgation, God leads beginners away from the self-centered delights and pleasures of spiritual exercises into darkness and withholds the sweet spiritual water they have tasted thus far. They are left so completely in the dark that they experience nothing but bitterness in the very exercises that previously brought pleasure.

## Dark Night of the Senses

Finding no pleasure in the things of God, the soul also finds no pleasure in anything created. This brings beginners to a place of doubt~a fear of backsliding since they can no longer "sense" God's presence. In response to the anxiety not to fail God, the spirit grows stronger, with more alertness and solicitude than before.

Through the sensual deprivation of the aforementioned sweetness, the spirit is sensitized to spiritual pleasure and goodness~as were the children of Israel to whom, in the wilderness, God gave sweet manna from Heaven. Yet, having palates accustomed to flesh and onions, they wept for their former food.

**"To such depths does the vileness of our desires descend that it makes us to long for our own wretched food and to be nauseated by the indescribable blessings of Heaven."**

While at first the spirit feels no sweetness, slowly, its gained sensitivity helps it to derive strength and energy from this new inward food. It produces in the soul an inclination to be quiet and alone; it is then that God performs His work. *"For God now begins to communicate Himself to it, no longer through sense, as He did aforesaid...but by pure spirit."* To

affect a change in the soul from a life of sense to a life of spirit, God allows spiritual persons to suffer great trials. They grow weary. They imagine they are failing through negligence or sin, when, in reality, God is leading them down another road.

Those in this condition do well to take comfort, to patiently persevere, and to trust in God. He provides all they need for this road until He brings them out into the clear, pure light of love. To make any effort of their own is to hinder the blessings that God is instilling into their soul. By remaining peaceful and quiet, their souls will receive a secret and loving infusion from God with more abundance. Their spirits will be enkindled and will burn with the love that this dark-night contemplation brings and impresses firmly into their souls.

This enkindled love does not begin immediately. It can take time and suffering for the soul to realize its state of impurity. Then it opens itself and creates a peaceful abiding place for this infusion of love. Soon the soul experiences a yearning for God. The spirit realizes an affection and love for God with no understanding of how or whence the affection and love came to be. The soul, during this severe and dark night, is healed of many imperfections and gains virtues that enable the said love to enkindle. The benefits to the soul are so plentiful that it utters, "Oh, happy

continued on page 5

**THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES  
AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT**  
continued from page 4

chance!” when it considers the dark night it has just passed through.

The soul has learned to commune with God, and God has enlightened it by giving it knowledge not only of its own wretchedness, but of His greatness and excellence. The soul has become spiritually humble, and it gains to a greater degree the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is wondrously delivered from the hold of the three enemies~world, devil, and flesh. Its only desire is to please God. The four passions of the soul~joy, grief, hope, and fear~are calmed and “the house is quiet and at rest.”

### The Dark Night of the Spirit

Most often, much time passes between the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit. During this peaceful time, the soul experiences greater freedom and satisfaction in God. On occasion the soul will experience darkness and a sense of peril when the two parts of the soul~sense and spirit~conflict. This is inevitable since the soul is not complete. The senses have been purged, but the spirit is still in a rawer state and not at ease.

At this stage, the progressive (the believer has moved beyond the level of beginner now) has two kinds of imperfection. The first is habitual and the other, actual. The habitual are imperfect habits and affections that are like deep roots that were untouched by the pruning during the purgation of the senses. Actual imperfections manifest differently in different believers. Commonly it appears as vain visions and false prophecy. They presume that God and the saints are communicating with them when in reality they are being manipulated by the devil. They become arrogant and display outward acts of false holiness, such as raptures and other manifestations.

All progressives experience this in one way or another, and no matter how strenuously they might resist, their imperfections cannot be overcome by their own power. Only God, through the purgation and purification of the spirit, can prepare the soul to pass to Divine union. In the dark night to follow, both parts of the soul are purged together, for the spirit cannot be perfected without the involvement of the senses. The purgation is violent and severe and requires great fortitude. During the dark night of the senses and the sweet and refreshing time of communion with God afterwards, the soul and character are strengthened and prepared to bear what is to come. And so begins God’s work. His goal is to strip the believer of the old man and clothe him with the new man, who is of His own design.

In this dark night, God teaches the soul of perfect love without its doing anything. Why is this Divine teaching called a dark night? This night is torment for the soul. The height of Divine Wisdom transcends the talent of the soul and is therefore darkness to it.

We can see this in the example of vision: when a person’s eyes are accustomed to dimness of light, the assault of bright light upon them causes great pain. In the same way, when the light and wisdom of God is poured into the dark and impure soul, the assault of the Divine light upon it causes great pain. The agony can be so great that the soul may even see advantage and relief in death. The incredible contrast between the in-pouring majesty and greatness of God as compared to the poverty

and wretchedness of the soul is the primary source of the pain it suffers during this purgation.

Job, who experienced this pain, described it thus: “I, who was wont to be wealthy and rich, am suddenly undone and broken to pieces; He hath taken me by my neck; He hath broken me and set me up for His mark to wound me; He hath compassed me round about with His lances; He hath wounded all my loins; He hath not spared; He hath poured out my bowels on the earth; He hath broken me with wound upon wound; He hath assailed me as a strong giant; I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin and have covered my flesh with ashes; my face is become swollen with weeping and mine eyes are blinded” (Job 16:12–16; Authorized Version of the Bible, 1611).

**“A thing of great wonder and pity is it that the soul’s weakness and impurity should now be so great that, though the hand of God is of itself so light and gentle, the soul should now feel it to be so heavy and so contrary, though it neither weighs it down nor rests upon it, but only touches it, and that mercifully, since He does this in order to grant the soul favours and not to chastise it.”**

To be entirely effectual, this dark night will last for some years, for He offers respite by ceasing the painful assault to instead assault the soul for a time in an illumina-

continued on page 6

**THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES  
AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT**  
continued from page 5

ting and loving manner. During these times, the soul is bathed in sweetness—a foretaste of the abundance that is to come. But, even then, **“it cannot completely enjoy that relief, but feels as if one of its enemies were within it, and although this enemy is, as it were, hushed and asleep, it fears that he will come to life again and attack it.”**

God humbles the soul in order that, after the night is over, He may greatly exalt it. He may show the soul good reason to be comforted because of the blessings that are to follow, but in such pain, it cannot believe Him. **“Although this happy night brings darkness to the spirit, it does so only to give it light in everything; and that, although it humbles it and makes it miserable, it does so only to exalt it and to raise it up; and, although it impoverishes it and empties it of all natural affection and attachment, it does so only that it may enable it to stretch forward, divinely, and thus to have fruition and experience of all things, both above and below, yet to preserve its unrestricted liberty of spirit in them all.”**

The contemplations of this dark night occur in the secret places of the soul—a characteristic of mystical theology. It takes place in steps like the steps of a ladder that can be ascended or descended. This is a ladder of love which the soul mounts. The soul climbs the ten steps, one by one, to God.

The first step brings distress to the soul, which is to the soul’s advantage. This distress presents like a sickness. The believer is sick with love. **“This sickness, however, is not unto death, but for the glory of God, for in this sickness the soul swoons as to sin and as to all things that are not God, for the sake of God Himself...”**

In the second step, the soul seeks God without ceasing. **“On this step the soul now walks so anxiously that it seeks the Beloved in all things. In whatsoever it thinks, it thinks at once of the Beloved. Of whatsoever it speaks, in whatsoever matters present themselves, it is speaking and communing at once with the Beloved. When it eats, when it sleeps, when it watches, when it does aught soever, all its care is about the Beloved, as is said above with respect to the yearnings of love.”**

The third step of the ladder of love causes the soul to work with eagerness so that it does not fail. **“On this step the soul considers great works undertaken for the Beloved as small; many things as few; and the long time for which it serves Him as short, by reason of the fire of love wherein it is now burning.”**

The fourth step brings habitual suffering because of the Beloved, yet the soul suffers no weariness. **“The spirit here has so much strength that it has subjected the flesh and takes as little account of it as does the tree of one of its leaves. In no way does the soul here seek its own consolation or pleasure, either in God, or in aught else, nor does it desire or seek to pray to God for favours, for it sees clearly that it has already received enough of these, and all its anxiety is set upon the manner wherein it will be able to do something that is pleasing to God...”**

The fifth step causes the soul to long for God impatiently. **“On this step the vehemence of the lover to comprehend the Beloved and be united with Him is such that every delay, however brief, becomes very long, wearisome and oppressive to it.”**

In the sixth step, the soul runs to God to touch Him again and again; it does not grow faint—strengthened by its hope. **“Of this step the prophet Isaias speaks thus: ‘The saints that hope in God shall renew their strength**

**they shall take wings as the eagle; they shall fly and shall not faint’ (Isaias XL:31). ...The cause of this swiftness in love which the soul has on this step is that its charity is greatly enlarged within it, since the soul is here almost wholly purified...”**

The seventh step makes the soul become heated in its boldness. **“Here love employs not its judgment in order to hope, nor does it take counsel so that it may draw back, neither can any shame restrain it; for the favour which God here grants to the soul causes it to become vehement in its boldness.”**

Upon the eighth step of the ladder of love, the soul seizes God and holds Him tightly—refusing to let go. **“Certain souls climb some way, and then lose their hold; for, if this state were to continue, it would be glory itself in this life; and thus the soul remains therein for very short periods of time.”**

In the ninth, the soul burns with sweetness. **“This step is that of the perfect, who now burn sweetly in God. For this sweet and delectable ardour is caused in them by the Holy Spirit by reason of the union which they have with God.”**

Finally, the tenth step of the ladder of love—the soul assimilated to God. **“The soul ... become[s] wholly assimilated to God, by reason of the clear and immediate vision of God which it then possesses; when, having ascended in this life to the ninth step, it goes forth from the flesh.... This vision is the cause of the perfect likeness of the soul to God, for, as Saint John says, we know that we shall be like Him. Not because the soul will come to have the capacity of God, for that is impossible; but because all that it is will become like to God, for which cause it will be called, and will be, God by participation.”**

# perfect unity with divine love

In that final step, the vision is absolutely clear by reason of complete assimilation. It is the point of which Our Saviour said, "In that day ye shall ask Me nothing" (John 16:23).

**"But, until that day, however high a point the soul may reach, there remains something hidden from it~namely, all that it lacks for total assimilation in the Divine Essence. After this manner, by this mystical theology and secret love, the soul continues to rise above all things and above itself, and to mount upward to God."**

## Stanzas of the Soul

1. On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings~  
oh, happy chance!  
I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.
2. In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised~  
oh, happy chance!~  
In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.
3. In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me,  
or I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which  
burned in my heart.  
.....
5. Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,  
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in  
the Beloved!  
.....
8. I remained, lost in oblivion; My face I reclined on the Beloved.  
All ceased and I abandoned myself, Leaving my cares forgotten  
among the lilies.



Volume 3, Number 48

**Publisher**  
Catherine & David Martin

**Editors**  
Cheryl & Michael Chiapperino

Published on the World Wide Web at  
**ChristianBookSummaries.com.**

The mission of Christian Book Summaries is to enhance the ministry of thinking Christians by providing thorough and readable summaries of noteworthy books from Christian publishers.

**The opinions expressed are those of the original writers and are not necessarily those of Christian Book Summaries or its Council of Reference.**

Dark Night of the Soul by *Saint John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz)*, first published in Barcelona in 1619, was written as a sequel to his eclogue, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in which the bride (representing the soul) searches for the bridegroom (representing Jesus Christ), and is anxious at having lost him; both are filled with joy upon reuniting. Dark Night of the Soul narrates the journey of the soul from her bodily home to her union with God. It happens during the night, which represents the hardships and difficulties she meets in detachment from the world and reaching the light of the union with the Creator. There are several steps in this night, which are related in successive stanzas. Public domain. Purchase this book at your favorite bookstore or online bookseller. Or you may access it online at *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

**The author:** Saint John of the Cross (*San Juan de la Cruz* 1542 -1591) was a major figure in the Catholic Reformation, a Spanish mystic, Carmelite friar, and priest born at Fontiveros, a small village near Ávila. He is renowned for his cooperation with Saint Teresa of Ávila in the reformation of the Carmelite order and for his writings~both his poetry and his studies on the growth of the soul.

**Summarized by:** Bonnie Church is a website content manager, editor, freelance writer, gardener, mother of three, and grandmother of five. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, Bonnie and her family live in Colorado Springs.