

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUAL DRYNESS: SPIRITUAL DESERTION AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL



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Abstract: St. John of the Cross' work, The Dark Night of the Soul, and Joseph Symonds' work, The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul, offer two compelling treatments on the subject of spiritual dryness. Moreover, these works represent two spiritual traditions (the Discalced Carmelites and the English Puritans respectively) which offer distinct but viable perspectives on the Christian life. This paper seeks to answer the following question: What is the degree of similarity between St. John of the Cross' understanding of the dark night of the soul and Joseph Symonds' understanding of spiritual desertion? A secondary question is also addressed: What is the value of these resources for pastoral care today? Although notable differences exist between the two, their degree of similarity is significant considering the disconnection between the spiritual traditions that each represent. Moreover, these works are invaluable resources for contemporary pastoral care.

INTRODUCTION

The fact is, as the Puritans recognized equally with traditional Catholic piety, there is a period of lone darkness and struggle in the experience of most serious Christians, and the more outstanding the spiritual genius, the more intense the gloom.¹

St. John of the Cross' work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and Joseph Symonds' work, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, offer two compelling treatments on the subject of spiritual dryness that were written roughly within the same time period (late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, respectively). Together, these works represent the wealth of

¹ Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 23.

thought and experiences of two celebrated spiritual traditions, the Discalced Carmelites and the English Puritans, which flourished during a time of renewal for the Western church—notably, one grew out of the Protestant Reformation while the other grew out of the Counter-Reformation. Each author developed and articulated an understanding of the nature, purpose, causes, and treatment of certain manifestations of spiritual dryness that was informed by Scripture, a robust doctrine of sanctification, and human experience. This present paper will seek to answer the following question: what is the degree of similarity between St. John of the Cross' understanding of the dark night of the soul and Joseph Symonds' understanding of spiritual desertion? In addition, a secondary topic will also be addressed: What is the value of these resources for pastoral care today?

For the sake of brevity, each individual work will not be summarized separately. As such, it will be assumed that the reader is already familiar with either or both works. An abundance of literature has grown out of St. John of the Cross' life and works while relatively sparse attention has been given to Joseph Symonds' *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*. In light of this, the author has presented a detailed discussion of Symonds' writing elsewhere.²

SPIRITUAL DESERTION AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: THEIR DEGREE OF SIMILARITY

To begin, it is important to note that spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul are not interchangeable concepts—they are not ultimately the same phenomena. Such an understanding would be a gross oversimplification, trivializing the rich and distinctive nuances of each perspective. With that being said, there nevertheless exists a significant degree of similarity between Joseph Symonds and St. John of the Cross in their understanding of certain kinds of spiritual dryness—so much so that one may have trouble reconciling the fact that their representative spiritual traditions were at such odds with each other. In many ways, the teaching and testimony of Joseph Symonds and the teaching and testimony of St. John of the Cross parallel each other in their expression of devotion to God. This congruence is particularly evident in their shared view of the Christian life as a journey, the glory of God as the human's chief end, the imperfect comfort of the saints, the distinction between certain forms of spiritual depression and melancholy, and God's relentless and persistent love.

² David C. Wang, "The English Puritans and Spiritual Desertion: A Protestant Perspective on the Place of Spiritual Dryness in the Christian Life," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 42–65.

1. *The Christian Life as a Journey*

Both the English Puritans and the Discalced Carmelites envisioned the Christian life as a costly, lifelong journey which began at the time of conversion and did not end until the final consummation of the Kingdom of God. Because they avoided the pitfall of overemphasizing either the point of conversion or the point of Christ's return, they were able to devote much of their attention to the process of living as a follower of Christ during the interim period. During this period, it was jointly assumed that the Christian remained in a state of tension between the available glimpses of union with God in this life and the perfect union that was to come. Spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul may thus be understood as masterful attempts to articulate this tension in a manner that edified and encouraged believers to persevere towards the goal of their journey.

Representing the English Puritans, John Bunyan saw the Christian life as a journey that required one to navigate both rugged and hazardous terrain on the way to the Celestial City.³ This should not come as a surprise, for the Puritans saw all of Christian experience as a recapitulation of biblical history, which included many accounts of both triumph and tragedy among the children of God.⁴ Because God is the supreme author of the biblical account, spiritual desertion was understood as a divinely-ordained event that was ultimately designed for the glory of God. Moreover, accounts of God's people dwelling and traveling in the wilderness abounded in Scripture and the Puritans were quick to draw inferences.

To the Spanish Mystics of the Discalced Carmelite Order, the Christian life was seen as a steep ascent to the summit of Mount Carmel. The notion of purgation fit well with this model, as purging oneself of all unnecessary baggage was a necessary endeavor before one could successfully reach the summit. Mount Carmel represented a land of paradox and challenge to them; its varied terrain included gardens and fountains as well as deserts and caves.⁵ This image of an individual ascending up a mountain in many ways paralleled the Puritan image of Christian's journey to the Celestial City in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The vision of the Christian journey employed by St. John closely followed the "three ways" of Catholic devotion: purgation, illumination, and union. The vision of the Christian journey employed by Symonds, on the other hand, similarly followed three ways, but these were justification, sanctification, and glorification.⁶ Although the former approach placed greater emphasis on union with Christ near the end of the Christian life

³ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

⁴ Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (London: The Epworth Press, 1957), 27.

⁵ John Welch, *When Gods Die: An Introduction to John of the Cross* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 14.

⁶ Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 160.

while the latter emphasized the same near the beginning,⁷ both ways similarly viewed the Christian life as a lifelong process with divine union as its highest end.

In the case of Symonds and St. John, it is important to note that the difference between the two perspectives is one of emphasis, not of substance; for Symonds would agree with St. John that a more perfect union with God may be available to the believer near the end of the journey while St. John would likewise agree with Symonds that a genuine and persisting relationship with God was established near the beginning of the journey. In fact, this difference in emphasis may provide a medium to synthesize the two bodies of teaching: namely, in authentic bouts of spiritual depression one may draw strength and encouragement both from the divine union that has been formerly established as well as the divine union that will be actualized in the future.

To Symonds, union with Christ was the fruit of justification and persisted throughout one's life despite an encounter with spiritual desertion. Even though desertion involved a deeply vivid experience of a broken fellowship with God, Symonds consistently oriented his admonition towards the truth that the deserted remained in union with God even though it did not seem that way. For instance, he noted the distinction between one's sense of grace and one's received influence of grace to argue that God's grace may still be at work even when his comforting presence was withdrawn: "One may want inward comfort, yet not be deserted in respect of the influence of grace; the tenure of grace and peace is not the same; a man may lose the sense of grace, and yet retain the life of it. Though he be more happy that hath grace and peace, yet he may be as holy that hath grace without peace?"⁸

Symonds' emphasis on the believer's existing union with Christ was also keenly evident in his suggested cure for spiritual desertion. However, before he offered specific directives concerning how the deserted were to conduct themselves, he first reminded them that recovery was indeed possible by virtue of the fact that Christ was already in them: "You have power to seek it [recovery]; though much deadness be upon you, yet if you be in Christ, you have a spirit of life in you . . . reason doth much in many without grace, much more may you."⁹

Symonds' first direction was to go directly to Christ for help: "Go to Christ, and beg of him to cause a spirit of life to come into thee."¹⁰ Carrying out such an admonishment would not have been possible if one did not previously attain some measure of union with Christ. Second, Symonds

⁷ Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 160.

⁸ Joseph Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul: A Treatise Concerning the Nature, Kinds, Degrees, Symptoms, Causes, Cure of, and Mistakes about Spiritual Desertions* (Edinburgh: Robert Bryson, 1642), 21.

⁹ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 195.

¹⁰ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 352.

counseled the deserted to set their hands on the work of the Lord, arguing that it was vain to expect God to help them if they were not willing to help themselves.¹¹ Third, he urged them to receive eagerly the help of the saints and also to not neglect the ordinances. Generally speaking, Symonds' suggested cure required a spirited effort on the part of the deserted, as they sought to exploit all available means of grace for recovery. He believed that many forms of divine grace still persisted through periods of spiritual desertion. To Symonds, the divine union that was irrevocably established at conversion sustained this grace.

The teaching of St. John, on the other hand, followed the Catholic perspective of the three ways, which emphasized divine union at the end of the Christian journey. As alluded to earlier, St. John did, however, acknowledge a kind of divine union that existed for all people, regardless of the stage of one's journey: "God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists."¹² However, to him, this union was not the perfect union which he regarded as the goal of the Christian life. When he used the term "perfect union," St. John was only referring to the purest union one could possibly achieve in this life, which still paled in comparison to the consummated union between the saints and Christ at the end of time.¹³ St. John explained that perfect union occurred only when there was a likeness of love between the individual and God that was established through the soul being purged and transformed:

Consequently, in discussing union with God we are not discussing the substantial union that always exists, but the soul's union with and transformation in God that does not always exist, except when there is likeness of love . . . [this union] exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love.¹⁴

In light of St. John's lucid description of the various imperfections common to beginners (i.e., those who had already undergone a sincere conversion and firmly committed themselves to live completely for God) it was clear to him that this likeness of love which was necessary for perfect union was not achieved during conversion. As such, perfect union was only attainable later in the journey, after one had been refined by the purgative and illuminative processes of the dark nights of sense and spirit.

¹¹ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 358.

¹² St. John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," in *The Collected Words of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 163.

¹³ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 114.

¹⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 163.

The dark night of the soul was a period when all experiences of God and former means to God became void. St. John believed that only in such a context did the light of perfect union dawn. Referencing Psalm 63:1–2, he wrote: “In a desert land, without water, dry, and without a way, I appeared before you to be able to see your power and your glory.”¹⁵ It followed, then, that St. John oriented his teaching toward the future rather than the past; one’s former ways of relating to God had brought them thus far, but could no longer bring them further. Instead, a new and different way was being developed and to progress from that point forward meant that one must leave former ways behind.

2. *God and His Glory, Not Human Comfort as the Chief End*

Though the teaching associated with spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul drew heavier on different phases of the Christian journey for encouragement in times of spiritual darkness, both perspectives firmly held the conviction that it was God and his glory, not human comfort, that was of utmost importance in the Christian life. To enjoy spiritual consolation for its own sake would have been inconceivable to both Symonds and St. John. The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, a document which the English Puritans helped produce, summarized it well, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”¹⁶ Symonds embodied this conviction and believed that the purpose of either the presence or absence of spiritual comfort was the cultivation of a soul that was completely subjected to God. Illustrating what such a soul might speak, he wrote:

Lord, impose, demand what thou will, I count nothing too dear for thee, I count the gain of the whole world loss for thee, and will deny myself for thee; if my heart draw back, draw it on to thee, as far as I am able to sacrifice myself to thee, I do it.¹⁷

Similarly, St. John solemnly warned against the dangers of making human comfort a person’s chief end. Far from being directed inwards, to checking up on how one felt, St. John directed people away from themselves and encouraged them to look at Jesus. Especially for those who were currently experiencing the dark night, the key for them was to act against

¹⁵ St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night,” in *The Collected Words of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 388.

¹⁶ G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism: Questions 1–38* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1970), 1.

¹⁷ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 467.

their feelings of comfort or discomfort and cast themselves in faith into the darkness of God.¹⁸

St. John spoke of the importance of depriving and emptying oneself of one's appetites for finite things, using the seven capital vices (pride, gluttony, avarice, wrath, luxury, envy, and sloth) as his basis for illustrating how such appetites fostered the development of various imperfections. Of these seven vices, St. John placed special emphasis in addressing the imperfection of spiritual gluttony. Speaking of this imperfection, he wrote:

Many, lured by the delight and satisfaction procured in their religious practices, strive more for spiritual savor than for spiritual purity and discretion; yet it is this purity and discretion that God looks for and finds acceptable throughout a soul's entire spiritual journey.¹⁹

As gluttony can be described as a habitual eating to excess, spiritual gluttony can also be described as an excessive seeking and consumption of spiritual consolation. St. John observed at least three ways whereby this vice hindered the spiritual life. First, spiritual gluttony created an aversion to obedience to God: "Some reach such a point that the mere obligation of obedience . . . makes them lose all desire and devotion. Their only yearning and satisfaction is to do what they feel inclined to do, whereas it would be better in all likelihood for them not to do this at all."²⁰ Second, the sweetness of religious consolation blinded the spiritual glutton from knowledge of his spiritual poverty and also prevented him from developing a loving fear and respect for God's brilliance.²¹ Last, those who were inclined towards spiritual delights were weak and neglectful in following Christ's way of the cross. St. John explained, "A soul given up to pleasure naturally feels aversion toward the bitterness of self-denial."²²

Last, it is notable that Jesus Christ stood as a central figure in the teaching of both Symonds and St. John. To them, Christ was critically involved at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Christian life; he was the initiator, sustainer, and even the goal of the journey. Symonds exhorted his readers accordingly, writing:

Stand not wasting thyself in sad thoughts of thy misery, but arise and pray; turn the streams of thy grief towards Christ, he will turn them into streams of joy . . . Christ is the fountain, let down thy bucket, and drink and live; go with incitements against yourself in one hand, and

¹⁸ Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love: The Spiritual Teaching of St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 93.

¹⁹ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 371.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 372.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 372.

²² *Ibid.*, 373.

with Christ's promises and thy petition in the other, and thou will be heard.²³

St. John similarly exhorts:

A person makes progress only by imitating Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father but through him, as he states himself in St. John. Accordingly, I would not consider any spirituality worthwhile that wants to walk in sweetness and ease and run from the imitation of Christ.²⁴

3. *The Imperfect Comfort of the Saints*

Because both Symonds and St. John envisioned the Christian life as a costly and lifelong journey, they recognized that from time to time Christians were prone to despair, to temporarily losing sight of their comfort in God and the goal of their salvation. However, Symonds noted that not all periods of lost spiritual comfort were caused by desertion; indeed, many of them occurred simply due to the fact that the saints presently had an imperfect comfort. He explained, "Sometimes it [comfort] is gone, and a day of gladness is turned into a night of heaviness, so that they complain as the Church [*sic*], 'The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning' . . . [comfort] is mixed with various fears and sorrows, which like the waters of Marah flow into the soul."²⁵

In one's progress towards the end of the Christian journey, whether it was the Celestial City or the summit of Mount Carmel, it was recognized that both inward and outward affliction would come regardless of any wrongdoing on the part of the sojourner. Neither Symonds nor St. John saw spiritual depression as a problem which was necessarily caused by a specific act of sin or by people not being adequately grounded in Scripture. In fact, the modern sentiment of an ideal Christian life consisting of sustained contentment and bliss following conversion would have been completely foreign to both of them.

Puritans and Carmelites alike struggled with forms of spiritual depression; they were perplexed and searched for the source of their troubles, wondering if they had strayed from the true path. As an expression of their shared pastoral concern for such people, both Symonds and St. John wrote their respective treatises. It was clearly evident in their writings that both authors were experienced and adept in the caring of souls. They were quick to write in the first person, addressing their readers as if they were speaking directly to them as a spiritual mentor. In their discussion on the imperfect

²³ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 356.

²⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 172.

²⁵ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 404.

comfort of the saints, some common themes emerge within Symonds' and St. John's teaching.

One theme that both authors raised was the matter of self-knowledge. They jointly agreed that a potential benefit of spiritually depressive experiences was that it gave people a unique opportunity to develop an awareness of the depth of their spiritual poverty, their utter need of God's mercy, and the richness of the grace that they receive from God. Symonds maintained that the principal purpose of spiritual desertion was instruction; desertion taught believers knowledge pertaining to their true nature, their sinfulness, their weakness, and their need of grace. He explained, "So in desertion when a man is left most in his colors and shape, he may best see what he is . . . It [desertion] discovers a man's weakness and emptiness; now a man shall discern by his deadness, indisposedness, unmeetness to all good; how great the insufficiency of nature is, and how little he has attained of grace."²⁶ Elsewhere, Symonds continued, "Thus God for this end sometimes suspends the workings of the Spirit of power from us, that we may see a necessity of grace, and know where the fountain is, and that all is of God, that so we may depend upon him, and not rest in ourselves, and ascribe all to him, and nothing to ourselves."²⁷

St. John viewed self-knowledge as the chief benefit of the dark night: "The first and chief benefit this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery."²⁸ Regarding beginners who had not yet experienced the dark night St. John observed that they were prone to walk in contentment, festivity, gratification, and consolation, thinking that they have derived their satisfaction from their spiritual exercises. However, when the dryness and desolation of the sensory and spiritual nights began their work people learned to consider themselves as nothing, knowing full well that they could do nothing apart from God.²⁹ Even so, St. John explained that not all knowledge attained through the dark night had to do with one's lowliness and misery. The believer also learned of his grandeur and majesty.³⁰ This seemed to reflect St. John's paradoxical approach to spirituality: an individual truly understood his great value precisely when he also understood his lowliness.

Despite the light shed by their discussions on self-knowledge, both Symonds and St. John openly acknowledged the mystery behind why believers often experience imperfect divine comfort. This was in line with their respective spiritual traditions, as neither the Puritans nor the Carmelites claimed to be able to understand fully or give a complete account for all occurrences of spiritual depression. Even though Symonds and St. John masterfully identified and explicated certain forms of spiritual desolation, both

²⁶ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 134–137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁸ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 385.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 387.

admitted that their treatments were neither comprehensive nor exhaustive to all forms of spiritual aridity. St. John explained:

[T]he darkneses and trials, spiritual and temporal, that fortunate souls ordinarily undergo on their way to the high state of perfection are so numerous and profound that human science cannot understand them adequately.³¹

The role of mystery was central to St. John's spirituality. One of the reasons he called the entire Christian journey a night pertained to God himself, who according to St. John, was so brilliant that he was necessarily dark to the limited human mind. Citing an analogy made by Aristotle, St. John illustrated the overwhelming nature of God's luminance: "Just as the sun is total darkness to the eyes of a bat, so the brightest light in God is total darkness to our intellect."³² Even though he never lost sight for a moment of the divine immanence, the overpowering impression produced by the terms he used to speak of God was one of awe and transcendence. E. Allison Peers posited that St. John's superior sense of God's transcendence, as evidenced by his frequent acknowledgement of mystery, was perhaps what made his teaching so attractive to people who live in our current context.³³

Towards the end of *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, Symonds reflected on the frequent and stark shifts between periods of joy and periods of gloom that were commonly observed in the lives of Christians. Paralleling St. John, Symonds concluded his work acknowledging the mystery behind why saints presently have an imperfect comfort from God:

The experience of all the saints almost contributes to the evidence of this truth: where shall we find a man that has not met with these rocks and sands, and has not seen some gloomy days and winter storms, passing through many changes, sometime rejoicing as the plants in the spring, in the sight and sense of God's gracious presence; sometimes again mourning for his loss of God; sometimes lift up to heaven in his soul . . . sometime again depressed to the deeps of hell and held as with chains of brass or iron; now quickened, but growing dull again?³⁴

4. *Spiritual Depression and Melancholy*

Both Symonds and St. John were careful to distinguish between certain forms of spiritual depression and melancholy, or what people in our current

³¹ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 176.

³³ E. Allison Peers, *Spirit of Flame: A Study of St. John of the Cross* (London: Student Christian Movement Press Ltd., 1943), 152.

³⁴ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 6.

context would understand as clinical depression. Although both authors clearly held a high view of Scripture, they recognized that Scripture alone was not the best remedy for certain forms of melancholy, especially those with physiological causes. To them, the presence of spiritually depressive symptoms did not necessitate the application of spiritual remedies—further investigation needed to be made to discern the true nature of the condition as well as the best course of action.

St. John wrote of three signs that needed to be present before one could discern a genuine dark night of the soul. He emphasized that all three signs must be simultaneously present before an affirmative diagnosis could be made since melancholy could potentially cause these same symptoms, though not all at once: "When one is incapable of making discursive meditation on the things of God and disinclined to consider subjects extraneous to God, the cause could be melancholia or some other kind of humor in the heart or brain capable of producing a certain stupefaction and suspension of the sense faculties."³⁵

Similarly, Symonds wrote of spiritually depressive symptoms with natural causes, distinguishing them from those with spiritual causes. Speaking to those who suffered from a condition with natural causes, he offered the following suggestion: "But I leave such with this advice, when they find their temper to be naturally or accidentally melancholic, to use all such ways as God hath prepared in a natural way; for as the soul is not cured by natural causes, so the body is not cured by spiritual remedies."³⁶

5. *God's Relentless and Persisting Love*

Another notable commonality between Symonds' teaching on spiritual desertion and St. John's teaching on the dark night of the soul was that both contended that God's love was not lost despite what seemed to be strong evidence to the contrary. Symonds argued that spiritual desertion represented only a variation in the operation of God's love and as such, it was not an indication that God's affection towards the believer had changed. Citing Jeremiah 31:3, he reaffirmed that God's love remained the same and was an everlasting love.³⁷ Moreover, desertion was only a partial withdrawal of God's grace: "God never denies it wholly to a faithful soul: though some degrees of divine help be denied, so that the soul languish in a sort, and sink into a state of deadness and dullness; yet there is life and that [is] both habitual and actual."³⁸

Symonds' conviction concerning God's relentless and persistent love was deeply rooted in the Puritans' belief in divine election. The covenant of

³⁵ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 190.

³⁶ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 516.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

grace—that commitment to save made to the believer by all three persons of the Trinity—was frequently mentioned in Puritan paraenetic literature as a source of comfort to believers.³⁹ This doctrine reminded them that their salvation was secure by virtue of the fact that it was grounded from a choice and commitment made first by God. Although the human will was also involved, a person was not saved by the merit or quality of their confession of Christ. In light of this, Symonds concluded that God's love was not withdrawn from the believer even in cases of spiritual desertion. To him, the critical involvement of the divine will in the salvation of man was the primary and most effective source of assurance one could have in times of spiritual darkness.

St. John similarly believed that God's love persisted during the dark night of the soul. However, he went even further. St. John argued that the darkness associated with the sensory and spiritual nights was due to a more intense inflow of God into the soul. God did not even partially withdraw himself from his children when he sought to purge them of their imperfections. On the contrary, he allowed his light to shine so brightly that it overwhelmed the human faculties: "In striking the soul with its divine light, it surpasses the natural light and thereby darkens and deprives a soul of all the natural affections and apprehensions it perceived by means of its natural light . . . Leaving the soul thus empty and dark, the ray purges and illumines it with divine spiritual light, while the soul thinks that it has no light and is in darkness."⁴⁰ Far from viewing it as a withdrawal of divine love, St. John described the experience of the dark night as a "wounding by a strong divine love" and "a certain feeling and foretaste of God."⁴¹

SPIRITUAL DESERTION AND THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: THEIR VALUE FOR CONTEMPORARY PASTORAL CARE

Prior to concluding this paper, I would like to briefly address a secondary question: What is the value of spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul in pastoral care today? Indeed, both Symonds and St. John make significant contributions to pastoral thinking about, and dealing with, what contemporary Christians experience as spiritual dryness. As hopefully evident from my previous, largely conceptual discussion on the common themes shared by the concepts of spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul, several points of practical application can be made for individuals currently entrusted with the noble work of caring for and shepherding souls. Although it is my opinion that all of Symonds' and St. John's teach-

³⁹ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 41.

⁴⁰ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 411.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 419.

ings are exceptionally valuable and relevant to contemporary pastoral care, for the sake of brevity, I would like to highlight just one particularly salient insight from each perspective and briefly discuss their implications on the practice of pastoral care.

1. *Joseph Symonds and Salvific Assurance*

Even though the Puritans believed that some measure of assurance of salvation was available at the outset, full assurance was not normally enjoyed except by those who have first labored for it and sought after it, serving God faithfully and patiently for some time without it. According to J.I. Packer, assurance was an aspect of faith which normally appeared only when faith had reached a high degree of development, far beyond its minimal saving exercise.⁴² Symonds explained, "For though the object of comfort be sufficient, yet the assurance and enjoyment of it is deficient, so that the soul is comforted, because it has God in a measure, but it is troubled because it wants still, not being so sure and full of him as it desires."⁴³

This perspective on salvific assurance is particularly helpful in debunking unrealistic expectations of the spiritual life that currently seem to be commonplace. Many of these expectations seem to follow what I consider to be misguided evangelistic techniques grounded in a therapeutically-reoriented understanding of the Gospel—which, according to Christopher Lasch, is a Gospel grounded not in the expression of genuine religious devotion nor the desire for spiritual transcendence but one driven solely by a hunger for subjective peace of mind, personal well-being, and psychic self-improvement and security.⁴⁴

It is important to note that Lasch's discussion on therapeutically-reoriented religion was not intended to be a critique of psychotherapy—for the process of healing that occurs in such a context often involves hard work and great courage. Neither was it intended to be a repudiation of the rightful place of comfort and healing within the Christian faith. Rather, he is presenting his observations concerning the tendency of modern Western culture to view comfort and peace of mind as religion's chief end. Philip Reiff articulated this well: "Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased. The difference was established long ago, when 'I believe,' the cry of the ascetic, lost precedence to 'one feels,' the caveat of the therapeutic."⁴⁵

⁴² Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 181–182.

⁴³ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 404.

⁴⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 33.

⁴⁵ Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 25.

As an oversimplified application of Luther's *sola fide*, some summarize the goal of the Christian life as entry into heaven, which in turn was to be guaranteed at the point of one's initial profession of faith. Often, this point is accompanied by promises of perfect spiritual and emotional bliss that are expected to follow the conversion experience. If such teaching in the church is left without qualification, it is particularly amenable to both disappointment and disenchantment. The Puritan belief that salvific assurance did not come until one had been refined by trial and temptation is a necessary corrective to this gospel of cheap grace. Sigmund Freud asserted, "[C]onsolation . . . at bottom, is what they are demanding . . . the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most virtuous believers."⁴⁶ In contrast, Symonds retorts: "[It is] not joy that makes a Christian, but grace; as it is the light, not the warmth of the sun that makes the day."⁴⁷

2. *St. John of the Cross and Transcending Meditative Technique*

One of the reasons St. John envisioned the entire Christian journey as a night was his affirmation that faith was necessary in achieving union with God. To him, faith required people to abandon their own thoughts and images of God with the aim of opening the self to God's limitless nature. St. John argued that the human imagination was insufficient for faith in God because it could not fashion or imagine anything beyond what could be experienced through the exterior senses.⁴⁸

It was therefore intentional on St. John's part that he did not teach any kind of technique for prayer or meditation, for doing so would have encouraged his readers to employ their imaginations. He noted that there were many people who had in fact practiced some kind of meditative technique with great spiritual profit until they arrived at a point where they received all they could out of that way of meditating and needed to progress.⁴⁹ They experienced a kind of spiritual dryness that frustrated all efforts to meditate in the manner to which they had previously grown accustomed. St. John's aim in writing on the dark night was to help people who had arrived at such a point to transcend their meditative technique, whatever it may have been, and go on to develop a deeper manner of communication with God.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* in James Strachey, ed., *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Series* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 154.

⁴⁷ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 437.

⁴⁸ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 186.

⁴⁹ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 376.

⁵⁰ Marilyn May Mallory, *Christian Mysticism Transcending Techniques: A Theological Reflection on the Empirical Testing of the Teaching of St. John of the Cross* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Company, 1977), 113.

Pastoral teaching on the value of transcending meditative technique may be particularly helpful to those who have too strongly attached themselves to a particular style or method of relating to God. Exclusively limiting oneself to particular means may in fact inhibit the integration of one's relationship with God into all aspects of life. For example, if one grew accustomed to communicating with God only through a quiet time (i.e., a period of retreat from the activities of the day to pray and read Scripture), then that person may subsequently have trouble seeking God's guidance and presence during times when a time of retreat is not possible. Also, St. John's teaching on transcending meditative technique may be a valuable corrective to cause-and-effect approaches of Christian spirituality, where one unknowingly seeks magically to evoke God's presence or action through refined rituals or prayer techniques.

CONCLUSION

Instead of darkness and not-knowing these people want clear knowledge; instead of poverty and humiliation they want to possess secrets; instead of struggle and affliction they want consolations; instead of the hard labor of acquiring virtue they want sweetness in prayer. They are bypassing Jesus, settling within the confines of created things, managing themselves, basically seeking themselves. This is not to enter into the mystery of the crucified Jesus.⁵¹

One of the greatest benefits of studying topics such as the dark night of the soul and spiritual desertion is that they return one to the center of the Christian faith, which, according to Rowan Williams, is that "central and fruitful darkness of the cross."⁵² Christ's death on the cross reminds people that mystery and paradox lie at the heart of Christianity. Reflecting on the image of the crucified Son crying to the Father, Williams highlights the mystery of why God allowed himself to be killed by his own creatures and their religion, and of how he was able to reshape the face of religious life through acts of meekness, vulnerability, and failure.⁵³

The problem of spiritual dryness, as it is illustrated by spiritual desertion and the dark night of the soul, similarly returns one to the darkness and mystery of the Christian faith. Why is it the case, for instance, that the path toward sanctification and divine union seems to lead one inevitably through prolonged periods of severe spiritual aridity? Symonds' keen observation that Christ himself experienced spiritual desertion on the cross helps

⁵¹ Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, 97.

⁵² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), 174.

⁵³ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 175.

one visualize this experience through biblical history, but it still does not reconcile its paradox. Moreover, how is it that God's love for the believer remains the same during these periods of spiritual dryness, especially in light of the fact that some successfully persevere and are purged and illumined while others fall away from the faith altogether? Again, St. John's discussions on the dark night of the soul and the benefits of detachment are helpful for understanding the nature and manner by which one is purged and illumined, but they do not give a full account of those who do not complete the Christian journey.

The topic of spiritual aridity ultimately points one to the reality that the Christian faith cannot be reduced to a matter of causes and effects. The consoling presence of God is not something that can be invoked as if by magic; it is imparted according to divine wisdom and foreknowledge, and it is received by those to whom God chooses to reveal himself. God's judgment against the friends of Job is a stern admonition concerning the folly of causal thinking, especially when it is applied to the problem of suffering. Moreover, the topic of spiritual depression also points to the reality that the crux of the Christian faith is not a matter of personal comfort, satisfaction, success, or even self-actualization. For if Christ suffered and was persecuted while he was on earth, how can his disciples expect anything different?

The joint message of Symonds and St. John is this: perfect and unsurpassed spiritual comfort will indeed come, but not here and now. This is why the Christian life is most accurately described as a journey. St. John explained, "This place must remain in darkness until the day, in the next life, when the clear vision of God dawns upon the soul; and in this life, until the daybreak of transformation in and union with God, the goal of a person's journey."⁵⁴ Reflecting on the bliss of the life to come, Symonds added, "Thus two old friends shall renew their friendship, and they that were at a distance, shall meet in love; he that did depart shall return with kindness, and he that was forsaken shall be received with mercy; and the ancient joy which was in heaven at his first conversion, shall be renewed at his restoration."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 205.

⁵⁵ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 528.

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