

7. Letting Go of the Need to Feel Close to God

There may come a point in a contemplative's prayer where even the longing for God fades. Not from loss—but from a deeper union. I don't know whether this happens to most or to a few. This final reflection from a Christian perspective in this series draws on a Sufi wisdom story. Consider: What if my sense of absence is not a failure, but a doorway into hidden nearness?

In earlier stages of contemplation, the soul may burn with longing. It prays to feel God's closeness, to taste the sweetness of presence. But there comes a time when God withdraws—not in anger or abandonment, but to deepen trust. To teach the soul to walk not by light, but by love. Saint John of the Cross, writing from his own 'dark nights', described how even the desire to feel God can become an obstacle. Only when we release our grasp—on image, experience, even spiritual desire—can God be truly free in us.

And Thomas Merton warned of mistaking the emotional intensity of seeking for the reality of God's presence. Sometimes, union no longer feels like closeness. It simply is. This final reflection in the series draws from a Sufi parable to invite us deeper into this paradox. Christ is not farther when we feel nothing. He may be closer than ever—precisely because we are no longer in the way.

The Fire Beneath the Ash

A disciple came to the Sufi master and said, "My heart once burned with love for God. Now there is nothing—no warmth, no flame." The master looked at him gently and replied, "You mistake fire for feeling. The fire is still burning. It's just deeper now—beneath the ash." "So what should I do?" the disciple asked. "Wait in silence," said the master. "Let the ash settle. Let the fire work in secret. It is no longer your warmth—but God's."

Source: Adapted from a traditional Sufi story.



Reflection: Many of us begin the contemplative path hoping for warmth, clarity, and a felt closeness with God. These can come—and they matter. But sooner or later, God invites us into deeper trust. A trust not based on feeling, but on love itself. Sometimes what we call ‘absence’ is only the quieting of sensation, so that we may learn to rest in Presence without grasping. Saint John of the Cross teaches that in the dark night, even the longing to feel God must be surrendered. Thomas Merton reminds us not to confuse emotional light with spiritual substance. In this silence, what feels like distance may actually be the purification of our desire. This stage is not a rejection. It is union, grown quiet. No longer clinging. No longer needing to sense. Only being—present to Presence. As Christ said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29)

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever experienced God's presence more deeply when you no longer felt it emotionally?
- Is there a difference for you between feeling close to God and actually being close to God?
- How do you discern the difference between spiritual dryness and genuine interior growth?
- What helps you remain faithful in prayer when it feels like nothing is happening?
- The place of emotion in different people can vary. Spiritual paths can

vary, even among Christians. Are you called to the path indicated in this episode? What is to be your attitude towards whose response that question is different from yours?



Scripture and Contemplative Echoes

Old Testament

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. — *Job 13:15*

Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Saviour of Israel. — *Isaiah 45:15*

New Testament

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. — *John 20:29*

We live by faith, not by sight. — 2
Corinthians 5:7

For now we see only a reflection as in a
mirror; then we shall see face to face. —
1 Corinthians 13:12

Contemplative Christian Writers

The soul that is empty of all satisfaction is nearest to God. In the dark night, all consolations are withdrawn so that union may be pure. Let the soul be content to endure in love, even without light. — *St. John of the Cross, The Dark Night, Book II, Chapter 6*

We do not attain God by effort or feeling, but by the poverty of spirit that rests in love without needing proof. The true contemplative lives in a deep hidden union—even when the surface feels dry. — *Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 44*

The path to God leads through the desert of the heart. We must let go not only of images of God, but of our craving for God to appear. This absence is its own form of presence, if we can remain faithful. — *Martin Laird, Into the Silent Land, p. 92*

Sometimes you will sit in silence and feel nothing. No presence, no warmth, no guidance. This is the hour of pure faith. Stay there. God is not gone. You are being drawn deeper into the mystery. — *Henri Nouwen, The Inner Voice of Love, p. 58*



In Verse

When It Went Away

when in the silence
the thinker of I-thoughts
had vanished
and nothing
seems to have replaced him,
in the stillness after
he wonders
what was it that remained
when I was not here?

and now that I'm back
what of this soundless sound?
is it I, the incomplete one,
or maybe is it all
creation,
delicately heard groaning
deeply, deeply
in the throes of childbirth?

or maybe, just maybe
whispers the I
—is it Spirit,
groaning
beyond all words?

tony macelli
07-09-12

Naked Pilgrim

align with enchanted time,
where the hymn of night
will sing you
and God will smile

the gap between thoughts is a
fertile low-lying lake
where many rivers emerge
and then, like you, return

when you wander there alone
let go of haste, of worry, of fear
of future, of past, regrets
resistance, judgment, control

surrender to holy void
where spirit, unfolding, infolds
where in awe the all flows you
and you, the all

tony macelli
09-07-2023

