

*"This book beckons all, for none can escape those seasons when we struggle.
Don't miss the uplifting light in God in the Dark!"*

BRUCE WILKINSON, president of Teach Every Nation & author of *The Prayer of Jabez*

GOD IN THE DARK

*31 Devotions to
Let the Light Back In*

SARAH VAN DIEST

Perceptive insights and poignant moments weave their way through the tapestry of Sarah Van Diest's touching new book, *God in the Dark*. This book beckons all, for none can escape those seasons when we struggle under the debilitating cords of discouragement and even despair. Don't miss the uplifting light in *God in the Dark*!

BRUCE WILKINSON

President of Teach Every Nation and author of *The Prayer of Jabez*

Almost everyone I know is trying to chase away their questions, frustrations, fears, confusion, and heartaches with methods that seem temporary. They creep back instantly with the same or worse confusion. This book has solid, long-lasting answers to chase away the darkness of life by offering truth and promises from the Book of Life. Read *God in the Dark*. Gift it to your loved ones and friends. Snuggle with it in your darkest hour, catch the light of God's love for you, and live free!

THELMA WELLS, MDIV, PHD (HON.)

Professor, author of forty books, including *Don't Give In . . . God Wants You to Win!*, and founder of Generation Love: Divine Explosion conferences and Mentoring at the Lake with Mama T

Into the experience of all come dark days, days in which feelings of despair are so overwhelming that death seems preferable to life—but if one could penetrate that dark veil, they would see God holding them close, directing His angels to strengthen and protect, His Spirit to enlighten, heal, and free the soul. Sarah Van Diest's *God in the Dark* is penetrating, powerful, illuminating—dispelling the dark and healing the soul! This book is a shining beacon of heavenly light!

TIMOTHY R. JENNINGS, MD

Author of *The God-Shaped Heart: How Correctly Understanding God's Love Transforms Us*

Sarah Van Diest's short devotional, *God in the Dark*, arrived at a pivotal point in my life. I read the intimate letters in the morning, not because I needed to write a blurb, but because it felt like the

perfect way to align my perspective with God's heart. Lyrical and yet easily understood, *God in the Dark* is a gift to believers during these crucial times.

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

Bestselling author of *The Alliance* series

Hope, faith, identity, and victory. These are just some of the very real issues that Sarah speaks into with vulnerability, authenticity, and truth in *God in the Dark*. Through Scripture and then her own reflection, Sarah compassionately yet confidently assures us that while we all have those times of walking in the hard, dark seasons of life, God is always there waiting to hold, guide, and at times carry us through, all the while taking us deeper in our relationship with Him.

DR. MICHELLE BENGTON

Neuropsychologist and author of *Hope Prevails: Insights from a Doctor's Personal Journey through Depression*

We are often scared of the dark. But do we need to be? With penetrating insight and pointed prose, my friend Sarah Van Diest has crafted an invitation into the dark. Not an invitation to live in the dark, but an invitation to crack open the door and let the light pierce the darkness. This beauty of a book makes being in the dark so much more hopeful. Highly recommended. Cheers.

A. J. SWOBODA, PhD

Professor, author, and pastor of Theophilus Church in urban Portland, Oregon

Penned with a poet's hand, *God in the Dark* is the kind of book that comes alongside you like a best friend. The kind of friend you can turn to when the rest of the world is sleeping and the quiet is overbearing. Who reminds us to hope when there are no clear roads or easy explanations and points us to worth, strength, and trust in the One who is greater than our overwhelm. I have a very short list of books I feel worthy to gift friends in times of difficulty. *God in the Dark* is now one of them.

TOSCA LEE

New York Times bestselling author

SARAH VAN DIEST

GOD
IN THE
DARK

*31 Devotions to
Let the Light Back In*

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FOREWORD BY MARY DEMUTH

SOMETIMES YOU FALL IN LOVE with a friend, and you wonder if perhaps you've been connected your whole life; the knowing is tangible. That's my testimony of Sarah Van Diest. Introduced by her brother, we dove beneath trivialities right away, and we camped in the depths, wrestling together with ideas like worth and love and pain. She is a rare pilgrim on an honest road, which is why I'm grateful to be writing this foreword for you.

In your hands, you hold an epiphany. It is Sarah's, and it is yours. Instead of glossing over long-read Scriptures and offering smatterings of platitudes and pretty prose, Sarah excavates the text, strips it to its sinew, and offers it back to you as a song. At least that's the effect it had on me.

The truth? This life is hard. And the gospel is never about some sort of higher level of success, creating the perfectly manicured life. Just look at its originator, Jesus. His walk on earth looked more like brokenness and grief,

interspersed with moments of laughter and hope upon hope. If he didn't escape the pains of this life, his followers won't either. There are no easy formulas to conjure a life of "ease." I'd venture to say there are lies in that faulty promise—a lie of ease. The promise of the Good News is not that God will make everything easy for you, but that he will meet with you in the midst of your messy story. He is the Good News, the Savior of your story, and because of that, we never walk this earth companionless.

Last night I spent time on the phone with a broken friend who tenaciously clings to Jesus as her marriage crumbles. Her tears flow freely, and she is anxious with far too many thoughts to process. She circles back on herself, coddling blame, wondering what she did wrong and how to live in this new broken-to-pieces paradigm. I listened. I grieved alongside. I tried desperately to dignify her story and be a good friend. But eventually, we had to hang up our phones as the night marched on, and she was left in a big house alone. I sent prayers on her behalf, though I wish I lived closer to embrace her. Although I ache for her, I know this truth: Jesus will be with her even when she feels utterly alone. He, our great empathetic Savior, knows how to grieve shattered relationships. He understands harsh betrayal, lies told about him, abandonment.

He will meet her in desolation, and she will grow, though now growth feels more like drowning than swimming.

You may be in that place right now, or you can vividly recall moments of your life like that—chock full of desperation and longing. Perhaps that’s why you’re holding *God in the Dark*. Fear not, friend! This book will shepherd you on a journey toward honesty, wholeness, and faith—toward the Shepherd who gently guides his sheep toward health and good pastures. Your suffering counts for something in light of eternity. It’s not for nothing. Do not believe the lie that all is futility and barrenness. No, as you lean into Jesus during this bewildering time, you will grow into something entirely, spectacularly beautiful.

That’s the power of living a great story. Those page-turning novels or edge-of-your-seat movies have this in common: constant conflict. It takes away your breath and threatens to make you want to pull the covers to your nose. And yet, when we look back on the times of our lives that we grew the most, we seldom point to spiritual mountaintops where we shout praises and claim victories in the midst of ease. No, we grow in the shadow valleys, where we learn about the nearness of Jesus in seemingly impossible situations.

My prayer for you as you read *God in the Dark* is

this: that you would know firsthand that Jesus loves you. That you would keenly understand his nearness when life careens into crazy land. That you would sense a beckoning to his beautiful Word—that collection of sacred writings that help you know the heart of the one who created you. That you would ascertain that you are not alone; there are others who struggle too. That you would offer yourself the same grace he lavishes on you, no longer enslaved to hurting yourself with harsh words and relentless self-judgment. That you would grant yourself permission to doubt and wrestle and fear. That you would be gloriously set free, even when the dark threatens to imprison your soul.

Oh, dear one, you are seen in the darkness. The light is continually rising; the sun attests to its relentlessness every morning. May Sarah's words bring solace, comfort, and hope. And may you find yourself discovering fragments and shards of joy in the loss—pieces of color and light that, in his hands, become stained-glass artwork. Oh, may he shine through your story in new ways because of the timeless truths in the pages ahead.

Mary DeMuth

SUMMER 2017

INTRODUCTION

It's difficult to comprehend how truly tragic the circumstances are, and yet I am hopeful. There is light peering through this darkness; the darkness that impotently attempts to snuff it out. It shall not succeed.

HELLO, MY FRIEND.

I see you. I see the pain you're in. I know that darkness. We all find ourselves in that place at times. And for some of us, those times come more often than we'd like.

Doubt, darkness, and pain are an unholy trinity I know only too well. These three adversaries have dominated the landscape of my soul for too long. They have been my companions, though not the sort I long for. They are draining and devour any sense of hope I might have.

At least that's how it seems. In the midst of the darkness, it can be easy to miss the truth.

Those words at the top of the last page? I penned them in the aftermath of a shocking and excruciatingly sad event. They were not easy words to write. They were not easy to believe. But the belief behind them, no matter how fragile, launched me on a journey of understanding what truly lies beneath doubt, darkness, and pain.

Doubt has many layers, and, for me, the foundational layer has always been about my worth to God. I doubted God's love for me, which meant I tried harder to please him. I was a morally good person, a solid student, a model citizen—and a missionary to China and Central America, giving precious years of my life in service to his cause. Surely he would find me worthy and love me.

But as I dug deeper into my doubt, I found that at its foundation was not only my view of God but also my view of myself. I seemed to think that God was an angry deity with exceptionally high expectations and that I was fundamentally flawed. How could I ever please him? Of course I doubted God's love—I found it difficult to believe that I was lovable.

And yet after I searched and studied, read and prayed, I learned a miraculous truth: I am already counted worthy. God doesn't look at me with disgust or disappointment. He doesn't see me as fundamentally flawed. Nothing I can do will alter God's view of me. Nothing. Because he made me, I will always be loved, precious, and fully worthy in his eyes.

Once I understood this—and chose to believe it—my view of myself and of God changed. Doubt was dispelled as I grasped the truth: His kindness is never ending, and his love is never failing.

Looking into doubt, instead of running from it, has brought about the sweetest fruit my soul has ever tasted.

I journeyed into the land of darkness—and how vast it is. In Scripture, literature, pop culture, and science, darkness occupies an incredible amount of time, space, and energy. In my life, darkness primarily manifests as inky black sorrow blanketing my soul or as the fierce lion of anxiety clawing at the door. I ran from doubt, but I hid from darkness. I hid under a blanket of denial, cocooning my sadness, while the wild, untamed darkness prowled outside my defenses.

But denial and hiding didn't work. The darkness began to overwhelm me. Something had to change.

In both faith and utter desperation, I pulled off the blanket and looked directly into the black. I laid down my attempts to control the darkness and chose to face it alongside the only one strong enough to defeat it. Did I really believe this darkness had the power to overtake the light? Did I honestly accept as true that there were corners of the earth or chambers in my soul God couldn't penetrate? If I believe his Word, then I know the answer.

*If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

PSALM 139:11-12, NIV

The absoluteness of darkness is an illusion. It is not all-encompassing. It is not greater than the light. Behind the veil of darkness, my Savior stands, his light emitting warmth, security, and love. God is both beyond the darkness and with us in the darkness. He doesn't leave us, no matter where we go. We see this in Exodus 20:21 when "Moses approached the thick darkness where God

was” (NIV). When we choose to grasp our Savior’s hand in the midst of the darkness, his light steps in. And the darkness must flee when the light invades.

Looking deeply into this darkness has enabled me to see Jesus. With his light ever present, no dark night should remain fully black. Darkness is no longer a monster I hide from; it is now a sweet invitation to draw closer to the light, my Jesus.

But more troubling than doubt or darkness is pain. While I have run from doubt and hid from darkness, I freeze from pain. Pain has kept me stuck in the same place—and yet still I spin, disoriented, as though I were a pinwheel held in place by the tack of pain. It has bound me, harnessed me, silenced me. Sadness sits in the pit of my stomach, and my eyes feel heavy with unshed tears.

Pain’s tendrils coil up the walls of my soul and wrap themselves around my heart, whispering, *If you feel pain, then you must not be healed. If you aren’t healed, you must not have enough faith or God doesn’t love you enough to heal you. If you feel pain, your eyes must be on yourself, not on Christ.* And shame seeps out of those words into the very air I breathe.

Shame lies to us that our faith must not be enough,

that our pain is a sign of spiritual weakness. As Greg Boyd wrote, “One of the unfortunate consequences of the certainty-seeking model of faith is that it encourages pain-avoidance and thus keeps people from learning, growing, and maturing.”¹ If I believe that my healing is dependent on my level of faith, then pain becomes a benchmark of faith I’ve failed to reach. And that’s just depressing . . . on top of the pain.

But we cannot miss this: Faith does not eliminate pain; God never promises that it will. Being healed doesn’t mean the pain from old wounds goes away. It may lessen over time, but we will likely always feel a twinge behind it. Healing is something entirely different from the absence of pain.

Healing, as I am coming to understand, is something God has done and is continuing to do. Healing is faith in him yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Healing is knowing he is with me, has never left me, and never will. It’s the breath to make it another day. It’s walking another mile with my hand in his. It’s fellowship and communion. It’s *life*. And, marvelously, his glory shows not in my greatness or my strength but in my weakness.

So if I look into my pain and still feel it, I can feel comforted that the cracks I perceive—the hurt I

feel—are where God is shining through. His healing, full and complete, holds me together. Though I still feel the hurt, I can see through it and rest and rejoice in God glorified. Faith is peace within the cracks. Faith is letting his glory radiate out. I don't have to punish myself for still feeling pain, and I don't have to be angry with God for not taking it away. Pain doesn't have the power to pin me down, to tighten its grip around my suffocating soul. It doesn't disappear entirely, but it is a reminder, a longing for a home we have yet to experience.

Doubt, darkness, and pain are each a veil over truth, obscuring wondrous potential. And so I refuse to run away from these twisted companions. I'm determined to stand firm and meet their gaze—not because I'm strong but because I know the one who is strong. And in faith, I know each of these will disintegrate, vanish before my eyes. And the light will spark in the darkness.

Should I take my conclusions about doubt, darkness, and pain and choose to see that my Savior stands behind all things that appear *bad*? Can I let my fears subside and trust that God's got this?

I believe so.

No matter how daunting the situation appears, how

hopeless we feel, or how desperate our circumstances, our Savior is with us. We are never alone.

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

PSALM 139:8, NIV

Though Satan may create chaos in our lives or torment us with thorns in our flesh, our Father is still on the throne. Satan's power is limited, and we should never conclude that he's won. His victories are only mile markers on the path to his defeat.

Know this, my friend: Whatever you're facing—doubt, darkness, pain, chaos, or any other horrific, hopeless, hellish experience—our Father is there. There's no place he will not go with you—to stand with you, breathe into you, and uplift your downtrodden spirit. Do not run from, hide from, or be paralyzed by the arrows thrown at you. Don't forget what your heart has learned. Let us grow in faith, healing, and strength in the Lord, so that when the doubts arise and the darkness invades and the pain is overwhelming, we will look them squarely in the eyes and see through them to our Jesus.

The words in the chapters ahead were written to help you find the light in whatever darkness you're in.

I first wrote them for a dear friend who was in pain. While he was going through this difficult time, there was nothing tangible I could do to fix things or make the pain go away, so I prayed for him and wrote him letters. Each day I sent one of the twenty-two sections from Psalm 119 with a small note, in hopes of bringing a bit of light where darkness threatened to overtake the path. Those letters, and a few other letters I wrote just for you, are what you have in your hands.

As you journey through the chaos of life, I hope you're encouraged by these thirty-one daily devotions. Hope is sometimes buried, but it is there. Our Father stands in those dark corners of our hearts; and just because it's dark and we don't see him at first glance doesn't mean he isn't there. Look deeply into the night. You are not alone. He has not abandoned you.

The best light for a dark path is our Father's voice. His words shine like stars in the blackest night. You and I both know that to be true.

My prayers go with you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop on the 'S' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'h'.

*The mighty drum of his Father heart
beats in my spirit
and lifts me from the sand.
I rise in the strength of the Lord.
Though the stars fall out of the night sky
and no light remains,
the Light of my Savior shines and illumines the way.
I am saved.*

DAY 1

HOPE EMBEDDED

PSALM 119:1-8

ALEPH.

*How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the LORD.
How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.
They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.
You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.
Oh that my ways may be established
To keep Your statutes!
Then I shall not be ashamed
When I look upon all Your commandments.
I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments.
I shall keep Your statutes;
Do not forsake me utterly!*

WE'RE SURROUNDED BY WORDS, you and I. They are living, active things, influencing our moments and days in ways we often don't realize. Some words are spoken loudly, some whispered, but each has the power to blaze through our lives, in our minds, out our mouths, through our fingertips, and into our hearts.

Words can be harsh and painful or sacred and full of hope. They can torment our souls with darkness and despair or thrill our hearts with light and life. Whether they bring pain or blessing, words are truly alive.

The Jewish people seemed to understand the power of words at a foundational level. They saw Hebrew letters as sacred, holy, and living, each signifying something about God. Hebrew, many believe, was the language God used to speak creation into existence—the language through which he spoke life into the darkness. Hope of the holy God was embedded in the very fabric of their words.

And so, in a psalm that uses all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet,¹ we must surely find that same hope.

In these first four verses of Psalm 119, I see a promise

of hope for those who walk hand in hand with God. I want the blessings promised there, but I know myself. I know my imperfections and shortcomings. In those verses I see what I long to be, not what I am. I think the psalmist would say the same. He sees hope ahead—the blessings of obedience and righteousness—but verse 5 tells us his heart: “Oh that my ways may be established to keep Your statutes.” His heart desires to be upright, he longs to be righteous, and he *hopes*, above all things, in the Lord, but he has not yet arrived in the place of hope fulfilled.

“Do not forsake me utterly!” is the cry of a desperate, dependent heart. The psalmist is putting all his hope in the Lord, all his faith, all his trust in the one whose very words are life. And he finds God faithful—not because of his own righteousness, but because of who God is. Hope, at the end of the day, never rests on us.

The world can be dark, and words of pain and despair may land so heavily on your heart that you feel hope is out of reach. But like the psalmist, cry out in desperation, my dear friend, because our Father is faithful. His love for you never hinges on your circumstances,

position, or accomplishments. No—it is in his character and on his words we can place our hope. Rest in that today.

You are very much loved.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.

DAY 2

WORD OF LIFE

PSALM 119:9-16

BETH.

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your word.
With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.
Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.
Blessed are You, O LORD;
Teach me Your statutes.
With my lips I have told of
All the ordinances of Your mouth.
I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.
I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.
I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.*

IT'S AMAZING TO ME how easy it is for some folks to quote Scripture. It's their second language—and almost their first. I'm not quite there, but I can somewhat relate: Whenever I need to translate a word or phrase into Spanish, there's a file in my brain I go straight to. The path is worn so deeply that I don't even know I'm traveling down it. When I get to the place where that word, or those words, are kept, I open the file drawer and the folders are all right there, waiting for me to choose the best fit for what I'm trying to say. It happens so quickly—most of the time, anyway—that I don't miss a beat and the Spanish equivalent rolls right off my tongue.

Like a language, our Father's Word has multiple words—in the form of verses—that apply to the emotions you might be feeling or the trials you might be going through. But unlike Spanish, which is simply a language, his Word brings life. God's Word and his statutes bring direction so that the darkness will not obstruct your path and so that you may not “wander from [his] commandments” or “sin against [him].”

You have asked him to teach you, and he is doing that even today. Your vocabulary grows in volume and depth—in meaning and understanding—as you walk

with him through this present circumstance. So treasure God's Word in your heart, learning it as a second language.

Though this psalm talks a lot about the law, which can feel restrictive or possibly even punitive, I think the point is the relationship forming it all—a relationship that makes us attentive to the words of the one we love. I can tell you that I love my heavenly Father so very deeply because of his love for me, and so I try to listen. And even if I do wander and find my path bathed in darkness, his words will still be true, and he will never leave me. Because of these truths, I delight in his law, in obedience, and in pleasing him. I know that's true for you, my friend.

Hide his Word deeply in your heart today. He will use it to bring light to your darkness.

Con el amor de nuestro Padre,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S' and a trailing flourish.

DAY 3

THE SCENT OF HOPE

HEBREWS 11:1

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

AS I WRITE THIS, there's a shooter loose in a nearby high school. The only news that has broken the airways is that shots were fired. Hundreds of police and emergency responders have arrived, but parents and loved ones have no idea if the shooter has killed or injured someone they care about. As parents run to the barricades, police gently but firmly push them back. The parents are standing on the dark side of understanding. They are waiting in what must feel like a vacuum of hope.

Before we know that all will be well, there is darkness, deep and suffocating. We hide, curled up under the covers, waiting for confirmation of the news we dread. The feeling of certain doom overwhelms our rational minds and drowns us in the possibilities of things we fear. We hold on, with white-knuckled hands, to the only thing we know: life. The threat that it could be taken from us is more than we can endure.

But there is something else in that darkness. It's always been there, but our panicked hearts haven't slowed down enough to recognize it.

It's hope. Faith. Belief. More real than our present circumstances.

It takes belief to smell the perfume of hope at times

like these. Hope is aromatic, a rose grown in the deepest of wells. It thrives in the absence of exposing, disclosing, unmasking light, and inhaling its fragrance takes faith. Our eyes can't see it, can't detect it, won't prove its existence. We can't see hope. We can only believe it. And though we would prefer to see with our eyes and know for certain what's to come around the corner, there are times we cannot see and cannot know. In the absence of proof, faith makes itself known. When there is no hard evidence, we rely on belief. Hope doesn't blast us with gale-force winds, but instead seeps through the crevices of a cave on a cold breeze. It is small but certain. It is a scent that, once detected, strengthens and intensifies—but in the moment we revert back to trusting in what our eyes see, the scent disperses.

But oh, hope is the sweetest scent. It comes from a place beyond us. Hope is the aroma of Christ, and we can find it only in him. Our present reality produces no such fragrance.

The writer of Hebrews brings this irony to light in this verse: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (11:3). We most often place our faith in this visible world. After all,

we can prove this realm by what our eyes observe. But where did this observable world come from? Where did that which we see originate?

Everything we see came from the invisible—from the *word* of God. But we mistakenly put our faith in something that came from “nothing” rather than in him who created it.

This world as we experience it, our temporal existence, is a vapor. *Hebel* in Hebrew.¹ Smoke. The thing that is more real is that which we cannot see: the Word of God . . . the aroma of Christ. Hope. Nothing this world has to offer has more permanence than the invisible.

Satan has done a masterful job of turning reality on its head. Our dependence on the physical realm is evidence of this. When circumstances threaten our lives and the lives of those we love, even to small degrees, we scurry into the dark places. We hide and wait. Fear sets in. Hope vanishes.

I do this more often than I like to admit. Dark seems to be my go-to place. But when I find myself again in those dark places, I want to make a different choice: I want to close my eyes and inhale deeply; to search, with a heart full of faith, for the scent of hope; to reach out

for God. If I do that—*when* I do that—I will detect the aroma of Christ, awakening the other senses to the reality of the truth surrounding me. I start to see with the eyes of faith the world that is more real than what I think I know.

My friend, if you lean not on your own understanding, but trust, believe—then you will begin to understand what it means for the things of this earth to grow strangely dim. Anxiety, fear, and doubt will melt away as the perfume of hope overtakes your need for certainty.

This isn't a recipe for all things to work out as we wish. Hardly. I think choosing hope is more in line with becoming sanctified. As we turn away from the lies that keep us in the darkness, we walk closer to the truth, to our Father. As we choose hope, the covering cloak of fear falls off. As we understand more of who our Father is and what his heart is, rest overtakes anxiety.

Take courage. Even the darkest night and the thickest air can be penetrated by the scent of hope.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.