



CLASSIC WISDOM COLLECTION

# Strength in Darkness

WISDOM FROM

John of the Cross





## Foreword

**H**ave you ever had that abiding sense that you just can't get through something? Things that you could have walked away from at one time now settle in the pit of your stomach. Traumatic losses take away what equilibrium you had. Someone you love dies. Losing a job challenges who you are and the meaning of your life. A failed relationship leaves you wounded and heartbroken.

Faith is tested in this suffering. Our anger rages against those we love, against God. We panic. We want to run away but don't know where. Who will love us in this condition? The one thing we do know is that we don't want to endure the pain. We are ready to accept anything that offers a promise of release from the difficult path of self-

transcendence. How are we to believe that God heals in this night? Can emptiness, fear, and pain really enkindle a “flame of love”?

One year after the death of my father, while still grieving, I transferred to a new community. The loss of two roles came with this move. I found myself in an unexpected crisis. The meaning that life held was sucked out of me. I didn’t know whom to turn to or where to go. I was unable to make sense of these upheavals. My spiritual life was in crisis. I no longer had any feelings during prayer. John of the Cross expressed what I felt so well: *nada, nada, nada* (nothing, nothing, nothing).

I found insight and enlightenment in ordinary road signs: When a sign read, “Dangerous intersection ahead,” my prayer became, “Hide me in the shelter of your wings!” For “Blind driveway,” I prayed, “Lord, open my eyes!” “No driving in the breakdown lane” became “Drive slowly in the breakdown lane.” “Yield” became “Stay where you are,” “Go slow,” and “Yield to God.” On a neighborhood street, “Go slow, children” reminded me, “I am a child in all of this and in need of you.”

Pseudo-Dionysus, an early Christian thinker, wrote: “In the dark night of the Cross all the greatness of divine love appears: where reason no longer sees, love does.”<sup>1</sup> Saint John of the Cross understood what this fifth-century

theologian meant. When we find ourselves entering a crisis of faith, hovering on the edge of hope, we have received an invitation to go deeper. John encourages us not to walk away from but to go through whatever it is we face, because in the final analysis it will lead us to freedom in love. This purified love will be greater and stronger than anything we have encountered. John describes this as a time God gently and lovingly awakens in our heart as we enter an unknown land and travel unknown roads. John echoes Isaiah: “I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them” (Isa 42:16).



Juan de Yepes y Álvarez was born in a small town not far from Avila, Spain, in 1542. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, was from a family of wealthy silk merchants. Gonzalo’s family disinherited him when he married Catalina Álvarez, a weaver from an unprivileged background. Their love joyfully welcomed three sons, Francisco, Luis, and John. When John was still a child, his brother Luis died, followed shortly by his father. Catalina Álvarez struggled to support

Francisco and John. She sent John for elementary studies as an apprentice to a local carpenter and stonemason. At the age of seventeen John went to care for the sick at a hospital for the poor in Medina. He nursed patients with the plague or other contagious diseases while also collecting alms to support the work. While in Medina, John enrolled in a nearby Jesuit college. By the time he was twenty he was attracted to the contemplative spirit of the Carmelite Order. Without hesitation he joined, receiving the name John of Saint Matthias. After completing studies at the renowned University of Salamanca, he was ordained a priest in 1567.

John knew what success felt like. He had been prefect of studies. His projects had gone smoothly, and the Order entrusted him with positions of leadership. It was not long after his ordination that young John met the wise Teresa of Ávila. She had heard that John was looking for an even more rigorous way of life, and she invited him to join her reform of Carmel. After their first meeting, Saint Teresa hurried to tell her sisters: “Help me, daughters, to give thanks to our Lord God, for we already have a friar and a half to begin the reform of the Friars.”<sup>2</sup> Antonio de Heredia was the “full” friar, while John was the “half.” Later, she wrote: “He is not tall, but I think he is of great stature in God’s eyes.” Saint Teresa probably referred to the young friar’s eloquent reflections on love between God and the

soul as well as his ability to pitch in to help the nuns put up walls, hang doors, and fix leaky ceilings.

Resistance against the reform, however, was building in his former community, and in 1575 the General Chapter of the Order suppressed monasteries of the reform. Now began the greatest and most dramatic crisis of John's life. In 1577 he was kidnapped and imprisoned by his Order. Each evening he was forced to eat kneeling down and was struck with a lash. After six months a new jailer furnished him with paper and ink. In a sparsely lit cell and under harsh conditions, John wrote two of his spiritual classics, *The Dark Night* and *The Living Flame of Love*. After almost one year in prison he realized that he would not be released until he renounced the reform. One night, making a cloth rope, he let himself down from the high prison window. He was welcomed by Saint Teresa's nuns in Toledo. Eventually John was transferred to a remote monastery, La Penuela, to prepare for an assignment in Mexico. Instead he became very sick and was sent to Ubeda, where he died on December 14, 1591.

Saint John is known as Spain's greatest lyrical poet. His books, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Living Flame of Love*, and *The Dark Night*, are remarkable road signs for us on the mystical road to union with God. In 1926 Saint John of the Cross was declared a Doctor of the Church.



In life we pass through various phases. Transition can be difficult, especially today when we long for stability in a changing world. Practicing faith while continually re-adjusting to new circumstances is challenging enough, but in times of crisis or traumatic experience we can feel overwhelmed. Our former way of seeing and choosing no longer works. It is in these circumstances that the invitation to transformation is given.

One day, as I walked down the steps to the subway in New York City. I found the tunnel deserted. The light was dim. The air didn't stir. The surroundings mirrored my inner emptiness. I felt very alone. Then, from somewhere in the shadows, music from a single violin reached through my desolation. Not only is someone else here, I thought, this someone has been here before and knows this is a good place.

That violinist was like Saint John of the Cross sounding the mystery of God. God's eternal silence is sung in John's writings, so that our soul can hear it described in words that speak of desire: bride, garden, hidden fountain, darkness, healing, bridegroom, beloved. The journey through crises is a journey toward new birth. To be Christian is not to maintain, it is to transform. To reach our destination we wait, listen, and set out. Waiting implies

staying in a solitary place while longing to arrive. It means moving onto the train, where we remain standing. Once the door opens, we walk out into God's loving gaze, reflected on our face.

John crossed the boundary of suffering seeking his beloved. As our companion, he lets us in on the secret way to serenity in the midst of a dark, pathless night. What we love and what we have lost reawaken us to a new encounter with the Divine. John presents the night as an inflow of God, more lovely than the dawn. Let yourself be carried by God, he encourages. God loves that you may love God with the love God has for you. This love is "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5), the spring that flows and runs, although it is night.





## I

# Dark Night of the Soul

**O**ne dark night,  
fired with love's urgent longings  
—ah, the sheer grace!—  
I went out unseen,  
my house being now all stilled.<sup>3</sup>

Souls begin to enter this dark night when God, gradually drawing them out of the state of beginners (those who practice meditation on the spiritual road), begins to place them in the state of proficient (those who are already contemplatives), so that by passing through this

state they might reach that of the perfect, which is the divine union of the soul with God.

We should first mention here some characteristics of beginners, for the sake of a better explanation and understanding of the nature of this night and of God's motive for placing the soul in it. Although our treatment of these things will be as brief as possible, it will help beginners understand the feebleness of their state and take courage and desire that God place them in this night where the soul is strengthened in virtue and fortified for the inestimable delights of the love of God. . . .

It should be known, then, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to his service, like a loving mother who warms her child with the heat of her bosom, nurses it with good milk and tender food, and carries and caresses it in her arms. But as the child grows older, the mother withholds her caresses and hides her tender love; she rubs bitter aloes on her sweet breast and sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grow accustomed to greater and more important things. The grace of God acts just as a loving mother by re-engendering in the soul new enthusiasm and fervor in the service of God. With no effort on the soul's part, this grace causes it to taste sweet and delectable milk and to experience intense satisfaction in the performance

of spiritual exercises, because God is handing the breast of his tender love to the soul, just as if it were a delicate child (1 Pet 2:2–3).

— Excerpts from: *The Dark Night*, Book 1: Chapter 1:1, 2





## II

### O, Guiding Night!

**N**o matter how much individuals do through their own efforts, they cannot actively purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over and purge them in that fire that is dark for them, as we will explain.



This night . . . causes two kinds of darkness or purgation in spiritual persons according to the two parts of the soul, the sensory and the spiritual. Hence one night of

purgation is sensory, by which the senses are purged and accommodated to the spirit; and the other night or purgation is spiritual, by which the spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for union with God through love.



Since the conduct of these beginners in the way of God is lowly and not too distant from love of pleasure and of self . . . God desires to withdraw them from this base manner of loving and lead them on to a higher degree of divine love. And he desires to liberate them from the lowly exercise of the senses and of discursive meditation, by which they go in search of him so inadequately and with so many difficulties, and lead them into the exercise of spirit, in which they become capable of a communion with God that is more abundant and more free of imperfections. God does this after beginners have exercised themselves for a time in the way of virtue and have persevered in meditation and prayer. For it is through the delight and satisfaction they experience in prayer that they have become detached from worldly things and have gained some spiritual strength in God. This strength has helped them somewhat to restrain their appetites for creatures,

and through it they will be able to suffer a little oppression and dryness without turning back. Consequently, it is at the time they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction, when in their opinion the sun of divine favor is shining most brightly on them, that God darkens all this light and closes the door and the spring of sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often and as long as they desired. For since they were weak and tender, no door was closed to them, as Saint John says in the Book of Revelation (Rev 3:8). God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn in their discursive imaginings. They cannot advance a step in meditation, as they used to, now that the interior sense faculties are engulfed in this night. He leaves them in such dryness that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter. As I said, when God sees that they have grown a little, he weans them from the sweet breast so that they might be strengthened, lays aside their swaddling bands, and puts them down from his arms that they may grow accustomed to walking by themselves. This change is a surprise to them because everything seems to be functioning in reverse.



If His Majesty intends to lead the soul on, he does not put it in this dark night of spirit immediately after its going out from the aridities and trials of the first purgation and night of sense. Instead, after having emerged from the state of beginners, the soul usually spends many years exercising itself in the state of proficient. In this new state, as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, it goes about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight than it did in the beginning before entering the night of sense. Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight. Nonetheless, the purgation of the soul is not complete. . . . These morsels of dark contemplation, though, are never as intense as is that frightful night of contemplation we are about to describe, in which God places the soul purposely in order to bring it to divine union.

— Excerpts from: *The Dark Night*,  
Book 1: Chapters 3:3; 8:1, 3; Book 2: Chapter 1:1