

The obscure night of prayer

Dan Schrock

In a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, Charles Colson writes about his soul's dark night, suggesting that the best of evangelicalism, which had nurtured him for thirty-two years, had not prepared him for the unnerving experience of God's distance.¹ His faith had taught him to expect unfailing intimacy with God. What happens when it seems that God has suddenly withdrawn?

I am not sure how well the best of most Protestant traditions has prepared us for the dark night. Although many of us experience it at least once, if not several times, in our life of faith, few of us talk about it. Most of us mistakenly assume the dark night comes from new sin, spiritual laziness, burnout, or depression.² But the dark night of the soul—or as I propose it might better be

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named, the “obscure night”—is not caused by any of these, and it will not disappear through repentance, hard work, rest, or treatment for depression. Although it feels painful, the dark night is actually a wonderful gift from God.

The three signs

A few weeks after Easter, Terry stopped by the church.³ As his pastor for the previous six years, I had worked with him on several congregational committees, including the elders. A successful businessman in his late thirties, Terry owned a thriving floral shop downtown.

“Do you have a few minutes?” he wondered.

“Yes,” I replied, swinging away from my computer to face him. “What’s on your mind?”

He walked in, carefully shut the door of my study, and sat down in one of my armchairs. Taking a deep breath, he stared out

the window for half a minute before responding. “Your sermon last Sunday on John 21:1-14. You talked about Simon Peter and six other disciples who went fishing one long, dark night but caught absolutely nothing.”

I nodded.

“That’s me. I can’t catch anything in my spiritual life. I try to pray but the words barely come. God seems far off, inaccessible, maybe even absent. I’m stuck and don’t know what to do.”

I tried to look calm but was inwardly astonished. Could he be talking about a dark night? Although I had never offered Terry personal spiritual guidance as I had done for others in the congregation, I thought I knew him well. I had struggled with him and the other elders through difficult issues in the congregation. I had drunk latte with him several times at the coffeehouse a few doors from his floral shop. I thought of him as a Christian who breezed along merrily in his relationship with God, but maybe my assumptions were wrong. I encouraged him to say more. “How long has this been going on?”

“About four years, ever since my father died in the car accident. Since then I’ve had no idea where God is.”

My eyebrows arched. “That’s a long time to feel distant from God. You aren’t able to pray the way you used to pray?”

“Right.”

“May I ask a few more questions?”

He nodded. “Sure. I came to talk about this.”

“I know you love to sing. How have you been experiencing Sunday morning worship services?”

His face grew sad. “Flat. Some Sundays I can’t open my mouth during the hymns. I look at the page, but I can’t focus. The notes and words swim under my eyes. Even if I manage to sing, it leaves me feeling hollow inside.”

“You feel your spiritual life has stalled out—you can’t pray or sing. How do you feel about your work at the shop?”

“Well,” he paused, “financially the business is fine, and I believe flowers are a ministry to people at births, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, funerals, and so on. But my work doesn’t satisfy me any more. I’m surrounded all day by some of the most beautiful things God ever created, and the flowers are like ashes in my hands.”

We sat in silence for a little while. “You’re not receiving any satisfaction in either your spiritual life or your work life,” I said.

He nodded.

“I know you enjoy being with people, but do you yearn for more solitude or silence?”

His eyes grew large. “Yes! In the evenings when the weather is nice, I’ve been going out for quiet walks along the river. Being away from other people and near the water is a balm to my soul. And last winter, I discovered that most nights I just wanted to build a fire in the fireplace, sit in the rocking chair, and watch the flames dance. I wasn’t doing or thinking of anything in particular, but I just watched. It gave me peace.”

I thought for a moment. “What do you want more than anything else? What’s your deepest desire right now?”

Terry’s eyes focused with a hungry, pained look. “God. More than anything else, I want to feel the presence of God in my life again, like I did before Dad died. But I’m stuck. I’m confused by all this and I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Although it feels devastating, the dark night purifies our desires and brings us into new friendship with God. God does not abandon us, but through a fresh outpouring of light and love, God works with us in intimate ways.

Terry exhibits all three signs of the dark night that were first outlined by John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite: a sense of dryness in one’s spiritual life, an inability to pray in the usual way, and a growing desire to be alone in loving awareness of God. For it to be a dark night, all three must be present at the same time.⁴ During the dark night it seems as if God has partially withdrawn or become wholly absent, leaving us feeling abandoned. Although it feels devastating, the

dark night purifies our desires—our loves—and brings us into new friendship with God. God does not abandon us during the dark night (Ps. 139:7-12), but through a fresh outpouring of light and love, God works with us in intimate ways.

The sense of obscurity

While the experience of dryness, of being unable to pray, and of yearning for a seemingly absent God has been around at least since biblical times, John of the Cross (1542–1591) was the first

in Christian history to coin the phrase “dark night,” and his description of the phenomenon and how God acts in it remain compelling. Although people now sometimes talk about “the dark night of the soul,” John never used the term *la noche oscura de la alma*, and often simply called it *la noche oscura*, usually translated as “the dark night.”

I prefer to translate *oscura* as “obscure,” for two reasons. First, in English usage *dark* can allude to immorality. The first figurative meaning of the word as an adjective is: “characterized by absence of moral or spiritual light; evil, wicked; also, in a stronger sense, characterized by a turpitude or wickedness of sombre or unrelieved nature; foul, iniquitous, atrocious.”⁵ For John of the Cross, though, the *noche oscura* is not caused by the absence of moral or spiritual light but precisely by the presence of God’s transforming light shining into us.

Second, the word *obscure* echoes the subjective experience of confusion that we typically sense in the night. In interviews I conducted in the fall of 2005 with people who were in a night, they repeatedly described how obscure this experience was for them. One woman, for instance, used the metaphor of a map. She had always thought of herself traveling on the main highway with God, but after entering the night she felt as though she were alone on an unmarked dirt road on the far edge of the map, with no signs telling her where this road would take her. In these interviews, only people who had emerged on the other side of the night were able to look back and trace what God had been doing.

God’s purpose in the night

In Mark 12:29-30, Jesus (quoting Deut. 6:4-5) names the central teaching of scripture: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Our central purpose is to love God fully, and then to let that love lead to love for neighbor (Mark 12:31).

But sooner or later, even after our baptism into Christ, most of us fall in love with, and ultimately come to worship, things that are not God: a new computer, an academic degree, a mentor, esteem from our colleagues. We can also become attached to spiritual things, such as a certain method of Bible study, a specific

practice of prayer, a church building, or a religious ideal like “the baby killers have to be stopped” or “give justice to the poor.” The problem is our attachment, which takes up spiritual space that we could otherwise dedicate to loving God and others.

Attachments are notoriously subtle. In the four obscure nights that God has given me so far, I have learned, to my chagrin, how quickly I become attached to even innocuous things. These

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attachments can become idolatrous, stirring up God’s jealousy (Exod. 20:4-5). God wants to be our primary focus, the recipient of our deepest love and highest commitment, but disordered attachments stand in the way.

The obscure night is a tool God uses to cut out the cancer of our disordered attachments, freeing us to love God as God. To borrow a biblical image, in the obscure night God prunes attachments that do not produce spiritual health (John 15:1-2). This explains why the obscure night sometimes feels awful:

we are being pruned. As God trims our lesser loves, our yearning for God intensifies in response to the divine love pouring into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). In the light of God’s love, our lesser loves are reordered and put in their proper place. By drying up the shallow satisfactions that we have found in our disordered attachments, the Holy Spirit deepens our desire for the true satisfaction that God offers.

In the obscure night, God furthers the process of transformation begun at our baptism. For some people the night is tantamount to a second conversion experience. By softening our disordered attachments, God dissolves some of the old, stubborn sin that we cannot eradicate through our practices of Christian virtue and discipleship. By removing the pleasure we felt at buying a new car, God dethrones materialism. By drying up the delight that rushed through us after we received a big promotion, God prevents us from idolizing our work. By withdrawing the satisfaction we once found in a particular spiritual practice, God turns us away from worshiping the practice and refocuses our worship on God alone. Because of the obscure night, our life takes on a more countercultural flavor.

Discursive meditation and contemplation

The obscure night also inaugurates a movement from discursive meditation into contemplation. *Discursive meditation* is a pathway of prayer and associated spiritual practices that uses words, images, and the five senses to grasp foundational knowledge about God and Christian living. We generally decide when, where, and how to carry out discursive meditation. Much of North American church life—most sermons and worship services, Bible study, Christian education classes, and theological conversation—uses discursive meditation. This is appropriate for the most part: discursive meditation is a foundational pathway in the Christian life that we never outgrow and discard.

But there is also *contemplation*, another pathway of prayer and associated spiritual practices that does not require words, images, or the five senses to receive communication from God. God largely guides when, where, and how contemplation occurs, although we may prepare ourselves for the gift of contemplation. Unlike discursive meditation, contemplation moves beyond thinking and doing to receiving God's presence and consenting to God's action, some of which is hidden from us.⁶ Contemplation is "a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love."⁷

In the obscure night, the Holy Spirit orients us toward the gift of contemplation, which marks a key development in our relationship with God. If we only practice discursive meditation, and if we continue to receive satisfaction from it, we might live under the illusion that we control most of what happens in our spiritual life. We can become attached not only to discursive meditation's pleasures but also to the notion that we have made it spiritually. But when God sours the sweetness of discursive meditation in order to interest us in contemplation, we learn that we are not in control of our spiritual life, because contemplation comes and goes as God chooses. In contemplation, we learn to rely on God for the very act of prayer.

Other than waiting for God to finish whatever purification God wants to accomplish, the best response to an obscure night is to cultivate contemplative practices that prepare us for contemplation. Centering prayer is specifically designed for this. Other contemplative practices may include *lectio divina*, walking a

labyrinth, the Jesus prayer, Taizé-style worship, and more. The Holy Spirit apparently used nature's quiet and fire's flames to open Terry to contemplation. Contemplation is available to any person of faith. I suspect that much more contemplation is going on in the lives of ordinary Christians than most of us recognize, or than much of our preaching, teaching, and worship acknowledge and bless.

Expressions

An obscure night can be mild or intense, lasting from a few weeks to many years. The longest I've witnessed is ten to twelve years, although in at least one case, Mother Teresa's, it lasted fifty years.⁸

John of the Cross distinguished the milder night of sense from the

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more intense night of spirit (as well as the active night from the passive). But John's categories, derived from medieval anthropology and scholastic theology, are difficult to discern in actual practice and do not fit as well with our understanding of the human person as an integrated whole. Nonetheless, John's insight remains valid: obscure nights come in various intensities and expressions.

The night can come at any point from soon after our baptism to just before we die. Although it may follow in the wake of one of the many forms of suffering that life throws at

us—such as death of a spouse, persistent infertility, chronic illness, job loss, hurricane devastation, war—it does not necessarily do so. It can come, as it has several times to me, when we are living in one of the more successful times of life, free from other forms of suffering. It can appear in the inner life of prayer, in marriage or family life, or in our vocational life.⁹

We often emerge from the night with a new sense of friendship (the traditional word is *union*) with God, more visible fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), a sharper sense of living counterculturally in relation to the world, and more passion about some form of mission. In what is now regarded as one of the foremost poems in the Spanish language, John of the Cross called the obscure night "more lovely than the dawn."¹⁰ Within a year after our conversa-

tion, Terry, by his own testimony, started to notice the flame of contemplation in his life. I observed that, like many others whom God has ushered through the obscure night, he began to glow.

Notes

¹ Charles Colson, "My Soul's Dark Night," *Christianity Today*, 12 December 2005, 80.

² The distinction between the dark night and depression is an important topic that lies beyond the scope of this article. See Kevin Culligan, "The Dark Night and Depression," in *Carmelite Prayer: A Tradition for the 21st Century*, ed. Keith J. Egan (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 119–38; a shortened version appeared in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 10, no. 1 (February 2004): 8–19. See also Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 155–59. Both authors agree that while a dark night and depression may occur simultaneously in a person's life, they are nevertheless distinct phenomena requiring different responses.

³ "Terry" is a composite of various people, male and female, with whom I've talked over the years. Our "conversation" is likewise invented, though representative of many I've had with people both inside and outside the congregations I've pastored.

⁴ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.13.2–4; *The Dark Night*, 1.9.2–3, 8; and *The Sayings of Light and Love*, 119. The standard English translation is *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "dark, a.," http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50057626?query_type=word&queryword=dark&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=uhir-ODkW6i-6316&hilite=50057626.

⁶ Ernest E. Larkin, "The Carmelite Tradition and Centering Prayer/Christian Meditation," in *Carmelite Prayer*, ed. Egan, 202–22; and Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 57.

⁷ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 1.10.6.

⁸ See Carol Zaleski, "The Dark Night of Mother Teresa," *First Things* 133 (May 2003): 24–27.

⁹ A congregation or church institution, as a corporate entity, may also go through an obscure night.

¹⁰ John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," stanza 5.

About the author

Dan Schrock, one of two pastors at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, Goshen, Indiana, is writing a book on the obscure night.