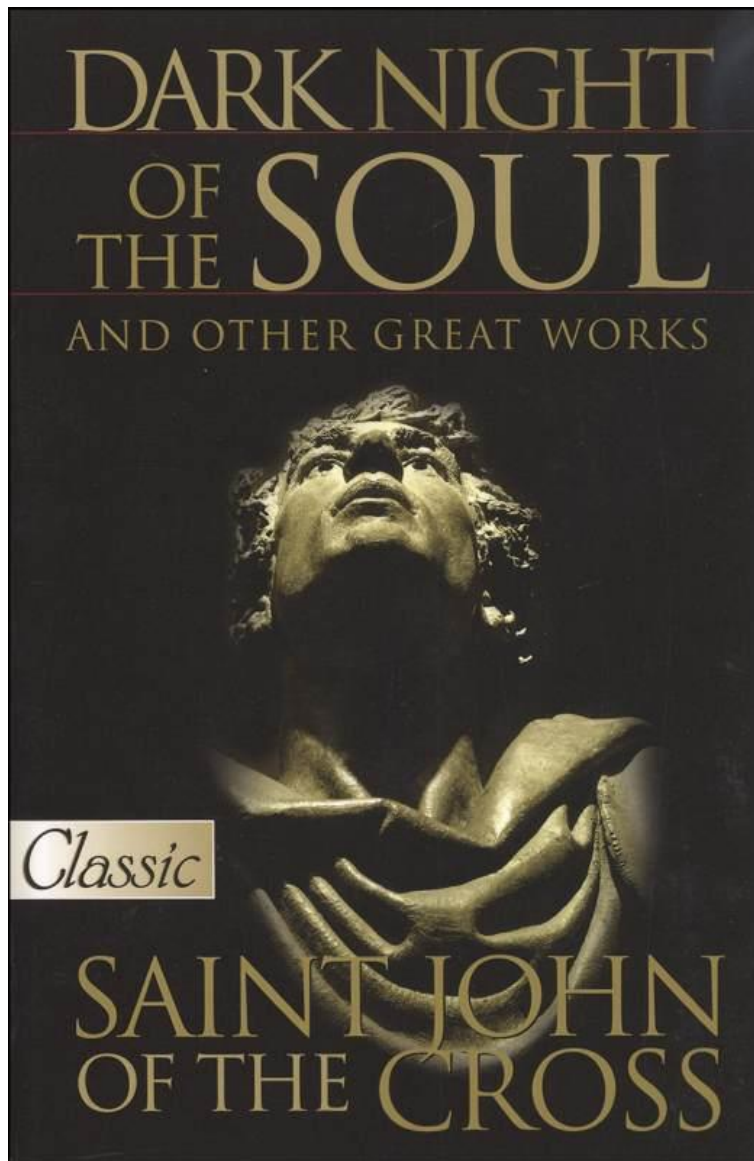


A Summary of The Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross



A Summary of *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross

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General Overview

Prologue for the Reader

First the entire poem is cited, and then each stanza will be explained, followed by an explanation of each verse. The first two stanzas describe the effects of the two kinds of spiritual purgation that take place in a person: one a purification of the sensory part, the other, purification of the spiritual part. The last six stanzas speak of the results obtained from spiritual illumination and union with God through love.

Stanzas of the Soul

One dark night, fired with love's urgent longings -ah, the sheer grace!- I went out unseen, my house being now all stilled.

In darkness, and secure by the secret ladder, disguised, -ah, the sheer grace!- in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled.

On that glad night, in secret, for no one saw me, nor did I look at anything, with no other light or guide than the one that burned in my heart.

This guided me more surely than the light of noon to where he was awaiting me -him I knew so well- there in a place where no one appeared.

O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn! O night that has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Upon my flowering breast which I kept wholly for him alone, there he lay sleeping, and I caressing him there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

When the breeze blew from the turret, as I parted his hair, it wounded my neck with its gentle hand, suspending all my senses.

I abandoned and forgot myself, laying my face on my Beloved: all things ceased; I went out from myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

The soul recites these poetic stanzas when it has reached union with God through love. The soul has already walked on the narrow road (Mt. 7:14) of many trials and conflicts to reach this perfection of love. This constricted road is called the dark night. The soul sings happily at having derived so much good from this road:

BOOK ONE: A Treatise on the Night of the Senses

One dark night, fired with love's urgent longings -ah, the sheer grace!- I went out unseen, my house being now all stilled.

Explanation:

The soul mortifies itself through purgative contemplation of all attachment to self and all things to reach the life of love with God. The soul was only able to achieve this negation through the strength of its loving

Bridegroom. None of the soul's three enemies (the world, the devil or the flesh) could impede it, because the purifying contemplation deadened the passions and appetites of the soul.

Chapter 1: Quotes the verse and begins to discuss the imperfections of beginners

God draws souls through three states to divine union. Beginners are those who practice spiritual meditation. Proficients are those who are already contemplatives. The Perfect are those who are in divine union of the soul with God. Beginners should understand their feebleness of state and take courage that God has placed them in the dark night to strengthen the virtue of their soul to receive the delights of love of God.

God nurtures and caresses the soul who is newly converted to His service as a mother nurtures her child at the breast. As the child grows the mother withholds her caresses and puts the child down so the child may put away childish habits and grow to greater things. At this stage, the soul, through no effort of its own, receives great satisfaction in performing spiritual exercises. The soul finds great joy and consolation in the prayers, penances, fasts and Sacraments. However, the motivation of the soul is the consolation and satisfaction received from these acts. They have not long practiced virtue so they still possess many faults and imperfections. Their habits are feeble like a weak child.

We will describe, using the seven capital vices, some of the many imperfections beginners commit. The dark night purifies the soul of these childish imperfections.

Chapter 2: Some of the imperfections of pride possessed by beginners.

Beginners feel a secret pride due to their fervor and diligence in their spiritual exercises, so that they become complacent with themselves. They become vain and speak of spiritual things in the presence of others, sometimes instructing, condemning, or criticizing the practice of others, like the Pharisee in Luke 18-11-12.

The devil uses this growing pride by increasing their fervor and readiness to perform spiritual works. But he does this to negate the worth of these virtues turning them into vices. These beginners will condemn and detract others, seeing the splinter in their brother's eye, rather than the plank in their own. (Mt. 7:3)

When confessors or spiritual directors disapprove of their spirit and methods, the beginner will say the director does not understand, or will seek a new confessor who will praise them. They will make many resolutions with little result, and will also make public displays of raptures so others will take notice.

Beginners want their confessor to think highly of them, so rather than accuse themselves of their true sins, they will excuse their behavior. Or they might seek out different confessors to confess so that their regular confessor thinks they commit no sins at all. They confess their good behavior. It would be better for them to make light of the good they do and wish no one consider it of any importance at all.

Beginners minimize their faults or become discouraged by them, since they felt they were already saints. They become impatient and angry with themselves, which is another fault. They wish that God would remove all their faults, but it is for personal peace rather than love of God. They don't realize that removal of their faults might make them more proud and presumptuous. They love praise from others, but dislike praising others, like the foolish virgins who had to borrow oil (cf. Mt. 25:8).

Beginners may have few or many imperfections or tendencies towards them, but all beginners will fall victim to some of these faults.

Souls who are advancing in perfection act in quite a different manner. They receive great benefit from their humility. They do not view the work they do for God as anything great, instead they see others serving God

with far more love and care. When they do good works, they see their debt to God and the inadequacy of their service to God goading them to do even more. They become preoccupied with how they can serve him. They are unaware of what others do or do not do for God. If these receive praise, they can't believe it, praise seems strange to them.

These souls long to be taught by anyone who might be a help to them, unlike the beginners who wish to be experts in spiritual things.

These humble souls would gladly change the path they were on if instructed to do so, for they do not believe they could ever be right. It is their joy for others to be praised. They seek to accuse themselves of their faults rather than bring attention to their “little works” for God. This is a great grace given to the humble to keep these treasures hidden.

These souls would give up their life for those who serve God. They suffer in humility when they fall into imperfections. Very few souls are so perfect in the beginning. It would be good to succumb to pride. God uses the dark night to purify these imperfections, and to advance.

Chapter 3: Some imperfections of spiritual avarice commonly found in beginners.

Some souls possess great spiritual avarice (i.e. greed). They are not content with what God gives them in their spirit, in consolations. They spend more time in pursuing knowledge and maxims than in striving after mortification and the perfection of interior poverty, which they are obliged to pursue. These souls are always looking for a new prayer, rosary, cross or practice, never content in what they are doing for love of God. They are possessive of heart and attached to the object rather than the poverty of spirit which is the substance of their devotion.

Well guided souls do not become attached to visible instruments. Instead, they set their eyes on interior perfection, pleasing God and not themselves.

Until a soul is placed in the dark night, it cannot purify itself from its imperfections. No matter how hard a soul tries it cannot actively purify itself enough to be disposed for divine union of perfect love. God must take over and purge them in the fire that is dark for them.

Chapter 4: The imperfections of lust, the third capital vice, usually found in beginners.

All souls have greater or lesser degrees of imperfection. As for the vice of lust, impure movements may be experienced in the sensory part of the soul during spiritual exercises, the Mass, or Sacraments. These impure feelings arise from any of three causes outside of one's control.

First there is a two-fold pleasure found in spiritual exercises. The spirit receives renewal and satisfaction in God and the senses feel sensory satisfaction. Even deep in prayer, a soul may experience sensual rebellion, not without its own great displeasure.

Even in Communion, “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.” Once the sensory part of the soul is reformed through the dark night, the soul receives God's spirit according to the mode of the spirit.

The second origin of these rebellions is the devil. The devil will try to distract those endeavoring to pray by exciting impure feelings in the sensory part. If one pays attention to these feelings, a soul may grow lax in prayer, the devil's goal. Some will give up prayer because this is when the devil tries to provoke these feelings the most. Sometimes these thoughts concern spiritually helpful things or people; the person trying to avoid the impure, then avoids the prayer so as not to stumble. Those who suffer melancholia truly suffer. They may feel that the devil has access to them without their ability to prevent it. The dark night, in time, deprives them of everything.

The third origin of impure feelings is the fear of thoughts and feelings. Here, the person is not at fault. Some people receive a gratification in prayer and immediately and simultaneously experience a lust that engulfs them. Some in spiritual conversations or works will manifest a vain satisfaction often accompanied by complacency of the will. Some will become attached to another as a result of lust rather than the spirit. One can determine its origin if it draws one toward that person it is lust or to an increase in love of God. As love of God grows greater, the soul grows cold in inordinate affection and comes to forget it. But if the lesser love increases, love of God will grow cold.

When the soul enters the dark night, all these loves are placed in reasonable order. This night strengthens and purifies the love that is of God, and takes away and destroys the other. However, in the beginning it causes the soul to lose sight of both of them.

Chapter 5: The imperfections of the capital vice of anger into which beginners fall.

For many beginners, after spiritual gratification is experienced and the savor fades, the soul is left without that pleasant feeling and becomes peevish and easily angered in the work they do. Souls are not at fault if they do not allow this dejection to influence them. This imperfection must be purged through dryness and distress of the dark night.

There is another kind of spiritual anger, that of seeing imperfections in others. They feel impelled to correct the sins of others contrary to the spirit of meekness.

Others become angry with their own imperfections, and exhibit impatience. They want to become saints in a day. They make many resolutions, the more they make, the more they fail and the greater their anger. They are impatient for God to change them instead of waiting for the grace in God's time. Others are too patient to advance.

Chapter 6: The imperfections of spiritual gluttony.

The fourth vice is spiritual gluttony. Most beginners fall into spiritual gluttony. In pursuit of spiritual satisfaction, many will go to great extremes in fasting and penances and hide these practices from counsel or do them contrary to obedience.

These souls are most imperfect preferring corporal penance to submissiveness and obedience (which is far more pleasing to God). Extremes in behavior grow the soul's own will, and those extremes grow in vice rather than virtue.

The devil stirs up this gluttony. To avoid obedience the soul will add, change, or modify what is commanded. Obedience is distasteful to them. Obedience makes some lose all desire for devotion. Their only pleasure is to do what they want to do.

Some souls insist on demanding permission from their spiritual director to follow their own desires. They are under the impression that they do not serve God when they are not allowed to do what they want. They equate serving and satisfying God as satisfying themselves.

Some souls have no fear and respect for God and demand permission to receive Communion from their spiritual director. Some dare receive without permission; with hearts set on frequent reception of communion, they are careless with their confessions. They bring great evil on themselves.

Once communion is received they seek a feeling rather than praising God who indwells in them. They judge God poorly, and misunderstand the sensory benefits as the least of those graces received in the most Blessed Sacrament. God removes sensory delight for the Faith on invisible grace. Desire to taste and feel God as if He were accessible and comprehensible is a serious imperfection because it involves impurity of Faith.

In prayer too, they strive for sensory satisfaction and devotion, through their own efforts. Because their prayer feels it has done nothing, they will abandon prayer. They are prompted to act on pleasure not reason.

God removes this satisfaction in beginners, to purge this desire for sweetness as in a child.

Those inclined towards delights are weak in treading the rough way of the cross.

Spiritual sobriety and temperance beget a different quality, one of mortification, fear, and submissiveness in all things. Souls will do well to practice self-denial until God purifies them in the dark night.

Chapter 7: The imperfections of spiritual envy and sloth.

Many beginners feel sad at the spiritual good of others. They cannot bear hearing that others are ahead of them on the road to perfection. They grow in annoyance as they do not receive the plaudits of their neighbors.

Regarding sloth, beginners become weary in spiritual exercises. They become bored when they do not receive the satisfaction they crave, often giving up prayer or returning to it grudgingly. Because of sloth, they give up the way of perfection because it requires sacrificing one's own will and satisfaction, for God.

These beginners mistakenly desire their own will and satisfaction and believe if they are satisfied, that God is too. They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God, which is in opposition to His teaching in the Gospel that those who lose their life for His sake will gain it, and those who desire to gain it will lose it (cf. Mt. 16:25).

Beginners become bored when told to do something unpleasant. They are lax in the fortitude and labor that perfection demands. They are scandalized by the Cross. Entering by the narrow way of life is saddening and repugnant to them (cf. Mt. 7:14).

To move beginners to the level of proficient, God introduces them to the dark night. No matter how much a beginner desires and mortifies himself, he cannot accomplish the weaning from gratifications and delights, childish ways on his own. The dark night makes them acquire virtues by a very different means. The verse, then, is: One dark night.

Chapter 8 - The beginning of the exposition of this dark night. An explanation of verse 1 of the first stanza.

The night consists of two kinds of purgation: the sensory and the spiritual. The sensory night purges the senses and accommodates the spirit. This is common and happens to many beginners. The spiritual night, by which the spirit is purged and denuded to accommodate and prepare for union with God through love. This night is for very few, who have been tried and are proficient.

The first purgation is bitter and terrible to the senses. It is first to be dealt with and one can find others who write on it. The second is horrible and frightening to the spirit, very little has been written about it.

The conduct of the beginner is not much different than love of pleasure and love of self. God desires to lead them to a higher degree of divine love. He desires them to move to a communion with God that is abundant and freer of imperfections. God waits until the beginner has practiced for a time the way of virtue and persevered in meditation and prayer. Delight and satisfaction in prayer help to detach them from worldly things and gain some spiritual strength in God. With this strength they can endure some oppression and dryness without turning back. Initially in prayer and meditation, no door was closed to them, they tasted sweetness and grew whenever they desired. God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn in their discursive imaginings. They cannot advance; they feel dry and fail to receive satisfaction from their spiritual exercises and works. Instead, they find them bitter and distasteful. This change is a surprise and reverse of how things functioned before.

A reform of the appetites is the requirement for entering the happy night of the senses. Not much time lapses after the initial stages of their spiritual life. It is common to see beginners suffer these aridities.

Many scriptures from the Psalms and Prophets can support this experience of the night.

Chapter 9: Signs for discerning whether a spiritual person is treading the path of this sensory night and purgation.

I will give some signs for discerning whether dryness is the result of purgation or a defect, such as: weakness, lukewarmness, bad humor, or bodily disposition. There are three principal signs for knowing this.

The first sign is that these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God or His creatures either. He finds sweetness and delight in nothing. If the distaste came from a newly committed sin, then the soul would look for satisfaction in something other than the things of God. If an appetite is indulged on the sensory part, the soul immediately feels an inclination toward it, in the proportion of the degree of its satisfaction and attachment. A want of satisfaction could also be the product of some indisposition or melancholic humor; a second sign is necessary.

The second sign is the turning towards God with solicitude and painful care, even accompanied by a feeling that one is not serving God, because it is aware of the distaste for things of God. Lukewarm people are not much concerned about the things of God nor are they solicitous about them.

There is a notable difference between dryness and lukewarmness. Lukewarm souls are very lax and remiss in their will and spirit, and have no solicitude about serving God. Those suffering from the purgative dryness are ordinarily solicitous, concerned, and painful about not serving God. Melancholia or some other humor, often may further the dryness, but it is not ineffective in its purgation, for the soul is deprived of satisfaction, but still concerned with God. If it's just humor, then there is no desire to serve God, and everything ends in displeasure and does harm to one's nature. In this purgation the soul is downcast, yet the spirit is ready and strong.

The reason for this dryness is that God transfers his goods and strength from sense to spirit. The sensory part remains dry, empty and deprived, causing it to become weak. The spirit is tasting nourishment, getting stronger, and growing more alert and more solicitous than before about not failing God.

If in the beginning the soul does not experience spiritual savor and delight, it is because the palate is unaccustomed to these subtle tastes. The soul will gradually be prepared for these savors by means of the dark and obscure night.

We are like the children of Israel who received heavenly food while in the desert, which changed to whatever taste each one hungered after. (Wisdom 16:20-21) Yet they craved meat and onions like they had in Egypt. They were unaccustomed to the heavenly manna. (Num. 11:4-6) The baseness of our appetite is such that it makes us long for our own miserable goods and experience aversion for the incommunicable heavenly good.

When the sensory appetite is purged and dry, the spirit feels the strength and energy to work. This spirit is obtained by interior food, even if the savor is not yet there. This food is the beginning of contemplation, which is secret and subtle even from the one who receives it. It produces a desire to remain alone in quietude. The soul is unable to dwell on any thought. If the soul can remain quiet and unconcerned by idleness, it may experience delicate interior nourishment. This nourishment is so delicate that if they desired to receive it, they would be unable.

We can begin to understand what the Spouse said to the bride in Song of Songs, “Turn your eyes from me, because they make me fly away.” (Sg. 6:4) God takes the soul on a different path. A desire to work with the faculties would hinder God's work, contrary to spiritual life in the beginning. When the soul leaves discursive meditation, it enters the state of proficients, and God works in it.

He binds the interior faculties, and leaves no support in the intellect, no satisfaction in the will, nor any remembrance in the memory. A person's efforts are an obstacle to the peace and work that God is producing in the spirit. This peace is delicate, and its fruit is quiet, delicate, solitary, satisfying, and peaceful, unlike earlier gratifications. This peace makes the soul spiritual (Ps. 85:8). The third sign follows from this one.

The third sign for the discernment of purgation is the powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts to meditate and make use of the imagination as one did before. God does not communicate Himself through the senses anymore, but by pure spirit through an act of simple contemplation. There is no succession of thought.

This third sign is not the result of bad humor for that would eventually pass. Instead, once this purgation of the appetite happens, one is always powerless to meditate. Some souls might have a complete weaning from mediation at the beginning due to their weaknesses.

Not all souls are brought to the life of the spirit in contemplation. In fact, not even half of those who exercise themselves in the way of the spirit are brought to the life of the spirit. God may place some in aridities for a short period or certain season. Perhaps to humble them, or reform their appetites so they don't form a harmful attraction to sweetness. God knows best.

Chapter 10

(The conduct required of souls in this dark night.)

This sensory night is arid. The soul fears having gone astray. It feels that there will be no more spiritual blessings bestowed, as God has abandoned them. They fall back to practice as before, striving to concentrate their faculties on some subject of meditation. This is accompanied by the soul's repugnance for the work it is enduring. Yet, they do not profit by this spiritual work. By searching for spirit, they lose the spirit that was the source of their tranquility. The soul no longer will benefit by the practice of meditation.

Without spiritual guidance or support, the soul will repeat the practice of discursive meditation to no avail. It will grow weary. But God does not have the soul on this path but on another beyond the range of the imagination and discursive reflection.

These souls should trust in God to provide for them who seek Him with a simple heart.

The attitude necessary in the night of the sense is to ignore discursive meditation, since this is not the time for that. Through patience and prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part. No thinking or meditating, but a simple, loving and peaceful attentiveness to God. Souls should live without the desire to taste or feel Him. These desires only distract the soul from contemplation.

The soul is aware of the wasting of time by not doing something else during prayer. If the soul can rest in ease and freedom of spirit, it will not hinder the work of God. If a model for a painting were to move during the session, the work would be spoiled. So to with the interior life, if a soul clings to support in knowledge and affection, the more it hinders the work of God. This person should prefer the loss of the faculties and speedily, so that they will pose no obstacle to the operation of infused contemplation. For contemplation is a secret and peaceful loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love. Contemplation is reflected in this verse: Fired with love's urgent longings

Chapter 11

God introduces souls into this dark night to purge their senses, and unite the lower part of the soul to the spiritual part, by darkening it and causing the cessation of discursive meditation. There are so many benefits to the soul that it senses, "Ah, the sheer grace!" The benefits are included in the next verse: I went out unseen.

This night frees the soul from the seven capital vices, by quenching all its earthly and heavenly satisfactions, darkening meditation, and acquiring all the virtues. These blessings are attained when a soul detaches from all earthly things and walks toward the eternal. First the soul's appetites and affections for all things are quenched and the soul endures and perseveres, entering the narrow gate spoken of in Matthew 7:14.

The soul is denuded and despoiled in this dark night, so it is capable of walking on the constricted road in pure faith whereby it is united to God. Few can walk on this obscure, dark, and terrible road, which is more difficult than the night of the sense, but has incomparably greater benefits to the soul.

Chapter 12

(The benefits this night causes in the soul.)

This glad night and purgation causes many benefits even though the souls seems deprived from them. The benefits are like the great feast Abraham gave for his son, Isaac. Now, the soul is being fed the food of the strong, not the comforting and nurturing food of the infant. The soul is walking on its own, no longer dressed in swaddling clothes.

The primary benefit is the knowledge of the soul's own misery. All favors from God are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge. The practice of virtue makes the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in its time of prosperity.

In Exodus 33:5, the Lord made the children of Israel remove all clothing and adornments of mirth and celebration and put on common working clothes. This was to remind them of their lowliness, each time they looked at themselves.

This recognition of its misery helps the soul know its place. The soul is longer content with thinking that it is serving God in some way. Now re-clothed, the soul has a more authentic light in this virtue of self-knowledge. It is aware that of itself it can do nothing.

God esteems this lack of self-satisfaction above all their former deeds, since these deeds were the occasion of many imperfections and ignorances.

First, souls commune with God more respectfully and courteously, the way one should converse with the Most High God. Like Moses in Exodus 3:4-5, who spoke boldly to God rather than considering if he should dare approach God, he was ordered to stop and take off his shoes. Having left the shoes of his appetites and gratifications, he was fully aware of his own misery in the sight of God. This was the manner that was fitting for him to hear God's work.

Similarly, Job was not prepared to speak with God in his prosperity. Only when he was naked on a dunghill, persecuted by his friends, aware of his anguish and bitterness, seeing the earth covered with worms (cf. Jb. 2:8, 30:17-18), was God then pleased to descend and speak face to face with him and reveal the deep mysteries of His wisdom.

Chapter 13

(Other benefits of this night of the senses)

There are many benefits of the night: knowledge of God and self as well as the virtues. In these benefits, the soul is perfected from avarice, in which it craved various spiritual exercises because of the covetousness of its appetites and the gratification it found in spiritual things. The soul no longer obtains the delight which it once did, but finds spiritual practices distasteful and laborious. There is a danger that the soul may fail through defect rather than excess. However, God usually blesses those whom He brings into this night with the humility and readiness to do what is commanded of them for His sake. Doing what is commanded of them usually brings about displeasure, but it also brings a greater detachment.

God curbs concupiscence and bridles the appetites through this arid and dark night. The soul is unable to feast on any sensory delight from earth or heaven. The passions lose their strength: they are sterile. The soul's withered appetites now live in sobriety, which is the cause of its spiritual peace and tranquility. St. John tells us that, "David affirms that a person obtains in this night these four benefits: the delight of peace; a habitual remembrance of God and solicitude concerning Him; cleanness and purity of soul; and the practice of virtue. For David had such experience by being in this night: *My soul refused consolations, I remembered God and found consolation, and exercised myself, and my soul swooned away*; and then he adds: *I meditated at night in my heart, and I exercised myself, and swept and purified my spirit* (of all its imperfections) [Ps. 77:2-6]."

Insofar as these people are purged of their sensory affections and appetites, they obtain freedom of spirit. Through freedom of spirit, those undergoing the dark night of the soul acquire the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. Having calmed the four passions (joy, sorrow, hope, and fear) through constant mortification, put to sleep the sensory appetites, and achieved harmony in the interior senses by discontinuing discursive operations, the soul states: my house being now all stilled

Chapter 14

(An explanation of the last verse of the first stanza)

St. John concludes book one with the duration of the dark night and its accompanying trials. With all of the soul's senses, appetites, and passions quieted, "the soul went out in order to begin its journey along the road of

the spirit, which is that of proficients and which by another terminology is referred to as the illuminative way or the way of infused contemplation. On this road, God himself pastures and refreshes the soul without any of its own discursive meditation or active help.”

That journey is the sensory night and purgation of the soul. For those who must then enter the night of the spirit, which is more oppressive, in order to reach the divine union of love, this night is ordinarily accompanied by long-lasting burdensome trials and sensory temptations. Satan is ever-presently buffeting their senses. Another spirit, *spiritus vertiginis* [Is. 19:14], is sent to these souls to try them. God generally sends these trials so that the senses and faculties may gradually be exercised, prepared, and inured for the union with wisdom that will be granted there.

“As is evident through experience, souls who will pass on to so happy and lofty a state as is the union of love must usually remain in these aridities and temptations for a long while no matter how quickly God leads them.”

Book II

Book Two is a continuation of Book One. It continues the expository of *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Whereas Book One delved into the sensory night, Book Two delves into the night of the spirit. The dark night of the spirit is necessary in order to perfect the soul so that it may be united to God. At the end of Book One, the senses have been perfected, now the soul and its desires must be perfected. Book Two tells us of the different afflictions and virtues that come from the suffering soul. The perfected soul is then united to God.

Chapters in Book II

- Introductory description of the proficient’s experience
- Necessity of the passive night of the spirit, demonstrated by way of the imperfections of proficients
- Passive night of the Spirit
- Nature
- Afflictions
- Positive Content
- Illustration as fire acting on wood
- The of love and its fruit
- Description of the passive night of the spirit based on the second stanza: darkness, secure, secret, ladder, distinguished
- Summary explanation of the third stanza

Chapters 1-3

In the beginning of chapter one, we learn that when the dark night commences, it reaches divine union. One must begin as a proficient in order to ascend to divine union. St. John states, “Thus God purges some individuals who are not destined to ascend to so lofty a degree of love as are others. God brings them into this night of contemplation and spiritual purgation at intervals, frequently causing the night to come and then the dawn so that David’s affirmation might be fulfilled: *He sends his crystal* (contemplation) *like morsels* [Ps. 147:17].” After travel through the night of the senses one enters the night of the spirit to correct more imperfections.

The imperfections found in proficients are of two kinds: habitual and actual. According to St. John, “The habitual are the imperfect affections and habits still remaining like roots in the spirit, for the sensory purgation could not reach the spirit.” Actual imperfections are easier for the devil to use for his antics. As a result of actual

imperfections, “These proficient are easily charmed and beguiled if they are not careful to renounce such apprehensions and feelings and energetically defend themselves through faith.”

After being purged of actual and habitual imperfections, souls are proficient. Their senses are united to the spirit and they receive nourishment from the same spiritual food and from the same dish of only one suppositum and subject. Because they are now united, the spirit is able to suffer the rough and arduous purgation that awaits it. Why is this? According to St. John, “All good and evil habits reside in the spirit and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices.” The proficient are still very lowly in their communication with God.

Chapter 4

In Chapter four, we once again encounter the first stanza:

One dark night, fired with love’s urgent longings --ah, the sheer grace! — went out unseen my house being now all stilled

In order to understand this stanza we must now refer to contemplative purgation or nakedness and poverty of spirit (which are about the same). The soul, unsupported by any of the apprehensions of the soul, departs from itself. It departs from its lowly manner of understanding, its feeble way of loving, and its poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God unhindered by either flesh or the devil. Through an annihilation and calming of faculties, passions, appetites, and affections, in which the experience and satisfaction in God is base, one debarks from the human way of acting to God’s operation and way of acting. When this happens, the strength and affections of the soul are renewed with divine qualities and delights.

Chapters 5-8

This dark night, which we reference, is, “an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology.” Through infused perfection, the soul is perfected through love. Infused contemplation, the loving wisdom of God, produces two effects in the soul: by purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love. Yet, the question arises: why, if it is a divine light (for it illumines souls and purges them of their ignorance), does the soul call it a dark night?

St. John informs us why there are two reasons this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul but also affliction and torment: “First because of the height of the divine wisdom that exceeds the abilities of the soul; and on this account the wisdom is dark for the soul. Second, because of the soul’s baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul.”

The two extremes, divine and human, produce the third type of pain and affliction that the soul suffers. This pain further purifies the sensory and spiritual substances of the soul. “This pain occurs because the divine extreme is the purgative contemplation, and the human extreme is the soul, the receiver of this contemplation. Since the divine extreme strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it, it so detangles and dissolves the spiritual substance—absorbing it in a profound darkness—that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel and spiritual death.” This pain is described by David in the Psalms, “*The sighs of death encircled me, the sorrows of hell surrounded me, in my tribulations I cried out* [Ps. 18:5-6].” In this dark stage of contemplation, the soul feels abandoned by God.

In addition to afflictions of the soul there are afflictions of the will. Sometimes these afflictions pierce the soul when it sees the evils in which it is immersed with no apparent remedy. Job tells us of these afflictions, “*I who was wont to be wealthy and rich am suddenly undone and broken; he has taken me by the neck, he has broken*

me and set me up as his mark so as to wound me. He has surrounded me with his lances, he wounded all my loins, he has not pardoned, he has scattered by bowels on the ground, he has torn me with wound upon wound, he has attached me like a strong giant. I sewed sackcloth upon my skin and covered my flesh with ashes. My face is swollen with weeping, and my eyes blinded [Jb.16:12-16].” Souls remain in these afflictions of the will until their spirits are humbled, softened, and purified. They can now be one with the Spirit of God.

There is also one more thing that grieves and troubles souls in this state; because this dark night impedes their faculties and affections the souls cannot beseech God or raise their minds and affections to Him. This night purges the intellect of its light, the will of its affections, and the memory of its discursive knowledge. The soul must be engulfed in the spiritual darkness of contemplation and withdrawn from all creaturely affections and apprehensions. Losing everything through spiritual darkness one is able to have nothing, yet possess all things.

Chapter 9

This night darkens the spirit to give it light. The soul is blessed with a divine light that transcends all natural light and does not belong naturally to the intellect. The divine affection of love is bestowed in the divine union of love. This love is spiritual, subtle, delicate, and interior, exceeding every affection and feeling of the will and every appetite. As we learned above, the will must first be purged and annihilated of all its affections and feelings in order to experience this divine affection and delight. According to St. John, “The soul is left in a dryness and distress proportional to its habitual natural affections (whether for divine or human things), so that every kind of demon may be debilitated, dried up, and tried in the fire of this divine contemplation, as when Tobias placed the fish heart in the fire [Tb. 6:16-17], and the soul may become pure and simple with a palate purged and healthy and ready to experience the sublime and marvelous touches of divine love.”

Outside of its common experience and natural knowledge, the soul will have a very abundant and delightful divine sense and knowledge of all divine and human things. It is the common experience and natural knowledge that must be refined. This war to purify what must be refined is profound because the peace awaiting the soul is profound. The spiritual suffering is intimate and penetrating because the love to be possessed by the soul will also be intimate and penetrating.

Chapter 10

In this Chapter, Saint John gives an analogy to the purgation of the soul; the divine light that we are learning about has the same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood: “The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire.” When fire is applied to wood it first must cleanse the wood by dehumidifying it and expelling all of its moisture and making it give off any water that it contains. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all of the ugly and dark accidents of wood that are contrary to fire. In the final stage, by heating and enkindling the wood, the fire transforms the wood into itself. The wood is now as beautiful as the fire: “Once transformed, the wood no longer has any activity or passivity of its own, except for its weight and quantity that is denser than the fire. It possesses the properties and performs the actions of fire: it is dry and it dries; it is hot and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines; it is also much lighter in weight than before. It is the fire that produces all these properties in the wood.”

It is in this same manner that St. John proceeds to philosophize about this divine and loving fire of contemplation. Just like the wood, the soul is purged of all of its contrary qualities. The soul must be purified of its blackness and darkness. The fire brings forth the ugliness of the soul in order to cleanse it. The ugliness of the soul is illuminated and, “it feels clearly that it is so bad as to be not only unworthy that God see it but deserving of this abhorrence.” With this example in mind we are ready to discuss the fruit of the soul’s tears in which it begins to sing in the second verse: “...fired with love’s urgent longing.”

Chapters 11-14

The second verse refers to the fire of love that penetrates the soul in the night of painful contemplation. Although the enkindling of love is similar to what occurs in the sensory part of the soul, it differs because although the intellect still remains in darkness it feels vividly and keenly that it is being wounded by a strong divine love and has a certain feeling and foretaste of God. This spiritual inflaming engenders the passion of love. Because it is an infused love, it is more passive than active and generates in the soul a strong passion of love. This love begins to possess a union with God and share in the properties of this union. These properties are actions of God residing in the soul with its consent. It is the love of God united to the soul that imparts the heat, strength, temper, and passion of love (also termed as fire). St. John states, “This love finds that the soul is equipped to receive the wound and union in the measure that all its appetites are brought into subjection, alienated, incapacitated, and unable to be satisfied by any heavenly or earthly thing.”

This night bears a resemblance to purgatory. Just as the souls in purgatory are purged with a dark material fire, so in this life, souls are purged and cleansed with a dark and loving spiritual fire. The difference is that souls in the other life are cleansed by fire but here on earth they are cleansed and illuminated solely through love. The prophet David asked for this love when he said: *Cor mundum crea in me Deus* (A clean heart create for me, O God) [Ps. 51: 12]. Cleanness of heart is the love and grace of God. Another example of this love is in the beatitudes when Christ calls the pure of heart blessed [Mt. 5:8]; blessedness is derived from love.

Christ also uses this same illumination to illumine and purge the angels in earth. Christ does this when He purges the angels of their ignorances and gives them understanding by illuminating them on matters that they have no knowledge. St. John informs us that, “This wisdom descends from God through the first hierarchies unto the last, and from these last to humans.” Scripture informs us that God either accomplishes or grants all the works of the angels and the inspirations that they impart. St. John draws another analogy: “This communication is like that of a ray of sunlight shining through many windows placed one after the other. Although it is true that of itself the ray of light passes through them all, nevertheless each window communicates this light to the other with a certain modification according to its own quality. This communication is more or less intense insofar as the window is closer to or farther from the sun.” The closer to God (or higher) that the spirits are to God, the more purged and clarified they are by a more general purification, the further away the spirits are the fainter and more remote is the illumination. Humans are the last of these spirits. They are the last to receive this loving communication of God. Because of the aforementioned reason, souls must receive this communication when God so desires it and they must receive it according to their own mode, in a very limited and painful way. All of this happens through grace. It alone is the sheer grace of God.

Chapters 15-24

Chapter fifteen begins with the second stanza:

In darkness, and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised, --ah, the sheer grace! — in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled.

This is a continuation of the properties of the night and the happiness that results from them. These traits are spoken of in response to a tacit objection: we should not think a person runs a more serious risk of being lost because of the torments of anguish, the doubts, the fears, and the horrors of this night and darkness, but, on the contrary, a person is saved through this night. Through the dark night, the soul is able to escape from its ever grasping enemy, Satan. In its journey through darkness the soul's garb is changed and it is distinguished by three different colored garments and it departs by a very secret ladder. This ladder is the living faith by which it departs in so concealed a way in order to carry out its plan successfully, and by which it cannot but escape

very securely. The soul is secure in this purgative night because its appetites, affections, passions, and so on, were put to sleep, mortified, and deadened.

The darkness of which the soul refers relates to the sensory, the interior, and the spiritual appetites and faculties, because this night darkens their natural light so that through purgation they may be illumined supernaturally. According to St. John, “In the measure that the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely.” As the prophet says, the soul’s perdition comes only from itself; (from its senses and interior and sensory appetites); and its good, says God, comes only from Me.” If all spiritual communication does not come from God then man will not taste it divinely and spiritually but rather humanly and naturally, no matter how much their faculties are employed in God and the satisfaction that flows from this. When the soul walks in these darkneses it advances by suffering. First strength is given to the soul by God. Second, virtues are practiced and acquired, and the soul is purified and made wiser and more cautious.

“We embrace what fills our eyes with the most light and satisfaction and run after what is the very worst thing for us, and we fall at every step. In how much danger and fear do humans live, since they must keep their eyes shut and tread the path in darkness if they want to be sure of where they are going and be safeguarded against the enemies of their house, their senses and faculties.”

There are three properties of this night that are indicated in the three terms of this verse, “In darkness, and secure/ By the secret ladder, disguised.” The first thing that should be noted is that the soul calls dark contemplation a ‘secret ladder.’ Because it is secret and a ladder, it goes out to the union of love by dark contemplation. Contemplation is called secret, not only because it is ineffable, but because of the effects it produces in the soul. Because contemplation is so simple, general, and spirit, when it enters the intellect it is not clothed in a sensory species. Contemplation, also known as the language of God, transcending everything sensory, immediately silences the entire ability and harmonious composite of the exterior and interior senses. St. John uses Jeremiah as his example of the ineffability of divine language: Jeremiah manifested his incapacity to describe divine language when, after God had spoken to him, he knew of nothing more to say than ah, ah, ah [Jer 1:6]! Contemplation is also called a ladder; there are many reasons for this. One reason is that the soul ascends the ladder in order to plunder, know, and possess the treasures of heaven. Another reason is that we call this secret wisdom a ladder because just as the same steps of a ladder are used for both ascent and descent, the soul is simultaneously exalted and humbled through divine contemplation.

St. John then proceeds to give an explanation of the ten steps on the mystical ladder of divine love: the first step of love makes the soul sick in an advantageous way, the second step causes a person to search for God unceasingly, the third step prompts the soul to perform works and gives it fervor that it might not fail, on the fourth step a habitual yet unwearisome suffering is engendered on account of the Beloved, the fifth step imparts an impatient desire and longing for God, the sixth step makes the soul run swiftly toward God, the seventh step gives the soul an ardent boldness, the eighth step impels the soul to lay hold of the Beloved without letting Him go, the ninth step causes the soul to burn gently, the tenth and last step of this secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it. By means of this mystical theology and secret love, the soul departs from itself and the things of this world and ascends to God.

So far St. John has explained why the soul calls this contemplation a secret ladder, but we still need to elaborate on the term disguised from the phrase, “secret ladder, disguised.” In order to understand this phrase, St. John tells us that, “people disguise themselves by simply dissembling their identity under a garb and appearance different than their own. And they do this either to show exteriorly by means of that garment their will and aspiration toward gaining the favor and good pleasure of the Beloved, or also to hide from rivals and better execute their plan.” The soul departs in the disguise that more vividly represents the affections of her spirit. Its advance in disguise makes it more secure against adversaries: the devil, the world, and the flesh.

The livery that the soul wears in order to protect itself consists of three colors: white, green, and red. These three colors stand for the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The first color that the soul wears is a white tunic, the color of faith. Over this white tunic of faith the soul puts on its second colored garment, a coat of green mail, signifying the virtue of hope. It is through hope that the soul is freed and defended from the world. Over the white tunic and the green mail the soul puts on a red toga. Red signifies charity. In addition to adding elegance to the soul, charity elevates the soul closer to God. With this livery of charity the soul receives protection and concealment from the flesh: where there is love of God, love of self, and love of the things of this world find no entry. Without walking sincerely in the garb and disguise of these three virtues it is impossible to reach perfect union with God. The soul then proclaims, “—ah, the sheer grace!”

It has been a great grace for the soul to liberate herself from the devil, the world, and her own sensuality. “In having reached the happy freedom of spirit desired by all, the soul went from the lowly to the sublime; being earthly, she became heavenly; and being human, she became divine, and arrived at having her conversation in heaven [Phil. 3:20], as is proper to this state of perfection.” This night was a sheer grace for the soul on account of what she says in the next verse, “in darkness and concealment.” Departing in darkness and concealment more truly indicates the security that the soul has just described. The soul received this security along the way toward union with God through love by means of this dark contemplation. The more spiritual and interior the communication and the more removed it is from the senses, the less the devil understands it.

Although the devil is ignorant of the nature of these interior spiritual communications, the devil frequently understands that a soul receives these communications because of the great quietude and silence that some of them cause in the sensory part of man. Also, God usually allows Satan to recognize favors granted through the good angels so this adversary may do what he can, in accord with the measure of justice, to hinder them.

Chapter 25

In this last chapter St. John elaborates briefly on the third stanza:

On that glad night, in secret, for no one saw me nor did I look at anything, with no other light or guide than the one that burned in my heart.

The soul uses the metaphor of a simile of a temporal night to describe this spiritual night; the soul enumerates and extols the three good properties of the night. The first property is that God conducts the soul so secretly, that nothing pertinent to the senses can detain the soul from the route leading to the union of God. The second property of the soul has all of the higher parts of the soul in obscurity. The soul is neither looking nor able to look at anything. The third and last property is that love alone guides the soul to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude. Thus, the soul is united to God, concluding the Dark Night of the Soul.