

LARGE LETTERS

by ps jim mcinnes



One of the great pleasures of the Christian life is the felt-presence of God. The Old and New Testaments celebrate a God who delights His people with His presence. 'In Your presence there is fullness of joy; in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore,' praises the writer of Psalm 16. 'Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you,' says Jesus to His disciples in John's Gospel, followed by the promise: 'that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' (John 14:27; 15:11).

We were created to **enjoy** God's company.



the dark night of the soul: why can't I feel god's presence like I used to?

The enlightened minds who crafted the simple questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (a teaching tool by which Presbyterians of an earlier generation learned basic Christian truths) understood well that God's presence is His greatest gift to us. The first question asks: 'What is the chief end of man?' The correct answer is: 'To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' That simple yet evocative word *enjoy* packs so much promise.

The trouble is, however, that we don't always feel God's presence. In fact, the Christian life can include long periods where the felt-presence of God is a dim memory and a lost hope. Having known God's comforting presence in her early years, Mother Teresa—that great saint of Calcutta and servant of the poor—lamented in her later years her inability to sense the presence of God. Not that she ceased to pray. She continued to pray faithfully to the Lord she was devoted and betrothed to, but she never recovered a sense of His presence.

Mother Teresa is not unique in no longer feeling the presence of God after a courtship and honeymoon where He felt so close. Recently two Vine church members have asked me as a pastor to help them understand why God seems absent all of a sudden.

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Wrong.'

They still seek Him. They still pray. Why has He withdrawn His presence? This is more common than many Christians realise. That fact may not offer you much comfort if you have lost the sense of God's presence. However, perhaps an explanation of why God might flood us with His presence in the early days of faith, only to obscure it at a later date, may help to dispel some of the despair and disorientation that can take hold when God falls silent. Our tendency when we lose sight of God's love is to sink into guilt. We wonder what dreadful sin we committed. Meanwhile we double-down on our efforts to please God in the hopes of recovering some sense of His pleasure in us. We step up our spiritual disciplines. We pray harder and lengthen our quiet times. After all, it was through such disciplines that we first learned to taste His presence on a daily basis. Surely if we give it more gusto, God will come out of hiding and reward us again with that tangible sweet taste of His love for us.

Wrong. Sorry! Some of you have probably tried this and know by now that the despair only deepens and the silence remains deafening. Why then doesn't the spiritual life work like it used to? The answer may surprise you: You may have entered the 'dark night of the soul'.

Attentive believers down through the ages have observed that there comes a time in the Christian life where the pleasure we once took in communing with God evaporates and we find ourselves in a wilderness. Call it *a desert*, or a *dark night*, it's all the same; no water, no light, no word from God to sooth our soul, no response when we pray, no joy for a season.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous fourteenth century English believer taught



that ‘This darkness and this cloud...hinders you, so that you may neither see Him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, nor feel Him in the sweetness of love in your affection.’ It’s as if a cloud sits over the mind and heart so that we no longer comprehend God nor desire Him as we once did. This can be frightening for the believer. To lose our sense of love relationship with God terrifies us because it feels like a loss of faith itself, and we know from scripture that without faith we cannot please God (Heb 11:6). We panic.

However, we are not in fact losing our faith. Rather, it is being tested and refined. Our faith is not to rest on feelings – on the pleasure of God’s company, or the peace and joy that fill our heart

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when we worship Him or open His word. Such fleeting moments when we ‘feel’ God are a gift and a foretaste of the communion we will one day enjoy with Him in eternity, but they are not to be grasped possessively now. The problem is, that’s just what we try to do with every foretaste of eternity. We clutch it and covet it, and try to keep hold of it by repeating what we did last time we felt God smiling at us. Only this time, it doesn’t work. God resists our efforts to re-produce His presence. We find to our dismay that we can’t tame the un-tameable. God won’t let us domesticate Him.

What we did as new believers, without realising it, was transfer the focus of our fallen pleasure-seeking natures from all that the world offered us as false-comfort and a shadow of the real thing, to God the real thing; the only thing that satisfies. What we then find confusing is the fact that we can’t have the real thing – the legitimate and ultimately fulfilling pleasure of God’s company – on those same selfish terms by which we once lived life as an unbeliever. God is intent on purging us of selfish motives and liberating us from self-love, so that we love as He loves: freely and unconditionally. To achieve that, He has to help us see that we don’t love Him as purely as we thought we did when it was easy in the flush of early romance. What we loved then was how it felt to be in His presence. What we loved was pleasure itself, not God Himself. There’s a difference.

Interestingly, God allows us in the early stage of faith to enjoy His presence without having to give thought to our motives. Like a mother with an infant forming an attachment, we are nurtured through the unconditional love of God, to whom we ‘attach’ as we experience the spiritual pleasure of His presence. We learn that God’s love is desirable; that His presence is life-giving. So far, so good. But an attachment to God based on the pleasure of His presence is not the same as to love Him for His sake alone. What’s more, we may wrongly conclude that our efforts elicit God’s love. Christian psychologist and theologian John Coe explains:

'As [new Christians] go on in the faith, they come to believe that their affection and experience of closeness to God is largely the result of their acts of obedience and energy in the spiritual disciplines. In truth beginners have neither the maturity, self-awareness, nor insight to realise that it was always God's love and infant-grace that made the difference, that they did not have the character to really take such joy in God of their own accord. They believe that if they are doing the disciplines correctly, God will feel close. Thus, a two-fold problem ensues in their spirituality: first, they come to use their senses for pleasure (their feelings) to measure their spirituality and God's love for them; secondly, they think that their diligence made the difference.'

Sooner or later God withdraws His presence. Only then do we see our selfish motives for what they are, and therefore our need for greater sanctification. This process is painful but necessary. It was St. John of the Cross (a 16th century Spanish Christian mystic) who first described in detail the *dark night of the soul*. St. John understood that only when God withdraws His presence do we clearly see our sinful nature and learn to love Him for His sake, not for our own. Selfless love is the true mark of maturity and Christ-likeness.

Take heart if you are in the dark night of the soul. It may be painful and disorientating but it does not mean God has left you. You are just not permitted to feel His presence for now. That's a blessing, not a curse. Why? Because, as Coe tells us, 'This experience of dryness is actually a sign that God believes one is ready to have the bottle taken away and move into a deeper place of growth and love by means of a dark night.' The dark night is a gift because it leads down the path of self-denial. Through dying to the need to feel God's presence we are in fact dying to self – the very process by which we become like Christ. As we learn to cling to God without the consolation of His presence, our faith is refined and matured. We learn to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). The end result is a deeper faith and trust in God. Coe assures us that, 'As one cooperates with the dark night, there begins to emerge a new conviction of faith by the Spirit-to-spirit, even while in darkness, that God is present.'

You cannot enjoy God's love while you cling to it possessively and fear the loss of it. The absence of God's presence, as unnerving as it is, actually purges us of such fear and false motives. If you are experiencing a dark night of the soul, embrace it. Wait patiently. As you learn to walk with God in darkness, He will strip away the sinful nature. When He's finished you will love as He loves – without thought for yourself. That is freedom. And in that freedom you will glorify God and enjoy Him forever.



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John H. Coe, 'Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality,' *Journal of Psychology and Theology* vol. 28, No. 4 (2000): 293–307