

The Dark Night of the Soul

by Dr. Henry Oursler

This last month, I have been reading through the book of Job in my devotions. What trials and struggles he endured! And yet, we all go through them. There are some of you right now who are going through severe health problems, job pressures, family struggles, lawsuits (one of our friends just told us about a lawsuit that has already cost his business \$100,000 in legal fees), emotional struggles and disappointments, and the list goes on.

But Job's greatest suffering did not come when he lost his property, when he lost his children, when he became horribly sick and suffered great physical pain, or even when his "friends" tried to get him to confess sins he had not committed. Job's greatest suffering came from the fact that in the midst of all this agony, God withdrew the assurance of His presence.

Christians go through these periods of abandonment from time to time. The Medieval theologians called them "dark nights of the soul" and the Puritans called such experiences "desertions." Just as God normally visits us with His presence and we bask in the glow of His love, so also God sometimes withdraws that sense from us and leaves us feeling utterly alone.

Has God really left us? No, but God makes us feel His absence so that we pursue Him and cry out more desperately to Him. Such experiences give us just a little taste of what our Savior experienced on the cross, when He cried out: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). In his last speech, Job accuses God of forsaking him, saying, "You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of Your hand You attack me" (Job 30:21). At this point, it seems that Job has fallen into sin. He has stopped living by faith and has begun to rely too heavily on his feelings. Job's suffering did not begin because of any sin on his part, but in the midst of his suffering he fell into the sin of thinking God had abandoned him.

Job 32-37 records the speech of Elihu, a young man who had been silent up to this time. interpreters debate whether what Elihu said is right or wrong, but it seems that Elihu spoke the truth to Job, thereby leading the discussion upward toward what God said to Job next. Elihu said that Job's friends were wrong to accuse him of sin, and that he wanted to help Job clear his name (33:22). But he also told Job that it was wrong to accuse God of being unfair. God is not obliged to answer man. He pointed to the greatness and majesty of God, and told Job to reflect on these things. God's ways are mysterious, but never wrong. Job must continue to trust Him.

And that's God's word to us: Trust and Obey. But you cannot trust someone fully that you know only partially. That is why for the Christian one of our chief goals of life must be to know God more and more intimately. The more we know Him, the more we will be able to trust Him - even in the dark nights of the soul.