


ALICIA BRITT CHOLE

THE
NIGHT
IS
NORMAL



A GUIDE THROUGH SPIRITUAL PAIN

I've just finished this book in full-body chills. Without a doubt, *The Night Is Normal* will become one of the most important books of our time. Alicia Britt Chole's words are crucial for the deep disillusionment seeping into our souls. I dare you to read this work and not be irresistibly drawn to Jesus.

LISA WHITTLE

Bestselling author, Bible teacher, and podcast host

Alicia Britt Chole is one of the richest and most timeless voices of the twenty-first century. In fact, I believe her work and insights will be as profoundly relevant one hundred years from now as they are today. Far too many believers feel betrayed by God when they encounter suffering. Thankfully, Dr. Chole's book serves as a wise and gentle guide to what often feels like an excruciatingly lonely journey in the Christian faith.

GRANT SKELDON

Next Gen Director at Q Ideas and author of *The Passion Generation*

When I entered into a prolonged night season in my own life, it was Alicia who stepped in to help me navigate the disillusionment I feared would cause my faith to unravel. *The Night Is Normal* is a gift to us all. This book is so timely, so insightful, so helpful, so *needed*. You will return to these pages time and time again as you discover that "disillusionment is a well-traveled path *within* faith, evidence of growth, not decay."

CHRISTINE CAINE

Founder of A21 and Propel Women

This book is an insightful journey through spiritual disillusionment—its meaning, healing, and hope—for those who have experienced night seasons. With Alicia as your guide, coach, and compassionate mentor, you will discover how to use spiritual pain as a tool for growth in your faith journey. During the difficult and turbulent times we are all navigating, *The Night Is Normal* will offer you a path leading from disillusionment back into the depths of God's never-ending love.

JENNIFER KEITT

CEO of The Keitt Institute: A Center for Emotional Development and Well-Being

Gold locked in deepest darkness requires a skilled miner to break open the rock, expose the vein, and initiate the process of extraction leading to refinement. Alicia does just that in this singular book. This is no pablum or spirituality-lite bromide. *The Night Is Normal* is robust, tough, and authentic. As an octogenarian with fifty-seven years of mission ministry, I thank Alicia for speaking into the liminality of my own journey.

WILLIAM D. TAYLOR, PHD

Servant, mentor, and writer

I know Alicia. I trust Alicia. You can trust her to be the wise and empathetic voice to speak into your own spiritual pain. Each word Alicia wrote in this book reflects her heart. If you are in spiritual pain, or if someone you love is struggling with disillusionment, you will get the perspective, empathy, and insight you need to find comfort, clarity, and hope. I'm convinced that God can use this book to sweep away the dark so the night will give way to beautiful hope.

JENNIFER ROTHSCHILD

Author of nineteen books and Bible studies, including *Lessons I Learned in the Dark*; founder of Fresh Grounded Faith women's events; and host of the *4:13 Podcast*

The measure of life is not how we avoid the experience of night but how well we acknowledge, embrace, and transcend the night. Alicia Britt Chole has put her ears to God's heart and mouth to help us navigate the night seasons of disillusionment with God, with ourselves, and with others. Through scholarship and the exegesis of her own walk with God, she helps us own the night seasons as cycles that produce an ever-increasing commitment and capacity to love and to faithfully endure.

BISHOP CLAUDE ALEXANDER

Pastor of The Park Church

When I first read the line "The night is not your enemy," my heart was welcomed into one of the most important books of our time. Like

a master craftsman at work, Alicia will challenge you, enlighten you, and give you the biblical framework and language to express and work through thoughts and emotions you have probably wrestled with in recent times.

DARLENE ZSCHECH

HopeUC Church

I welcome the innovative and creative ways Alicia Britt Chole uses in her approach to the awful purposes of spiritual pain. Consistent with her other works, *The Night Is Normal* graces us with an insightful and realistic assessment of disillusionment with God, ourselves, and others. Her practical counsel invites and empowers the reader to surrender to God's upward pull of love.

KENNETH BOA

President of Reflections Ministries and Trinity House Publishers

In *The Night Is Normal*, Dr. Alicia Britt Chole challenges us to discover treasures in the darkest moments of our lives. She dismantles our desire to make everything okay and calls us to recognize that God is God of the night just as He is of the day. This book will encourage you to never give up because you never know what is waiting on the other side of your disillusionment. Prepare to discover gems in the darkest part of the ocean to help you navigate the nights of your life.

KIMBERLY ALEXANDER, DPHIL

Leading lady of The Park Church and founder of Deeper Roots SoulCare, LLC

It took me a really long time to understand that pain isn't divinely punitive but is instead, more often than not, a spiritual promotion. A tangible way in which God entrusts His beloved to carry heavy and hard things in such a way that He's glorified, we lean more fully into His merciful sufficiency, and our story gains credibility with the precious image bearers we get to rub shoulders with. And I can't think of too many people I'd trust more to guide us through these deep waters than Dr. Alicia Britt Chole, who's faithfully navigated difficult nights of the soul and come through with humility, wisdom, and compassion,

which clarify who she was with until the sun came up again. This book will surely be among the most dog-eared on my shelf!

LISA HARPER

Bible teacher, speaker, author of *Life*

The Night Is Normal



THE
NIGHT
IS
NORMAL

A GUIDE THROUGH SPIRITUAL PAIN

ALICIA BRITT CHOLE



TYNDALE
REFRESH™

Think Well. Live Well. Be Well.

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit the author online at <https://aliciachole.com>.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Refresh*, and the Tyndale Refresh logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Refresh is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

The Night Is Normal: A Guide through Spiritual Pain

Copyright © 2023 by Dr. Alicia Britt Chole. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration of intersecting circles by Lindsey Bergsma. Copyright © Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of stars by Guille Pozzi on Unsplash.com

Author photo by Randy Bacon, Copyright © 2022. All Rights Reserved.

Designed by Lindsey Bergsma

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New International Version*, Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1996.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Isaiah 20:5 on page 258 is from The Expanded Bible. Copyright © 2011 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked GNT are taken from the Good News Translation in Today's English Version, Second Edition, copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® (Some quotations may be from the earlier NIV edition, copyright © 1984.) Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-6515-3

Printed in the United States of America

29 28 27 26 25 24 23
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

PART ONE Navigating the Night

- 1 Facing the Storm Together 3
- 2 Night-Faith 9
- 3 That Startling “Pop” 14
- 4 What’s in a Word, Part One 20
- 5 What’s in a Word, Part Two 26
- 6 A Relational Cycle 32
- 7 Between Illusion and Reality 38
- 8 The Upward Pull of Love 44
- 9 A Choice in the Dark 48
- 10 A Spiritual Exfoliate 53

PART TWO Disillusionment with God

- 11 Yellow Jackets 58
- 12 What God Wants 63
- 13 Something Old 68
- 14 Something New, Part One 72
- 15 Something New, Part Two 76
- 16 Growing Pains 81
- 17 Cookies and Candor 85
- 18 What Dots Are Not 89
- 19 Thirsty Thoughts 93
- 20 Body Building 97
- 21 In the Mourning 100

- 22 Proof Misuse 104
- 23 A Lifeline 109
- 24 The Unglamorous Gift 115
- 25 On the Other Side 119

PART THREE Disillusionment with Self

- 26 Spiritual Frustration 126
- 27 Something Old 130
- 28 Something New 134
- 29 Chasing Horses 138
- 30 Heart Matters 142
- 31 That Same Old Spot 147
- 32 Gaining Ground 152
- 33 Never Wasted 157
- 34 Filtering “Failures” 161
- 35 Pickle Soup 166
- 36 The Common Thread 172
- 37 Breathe Deeply 177

PART FOUR Disillusionment with Others

- 38 (Not So) Well with My Soul 182
- 39 Something Old and Something New 187
- 40 Sunday Schooled 192
- 41 Less Than Blessed 198
- 42 How We Hear 204
- 43 Holding the Glass 207
- 44 Table Stretches 210
- 45 To Have, or Not to Have, a Cow 214
- 46 A Muscular Mercy 218

47 What Was, Was 222
48 The “Show Me” State 226
49 From Above 230
50 Forty-Four Chapters Past Bail 234
51 The Man in the Middle 238
52 Conclusion 243

APPENDIX A Objections 247

APPENDIX B Occurrences of *Disillusion* in English
Translations of the Bible 258

APPENDIX C A Brief Etymology of Disillusionment 260

APPENDIX D A Commentary on Related Terms
and Concepts 262

Notes 277

Bibliography 297

About the Author 305

PART ONE



Navigating the Night

Chapter 1

• • •

FACING THE STORM TOGETHER

Perhaps it began on the front porch. Or rather, on the front porches. My family moved every year to a new city, new house, and new school as my dad pursued a new dream. Growing up, the happy constant was the love of my parents and a few traditions like this one.

“Porch” might be a bit generous, though. Often, it was more of a covered doorstep. Big or small, it was a haven for me. Dad worked all day and most weekends, so this was a night tradition. To this day, it remains one of my sweetest memories.

Every once in a while, we started early if we happened to notice the lightning. But most times the tradition began when we heard thunder in the distance. Dad’s eyes would brighten as he announced, “A storm is coming!”

When I was little, Dad would scoop me up in his arms and carry me. As I grew too big for scooping, he would hold my hand as we hurried to take our positions on the porch. Then, facing the storm in the darkness, Dad would tuck me under his arm as we sat together in silence (except,

of course, when counting seconds between lightning flashes and crackling rumbles).

Sometimes, depending on how porchy the porch was, we stayed outside for the entire storm. But always, we would stay as long as we could, enjoying the wind, rain, “thunderboomers,”¹ and light show together.

Dad decided early on that I would not inherit the family fear of storms. He succeeded. Since I was small, I have associated storms with an invitation to spend time in the safe arms of my dad.

That association eventually—but not immediately—transferred from my earthly dad to my heavenly One. My earliest years as a follower of Jesus were filled with little night and lots of daylight. The first night-storm in my faith actually took me by surprise, and I initially interpreted it as a faith failure instead of an invitation to enrich my relationship with God. Since God mercifully reestablished that connection, the night has hosted my greatest spiritual growth spurts and become a faith-strengthening focus of my studies.

In that sense, I began writing this book a long time ago on a little porch in the middle of the night through the realization that storms are survivable when we view them as relational. The night is filled with holy invitations to grow our love for God.

A disconnect between the night and *growth, nearness, and love* has spiritually shipwrecked many souls. Misinterpreting the night and overwhelmed by spiritual pain, we cut anchor and lose, or abandon, our confidence in God, in our ability to follow God, or in the community of God’s people.

This may be where you are right now: adrift, aware of an undercurrent pulling you away from shore into a dark, turbulent sea. It can be frightening when your faith feels ungrounded, untethered, unkept. It certainly has been distressing for me.

You and I may be meeting for the very first time in these pages, but from the beginning, please know that you are not alone. And you are not as far away from home as you may think or as it may feel.

The night is not your enemy.

My goal in this offering is to help you reclaim the night and reinterpret the pain by building (or rebuilding) a framework for spiritual disillusionment.

Thankfully, I did not have to start from scratch. Many brilliant voices and profound pens have gone before me. My small, but hopefully meaningful, contribution is the offering of a visual framework and a set of practical tools for navigating the night.

Part One of this book is foundational. In this first set of chapters, we will wrap our minds around *the concept of spiritual pain and discover how disillusionment is an invitation to love*. Subsequent parts will offer tools for navigating *disillusionment with God* (Part Two), *disillusionment with ourselves* (Part Three), and *disillusionment with God's people* (Part Four). Because even though the night is normal, a lack of tools can make it longer and thicker than it needs to be.

However, if your night seems overwhelming, it is okay to skip ahead to a part that meets a felt need. But please remember to circle back and read Part One. That foundation is our compass through spiritual pain. Knowing where you are headed will make the tools offered here far more effective.

The supplemental materials—appendices, endnotes, and bibliography—contain some of the overflow of my thirty years of study on the subject. To keep the book accessible, I have chosen to present that material as optional but highly recommended reading.

As you begin this journey, I encourage you to bring any uncertainty, frustration, and pain with you. Denial—however polite or well-intended—has

no regenerative power. Personally, I honor honest questions (especially thorny ones) as welcome friends, in part because I view their primary purpose as strengthening relationships instead of acquiring answers. It was an early ease with questioning that led me to a lifelong love of learning. And the subject of disillusionment has been my primary study focus since the park-bench crisis you will soon read about.

It might be helpful for you to know two more things about me from the start. First, though I do a bit of writing and speaking, my core calling has always been as a mentor, which means I have had the privilege of wading through a lot of spiritual pain with a lot of stunning hearts and minds.

Second, I am *deeply* concerned about the frailty of our collective faith. God has not changed. But our understanding of what it means to follow Him has undergone an alarming mutation from the dual toxins of mistaking emotions for devotion and viewing abundance as proof of obedience.

Lacking a framework for valuing and processing disillusionment, we assume that spiritual growth prefers the happy day and shuns the not-so-happy night. Consequently, we avoid the night, viewing it as spiritual-formation misfire or a senseless waste of time and potential.

This error is certainly not new, as even a brief reading of the counsel of Job's friends can confirm. But in any age, when an error is elevated to the status of belief, creed, or doctrine, its power to undermine faith is amplified. Untruth can never heal. And truth—not optimism or daylight—is what genuine spiritual growth craves.

Denying the night's place in our faith silences one of faith's wisest teachers and creates an unsustainable version of what it means to follow Jesus.

So, if truth is looking a little fuzzy,

Or hope is sounding more than a little hollow.

If you are trying in vain to silence the questions,

Or find yourself each day just going through the motions.
 If it feels like your faith is barely holding itself together,
 Or if you have not felt anything in what seems like forever.
 If you love God but are unsure if you still like Him,
 Or are growing weary of those people who hang out with Him.
 If your faith walk has been . . . well, underwhelming,
 Or if abandoning ship is becoming an increasingly enticing
 drawing
 If you have often wondered *why* in the midst of the storm,
 Or have searched for a way through the pain when daylight is no
 longer your norm,

Please do not bail yet.

Join me in hope as we explore the gain in spiritual pain. Risk reclaiming the night and reframing disillusionment as an unexpected friend. Your night will not last forever, but within it, there is priceless treasure that is too weighty to be held by sunshine.

I encourage you to resist the urge to outrun or outgun the pain by moving faster, singing louder, or working harder to stuff your soul with distractions. As you may have experienced, such efforts provide only temporary relief until real life reminds us that something else is off-center, that something at our very core is misaligned.

Though spiritual disillusionment can be profoundly unsettling and though pain's terrain can be rocky and rough, the path toward a healthier, hope-filled view of the night is not unknown. A "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) has gone before us. Our generation has simply lost the way in our shared illusion that faith always needs full sun to flourish.

No, the night is normal.

In fact, the night is necessary.

Personally, the night is among my faith's oldest and most generous of mentors.