

Reason 14: Seeking God “With All Our Heart”

Our relationship with God does not just “happen” and it doesn’t grow on its own.

1. God tells us to seek him. What are some reasons, below?

* *Deuteronomy 4:29*—

* *Psalms 105:4*—

* *Hosea 10:12*—

* *Luke 11:10*—

2. How are we to seek God?

* *Deuteronomy 4:29*—

* *Matthew 6:33*—

* *Jeremiah 29:13*—

3. How are we to love God? How high a priority is loving God to be in our lives?

* *Matt. 22:37-38*—

* *Ephesians 6:24*—

* *Deuteronomy 10:12*—

4. How would the dark night of the soul actually produce a greater love for God and greater urgency to seek him?



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Dark Night of the Soul: Study 1

Drawing Near to God When He Seems Far Away



“God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.” Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Symptoms you are in a “dark night of the soul”:

- Feeling spiritually dry or dead
- Little interest in spiritual disciplines, (Quiet Time, bible reading, prayer, serving, sharing, worship, etc.)
- God seems far removed; “my prayers seem to hit the ceiling;” does He care about me?”
- Asking, “Is it really worth it to follow God?”
- Asking, “What’s wrong? Is it me? My church? My small group? My pastor?”

SPIRITUAL FORMATION:

These symptoms and feelings are a *normative* part of the Christian journey. Not only are they normative, but they’re *necessary!* Not only are they necessary, but *God takes us through* dark nights (years?) of the soul.

FACTORS: What is God doing in our lives during dark nights of the soul? This study is meant to give you thumb nail sketches of 14 reasons why you may be experiencing the Dark Night of the Soul.

DIRECTIONS: For each of the points below, read the starred verse (*). The other verses are listed to either be studied on your own or by the group if there is time. Next to the verse, jot down what strikes you about it.

1. Depravity of man: sin runs much deeper than we imagine. We justify, rationalize, are “arrogant” and rebellious. God has a lot more work to do in us than we ever imagine.

* *Jeremiah 17:9-10*—

Rom. 3:10-18--

2. Fallen world. There is a lot more pain and “reality” to life than we imagine when we’re younger. People disappoint us; we experience betrayal; people are deceitful and self-centered. I will hurt. This life will disappoint me more than I thought it would.

* *Genesis 3:14-19*—

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3. Priority shift: God uses dark nights to help us put God first; not just in theory; we'll pay any price to become more like Christ;

* *Matt. 6:33*—

Romans 12:1-2—

4. Suffering: Becoming like Christ *requires* suffering and testing.

* *Acts 14:22*—

Deut. 8:2-3--

5. One way God glorifies himself to us! Our backs against the wall, no human action will do; deliverance!

* *Psalms 106:7-12*—

6. Trust shift: Actually trusting God means learning not to trust what we've trusted before!

* *Prov. 29:25*—

* *Proverbs 28:26*—

7. Walk by faith, not by sight: we "know" this but hate having to do it. Faith sometimes brings "good" results and sometimes doesn't. Walking by faith instead of "sight" includes not walking by our emotions; not walking by "guaranteed outcomes" or results, living by the promises of God, and developing "childlike faith" = delightfully dependent!

* *2 Cor. 5:7*—

* *Hebrews 11:1, 6*—

8. Greater anticipation for heaven: loosening our grip on this world, what this world has to "offer." We are "aliens and strangers;" this world is not our "home." We are never really "home" until we arrive in heaven."

* *1 John 2:15-17*—

Hebrews 11:13-16—

9. Maturity; God is working to make us more character and commit driven and less emotion or results driven.

* *Ephesians 4:13*—

10. Examples from the Psalms: psalms of lament (22, 77, 88, etc.) Even God's greatest believers went through dark nights of the soul.

* *Psalms 22:1-5*—

11. Difference between God's "real" presence and His "felt" presence: We "know" God is with us, but when we don't *feel* his presence we start to freak, or get discouraged.

* *Hebrews 13:5-6*—

* *Psalms 22:1*—

12. The desert: God's metaphor for change. His laboratory for our spiritual formation

* *Hosea 2:3, 14*—

13. God's occasional discipline to get us on track

* *Hebrews 12:4-13*—

14. Seeking God first: and with all our hearts. Loving him in actuality, not just in theory.

* *Deuteronomy 4:29*—

* *Matt. 22:37-38*—

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Reason 13: God's Discipline or Pruning May be Felt as a Dark Night

A. **God's Discipline:** God occasionally disciplines his children to get us back on track.

1. What attitudes should we have when God disciplines us?

* *Hebrews 12:5*—

* *Hebrews 12:6*—

* *Hebrews 12:7*—

* *Hebrews 12:8*—

* *Hebrews 12:9*—

* *Hebrews 12:10*—

2. The writer describes three effects of discipline. What are they?

* *Hebrews 12:11*—

3. What should our final response be when undergoing discipline?

* *Hebrews 12:12*—

B. **God's Pruning:** God occasionally *prunes* us to help us be more fruitful.

Jesus uses the metaphor of God the gardener, Jesus the vine, and we are the branches. Sometimes the Gardener *chops off* branches; sometimes he *prunes back* branches. Read *John 15:1-11*.

1. The Gardener is cutting two kinds of branches. *John 15:1-2*

* What are the two kinds of branches?

2. How are they different? How are they alike?

3. A gardener uses the same garden implement to cut both kinds of branches. Both involve "pain," but the reasons for the cutting are polar opposites! One branch did great: more fruit! The other branch bore no fruit. How might this be confusing for the Christian?

4. How do we know if we are being "pruned" (because we've done some things right—fruit born) or if we are being "chopped" because we have not born fruit? Some questions to ask yourself:

* Am I aware of an area of my life that I've been resisting God?

* Ask a close Christian friend.

* If God does not bring anything to mind within 24 hours, assume pruning, until told differently.

Reason 12: The “Desert:” God’s Place to Surface Heart Issues

There are times when God takes us to “the desert.” It is a scriptural metaphor for God taking away some of our *real* “trusts.” The effect is to *feel* as if God is far away, when in reality our feelings of isolation, emptiness, or abandonment more reflect the loss of some of our treasured “idols.” (misplaced feelings)

In the desert we begin to see that our complaint against God is the loss of our treasured possessions, people, or our deepest personal needs (acceptance, respect, love, importance, value—usually met by certain persons, our job performance, how people see us as a parent, spouse, etc.)

The nation of Judah had been unfaithful to God. The nation had acted in spiritual adultery, pursuing idols. God called her an “adulteress.” She would not respond to God’s prophets to repent. So, God took the whole nation to “the desert.”

1. Read *Hosea 2:5*

How would you describe Judah’s actions and attitudes?

2. Read *Hosea 2:6-7*

What will God do to Judah?

What could that feel like to the people?

3. Read *Hosea 2:8*

In spite of Judah’s spiritual adultery, how does God relate to her?

4. The nation refuses to turn back to God. *Hosea 2:9-13*

What does God do next?

5. Life would get significantly harder for the people. It would seem that God was a million miles from them. But, for what does God hope? Towards what is he working? *Hosea 2:14-23*

“The desert” is not God’s final word. It is for a season, to strip us of our *real trusts*, to cause us to loosen our grip on our real demands—of God, people, ourselves, and “life.” God desires something far better for us—himself.

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 2

“God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.” Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*

Reason 1: The Depravity of Mankind

Most of us assume that we may need a little “tinkering” in our life by God. We know God wants to clean up our foul mouth, break a bad habit, help us with our temper, or “be a little nicer,” but that’s about it. He wants to make us like Christ. *We have little idea the depth of change God wants to bring to our lives.*
Read *Colossians 1:28*

If becoming like Christ is the final goal, what is the “raw product” that God works with?

Total Depravity—the term used to describe that man is not meritorious in God’s eyes.

What depravity does **NOT** mean: (1) that every person has exhibited his depravity as thoroughly as he could; (2) that sinners do not have a conscience or an idea about God; (3) that sinners indulge in every form of sin; or (4) that depraved man does not perform actions that are good in the sight of *man*.

What depravity **DOES** mean: (1) that corruption extends to every part of man’s nature, including all the faculties of his being; and (2) that there is nothing in man that can commend him to a completely righteous God.

In the following questions, study the starred (*) verses first. The rest of the verses can be “on your own.”

1. “Sin” is a big word, with lots of facets of meaning. In the following verses how is “sin” defined?

* *Romans 14:23*—

* *James 4:17*—

Proverbs 10:19—

1 John 3:4—

1 John 5:17—

2. In the following verses, how prevalent is “sin”?

* *Genesis 6:5*—

* *1 Kings 8:46*—

* *Psalms 53:3*—

Proverbs 20:9—

1 John 1:8—

Isaiah 53:6—

3. People assume, “I’m not a sinner. I’m basically a good person.” Does the bible say we are “basically good?”

* *Isaiah 64:6*—

* *1 John 1:8*—

Titus 3:3—

Matthew 19:16-17—

How humans define “good” and how God defines “good” are vastly different!

4. In the following verses what words are used to describe our “sin” nature?

* *Jeremiah 17:9*—

* *Genesis 6:5*—

* *Deuteronomy 1:43*—

Isaiah 28:12—

2 Peter 2:10—

Exodus 32:9—

Jeremiah 32:33—

Zechariah 7:11—

5. Is “sin” just our actions, or is sin something more pervasive in us? *Jeremiah 17:10*

From God’s point of view, is the character change we need more like a change of clothes or a voyage by canoe from Newport Beach to Hawaii?

Reason 2: The Fall of Man

Sometimes we experience dark nights of the soul because of the world we live in. When we were children we idealized the world, but with age, you experience more and more the harsh realities of life. People disappoint you, betrayal strikes, conflict won't go away. Too often things aren't the way they "should be."

How are the effects of the Fall of Man seen in the following verses?

* *2 Timothy 4:2*—

* *Ephesians 2:2*—

* *2 Kings 17:5*—

* *Matt. 13:22*—

* *Luke 21:34*—

* *Titus 2:12*—

Summary: How would you summarize the points from the verses in this section?

What strikes you about them?

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 7

"God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present." Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Reason 11: Discovering God's "Better" Presence

In far too many ways, we think like the world thinks. First and foremost may be our attachment (love affair) with our emotions. We foolishly believe that we need to feel a certain way, or that if we don't feel a certain way something is wrong. We even carry this over into our relationship with God. We gauge our spiritual life by how we feel—about God, what he is doing, and about ourselves. We couldn't pick a worse gauge if we tried.

If we don't feel close to God we panic. We conclude there must be something wrong with me, my life group, my church or my pastor. We live as if it's their job to keep my spiritual feelings "up," when in reality God may be dealing with you in the opposite direction, as this study will show!

We like feeling close to God. We *hate* it when he seems far away. THAT is what God wants to change in us. He wants to move us to the place that ALL THE TIME, ALL THROUGH THE DAY we *know* he IS with us, and in us. *That* presence of God is far, far better than the up and down *feeling* close to God part of the time. (The ALL THE TIME *feeling* close to God happens in heaven, not here).

1. Is there a distinction between God's "felt" presence and His "real" presence? What do the following verses indicate? Can we trust our feelings?

* *Hebrews 13:5-6*—

* *Psalms 22:1*—

2. We usually associate our greatest challenges and darkest days with thoughts of God being gone or not caring. The following verses indicate trying challenges. Identify the challenges, then ask, "Is God gone, and does he care?"

* *Isaiah 43:2*—

* *Deuteronomy 20:1*—

* *Genesis 27:41; 28:15-22*—

3. Is there anything *we* can do regarding God's presence?

* *Psalms 16:8*—

* *Hebrews 10:22*—

* *James 4:8*—

* *John 15:4-7, 10*—

4. Are there times when God hasn't left us but we have left him, either directly or inadvertently?

* *Jeremiah 2:5*—

* *Ezekiel 14:5*—

* *Matthew 15:8*—

Reason 10: Examples from the Psalms

We sometimes forget that people of faith in the bible all went through difficult times. Somehow, we assume that shouldn't happen to us.

Over the course of 2,000 years of Old Testament history, (pre-Christ) God's people also endured seasons of doubt, fear, overwhelming fear, disillusionment and dark nights, wondering where God was.

The bible was written partly for our "encouragement" and that we might have hope. (*Romans 15:4*). Our hope is *not* that we escape dark nights. Our hope is that *even though we will experience dark nights*, we need not "give in" to the feelings of dark nights.

There are nine different kinds of Psalms (Praise, Nature, Historical, Social, Imprecatory, Penitential, Messianic, Liturgical, and Lament).

Psalms of lament are written precisely for "Dark Nighters." As you read these Psalms you realize you're not alone, that what you're going through is not unique to you, and not necessarily the result of something "you did wrong."

Read *Psalms 88*

1. What strikes you about the Psalmist's dark night?

Read *Psalms 77:1-9*

2. Look at the "title" before verse 1. You will find the author's name is Asaph. He was King David's and King Solomon's "worship leader," not just an "average Joe."

In Psalm 77, three elements strike me: (1) There is a "time" element involved (2) the questioning of God's character (3) picturesque language of his dark night.

3. What descriptions of the psalmist's dark nights strike you most?

4. Read the rest of *Psalms 77*. What helps him get through his dark night?

* What does he remember?

* What does he do?

5. Even Jesus had his own dark night! *Psalms 22* is a Messianic Psalm, meaning, a number of the descriptions in the Psalm cannot apply to the psalmist himself. Some of the words "hint" at Another's experience, which culminated in Christ's experience.

Psalms 22:1-2. Jesus quoted these verses while hanging on the cross! What strikes you about that?

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 3

"God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present." Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Reason 3: "I Didn't Get What I Thought God Would Give Me"

After I come to Christ, it's easy to assume that it's now God's "job" to make my life easier and give me what I really want. I also assume that's what God wants. When I don't get what I want when I want it, I question God's power or His goodness or both. This is usually done in my quiet, private moments.

What makes this harder is that sometimes what we want are good things, godly things. When *those* don't come we can spiral downward into confusion, discouragement or doubt. As established Christians, we feel guilty and ashamed of questioning God. We don't verbalize this to anyone else. We hold it in. "No one else knows. Everybody else seems to get what they want.... except me."

1. Does God know about my desires? Do my desires matter to Him?

* *Psalms 38:9* —

* *Isaiah 63:9* —

2. God wants to meet our desires, but not at the expense of building in us a hunger for more important desires. What are some areas of our life can we expect we need to yield to God's authority?

* *Luke 14:26* —

* *Luke 14:27* —

* *Luke 14:33* —

Matt. 19:29

3. Read *Psalms 73:1-17*. What are some of the reasons the psalmist slipped into his own dark night of the soul?

* *Psalms 73:3* —

* *Ps. 73:4-9* —

* *Ps. 73:12* —

* *Ps. 73:14* —

* *Ps. 73:16* —

What got him out of his dark night?

* *Psalms 73:1* —

* *Ps. 73:17* —

* *Ps. 73:18-20* —

* *Ps. 73:21-22* —

* *Ps. 73:23-24* —

What is his conclusion? What does he understand, and then seek?

* *Ps. 73:25-28*

4. Why might God allow even my most wholesome desires to not be met?

* *Psalms 73:25* —

* *Psalms 37:4-5* —

* *Isaiah 26:9* —

5. There is a mystery about life that is sometimes a part of dark night. (We never get away from faith).

* *Psalms 73:17* —

* *John 13:7* —

Reason 4: Suffering

Once we've come to Christ it's easy to assume that now we're on the "inside track," that our life will become easier, and though bad things happen to others, "God wouldn't let me go through suffering."

Does God make us immune from suffering?

* *Acts 9:16*—

What attitude *should* we have regarding our own suffering?

* *Acts 5:41*—

* *James 5:10*—

We can understand why the wicked would suffer. Would God allow the righteous to suffer?

Why would God allow His kids to suffer?

* *Romans 8:17*—

* *Acts 14:21-23*

Is suffering something we'd ever choose?

* *Hebrews 11:24-27*—

What do you notice about Jesus' own experience of suffering?

* *1 Peter 2:21-25*--

Summary: How would you summarize the points from the verses in this section?

What strikes you most?

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 6

"God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present." Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Reason 9: The Deepening of Spiritual Maturity

In our life before coming to Christ, we followed our "passions." We were driven by our emotions, what feels right. We assumed we knew what we needed and knew how to live. We assumed our thinking was accurate. We were "pragmatic," meaning, "If it makes sense to me, if I think it works, I'll take a course of action."

After coming to Christ we began to realize that our "old life," the mental underpinnings and assumptions were faulty. However, without knowing it, we can try to live the Christian life with some of the same old underpinnings we already proved didn't work. We do this, oftentimes, without even knowing we're doing it. I think of this as our "autopilot."

God will be at work to dismantle our old way of living, thinking, evaluating and relating. Much of what he'll do is completely overhaul our old "autopilot." It's a makeover only He can do.

Next to each verse, write in what strikes you most...

1. Our "old" underpinnings:

A. Our "passions," evil desires:

* *Ephesians 2:3*—

* *Mark 4:19*—

B. Wrong thinking:

* *Proverbs 14:12*—

* *Romans 1:21*—

* *Proverbs 28:26*—

C. Our will and purpose:

* *Titus 3:3*—

2. God's "extreme" makeover of us:

A. New or godly desires:

* *Psalms 37:4*—

* *Psalms 103:5*—

Isaiah 58:11—

B. Right thinking:

* *Romans 12:2*—

* *Proverbs 12:15*—

C. Our will and purpose:

* *Matthew 6:33*—

* *2 Corinthians 5:9*—

* *2 Corinthians 5:15*—

Reason 8: Loosens our Grip on the World; Gives Us a Deeper Hunger for Heaven

1. We start out committed to making what this world has to offer meeting our deepest needs. Is that a good idea?

* *Ephesians 2:2*—

* *Matthew 16:26*—

2. What consequences can we expect when we are living for what this world has to offer?

* *1 John 2:15-16*—

* *Matt. 13:22*—

2 Timothy 4:10—

3. God is working to loosen our grip on all the things we think we have to have in order to be content. That list includes things, people, and how people treat us.

At the same time, he wants to build in us a greater anticipation for heaven. Our tendency is to think of *this* world as our home, and heaven as the “next life,” the less important one. How does God compare this life versus heaven?

* *1 Corinthians 7:31*—

* *1 John 2:17*—

4. Read *Hebrews 11:13-16*—

A. How did the people think of themselves in this life? *Heb. 11:13*—

B. What did the people value? *Heb. 11:14*—

C. What did the people decide not to do? *Heb. 11:15*—

D. What verb describes their emotional, mental, and spiritual state? *Heb. 11:16*—

E. What was God’s “take” on their faith?

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 4

“God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.” Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Reason 5: One Way God Glorifies Himself

For much of our Christian life, we “know” in our heads God is real. However, God is not satisfied (and neither will we) until we “know” in our gut that God is real, and in our experience that God is real. How does God make himself known in our gut and in our experience? Many times by taking us through very difficult dilemmas that requires his intervention, and only his intervention. Then, God is glorified.

1. God wants to be glorified, not because he is vain, but because he knows that when he is glorified, *we* benefit! We walk in more peace, less anxiety, are more stable in the midst of crisis, etc. What benefits are listed when we glorify God?

* *Isaiah 25:1*—

* *Romans 15:6*—

Revelation 19:7—

2. Joseph is kidnapped, thrown down a well, left to die, and sold into slavery—by his brothers! He ends up serving a prison term in Egypt for a crime he did not commit. He ends up being second in command in all Egypt. When he later talks to his brothers about what they had done, what is Joseph’s perspective?

* *Genesis 45:8* —

* *Genesis 50:20*—

3. What emotions or circumstances accompany the glory of God?

* *Luke 2:9*—

* *Acts 7:55-56*—

4. What great purpose is associated with the glory of God? How does Paul relate God’s glory and our growth?

* *2 Corinthians 3:18*—

What are ways God glorifies himself to us?

* *John 15:8*—

* *John 14:13*—

John 17:4 —

1 Peter 4:11—

5. Read *Acts 7:54-8:1*. Stephen had just preached a sermon about Jesus to the Jewish religious leaders. Contrast the responses of the religious leaders to Stephen’s responses.

What allowed Stephen to be so calm and confident during this crisis?

Reason 6: Building Real Faith/ Trust

We “know” faith is important to God, but God wants to make trusting him one of the most important aspects and realities of our lives.

1. Our sinful tendency is not to trust God but to trust other people and ourselves. Is this a good idea?

* *Prov. 29:25*—

* *Proverbs 28:26*—

2. How does the writer define “faith?”

* *Mark 10:15*—

* *James 2:17*—

3. How important is our faith to God?

* *Hebrews 11:6*—

* *John 6:28-29*—

* *Habakkuk 2:4*—

4. What should “faith” produce in us?

* *1 John 5:4*—

* *Ephesians 6:16*—

5. Abraham was promised a son and heir. For decades, there was no son. How did Abraham deal with this dilemma?

* *Romans 4:18-22*—

6. What reasons can you think of that God would wait so long for Abraham to have a son?

Summary: How would you summarize the points from the verses in this section?

What strikes you about them?

Dark Night of the Soul: Study 5

“God who is everywhere never leaves us. Yet He seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do not know Him well, we do not realize that He may be more present to us when He is absent than when He is present.” Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island

Reason 7: Walking by Faith Regardless of Immediate “Results”

We “know” we’re supposed to walk by faith and not by sight. When we come to Christ we assume that walking by faith will always bring “good results,” meaning results that *we think* are good. Many times that’s true, but sometimes we walk by faith and get “bad results.” When we’re trusted God and it “hasn’t worked” we can enter into a dark night of the soul... until it starts “working” again.

1. We start to live by “guaranteed outcomes,” or by our emotions (how *we evaluate* our circumstances). God will sometimes intervene to break us of our habit of walking by guaranteed outcomes, and live by the promises of God regardless of our current “outcomes.” What does God promise in the following verses?

* *Romans 8:28*—

* *Romans 8:29*—

* *Romans 8:30*—

* *Romans 8:31-32*—

2. We will sometimes encounter and be forced to live with “bad outcomes.” What are some of those “bad” outcomes we may live through?

* *Romans 8:31-39*—

3. What does God promise in spite of “bad outcomes?”

* *Romans 8:37*—

* *Romans 8:39*—

4. Hebrews 11 is often called the “faith chapter.” Most of the chapter is loaded with Old Testament figures who, in this chapter, generally had “good outcomes” to their faith. What “bad outcomes” did some of God’s people face?

* *Hebrews 11:35-37*—

5. Was their “bad outcomes” a result of little or no faith? Did they “mess it up?” How did God look at these people’s faith?

* *Hebrews 11:38*—

* *Hebrews 11:39*—

* *Hebrews 11:40*—