



Why are there times I feel so separated from God?

Is this normal?

How do I get through these times?



Addressed by
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vignettes of separation*

* Based on the stories of actual people I have meet in ministry.
All identifiable information has been changed and two are composite sketches.

Bill. He is a thirty-seven year old software salesman. He became a Christian in college (he grew up in a nominal church family) and was disciplined through an evangelical campus group. He thrived in this group which he describes "as a bunch of entrepreneurial Christians—who were sold out for Jesus." After college he volunteered with this group and describes this as his "highest point spiritually." He and his family (wife and three children) have moved a great deal because of business transfers. His wife grew up in the church and always plugs in first, but he has never come to really feel at home in church. As we talked he despaired that "my faith plateaued ten years ago." His assessment was "everything else is going so well. I just wish I could fix this part of my life." He continues to practice personal spiritual disciplines (mainly Bible reading and family prayer time at dinner), but is not connected to his church or involved in ministry.



Sarah. She is twenty-four and became a Christian about three years ago. She grew up in what she calls "a perfect family," but when she went away to college she adopted a promiscuous lifestyle and rarely sees her family. About three years ago her live-in boyfriend introduced her to the Gospel. As Sarah tells it "he wasn't into church," and it wasn't until they broke up a year ago that she began to attend church and fellowship with other Christians. She says that she has really grown in the past year and finds her joy in who she is becoming. However, she is often plagued by doubts and frequently wonders if she really is saved. Recently, after she blew up at a co-worker, she confided to a friend, "I'm trying so hard to be a good Christian. I'm scared to think what will happen when I run out of energy to keep trying."

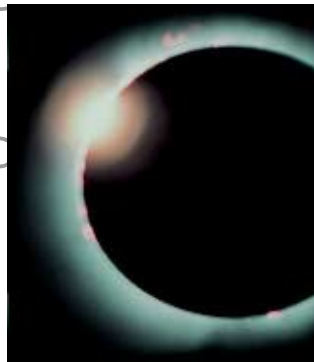
Frank. He is forty-six years old, known for his personal evangelism at work, his devoted service to church, where he serves as an elder, and his love for his family. One spring he told other elders that he had been having some trouble with one of his boys, and he thought it would be good to “back away from church a bit over the summer.” He was taken off the teaching schedule, but members were surprised that he and his family stopped coming to church altogether. Friends found that he and his family were spending their Sundays water skiing. When the fall came, he showed no interest in taking up his responsibilities and confessed to the pastor that he “was tired of the church thing, but I would like to continue as an elder.” He and his family continue to attend church about once a month and he volunteers to coordinate big events, but he no longer brings new converts from work to church.

Betsy. She is fifty-four and a lifelong Christian. She describes herself as “the volunteer queen.” Most of her volunteer energy has been directed to her church, her children’s schools and a small Christian humanitarian mission based in her town. She and her husband have been through a very difficult five years. He suffered a heart attack followed by a slow and painful rehabilitation, and the marriage of one of their three children failed. During this time she “experienced the sweetness of prayer and the treasure of Christian friends.” However, as they were just getting out of this dark tunnel she says, “The bottom dropped out spiritually.” During the dark days of her husband’s recovery and the divorce she found great joy in prayer and was overjoyed when she woke up early because she could pray longer. Now she feels like she is “just going through the motions.” She still prays, but finds it hard to be around “happy Christians.” She wonders if she is being punished for something and at times wonders if she has lost her faith. The words of Job about God, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” brings her great comfort as she goes on day by day. She has a sense at times that God is working on her and finds great comfort and wisdom in her elderly grandmother.



understanding the dark night of the soul

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discerning the dark night

First rule out/consider: Depression, circumstantial issues and life-stage concerns.

Is there clear evidence of **unrepentant sin, wrong belief or idolatry**?

Does this aridity exist in **other areas** of his/her life?

Does the sufferer possess a **genuine and growing relationship** with Christ?

Has this person has made **progress in prayer, discipleship and Christian virtue**?

Is the sufferer more **aware of this aridity of soul** than are other people?

Has **perceived distance** from God been **resistant** to wise patterns of trying to **bridge** it?

Have previous **sweet patterns of devotions** lost their appeal?

a few heroes who had dark nights



John Newton

Author of Amazing Grace. Struggled in prayer as his wife dies of breast cancer. He wrote after his wife's death "It was well worth standing a while in the fire, for such an opportunity of experiencing and exhibiting the power and faithfulness of His promises."

David

"A man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). The Psalms of David are refreshing water to those who are in the midst of a dark night. David knew the experience well.

"O my God, I cry out by day, but you **do not answer**, by night, and am not silent"
(Ps 22:2).

Job

God said of him, "There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). Yet, he experienced a great loss and the accompanied dark night of the soul. He maintains his faith in the midst of this; "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). The dark night purified his relationship with God, "But I have spoken of great things which I have not understood, things too wonderful for me to know. I knew of thee then only by report, but now I see thee with my own eyes, therefore I melt away; I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2).



how to think about being distant from God

focus: you need to be careful about your focus

Our present feelings (God feels close or distant)

The reality of our present spiritual condition (the reality of your present walk with Christ)

The reality of our being adopted by God (chosen, adopted and cherished by God)

reality: God is apparently absent

God is still king and still loves you.

Relationships change and grow.

Truth is deeper than feelings.

why?

God is training us to love him more than the fruits of being a Christian.

God is calling us to a deeper place through the purification of the desert.

God is purifying a sinful distortion of our relationship with him. John of the Cross taught that the seven deadly sins all are present in our relationship with God. The dark night as a cure for spiritual gluttony.

how do I go forward?

Do what you can to **stay engaged** with God.

Find a **spiritual friend** who knows about the dark night and let him/her **guide** you.

Small groups may be a difficult place during this time.

Seek out **worship experiences** that connect you with **God's truth** and **presence**.

Keep a journal.

Give yourself **permission** to **step back** from **ministries** as you deem necessary.

Be careful with what you say about God, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:22).

Find **Christian music** and **authors** that **speak truth** to your **situation**.

Never become comfortable in the desert—travel through it, don't dwell there.

resources that have helped others

Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure
by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom
by Henri J. M. Nouwen

Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging
by Brennan Manning

Embracing the Love of God: The Path and Promise of Christian Life
by James Bryan Smith

Dark Night of the Soul
By St. John of the Cross