

Growing through a Dark Night of the Soul

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The Dark Night is not something to fear. Yes, it feels empty and lonely. But it doesn't have to cause you shame. And it doesn't have to lead to burn out. In fact, it can be a prelude to a great spiritual breakthrough in your life — if you understand what's going on and learn how to follow Christ in the darkness.

Are you ready to learn? Are you willing to put some time in to study? Will you prepare your heart now so that when you go through a Dark Night of the Soul you are ready to respond with trust in Jesus?

Three Ancient Stages of Spiritual Growth

Saint John of the Cross (1542 – 1591) is one of the ancient writers that offers us a developmental understanding of our life with Christ. This 16th Century monk has so much to teach us today about the spiritual life: who we are before God and how we grow in holiness and wholeness. As we said earlier, the goal of the Christian life is love – growing in the love of Christ for us (abiding in him) and through us (bearing fruit).

We want our spiritual life to be an upward journey of growing closer and closer to God and becoming more and more like Christ. And we want to feel this continual improvement and see it in our life circumstances. But in reality our growth does not progress in a straight upward line. Nor does our experience of intimacy with Christ. Our journey goes up and down, forward and backward. The realistic goal is that over time we would make progress in developing a more Christ-like character.

Just like a child grows into young adulthood and then into parenthood or eldership so also disciples of Jesus mature in their faith through stages. Here's my distillation of what I've learned from Saint John of the Cross (and also from John Coe, Director of the Institute for Spiritual Formation at Talbot seminary) on spiritual development and the Dark Night of the Soul.

Let's explore further these stages of maturing in God's love. Keep in mind that we don't progress in a linear fashion. The stages overlap, so much so that we may have aspects of all three in our lives. Nonetheless, we can see a general progression of maturity in disciples to Jesus who are devoted to him and intentionally engaged in their spiritual formation with him. And, we must admit with sadness, that many and perhaps most Christians don't get much beyond the first stage in their spiritual development!

Don't misunderstand me, it's not that the first stage is bad. We all begin our journey with Christ in this spiritual childhood. And we all have aspects of this in us all our lives long. God understands this and is compassionate and patient! But as we look across the landscape of Christianity today we ask, where are the apprentices to Jesus who are learning more and more to live lives that are fully submitted to Christ and the purposes of his kingdom? Where are the disciples who persist in their devotion to Jesus even when he seems distant and doesn't seem to be blessing them? And, of course, you and I need to turn our attention to looking in the mirror... Is a submitted and devoted disciple of Jesus there?

1. New Disciples Love God for the Pleasure He Gives (“Purgation”)

“I’m forgiven of my sins!” The Apostle John says that our spiritual journey begins by putting our faith in Christ and receiving the gift of forgiveness for our sins. Indeed, when we first trust in Christ or return to him after a period of selfish or sinful living we’re blessed immensely by God’s mercy to us that removes our guilt. St. John of the Cross called this first stage in our spiritual development “Purgation” because when we trust Christ as Savior he begins to purge us of our sins and cleanse us of worldliness (1 John 1:9; 2:15-17). Turning away from sin opens up space in our heart and our life for God in his grace to move in!

“I know God as Father!” The other blessing we enjoy in our early journey with Christ is discovering that the Almighty God and Creator is our Father and we are his children! What a blessing it is to come to know the father-love of God. Jesus said that if we want to be born again and enter his kingdom of the heavens that we must become as children – humble, honest, eager, teachable, trusting, playful. We all begin our journey as children. And in a sense we always want to remain child-like before God, appreciating the gifts of forgiveness and the Father’s love.

2. Young Disciples Love God for the Relationship with Him (“Illumination”)

“I am learning to love God in hard times.” The Apostle characterizes the middle stage in our spiritual journey as one of persevering through challenges. The early blessings of faith may seem to give way to the trials of life. We appreciate that the Christian life is about more than being forgiven and loved by God – we’re to learn and grow as disciples of Jesus in the midst of the stresses and opportunities of daily life. We get to develop an interactive relationship with Christ, growing in closeness with him and drawing strength for life from him.

“I am learning to overcome evil by relying on God’s Word.” Our learning and growth comes out of our interactions with God’s Word, which was embodied and proclaimed by Christ. We discover that the Bible is a treasure store of wisdom and knowledge about the good and godly life and so we read it, study it, meditate on it, memorize portions, and learn how to pray and apply it in our lives. St. John of the Cross labels this stage “Illumination” because God’s Word enlightens our way and the new life of Christ is getting brighter and brighter in us.

3. Spiritual Fathers and Mothers Love God for God (“Union”)

“I am submitting to God’s will in all that I do.” The ancient Christian writers, like St. John of the Cross, taught that the spiritually mature grow towards “Union” with Christ. The key to this deeper intimacy and identification with Christ is submission to the Sovereign Lord’s will in all things. In our activities, trials, relationships, work, projects, errands, ministry, and all that we do we learn to seek first the kingdom of God, praying, “Lord, your will, your way, and your time.”

“I have seen the Sovereign Lord work over the course of my life.” The Apostle John said that the key to growing into spiritual parenthood is to trust God as sovereign over our lives in loving ways. At this stage we’re able to look back over all the ups and downs of our life and see that God was in charge and he was loving and guiding and shaping us in good ways. Our worship of God deepens and we realize more fully what an honor it is that our praise to God and our service in his name blesses the Lord. And we also appreciate that it is only out of God’s grace and wisdom working its way into our lives that we can minister to others, partnering with Christ in his kingdom work.