

The Dark Night

Job 23:1-10 • Psalm 88 • Mark 15:33-34 • Psalm 22

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group opens the sealed guess from Session 1, then discovers that Scripture itself prays from inside the experience of God's absence, and that on the cross Christ took the words of that darkness into his own mouth and carried them to the Father.

Catholic Touchstone. Sheer faith in the dark (CCC 2731; CCC 164-165): we walk by faith and not by sight, and when God seems absent, the Church points us to the witnesses of faith who walked the night, and above all to Jesus in his agony.

What You Need to Know

This is the hinge session of the study, and it begins with a small liturgy of honesty: opening the sealed guesses. Do it first, before any teaching. Each person opens their own Session 1 sheet and rereads what they wrote to the question: when God feels absent in your prayer, what do you think is actually happening? Invite (never require) people to share what they wrote and whether five sessions have moved them. Resist the urge to correct anyone's guess in the moment; tonight's texts will do the work.

Then be precise about terms, because "the dark night" has escaped into pop language as a synonym for any bad season. In St. John of the Cross it is something specific: God's own purifying action on the soul, experienced as darkness. John distinguishes the night of sense (Session 5: the weaning from felt sweetness, common among those who give themselves to prayer) from the deeper night of spirit, in which even the soul's sense of God's favor and of its own faith seems eclipsed, precisely so that faith, hope, and love may be purified of everything that is not God. His startling definition: this dark night is an inflow of God into the soul. In his account, what the soul suffers is not God's absence but God's unshielded nearness, felt as darkness by an unready soul, the way strong light blinds.

Guard the pastoral rails set last week and restate them briefly: not every darkness is the night of spirit (ordinary causes and clinical depression remain real, and a doctor is a friend of grace); the night is recognized by its fruits over time (humility, fidelity, love) rather than by its intensity; and nobody should self-diagnose into spiritual heroics. What tonight gives every person, wherever their darkness comes from, is this: Scripture prays from inside it, and Christ has been there ahead of us.

The emotional center of the session is the move from Psalm 88 (the one psalm with no dawn in it) to Mark 15:34, where Jesus prays the first line of Psalm 22. Take that sequence slowly. It is the answer to most of the sealed guesses, and it is the reason the Church can call desolation "the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony" (CCC 2731).

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Job 23 gives the geometry of felt absence: "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him" (23:8), yet in the same breath the stubborn confession: "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10). Absence on Job's side; knowledge and purpose on God's.

Psalm 88 is the darkest prayer in the Psalter: it begins "O LORD, my God, I call for help by day; I cry out in the night before you" and ends, uniquely, without resolution, in darkness. The Holy Spirit inspired this psalm and Israel kept praying it. Its existence in the canon means the prayer of the desolate is still prayer, still addressed, still heard.

Psalm 22 begins in the same country ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") but travels: complaint (vv. 1-21) turns to praise (vv. 22-31), including the line the Church hears on Easter ground: "he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him" (22:24). On the cross, Jesus prays this psalm's first line

(Mark 15:34), placing his dereliction inside a prayer that ends in vindication. The darkness is real; so is the trajectory.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John of the Cross

Of the deeper night John writes that this dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its ignorances and imperfections; the very light of God, received by a soul not yet pure, is suffered as darkness, the way eyes long used to the dark are blinded by the sun, an image John himself borrows from the philosophers. The pain, he insists, comes not from God's distance but from his unaccustomed nearness. What feels like losing God is, in the souls God is purifying, God arriving too brightly to be seen.

The Dark Night, Book II, ch. 5.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Teresa of Avila

Teresa describes, in the sixth dwelling places, the severe interior and exterior trials by which God prepares a soul for full union: misunderstanding from good people, illness, and worst of all, an interior darkness in which the soul can find no comfort in anything and feels banished from God, while (she notes shrewdly) never actually leaving him. For such nights the little prayer long attributed to her, found in her breviary after her death, has steadied centuries of Christians, in substance: let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; all things are passing; God never changes; patience obtains all things; whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices.

Summarized from The Interior Castle, Sixth Dwelling Places; the short prayer is from a paper found in her breviary after her death, by long tradition her own.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thérèse of Lisieux

In the last eighteen months of her short life, Thérèse, the saint of confidence, entered what she called a night in which the very thought of heaven, once her joy, became a wall. She wrote that she sat, as it were, at a table of sinners, eating the bread of doubt with those who do not believe, and offering her darkness for them. She died at twenty-four with her faith intact and her feelings of faith gone, proving in miniature what this session teaches: the night attacks the felt certainties in order to lay bare the naked, willing yes.

Story of a Soul, Manuscript C.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2731, carried over from last week, now shows its depth: dryness at its extreme is "the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb." The Church locates our darkness inside his.

CCC 164-165 names the condition of this whole life: we walk by faith, not by sight, and faith can be put to the test by evil, suffering, and the experience of God's apparent silence. The Catechism's counsel is to turn to the witnesses of faith: to Abraham, and to Mary, who advanced in her pilgrimage of faith even into the night of faith at the cross of her Son. The Church has always known about the night; she keeps a list of people who walked it.

CCC 603 guards the mystery of the cry from the cross: Jesus, who knew the Father without interruption, nonetheless assumed us in our estrangement so completely that he could speak, in our name, the "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" of sinful humanity. He assumes us in our estrangement to the point of praying our felt godforsakenness in our name, while never ceasing to be united to the Father in redeeming love (CCC 603); and by praying it, he opens it toward the Father.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The sealed guess OPENS tonight, first thing. Protocol: open, reread silently, share voluntarily, no correcting. Return to the guesses at the end of the session and ask the closing Send question against them.

Thread A ("The Tailor's Apprentice"): one sentence available if the room needs hope late in the session: the Krakow tailor's hidden years included long illness and the Nazi occupation of his city; his lights stayed lit in that darkness, and Session 11 tells how far they reached.

Thread B ("Water to Flame"): do not touch it tonight; next session the water arrives. The contrast is deliberate: from the driest night to living water.

Pastoral watch, highest of the study: tonight can surface grief, doubt, and past spiritual wounds. Leave unhurried silence. Have the parish's confession times and a counseling referral ready to mention without drama.

Session Goals

1. Open the sealed guesses with honesty and without correction.
2. Define the dark night accurately (God's purifying inflow, not his absence) and re-fence it pastorally.
3. Pray through the canon's own darkness: Job 23, Psalm 88, Psalm 22, and hear Christ take up the cry on the cross.
4. Give every person one act of "sheer faith" to carry into their own night, present or future.

Time note (75-90 min). Sealed guess opening 15 min; Win 5 min (shortened tonight); Build 45 min; Send and Live It 15 min. If pressed, cut Q2 (Job) to a read-aloud with one comment; never cut Psalm 88, the Mark 15 discovery, or the closing return to the guesses.

The Dark Night

Job 23:1-10 · Psalm 88 · Mark 15:33-34 · Psalm 22

Opening Prayer

Father, your Son cried out to you from the darkness with the words of the psalm, and you heard him. We bring you tonight our honest guesses, our past darkness and our present one. Give us the faith that clings when it cannot see. Through Christ our Lord, who descended into our night and rose. Amen.

WIN

W1. Having reread your sealed guess: would you write the same answer tonight? What, if anything, has shifted since Session 1?

BUILD

Q1. Read Job 23:1-10 aloud. Job cannot find God in any direction (vv. 8-9), yet what does he confess in verse 10? How can both be true in one prayer?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Verses 8-9 map total experiential absence: forward, backward, left, right, no perception of God. Verse 10 answers with the reversal that carries the whole session: "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Job cannot see God, but God sees Job; the absence is one-sided, and it has a purpose (testing toward gold, echoing the testing we met in Deuteronomy 8:2 last week). Both are true because perception and presence are not the same thing. That distinction, applied to prayer, answers a large share of the sealed guesses.

Q2. Read Psalm 88, all of it, slowly, perhaps by alternating verses around the circle. It is the only psalm that ends in darkness. Why do you think God inspired and preserved a prayer like this? What does its existence permit you?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Let the group sit with it before answering. The psalm is relentless: no turn, no vow of praise, ending (in substance) with darkness as the psalmist's only companion. Yet notice: it is still prayer, addressed "O LORD, my God" from the first line, still crying "in the night before you," and Israel sang it in the temple; the Church prays it to this day. Its canonical existence means the desolate are not excused from prayer, and not disqualified from it either: God himself supplied words for the season when his people would have none. It permits total honesty Godward. What it does not permit is walking away: even this psalm talks to him.

DISCOVERY MOMENT · Q3

Read Mark 15:33-34: darkness over the land, and Jesus crying with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is quoting. Send the group to find the source, then have them read that entire psalm to the end, watching what happens after the verses of dereliction. What do they find at verse 24? Where does the psalm finally arrive?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The source is Psalm 22:1. Read whole, the psalm moves from forsakenness (vv. 1-2), through mockery that Matthew and Mark echo almost verbatim in the crucifixion scene (vv. 7-8), pierced hands and feet and divided garments (vv. 16-18), to the turn: "he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him" (22:24), and on to worldwide praise (vv. 27-31). When Jesus prays the first line from the cross, he is not announcing the Father's rejection; he is placing his real dereliction inside Israel's prayer that runs all the way from abandonment to vindication. When a dying rabbi prays the first line of a psalm every hearer knows by heart, the Church has always heard the whole psalm in the cry. Our darkness, prayed in him, sits inside the same trajectory: the cry is permitted, and the ending is already written (CCC 603 guards both truths: the dereliction is really assumed, and the communion with the Father is never broken).

BUILD, THEN PRESS: DOES THE NIGHT CONTRADICT THE GOSPEL?

Press it at full strength, in two moves. First: "Christianity announces that God's people are never forsaken: I will never fail you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5); nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Now, trials, temptation, suffering, discipline for sin: Scripture names all of these. But a special divine work whose signature is feeling abandoned? That diagnosis is on no page of the Bible; it is in a sixteenth-century book. Perhaps your darkness is temptation to resist, or depression to treat, or drift to repent of; calling it God at work risks baptizing what God wants healed, and it contradicts his own promises of presence." Second: "And the appeal to the cross proves too much. Jesus's cry of dereliction was unique and unrepeatable: he was bearing sin, actually enduring the judgment we deserved. To borrow his cry for our moods trivializes the atonement. Your dry Tuesday is not Calvary."

Both moves deserve respect; the second one guards the uniqueness of the cross, and should not be waved away.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Take the second move first, and concede its guard-rail: Calvary is unrepeatable, and no Christian's desolation is the atonement. But the New Testament itself invites the connection the objection forbids: Christ suffered "leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21), and Paul speaks of sharing his sufferings (Philippians 3:10). CCC 2731 is careful exactly here: our dryness is faith "clinging to Jesus in his agony," clinging to him, not replacing him. On the first move: God's promise is presence, not the feeling of presence, and Scripture never confuses the two: the same canon that says "I will never fail you" gives his people Psalm 88, Psalm 13, Job 23, and Mary's night of faith at the cross (CCC 165). The promises are the solid ground under the night, not evidence that the night cannot happen. And on the charge that the diagnosis is Carmelite rather than biblical: the pattern is older than Carmel. God himself led Israel into the desert to test and humble (Deuteronomy 8:2), and the Spirit led Jesus there (Matthew 4:1); what St. John adds is not a new work of God but three signs for discerning it, precisely so that no one baptizes what God wants healed. The night is not God manufacturing feelings of abandonment; it is God drawing near beyond the soul's capacity, his light suffered as darkness until the eyes are healed, and it is recognized by its fruits over time, never by its intensity. A Father who weans, tests as gold (Job 23:10), and disciplines as sons (Deuteronomy 8:5, Hebrews 12:7) is precisely the Father of both Testaments, and he has never once actually left the room.

DIG DEEPER: ELOI, ELOI: THE CRY IN HIS OWN TONGUE

Mark preserves the cry in Aramaic, Jesus's mother tongue: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." Even quoting the Hebrew psalter, he prays it in the language of his childhood. Ask: what does it tell you that the tradition kept the sound of these words, and that the Church was never embarrassed by them?

Q4. Return to the sealed guesses. In light of Job 23:10, Psalm 22 prayed whole, and John's "inflow of God": how would you now answer the question, "When God feels absent in your prayer, what is actually happening?" Build the group's shared answer on the board.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Let the group construct it; a faithful composite: something real, but not what it feels like. Possibilities the evidence allows: ordinary causes needing ordinary remedies; rocky soil needing conversion (CCC 2731); or God's own purifying work, weaning us from sweetness (Session 5) or drawing nearer than our sight can bear (tonight), while his knowledge and presence never waver (Job 23:10) and our cry itself is carried inside Christ's (Mark 15:34; CCC 603). What is never happening: God breaking his promise. The one universally right response in the dark: stay, and cling, and keep talking to him, with borrowed psalms if we have no words.

SEND

S1. What one act of "sheer faith" (a kept appointment, a psalm prayed, a return to confession, a refusal to quit) will you commit to for your next dark stretch, and will you name it aloud tonight?

S2. Whose darkness have you been interpreting for them, maybe wrongly? What would it mean to sit with them the way Psalm 88 sits, instead of fixing them the way Job's friends fixed?

Live It This Week

- Keep the daily fifteen minutes without exception this week. On one day, pray Psalm 22 whole, slowly, in Jesus's company.
- Memorize the memory verse and say it each night before sleep this week.
- Write one sentence at week's end: what I now believe is happening when God feels absent. Keep it with your old sealed guess.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in the darkness you cried out with the psalm and entrusted yourself to the Father, and the Father did not hide his face forever. Take our nights into yours. Teach us to cling when we cannot see, and bring us forth as gold. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE · PSALM 34:18

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

SESSION 6 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

The Dark Night

Every passage used, in order

Passage	Where it is used
Job 23:1-10	Q1: absence on our side, knowledge on God's; tried as gold
Ps 88	Q2: the psalm without a dawn, still addressed to God
Mark 15:33-34	Discovery: the cry from the cross
Ps 22 (whole)	Discovery answer: from dereliction to he has heard (v. 24) to worldwide praise
Heb 13:5; Rom 8:38-39	Steelman: the promises of presence at full strength
1 Pet 2:21; Phil 3:10; Heb 12:7	Steelman answer: sharing his sufferings; discipline of sons
Ps 13:1; Deut 8:2-5	Steelman answer: inspired laments; the desert as pedagogy (Session 5 link)
Ps 34:18	Memory verse