

# Van Gogh's dark night

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## In Review



### BONE DEAD, AND RISING

Vincent van Gogh and the Self Before God

Charles Davidson  
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## Bone Dead, and Rising

by Charles Davidson

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The world will always be fascinated with Vincent van Gogh. It doesn't matter that his sunflowers are on mugs, t-shirts, calendars and billboards, or that psychologists have spent years studying every facet of van Gogh's emotional and mental instability. It only takes a fresh encounter with one of his paintings to draw us back to the art, or an excerpt from one of his letters to remind us of his intense spiritual journey.

In *Bone Dead, and Rising*, Charles Davidson shares the results of his own absorption with van Gogh the artist, the man and the Christian. For 15 years Davidson pored over 900 paintings, 800 letters, 1,000 drawings and existing scholarship on van Gogh. With the empathy of a pastor, Davidson leans into the torment of this man who yearned to follow Christ but met discouragement and alienation at every turn.

As a psychotherapist, Davidson knows and can professionally second many of the existing theories about van Gogh--lead poisoning, alienation from his Calvinist family, malnutrition, epilepsy and bipolar disorder. But it's too easy to limit discussions to pathology, in Davidson's view. Whatever the diagnosis, the dark night of the soul that was van Gogh's spiritual life is still worth reflection.

In this case, the dark night existed next to expressions of brilliant beauty. Davidson asks about the theological implications. How does this happen? How do we explain the disjointedness between the darkness of a life and the glory of the same man's art? Davidson argues that the struggles of the van Gogh who felt without God were matched by the strokes of an artist who saw God made visible in a human face, a meal shared, cypress trees and yes, sunflowers.

Davidson leaves us with this haunting question: "To what extent, if at all, is the divine presence revealed in the bleakest moments of suffering and despair?" This book becomes personal as we consider where we are with God when we too are lost, ill and abandoned.