

The Dark Night

Deep Calls to Deep · Praying the Scriptures with St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila

What We Found

Scripture prays from inside the darkness: Job cannot find God in any direction, yet confesses "he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:8-10). Psalm 88, the one psalm that ends without a dawn, is still prayer, still addressed to "O LORD, my God." God himself supplies words for the season when we have none.

On the cross, in real darkness, Jesus prayed the first line of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33-34). Prayed whole, that psalm runs from abandonment to "he has not hid his face from him, but has heard" (22:24). Our cry, prayed in him, sits inside the same trajectory; the Church calls desolation "the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony" (CCC 2731).

St. John of the Cross defines the dark night not as God's absence but as an inflow of God into the soul: light so near and so strong that unready eyes suffer it as darkness (The Dark Night II.5). In the night he describes, perception and presence are not the same thing. Whatever else is happening in the dark, God breaking his promise is not.

Voices 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.

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.

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.

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.

MEMORY VERSE · PSALM 34:18

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

Before next session: Read John 4:1-30 (the woman at the well). Notice who is thirsty at the start, and who is thirsty by the end.

Catechism references for this session: CCC 2731, 164-165, 603.