

Dark Night of the Soul Study Guide

Dark Night of the Soul by John of the Cross

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Contents

[Dark Night of the Soul Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 4](#)

[Prologue..... 6](#)

[Book I, Chapter I..... 7](#)

[Book I, Chapter II..... 8](#)

[Book I, Chapter III..... 9](#)

[Book I, Chapter IV..... 10](#)

[Book I, Chapter V..... 11](#)

[Book I, Chapter VI..... 12](#)

[Book I, Chapter VII..... 13](#)

[Book I, Chapter VIII..... 14](#)

[Book I, Chapter IX..... 15](#)

[Book I, Chapter X..... 16](#)

[Book I, Chapter XI..... 17](#)

[Book I, Chapter XII..... 18](#)

[Book I, Chapter XIII..... 19](#)

[Book I, Chapter XIV..... 20](#)

[Book II, Chapter I..... 21](#)

[Book II, Chapter II..... 22](#)

[Book II, Chapter III..... 23](#)

[Book II, Chapter IV..... 24](#)

[Book II, Chapter V..... 25](#)

[Book II, Chapter VI..... 26](#)

[Book II, Chapter VII..... 27](#)



[Book II, Chapter VIII..... 28](#)

[Book II, Chapter IX..... 29](#)

[Book II, Chapter X..... 30](#)

[Book II, Chapter XI..... 31](#)

[Book II, Chapter XII..... 32](#)

[Book II, Chapter XIII..... 33](#)

[Book II, Chapter XIV..... 34](#)

[Book II, Chapter XV..... 35](#)

[Book II, Chapter XVI..... 36](#)

[Book II, Chapter XVII..... 37](#)

[Book II, Chapter XVIII..... 38](#)

[Book II, Chapter XIX..... 39](#)

[Book II, Chapter XX..... 40](#)

[Book II, Chapter XXI..... 41](#)

[Book II, Chapter XXII..... 42](#)

[Book II, Chapter XXIII..... 43](#)

[Book II, Chapter XXIV..... 44](#)

[Book II, Chapter XXV..... 45](#)

[Characters..... 46](#)

[Objects/Places..... 50](#)

[Themes..... 52](#)

[Style..... 54](#)

[Quotes..... 56](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 58](#)



Plot Summary

Dark Night of the Soul is an instructional religious book used mainly by the Roman Catholic Church. The premise of the book is that there are two "dark nights," or times of spiritual bleakness that a person must travel through in order to come to a completely mature and perfect union with God. It is during these times of spiritual darkness that God refines and perfects the spirit of a man to be more like God himself. The original text was written in Spanish in the 16th century by St. John, a Roman Catholic priest and poet. Since the original Spanish text has been translated into English, there are numerous footnotes, which provide alternate translations or other references for particular passages.

Much of this book is based on a poem called "The Stanzas of the Soul." The complete text of this poem is included in the prologue of the book. Throughout his book, St. John refers to the poem as he writes about the different stages of love through which the soul must pass. In several places, St. John goes into much detail about the meaning of the imagery and symbolism of the poem, which at first glance appears to be about the love affair between two humans. After the poem is interpreted, however, one comes to understand that it is actually a poem about the love between God and the human soul.

St. John begins his work by describing the common failings and sins of beginning Christians. He does this so as to enlighten these beginners to the traps into which they may fall during their early days as Christians. These failings are introduced as they relate to each of the seven deadly sins as described by the Catholic Church. These sins are: pride, sloth, envy, avarice, luxury, gluttony and wrath. These failings aren't general failings, but failings as they directly relate to the Christian's life and their relationship with God.

After addressing these failings that can affect beginning Christians, St. John describes what he calls the dark night of the soul. Along with explaining what a person going through a dark night of the soul will feel and experience, St. John also gives three criteria to determine if a person is truly experiencing this dark night. These criteria are given because a person may experience feelings similar to those associated with a dark night but will not actually be going through a dark night. It is during this dark night of the soul that God works in the beginner's soul to purge the desire for sensual pleasures and helps the soul recognize and enjoy spiritual pleasures. The soul will reap additional benefits from a successful journey through this dark night such as humility, delight in peace, and a deeper reverence for God.

In the second book, St. John describes the dark night of the spirit. It is during this dark night that God works to bring the spirit into perfect union and love with God. In a similar way as in the first book, St. John describes how a soul traveling through this dark night will feel and what it will experience. He also details how it is essential for the soul to have successfully passed through the first dark night before it enters the second dark night. Also in the second book, St. John describes the ten steps of the ladder of love. This ladder leads the believer from his worldly bonds to a perfect, complete union with

God. While climbing this ladder of love, the soul wears a disguise in the colors of white, green and purple to hide it from the devil, worldly pleasures and human nature.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

A brief prologue introduces a poem "The Stanzas of the Soul," on which the book expounds. This prologue also introduces the purpose of the book, which is to describe the process by which the soul enters the union of love with God.



Book I, Chapter I

Book I, Chapter I Summary and Analysis

This first chapter contains a description of the flaws of beginners on the spiritual journey. These descriptions are not given to discourage the beginner but to make them aware of their spiritual imperfections. The new Christian is compared to a small baby who is cared for by its mother. Like the mother, God also cares for His children, who are still babies in their faith. He feeds them with spiritual milk; therefore, these beginners enjoy the things of God and religion such as prayers, fasts and penances. These beginners, however, do these things mostly because the rituals are enjoyable for them. These beginners, like children, are not perfect and are still unable to do the works of God in full strength. By going through the period of the dark night, these beginner Christians will increase their strength and lose their imperfections.



Book I, Chapter II

Book I, Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins as recognized by the Catholic Church. Beginners sometimes become entangled in this sin of pride where they are both scornful of others and also do not learn about the things of God. Once pride sneaks into a young Christian's life, the devil uses religious rituals against the beginner. Examples of prideful people are in the Bible, about people who find another's small fault without correcting their own, often more serious faults.

Beginners show pride by their choice of spiritual leaders. Beginners choose a leader who agrees with their own views. Beginners often avoid or condemn leaders who do not share their viewpoint, even if these leaders are spiritually correct. Beginners seek praise from others. Sometimes, pride can even cause a person not to be honest with their confessor. The beginners tends to be impatient with themselves and God.

There are ways those who truly seek God will react to pride. True believers work hard for God with no regard for themselves. They are critical of themselves and believe they are not worthy of praise or encouragement. Those new believers not caught up in the sin of pride will seek out people from whom they can learn about spiritual truths. These believers also seek to speak of their faults and not their virtues and desire to further God's kingdom. God desires the humble and grants them special grace. However, this type of beginner is few and far between. Most require God's purification through the dark night.



Book I, Chapter III

Book I, Chapter III Summary and Analysis

Avarice is another deadly sin that can trip up new believers. Avarice (greed) takes root when beginners become unhappy with the spirituality God has given them. Possessing and reading books, as well as unique crucifixes and rosaries is important. Greed for possessions is wrong and must be removed from a person's character. In writing of the trouble avarice can bring a person, St. John recalls two Christians, one who used a cross made of a branch and another whose rosary was made of the spines of fish. Although neither of these two believers had fancy religious aids, they were both deeply spiritual. However hard a human may work at not allowing the sins of pride or avarice a place in their lives, they can not be fully purified until God takes them through this dark night.



Book I, Chapter IV

Book I, Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

St. John writes of the dangers of spiritual luxury, which is generally the result of one of three different causes and shows itself when a new believer is involved in a spiritual activity, and an impure thought comes to mind. These impure thoughts are a result of the pleasure humans find in spiritual things. The only way the sensual part of man can respond to this pleasure, however, is by remembering sensual pleasure. The devil can put these thoughts into a believer's mind to distract them from worship. Fear of these impure thoughts can cause them to come to a Christian's mind while they are trying to worship. There are several ways spiritual pleasure can cause a man's mind to have impure thoughts. When the spiritual part of a man is pleased, his sensual part also feels pleasure. Without being perfected, however, this sensual part reacts in an unspiritual manner, the only reaction it knows. Once a person goes through a dark night and both the spiritual and sensual parts of the man are perfected, these impure thoughts cease to be a problem. The devil may bring these impure thoughts to a person's mind to keep that person from praying and performing spiritual activities. Often a person is so disturbed by these thoughts that the person gives up spiritual activities so to avoid the impure thoughts. A depressed person can even believe s/he has no power against the devil; however, if that person tries hard enough, the person can overcome the devil's attacks. However, that person is not fully freed from spiritual luxury until passing successfully through the dark night.

There are other ways a new believer can be affected by spiritual luxury. Some believers have such a delicate nature that they are easily overcome by impure thoughts and are often easily moved by grief or anger. This luxury of the spirit can cause a believer to show off to others. Spiritual luxury can be apparent through a friendship. A spiritual friendship grows with the love of God; however, a sensual friendship does not encourage the love of God to grow. This should be ended and the new believer concentrate on the love of God.

Book I, Chapter V

Book I, Chapter V Summary and Analysis

Wrath is another spiritual sin to which many beginners fall prey. Wrath can affect the life of a Christian after a person has been pleasurable involved in spiritual activities and the pleasure fades, so the new Christian is angry about that. This feeling is natural and is not a sin and only become a sin when the person allows the spirit to indulge in the wrath. However, St. John notes that this wrath is best purged by a trip through the dark night. Other beginners fall prey to spiritual wrath when they allow the sins of others to irritate them, even to the point of correcting another. Others become angry at their own spiritual imperfections. There people try to build their own spirituality instead of waiting on God's timing and, thus, become frustrated with their lack of progress.



Book I, Chapter VI

Book I, Chapter VI Summary and Analysis

The sin of spiritual gluttony is one to which new believers are especially prone. This is because of the sweetness of spiritual exercises and gluttonous Christians come to crave this sweetness. The believer may go to extremes and will not stop an exercise even when ordered. God desires discretion, which spiritual gluttons do not have. It would be better for them not to participate in the exercises at all. These gluttonous Christians mistake their sensual desires for the desires of God and often become angry when not allowed to do what they desire.

Spiritual gluttony can cause the new believer to confess to and commune with God too often. Those suffering with spiritual gluttony miss the point of praise and worship and seek only the sweetness found in these activities. Spiritual gluttons fail to understand that God works in ways other than granting the sensual desires of His believers. They are much like children, doing what they want to do and not what they should do. If they are not given the spiritual pleasure they desire from their actions, they tend to stop altogether. These Christians who seek only the sweetness also have a hard time traveling the road of Christianity, since this road requires sacrifice and hard work and is often void of sweetness and pleasure.

Book I, Chapter VII

Book I, Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

Spiritual envy and sloth are two vices that do not seem to give beginning Christians too much trouble. Spiritual envy comes mostly when a new believer hears another being praised and wants that praise for himself and will try to devalue the praise. Spiritual sloth interferes with growth when they abandon the ways of Christianity when they don't get the rewards for which they hoped. Slothful Christians have trouble aligning themselves with the will of God and believe that things they want are God's will for them. They do not want to do things that bring no pleasure, even if they are commanded by God or by their spiritual leaders. St. John makes his transition from the imperfections of beginning Christians into his discussion of the dark night.



Book I, Chapter VIII

Book I, Chapter VIII Summary and Analysis

There are actually two nights through which the soul must pass to be completely purified. The first night purifies the sensual, while the second purifies the soul. Almost all beginners will experience the sensual purgation; very few experience the spiritual. Since little is known or written about the purification of the spirit, St. John devotes more space to this topic. As beginning Christians grow in faith and give up love for material possessions and deal with some suffering for the sake of God, they suddenly feel God has turned away from them. This feeling is a sign that the spiritual night of darkness has begun.



Book I, Chapter IX

Book I, Chapter IX Summary and Analysis

Christians can experience the events of the dark night even if they are not actually going through the dark night, which is the presence of sin in their lives. There are several signs that tells a person s/he is going through a dark night or if s/he is just suffering with sinfulness. One going through the dark night do not find pleasure in anything spiritual or physical. Also a person experiencing this night will have one's full concentration upon God. Those not in the dark night will not have the mind completely set on God. During the dark night, the believer will feel God has switched off the sensual pleasure receptors, but switches on the spiritual pleasure receptors. It takes awhile to learn to enjoy spiritual pleasures. There is a time when God takes away all reasoning and anxiety and causes the soul of the person to simply desire to be quiet and alone. Therefore, the third sign that a person is traveling through this dark night is an inability to think or reflect in the "imaginative sphere of sense." If a person is truly experiencing the dark night, this inability will continue to grow worse with time.

Book I, Chapter X

Book I, Chapter X Summary and Analysis

Those who have entered the dark night should let their spirit enjoy its peace and tranquility. If there is no one who recognizes the beginner is going through a dark night and helps them, a person can become very discouraged. Beginners experiencing this dark night need to trust in God and be patient with themselves and God. Those going through this dark night should allow their soul to be peaceful and quiet. Even if they feel they are doing or accomplishing nothing, these beginners must allow their spirit to remain at peace. This peaceful time with God will spark the spirit of love in the soul.



Book I, Chapter XI

Book I, Chapter XI Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, St. John expounds upon the first three lines of the "Stanzas of the Soul." As the soul becomes kindled with the spirit of love, the new Christian senses a strong desire, which is identified as that of thirst for God. This love for God and desire for God is generally not felt at the onset of the dark night but slowly develops as the beginner progresses through the dark night. The following line of the poem refers to the happiness the soul finds in being freed from the heaviness of the bonds of human sensuality. This dark night also allows the soul to move forward in its relationship with God without being caught up in the sins and imperfections of the sensual or lower part of the man.



Book I, Chapter XII

Book I, Chapter XII Summary and Analysis

The soul reaps many benefits from its journey through the dark night. Although the soul doesn't recognize it at first, there is joy in this dark, painful night because the soul is "growing up" in Christ. The main benefit the soul reaps from the dark night is the knowledge that by itself the soul is weak and miserable. God esteems a soul that has learned this truth more greatly than He esteems a soul that is content, but unaware of its own failings. During this dark night, the soul also gains a healthy respect for God. It is also during this time of darkness that the soul will truly experience the greatness and majesty of God. During this time, the soul also develops humility. It is from this humility that the love of others develops. The soul learns to esteem others and to not judge. Finally, the soul becomes submissive and obedient to the will of God. In these ways, all sins connected with spiritual pride are taken from the soul.

Book I, Chapter XIII

Book I, Chapter XIII Summary and Analysis

The presence of spiritual avarice is another condition which is addressed by the dark night. Christians on this road find they no longer desire spiritual things or possessions because they no longer find any pleasure in these things. Spiritual luxury is removed from the soul in much the same way. With regard to spiritual gluttony, the soul loses its taste for those sensual things it once found pleasurable. Also, the source of these sensual pleasures dries up, just as breast milk does when a baby stops nursing. Another benefit of this purification through the dark night of the soul is that the soul develops a more habitual remembrance of God, as well as a fear of backsliding. An additional benefit of a successful passage through the dark night of the soul is that the new Christian learns to put into action more than one virtue at the same time.



Book I, Chapter XIV

Book I, Chapter XIV Summary and Analysis

St. John writes about the final line of the first stanza of the "Stanzas of the Soul." The house is the person's sensual nature, which is put to rest by the trip through the dark night. During this dark night, in addition to the lack of sensual pleasure, the soul has other trials and temptations, including the spirit of blasphemy, which causes the Christian to want to speak out loud blasphemous statements. A perverse or giddy spirit may also descend upon the Christian. God intends to bring through the second night of darkness, or the night of the spirit those beginners who are tormented with these trials. It depends on the strength of a person's soul and faith as to how severe their trials will be and how long they will last. God determines which person is able to handle and withstand which trials and deals them out accordingly.

Book II, Chapter I

Book II, Chapter I Summary and Analysis

After passing through the dark night of the soul, the beginning Christian becomes a proficient Christian, who is more purposeful and enjoys more inward delight than the beginning Christian. Spiritual anxiety is replaced by peacefulness. God may send additional short periods of darkness to continue to purge the soul. The most intense darkness is reserved for those God wants to bring closest to Him. Even in the proficient state, the Christian still has weaknesses. For example, the spirit of the man is still held back by the body and sensual portion of the man.

Book II, Chapter II

Book II, Chapter II Summary and Analysis

Proficients have habitual imperfections and actual imperfections. Habitual imperfections are deeply rooted in the spirit and are removed by the purging of the soul. Living in a sinful world deadens the Christian to the presence of sin and makes sin habitual. This deadening must be refreshed during the second night of purging. Actual imperfections affect Christians who are swayed by their senses and see imaginary visions and are easily overtaken by the devil. These Christians with actual imperfections are in danger of losing their respect and honor for God.



Book II, Chapter III

Book II, Chapter III Summary and Analysis

It is necessary for the spirit and sensual portion of the man to be separated in the first night before the soul can experience the second night of darkness. In this second night, both parts of the soul are purged together. It is important, however, that the two first experience the tranquility of the first night to develop the strength needed to suffer through the second night of purgation. Even after they have been through the first night, believers are still merely spiritual children. They still react to God and refer to Him in a way similar to that of children. In order for these immature Christians to become spiritual adults, they must suffer through the second night of purgation.

Book II, Chapter IV

Book II, Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

The dark night refers to the darkness of the natural senses and lack of understanding with respect to the things of God. It is in this darkness that the spirit of man goes in search for God. The spirit is not observed leaving on its journey. It is a happy day for the man who seeks God in the divine way rather than in the human and the natural ways. When the spirit is united with God, it no longer understands or loves in the base ways but rather in the divine way. Therefore the spirit and the soul of the man are transformed into a new person.



Book II, Chapter V

Book II, Chapter V Summary and Analysis

The second dark night is when a soul does nothing but wait on God for instruction and perfection of love. If this is a time of illumination of the soul, why is it called a dark night? First, divine wisdom is so far above the soul's wisdom that it seems as darkness to the soul. Second, because the human soul is so vile and impure, the divine wisdom of God is actually painful to the soul. The pain associated with this dark night comes when a sinful soul tries to accept divinely-infused thoughts or contemplations. The two opposites war against each other, causing pain and anguish. The soul also feels pain when it realizes how unworthy it is of God and fears that God will no longer bless the soul. The soul is also given pain due to its weaknesses. The divine thoughts of God seem as a weight that threatens to oppresses the soul to the point it wishes for death. As a result of this great oppressive power, the soul believes it is being punished instead of having the favor and mercy of God placed upon it.

Book II, Chapter VI

Book II, Chapter VI Summary and Analysis

There are three kinds of pain that result from the extremes of the divine and the human meeting in one. Attachments are stripped away by the divine and the man feels as if he is being eaten by some huge beast. Almost as if the spirit must die a spiritual death and be resurrected as a new being. The soul only feels the spiritual pain of being chastised by God and fears this chastisement will last forever. A person going through this dark night believes his friends have abandoned him, which causes further pain. Another sort of pain is caused by the soul's recognition of its deep poverty and wretchedness. These feelings of poverty are necessary to completely purge the spirit. Additionally, God also causes this part of man to be consumed as metal in a fire. During this time, the pains of the soul are so strong that the Christian may feel as if he is entering Hell itself.

Book II, Chapter VII

Book II, Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

St. John writes of the afflictions this second night of darkness places on the will and soul. The soul remembers its evils and is uncertain of finding a way out. The soul will be reminded of past prosperity. Quotes from Job and Jeremias describe a state of extreme pain in which the soul can find no comfort, not even the blessings which will follow the night of darkness. There are periods of relief. In times of affliction the soul may feel the pain will never go away. Even the periods of communication with God do not hide there is something missing in the soul. It is during these times of rest that it is attacked again, harder and longer than before. Souls experiencing a dark night feel much the same as a soul in purgatory and can not believe God loves them.

Book II, Chapter VIII

Book II, Chapter VIII Summary and Analysis

The inability to pray or feeling that prayers do not reach God is another of the pains felt, but this is not actually a problem, since the soul should spend the time being quiet and patient. The soul tends to be easily distracted, especially when the distractions are divine activities. Memory is also disturbed by the divine purgation. These disturbances occur so that the entire person can be perfected and ready for its union with God. St. John uses the example of a ray of sunlight to explain the idea of divine light. If there is nothing to impede the ray of light, it passes unseen. Divine light acts in much the same way when it enters the human soul. The soul is illuminated with divine light; however, the soul cannot perceive this light until there is some speck of spiritual knowledge to be understood, then the soul is able to see and understand these spiritual things better. It is only the soul that has been purged of understanding.

Book II, Chapter IX

Book II, Chapter IX Summary and Analysis

Although the soul finds only misery in the dark night, it must face this darkness. Any sin will impede the process of unification with God. The divine and the natural can not exist in the same person. The soul must be left without natural light for as long as it takes to get rid of the soul's habit of seeing by natural light. The soul must forget all forms of natural love so that it can appreciate divine love. The soul is weak and cannot receive all the blessings of God, so must be cleansed. As the spirit becomes closer to the divine, things once normal seem foreign. For the soul to find true peace, it must go through a night so dark that it will groan and cry out in pain. The harder the labor and more severe the pain, the more perfect will be the finished product. St. John asks why does the preparation for a union with God cause so much pain to the soul? Because of the underlying impurity of the soul.

Book II, Chapter X

Book II, Chapter X Summary and Analysis

St. John gives an example of a log in a fire to illustrate the way the purification process works. The fire of divine love will first bring out all the imperfections in a soul and make it seem worse than before and it becomes clear how wretched the soul is before God. There are seven important points of the burning wood example. First, one can understand how the divine love can purge the soul. Second, the soul feels its afflictions come from the weakness and flaws of the soul. Third, this example teaches about the state of souls in purgatory. The fire of hell would have no power over souls in purgatory if there were no imperfections in their souls. Once these imperfections are gone, the fire is finished with them. Fourth, just as the wood becomes enkindled by the fire, so the soul becomes enkindled with the love of God. Fifth, after periods of relief, the soul is attacked more strongly. Sixth, just as the wood is consumed by fire, similarly, the human soul is consumed by the fire of the love of God. Seventh, during these periods of rest, it is clear which parts of the soul are cleansed and which are still not purified.



Book II, Chapter XI

Book II, Chapter XI Summary and Analysis

St. John writes of the depth and power of the love of the Spirit of God. Once the soul has received this love for God, the soul will want only to work for and love God. After enkindlement, the soul will seek God. However, the yearning for God will also leave the soul in a restless, comfortless state. As the same time the fire of God burns and hurts the soul, if this fire of the spirit were to go away, the soul would miss the spiritual love and affection.



Book II, Chapter XII

Book II, Chapter XII Summary and Analysis

As the spirits of those in purgatory are purged with real fire, so are souls on earth purged with the fire of love, which infuses both love and wisdom. It is this spirit of love and wisdom that pierces souls that also purifies angels' souls. The more complete this purging is, the closer to God a being will become, whether man or angel. This enkindling of love accompanies the union of understanding and the will. Sometimes at the desire of the Lord, there may be understanding imparted to the soul but no love, or love but no understanding.



Book II, Chapter XIII

Book II, Chapter XIII Summary and Analysis

St. John describes how the soul experiences the presence of God, even during the dark night of the spirit. Sometimes, even while the soul is in pain, the spirit is filled with the love of God. Love is felt by the emotions and does not directly affect the will. The will is a free agent and must be tamed by love. The thirst for love is felt more keenly by the spirit than by the soul in the first dark night because the spirit realizes what it lacks and needs, unlike the will. St. John uses Mary Magdalene as an example of the type of yearning for God a soul in the second night of darkness will feel. All of Mary's single-minded acts of devotion to Jesus are signs of a spirit caught up in the love for God. In fact, this soul will even go out in the darkness of the night in which it finds itself in order to find God. The soul can't see beyond its darkness until it has been properly purged and cleansed of its own evil nature. It is by this purging that a new man is created with a divine understanding and love.

Book II, Chapter XIV

Book II, Chapter XIV Summary and Analysis

St. John writes about the line in "Stanzas of the Soul," which reads "I went forth without being observed / My house being now at rest." The soul speaks these lines out of the happiness of being purged. The house being at rest can indicate that the passions of the natural man are asleep. God calls that which keeps the soul from seeking Him the enemies of man, and they must be purged. People who have not experienced this dark night do not understand what spiritual freedom is like because they are still prisoners of their natural desires and wants.

Book II, Chapter XV

Book II, Chapter XV Summary and Analysis

Discussion of the second stanza begins in this chapter. The soul continues to praise the darkness through which it escaped from its sensual affections. The soul is secure in the fact that it has found itself. The secret ladder spoken of in this stanza is the ladder of living faith.



Book II, Chapter XVI

Book II, Chapter XVI Summary and Analysis

The properties of the darkness in which the soul finds itself is written about in this chapter. All human senses are useless to the soul in darkness. The soul itself is enveloped in a cloud darkness. The darkening of the senses must take place for the soul to be freed from the desires that hold it back from its search for God. It is only in darkness where it is unhindered in its search for God's love is the soul truly freed from sin and secure in this love.

St. John asks if the things of God are good for the soul, why do natural desires have to be numbed for the soul to receive these things? If the soul were to respond to these divine things without these natural senses being numbed, the soul would only know how to respond in an impure and unholy way. The soul be happy when it feels its natural senses being dimmed, as God is taking charge and preparing the soul for union with Himself.

The soul must overcome the feeling that it is losing spiritual ground. The soul is just exploring new territory. The suffering the soul feels is another reason it feels secure in this time of darkness. It is during this suffering that the soul is aided by the strength of God. The light that appears comforting to humans actually leads them away from the will of God. To be protected from the evils of the natural senses, man must learn to walk in darkness.



Book II, Chapter XVII

Book II, Chapter XVII Summary and Analysis

Here St. John expounds on the line of the "Stanzas of the Soul," which reads: "By the secret ladder disguised." The knowledge of divine things is considered secret because it comes to the soul by the Holy Spirit. No everyone is given the gift of knowing these things. This knowledge surpasses human understanding and human knowledge. The word secret also describes the ladder because even after the soul has been infused with love and understanding, there is no way for the soul to talk about what it has experienced. Jeremias and Moses experienced the inability to speak after they had been infused with the wisdom of God. After a person has traveled through a dark night, the experience is ineffable, a term often given to a spiritual/mystical experience that is beyond words.

Another reason why this knowledge is kept secret is because during this time, the soul is aware that human knowledge does not have the words to properly speak of God and divine things. St. John writes that it is as if the trail God walks as He leads the soul on its journey is like a walk on the sea. God leaves no footprints that can be traced, therefore keeping the knowledge a secret and granting it only to those whom He wishes.



Book II, Chapter XVIII

Book II, Chapter XVIII Summary and Analysis

Just as a ladder is used to climb up and reach things that are above, so this secret ladder of spiritual wisdom allows a soul to reach spiritual understanding that is generally above human understanding. Also, like a ladder, men can both ascend and descend in spiritual contemplation. A person can only finish going up and down this ladder when they realize a perfect union in the love of God, as well as a feeling of contempt for their own self. The imagery of the ladder is taken from the dream of Joseph in which he sees a ladder going up from man to God with angels ascending and descending this ladder.



Book II, Chapter XIX

Book II, Chapter XIX Summary and Analysis

There are ten steps on the ladder of love which leads to God. On the first step, the soul swoons for God. It acts much the same way as a person does in the early stage of romantic love. On the second step, the soul searches for its love, God, with all of its strength. When the soul reaches the third step on the ladder of love, it will display a desire to work for God, as well as the strength to do this work without failing or stopping. Also on this step, the soul becomes aware of the feeling that it is worse off spiritually than other souls and that the things it is able to do for God are small and insignificant.

On the fourth step of love, the soul seeks to do something worthy for God without respect for itself. During this time, the soul does not seek pleasure or favors from God because it believes it has already been given too many of these in the past. On the fifth step of love the soul desires God to the point of death, as a starving person hungers for food.



Book II, Chapter XX

Book II, Chapter XX Summary and Analysis

In this chapter St. John continues his discussion of the ten steps on the ladder of love. The sixth step of love causes the soul to run to God and have contact with Him ceaselessly. The soul must not mount this sixth step unless it feels invited there by God; however, it is on this sixth step that the soul becomes bold in its search for God and the things of God. It is men who are on this sixth step of love that receive the favor of God and are granted the things for which they ask. On the eighth step of love, the soul is allowed to grab hold of God and not let Him go. However, souls do not stay on this step long because this step is like enjoying heaven on earth. The ninth step is reserved for those who are perfect, those who in their enkindlement burn sweetly in the love of God. The final step on the ladder of love cannot be reached until after death. It is here that the soul is completely one with God. St. John points out that as the soul rises to each new step, more secret and divine knowledge is revealed to it. When the soul finally reaches the tenth step, it knows all the things that God knows.



Book II, Chapter XXI

Book II, Chapter XXI Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, St. John describes the disguise worn by the soul as it ascends this secret ladder. He starts by describing the purpose of a disguise. This purpose is to hide one's self in order to gain a particular goal. This disguise also protects one from enemies. In the case of the soul, these enemies are the devil, the fleshly desires and the influence of the world. The colors of a believer's disguise are white, green and purple. These colors correspond to the virtues of faith, hope and charity, or love. While wearing a white garment of faith, the devil can neither see nor hurt the believer. The green of hope is worn over this white garment. This garment of green protects the soul from the things of the world. The believer also wears a helmet, which keeps the head and thoughts protected from the desires and thoughts of the world. The visor of the helmet keeps the believer's eyes focused on heaven. Added to the green and white garments and helmet is an overgarment of purple, denoting charity or love. The addition of charity makes the soul pleasing to God. Unless it puts on these garments, there is no way for the soul to attain unity with God.

Book II, Chapter XXII

Book II, Chapter XXII Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, St. John returns to the explanation of the poem "Stanzas of the Soul" and explains the soul is happy that it has been given the chance to journey out and escape from its bondage to the world, the devil and its own senses. St. John then restates his reasons for writing the book, to teach souls about the events and emotions of the dark night.



Book II, Chapter XXIII

Book II, Chapter XXIII Summary and Analysis

Here St. John explains that the soul travels through the dark night of the soul in concealment, as well as darkness. The soul is concealed from not only the evil influences of the world, but also the devil. In addition, the soul is concealed from the sensual nature of the human, which would draw the soul away from the things of God. Although the devil has no knowledge of the spiritual wisdom passed between the spirit and God while in this concealment, he can sense when these contemplations are taking place. It is at this point the devil tries to stir up the sensual part of man, in an attempt to draw the spiritual part of him away from God. The devil can also use the senses to terrify the spirit when there is little communication from God. At other times, God allows the devil access into the life of a believer so as to give him an equal chance at winning the soul's allegiance. This was the case with Job.

St. John warns the believer that in his attacks, the devil can imitate the being of God. While the devil cannot know spiritual wisdom, he can block the giving of spiritual wisdom if he senses this act (the giving of wisdom) is about to take place. The devil can also communicate to believers horrible thoughts and visions, which disturb the soul and stay in the memory for long periods of time, causing grief and horror. Again, St. John warns believers to keep in mind that it is during these times of assault by the devil that God is working in the soul to purify and cleanse it.

Book II, Chapter XXIV

Book II, Chapter XXIV Summary and Analysis

After its two periods of trials, the spirit at last finds peace and rest. It is at this point that the soul is united with divine wisdom and is considered perfect. In order to find this union, however, the soul must go through the periods of trial, testing and purification. None will realize this union without some trials.

Book II, Chapter XXV

Book II, Chapter XXV Summary and Analysis

St. John concludes his work by sharing three properties gained by the soul through this dark night of trial. First, the senses do not hinder the spirit on it travels down the spiritual road to wisdom and union with God. Second, in the darkness of the night, the soul does not see anything that is not God. Third, the soul is led down the road only by its longing for God.



Characters

St. John of the Cross

St. John is the author of *Dark Night of the Soul*. He was a Spanish priest and friar of the Carmelite order of the Catholic Church. He is considered to be one of the co-founders of the Discalced Carmelites, a sect of the Catholic Church. In 1675, eighty-three years after his death, St. John was beatified, which means the Catholic Church acknowledged he went to heaven when he died. It also indicates St. John has the power to intercede with God on the behalf of believers on earth. St. John is also named among the twenty-three doctors of the Catholic Church.

During his lifetime, St. John was dedicated to working for the church and for God. He helped reform the Carmelite order of the Church and also wrote poetry and books about Christianity. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Church when he refused to follow an order given to him by his superiors. It is also suspected this arrest was related to his work reforming the Carmelite order. After nine months of imprisonment, St. John escaped and continued his work in the Church.

It is from his experiences in his walk with God that St. John writes about the dark night of the soul. Since he indicates in his book that it is impossible to share with another the experiences and knowledge learned during this time of spiritual trial, it is assumed that St. John writes from his own experience of his own dark night. Since he spent much time involved in religious work and dealing with others on their own spiritual journeys, he also gleaned knowledge for his writing from these experiences.

God

In Christian faith, God is the creator of the universe and all things that exist in the universe. Since the beginning of man, God has acted as a shepherd and protector to the people that he claimed as His own. Most importantly, God sent His son to earth in the form of a baby born of an earthly mother. While on earth, Jesus, the Son of God, worked many miracles and encouraged people to come to a personal relationship with God the Father. Jesus was put to death by crucifixion because of His claims that He was the Son of God and King of the Jews. However, it was through the sacrifice of His Son that God offers a way for people to be saved from eternal death and damnation. One must simply believe Jesus was the Son of God, and that He died to save mankind from their sins. It is these new believers in God and Jesus that St. John hopes to reach through his religious teaching. St. John supports the idea that a Christian will never be fully content in their faith until they have reached a perfect union with God.



The Beginner

The beginner is a new Christian who has not yet traveled through the dark night of the soul. It is these beginners that St. John hopes to bring, through his teaching, to a closer, more perfect union with God. The beginners are apt to fall prey to flaws caused by the seven deadly sins. It is only after the beginner has passed through the dark night of the soul that they can overcome these temptations and enter the level of the proficient Christian.

Proficients

These proficients are Christians who have successfully passed through the dark night of the soul but have not yet passed through the dark night of the spirit. Believers may remain in the proficient stage for days, months or even years before they enter the second phase of their union with God. In fact, St. John indicates some believers may remain proficients all their lives as there are few people who God chooses to experience the dark night of the spirit.

The Devil

The devil is the ruler over hell and the arch enemy of God. Along with the things of the world and man's own evil nature, the devil is named as one of the three main threats to a believer's union with God. The devil has the ability to use a believer's mind and emotions to lure the believer away from God. For instance, it is noted in the first book that the devil is responsible for placing evil thoughts into the mind of the believer while he is trying to complete spiritual exercises. The devil's reason for doing this is to scare the believer and keep him from doing these spiritual exercises out of fear of evil thoughts. However, St. John does indicate there is one place the devil has no power—this place is in the area of the divine knowledge that is passed to the soul during its dark night. The devil does not know this spiritual knowledge and understanding.

The devil was also allowed by God to have his way with Job, a Godly man whose story is recorded in the Bible. The deal was made between God and the devil that the devil could do anything he wanted to Job, except take Job's life, in an attempt to make Job curse God. As expected, Job endures his torment patiently without cursing God. Job is a character who St. John quotes often in the course of his book.

Job

Job is a Biblical character who St. John quotes often in his descriptions of the inward agony felt by those going through the dark night of the spirit. In the story of Job, God allows the devil to persecute Job, who is an excellent example of a good person. The devil takes away Job's wealth, has Job's family killed and, ultimately, even Job's friends forsake him. The pain felt by Job in these tragic circumstances is much like that of the



soul going through the dark night. Many of the utterances spoken by Job relate to the state of the soul in the midst of spiritual attack.

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is a character from the Bible's New Testament. She lived during the time of Jesus. During her lifetime, she was a disciple of Jesus and ministered to Him in many ways. She has been identified as having had seven demons exorcised from her by Jesus before the beginning of her active ministry. St. John uses Magdalene as an example of a soul in love with God, who will seek Him at all costs. For instance, Magdalene was one of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus after He was crucified to anoint His body with burial oils and spices. They did this despite the fact that the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers, who would probably not let the women near the body, and the fact that the opening of the tomb was covered with a huge rock, which the women could not move by themselves. When the women found the body of Jesus was gone, Magdalene's first action was to question a nearby gardener if he knew where Jesus' body had been taken. This example shows the single-mindedness a believer should have when seeking God.

David

The Psalms of David are quoted often in St. John's book, particularly to illustrate the way a believer's heart will cry out for God. David was a character in the Bible's Old Testament, who began his life as a shepherd, but ended up a king. Despite his rise in status, however, David made many mistakes in his life and sinned against God in grievous ways. He is best known for his book of Psalms, songs or prayers, found in the Old Testament. While some of these Psalms are joyful and rejoice in God and His mercy, many are written from a heart of pain and rejection. St. John compares the pain that David feels with that of a believer going through a dark night of the soul.

Joseph

Joseph is also a character from the Bible's Old Testament. St. John uses the story of Joseph as a way to illustrate the fact that a person in love will work without ceasing for the one they love. In Joseph's case, he made a deal with Rachel's father that Joseph would work seven years for Rachel's father for the right to marry Rachel. At the end of the seven year period, however, Joseph is tricked and winds up marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah, instead of Rachel. Despite his frustration, Joseph agrees to work another seven years for the right to marry Rachel. This time his work pays off and he gets to marry the love of his life. Joseph's willingness to work shows how ceaselessly a soul motivated by love will try to achieve the person or object of their desires.



Jesus

Jesus is a character from the Bible's New Testament. He is the Son of God. Some examples given by St. John refer to Jesus in much the way others refer to God. In order to understand how Jesus and God are related, one must understand the trinity. God and Jesus are two separate entities, but like the spirit and soul of man, are one. The trinity consists of the Father (God), the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God come to earth. He is God's representative on earth, so a person seeking after Jesus is also seeking after God.

Bride/Beloved

The characters of the bride and the beloved come from the "Song of Songs," written by Solomon, a Hebrew King, in the Bible's Old Testament. Just as the "Stanzas of the Soul" is a love poem between God and the believer and uses the language of secular love, so is the Song of Songs. Some take the relationship between the bride and beloved in the Songs at face value and believe the poem is only about human sexual love. Others believe the bride represents the church and the beloved represents God, therefore making the poem a love story between God and humans told in the words of the vernacular. During his discussion of the ten steps on the ladder of love, St. John uses numerous quotes taken from the Songs to illustrate the ways a lover, whether it be a woman seeking a man or a believer seeking God, will yearn to be with and please the one that they love.



Objects/Places

Dark Night

This dark night is a symbol that stands for a state of separation from God through which the soul must pass in order to enter a perfect union with God.

State of Perfect

This state of perfect describes the condition of a soul that is in union with the soul and love of God.

Seven Deadly Sins

These seven sins were identified by the Catholic Church as the sins that put a believer in danger of separation from God and a life of grace. These seven sins include lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

The Bible

The Bible is a divinely inspired book written by a variety of prophets, priests and other Godly men. The Bible tells the story of man beginning with God's creation of Adam and Eve, His care for the Israelites and His sacrifice of His own Son as well as a glimpse into the end of the earth.

Spiritual Exercises

Exercises carried out by a Christian with the intent of becoming closer to God. These exercises include things such as prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Manna

After the Israelite people escaped from their slavery in Egypt, they were fed with manna while they wandered in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. Manna was a food substance which came miraculously from heaven each day and filled the people's nutritional needs.

Songs

St. John refers to the Songs in one place in his work. These Songs refer to the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, a book in the Bible that describes the sensual love between



a man and a woman. Two characters in the book are the spouse, or man, and the bride, or woman. Some see the Songs as an allegory of the relationship between God and the Israelites while others believe it is simply a poem about the beauty of human sexual love.

Strait Gate - Narrow Way

These two phrases come from a passage in the Bible where Jesus speaks of the way into heaven. The strait gate refers to a narrow or small gate through which one must pass in order to enter heaven. Likewise, the narrow way is the more difficult way for a person to go through. Both the strait gate and narrow way are the ways a Christian must travel in order to please God.

Mystical Theology

This theology is a form of Christianity in which the soul or spirit of a man progresses through certain stages to achieve complete unity with God. These mystics put great emphasis on prayer, self-denial and works of service to others.

Parts of the Man

From reading St. John's work, one can infer he believes there are three parts to each man. One of these is the physical man, the body that weighs down the spirit and soul. The soul is the part of the man that enjoys and is distracted by sensual pleasures. It is this soul that is purified by the first dark night. The spirit, on the other hand, is the part of the man that is closest to God. However, it must be freed from the weight of the natural man and base nature of the soul in order to become completely united in love with God.

Purgatory

According to the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, purgatory is a third place, in addition to heaven and hell, where some souls go when they die. Purgatory is like a holding place where the soul is either perfected and allowed to go on to heaven, or sent to hell.

Dark Waters

St. John uses this phrase borrowed from the Psalms of David as a way to reference the dark contemplation as well as the divine wisdom surrounding souls which are traveling through the dark night.



Themes

The Soul's Journey to the Union of Love

The main theme of this book describes the steps the soul must take on its journey toward a union with God in love. It is not through the power of the soul itself to start this journey; it is one that can only be begun in God's own timing. First, a beginning Christian must go through the dark night of the soul. It is during this dark night that the pleasures of the human nature of man are restrained. After this period of trial, the natural man is in a way, united with the spirit, and the spirit is no longer held back on its journey toward God by base or earthly pleasures. It is after the successful passage through this dark night of the soul that a beginning Christian graduates to become a proficient Christian. A period of time, sometimes even years, will pass before the Christian is taken through the second night of darkness. St. John also notes that not all Christians experience this second night. This second night of darkness, or the dark night of the spirit, is one through which few Christians will pass. Since so few Christians actually reach this level and so little is written or known about it, St. John spends more space discussing the torments and blessings associated with this level of understanding in God. It is only after a person has passed through this second dark night and has been completely purified and perfected that his spirit can be truly united in love with the spirit of God.

This journey is highlighted by St. John's exploration of the ladder of secret contemplation. The entire imagery of the ladder symbolizes the journey of the soul to its perfect union with God. This journey starts with the soul's desire for God and ends in perfect union with God, which can only be achieved after a person dies and is united with God in heaven.

Purgatory

Many times in the text, St. John makes reference to souls in purgatory experiencing the same spiritual pain as those souls that are traveling through the dark nights. Unlike the soul of a man on earth, which is being readied for union with God, a soul in purgatory is the soul of a person who has already died. They have no more chances to become united with God in the earthly realm. Instead, they are in a place that is between heaven and hell. Although they are not engulfed by hell's fire, they feel the pain from this fire as it cleanses their souls from the impurities and sins that sent them to purgatory in the first place. If their soul is properly cleansed, the soul is allowed to pass into heaven; if not, they are sent to hell.

This process of soul cleansing in purgatory is much like the process by which a soul is prepared for its union with God. The soul is burned in the fire of love and all of its impurities and sins are cleaned out in this manner. It is only after the soul has been properly purified and cleansed that it can become one with God. Unlike the souls in



purgatory, which are physically burned by hell's fires, the soul experiencing the dark night will be burned by the fire of God's love.

Manna

The example of manna is one that St. John uses often in his description of the purgation of the soul. Manna was the food source for the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness after they had escaped captivity in Egypt. This manna miraculously appeared each day for the people to gather and eat. In the book of Wisdom, which is part of the Catholic Bible, it is indicated that this manna could transform itself and taste like anything the eater wanted it to taste like. Even though the Israelites had all of their nutritional needs met by this miraculous manna, they were still unhappy because they remembered the foods they had eaten while in Egypt. In order for them to fully appreciate the manna, they needed to forget the foods of the past. Similarly, the soul can not fully appreciate its union with God until it has forgotten the sensual pleasures it once knew in its former life. The remembrance of these earthly pleasures must be purged or cleaned from the soul's memory before it can truly appreciate the great gifts God has in store for it.



Style

Perspective

During his life, St. John was both a Carmelite priest and friar. Together with St. Teresa of Avila, St. John founded the Order of the Discalced Carmelites. He was later canonized (made a Saint) in this particular sect of the Catholic Church. In addition, St. John's name is among the thirty-three doctors of the Catholic Church. This indicates the Church holds St. John's teaching in high regard. St. John was also beatified by the Catholic Church in 1675. This indicates the Church's acknowledgment that he went to heaven after his death and therefore has the ability to intercede with God on the behalf of the believers on earth.

As is shown by the above credentials, St. John lived his life seeking and working for God. As a result of his work, he has been acknowledged by the Catholic Church as a saint and doctor. These honors speak highly of his ability to teach others about spiritual things. Also during his life, St. John was especially interested and conducted much study in the realm of mysticism, of which he writes in his book.

The book was originally written as an instructional book used by the Catholic Church to teach others about this crisis of the soul. St. John's intent in writing this book is to share with others the occurrences of the dark night. By sharing with others, he intends to bring comfort to them by teaching that these painful times are sent by God and are intended to make the spirit stronger and closer to God.

Tone

The tone of the book is subjective, as it conveys very strongly the way St. John feels about a soul that has or is passing through a dark night. During his discussion of the dark nights of the soul and spirit, St. John gives examples of how the soul will feel and what it will experience during its journey toward union with God. Knowledge of these feelings, thoughts and emotions could only come through St. John's own personal experience.

The mood of the book is dark, but hopeful. It talks about a very distressing point in a believer's life when God will seem distant to the believer. The soul and spirit will experience pain and be burnt as if in a fire. However, this unhappy information is paired with the idea that at the end of these trials, and as a direct result of them, the believer will be closer to God than ever before. The spirit will be happy in its union with God and will be secure walking in the darkness of faith.



Structure

This book has a very rigid structure. It is divided in two books; the first talks about the dark night of the soul and the second covers the topic of the dark night of the spirit. Within each book, the material is divided into chapters. Each chapter is titled with a Roman numeral after which there is a short description of what the chapter will discuss. It is noted in several places that the original work did not include these chapter descriptions at the beginning of each division. Also, in some places, material has been divided into chapters, which was originally not divided. These divisions which were made by translators are generally also noted in the footnotes. Within each chapter, material is presented with each point given a separate numbered section.

Since this is an instructional book, it makes sense that the material should be very highly structured. This form sets forth a very easy to understand point-by-point discussion of each topic. The added descriptions of the topic each chapter will cover also help the reader determine what the chapter is about and prepare the mind to think about this particular topic. However, St. John's use of extremely long and complex sentences can make the text very difficult to follow. Sometimes it is necessary to read a sentence carefully, leaving out the secondary phrases and background information included in the sentence, in order to pick out the true point which St. John hopes to make.



Quotes

"Since this road (as the Lord Himself says likewise) is so strait, and since there are so few that enter by it, the soul considers it a great happiness and good chance to have passed along it to the said perfection of love, as it sings in the first stanza, calling this strait road with full propriety "dark night," as will be explained hereafter in the lines of the said stanza." Prologue, pg. 31.

"This is a characteristic of the spirit which is simple, pure, genuine and very pleasing to God. For as the wise Spirit of God dwells in these humble souls, He moves them and inclines them to keep His treasures secretly within and likewise to cast out from themselves all evil. God gives this grace to the humble, together with the other virtues, even as He denies it to the proud." Book I, Chapter II, pg. 43.

"I knew a person who for more than ten years made use of a cross roughly formed from a branch that had been blessed, fastened with a pin twisted round it; he had never ceased using it, and he always carried it about with him until I took it away from him; and this was a person of no small sense or understanding. And I saw another who said his prayers using beads that were made of bones from the spine of a fish; his devotion was certainly no less precious on that account in the sight of God, for it is clear that these things carried no devotion in their workmanship or value." Book I, Chapter III, pg. 46.

"Wherefore Our Saviour said in the Gospel: 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' That is to say, the love which is born of sensuality ends in sensuality, and that which is of the spirit ends in the spirit of God and causes it to grow." Book I, Chapter IV, pg. 52.

"Let them trust in God, Who abandons not those that seek Him with a simple and right heart, and will not fail to give them what is needful for the road, until He bring them into the clear and pure light of love." Book I, Chapter X, pg. 72.

"The soul which God is about to lead onward is not led by His Majesty into this night of the spirit as soon as it goes forth from the aridities and trials of the first purgation and night of sense; rather it is wont to pass a long time, even years, after leaving the state of beginners, in exercising itself in that of proficientes." Book II, Chapter I, pg. 97.

"Wherefore the night which we have called that of sense may and should be called a kind of correction and restraint of the desire rather than purgation." Book II, Chapter III, pg. 103.

"This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and imperfections, habitual, natural and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation, or mystical theology." Book II, Chapter V, pg. 107.



"For, by means of this pure light, the soul now sees its impurity clearly (although darkly), and knows clearly that it is unworthy of God or of any creature. And what gives it most pain is that it thinks that it will never be worthy and that its good things are all over for it." Book II, Chapter V, pg. 109.

"Divine things and perfections are known and understood as they are, not when they are being sought after and practiced, but when they have been found and practiced." Book II, Chapter XVII, pg. 173.

"For the most important part of my task, and the part which chiefly lead me to undertake it, was the explanation of this night to many souls who pass through it and yet know nothing about it, as was said in the prologue." Book II, Chapter XXII, pg. 193.



Topics for Discussion

Consider the idea of the dark night of the spirit and/or soul. Choose a person, either from the Bible or modern times who you think has experienced this dark night. Explain why you think they've experienced this night and how it has changed them.

Taking into account your religious background, do you think the soul travels through these dark nights as St. John as described? Why or why not.

One point that St. John makes concerning the dark night of the spirit is that the soul cannot be united in love with God until it finds itself to be contemptible. In your opinion, what do you think St. John means by this. Is the soul really supposed to hate itself? Or just the evil things it does? Explain your answer.

Consider souls in purgatory. In what ways are these souls like those going through the dark night? In what ways are they different?

Discuss the seven deadly sins. Consider ways in which these sins can draw a believer away from the will of God.

Compare and contrast the beginning Christian and the proficient Christian as described by St. John.

Consider the ways in which imagery is used in "Dark Night of the Soul." For instance, the image of the ladder representing man's climb to spiritual knowledge, as well as St. John's use of the example of burning wood to clarify the idea of the cleansing of the spirit. Is this imagery used in a way that eases understanding of the material? Why or why not.

At one point in his book, St. John discusses how it is impossible for a soul that has experienced a dark night to speak of its experiences. Consider this statement in light of St. John writing an entire book about the subject. If a soul is unable to describe its experience in this dark night, how is St. John able to write about it?

Compare and contrast the ten steps on the ladder of love with a love affair. How is the love for God like human love? How is it different?

Discuss the disguise of the soul as it travels on its secret journey. What does this disguise consist of and what is its symbolism?