

St John of the Cross
1542–1591

Saint John of the Cross was declared Doctor of the Universal Church in 1926. This Carmelite saint has left to the world writings and poems which contain some of the most profound mystical truths ever written. He is considered one of Spain's greatest lyric poets.

At the time of John's birth, Spain, a superpower, was suffering from widespread poverty and deep social discrimination. John's father Gonzalo de Yepes came from a wealthy family of silk merchants in Toledo. On a business trip to the town of Fontiveros he met and fell in love with Catalina, an orphaned girl from a poor background. They married and Gonzalo's merchant family disinherited him for his disloyalty to the family in marrying a girl from a low social class. At the time it was very much frowned on to marry outside your class structure. Gonzalo's family would never accept this marriage.

Three sons were born to the couple: Francisco, Luis and the youngest Juan who is known to us now as St John of the Cross. When John was two years old his father died. His widowed mother was reduced to poverty. As a last resort, seeking help, she went to visit the wealthy members of her husband's family but was again rejected by them. Shortly afterwards John's brother Luis died and Catalina and her two sons moved to Medina del Campo, a market centre in Castile where the family continued to live in

poverty; Catalina made whatever money she could by continuing to work as a weaver.

John received an education when he entered a school in the city set up to educate disadvantaged children. From an early age John was a very talented student, eager to learn. From here, at the age of fifteen he worked as a nurse-cum-porter in one of the city's hospitals which cared for people suffering from contagious diseases. Thus, John spent his adolescent years discovering his gift of compassion for others as he cared for the sick. Through his work in the hospital he had further experience of suffering. Instead of making him cynical and hard this experience of suffering had the effect of opening his heart to God and to his fellow human beings.

In the hospital John came to the notice of the hospital's administrator who arranged for him to further his studies by enrolling in the local Jesuit school. After his studies it was thought that John would join the Jesuits, but, surprisingly at the age of twenty-one, John entered the Carmelites. With his novitiate year completed he moved to Salamanca where he studied theology and philosophy. Salamanca at that time had one of the best universities in Europe with large numbers of students from all over Spain. Here John continued to be regarded as a very bright student. In July 1567 John was ordained as a priest of the Carmelite order.

During his first year as a priest John became dissatisfied. Like Teresa of Avila before him, he had a desire for a purely contemplative way of life. His thoughts turned to the Carthusians. All changed, however, when in the autumn of that year he met Madre Teresa de Jesus (Teresa of Avila). Hearing about his aspirations toward more solitude and prayer and his thought of transferring to the Carthusians, she pointed out to him that he could find all he was seeking without leaving 'Our Lady's order'. She told him of her work reforming the Carmelite order to bring it back to its contemplative origins. With her characteristic zeal and friendliness she spoke to him of her plan to adapt this way of life for

friars also.¹ Teresa was later to say that she started the reform of the friars with one and a half friars, John being the half friar – this on account of his small stature – however, Teresa also said, ‘even though he is small, I understand him to be huge in the eyes of God.’²

John joined Teresa on a trip to Valladolid the following year where she was setting up a new foundation. He remained with Teresa for several months to learn the Teresian way of life. This was to inspire John to set up the first monastery for discalced Carmelite friars. The opposition to the reform of the Carmelites that Teresa had met continued and for John the outcome of this was that on the night of 2 December 1577 he was kidnapped by a group of Carmelites and lay people opposed to the reform, and who believed him to be guilty of crimes against canon law. He was taken blindfolded to a monastery in Toledo.

His accusers locked him first in the monastery prison, but at the end of two months, for fear of escape, they moved him to another spot, a room narrow and dark, without air or light except for whatever filtered through a small slit high up in the wall. The room was six feet wide and ten feet long. There John remained alone, without anything but his breviary, through the terrible cold winter months and the suffocating heat of summer. Added to this were the floggings, fasting on bread and water, wearing the same bedraggled clothes month after month without being washed; and the lice.

In the midst of this deprivation, John was seeking relief composing poetry, thus leaving to posterity some of the greatest lyric stanzas in Spanish literature. In that cramped prison, stripped of all earthly comfort, he was touched with some rays of divine light.

(p. 19)

1. Unless otherwise stated all quotations from St John are from *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991). Further references will indicate in brackets after each citation the page number. (p. 13)

2. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 8.

After nine months John made a miraculous escape. He managed to loosen the screws of the lock on the door of his cell and when all were asleep he made a rope from strips of his bed covers and escaped over the wall of the monastery taking with him various poems which he had written during his captivity.

After his escape from Toledo, John went to one of Teresa's communities in Beas de Sugura. The nuns there were shocked at his frail condition but were glad to have him with them and to nurse him back to health. John never spoke about what he had endured and bore no animosity towards those who had imprisoned him.

When Teresa took up duties as prioress at the Incarnation in Avila, John, who had by now taken the name of John of the Cross, joined her. He became spiritual director to the large number of nuns there, including Teresa herself. Later when Teresa's term as prioress of the Incarnation ended John stayed on as spiritual director. Over the next years John founded seven new monasteries for friars in the south of Spain.

However, there remained continued unrest in some quarters due to the unpopularity of the reform of the Carmelites, and John once again found himself embroiled in this. In the summer of 1591 a major meeting in Madrid showed up serious differences of opinion in the Teresian reform (Teresa herself had died in 1582). John objected to some of the policies and at the end of the meeting he found himself without a position or voice in running the reform. Instead, John was to lead a mission to Mexico with twelve other friars. John as always felt no bitterness at what had happened; in a letter written by him to the prioress in Segovia at this time he said:

Do not let what is happening to me, daughter, cause you any grief, for it does not cause me any. Men do not do these things, but God, who knows what is suitable for us and arranges things for our own good. Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love.

(p. 22)

John was never to go on the mission. In September, he developed an inflammation of his leg. At first this did not seem too serious. However, when it persisted he decided to seek medical attention in Ubeda. The prior of the monastery in Ubeda was not happy with the arrival of John. The man needed care and this would mean expense which the monastery could ill afford.

John's sickness grew worse. His leg already ulcerated, and the disease, erysipelas, had spread to his back. On 13 December, Fray John of the Cross, knowing the time was running short, called the prior and begged pardon for all the trouble he had caused. This profoundly changed the prior, who himself then begged forgiveness and left the cell in tears, totally transformed. At midnight, without agony, without struggle, John died, repeating the words of the psalmist: 'Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.'
(p. 23)

John was forty-nine years old at the time of his death.



The Writings of St John of the Cross

The Ascent of Mount Carmel

Commentary on poem 'The Dark Night'

The Dark Night

Commentary on poem 'The Dark Night'

The Spiritual Canticle

Commentary on poem 'The Spirit Canticle'

The Living Flame of Love

Commentary on poem 'The Living Flame of Love'

The Ascent of Mount Carmel

John was first of all a poet. He wrote books as commentaries on his poems when the friars, nuns and also the clergy and lay people who received spiritual direction from him asked for an

explanation of one or other of the poems he had given them. He wrote how he was reluctant to explain the poems as they were about matters so interior and spiritual for which words are usually inadequate. Both *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night* are commentaries on John's poem *The Dark Night*. At the beginning of each book John promises to comment on all eight verses of the poem but never got past verse two in either book.

It would be necessary to read the two commentaries in full to appreciate the meaning John gives the first two verses. I will just mention a few points which may be useful when reading the poem. John said his spiritual journey took place when his senses had been subdued; when he was fired with longing for union with God. In verse two he describes faith as the secret ladder. And the entire journey took place only through grace, as he states, 'ah, the sheer grace'.

The Dark Night of the Soul

1. One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
– ah, the sheer grace! –
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.
2. In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
– ah, the sheer grace! –
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.
3. On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.
4. This guided me
more surely than the light of noon

to where he was awaiting me
– him I knew so well –
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck
with its gentle hand,
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.

(p. 50)

John made a sketch which he called 'Mount Carmel' and said it would serve as a summary of the doctrine contained in his book *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. (p. 113) The sketch shows the side of a mountain with three paths going up to the top.

On the sketch 'Mount Carmel' the middle path is straight and narrow and goes right up to the top of the mountain. On either side are two other paths. Each much broader than the middle path; both these paths stop far short of the top.

On the middle path, called the path of the perfect spirit, the word *nada*, meaning 'nothing', is written all the way up and even on the Mount. But this path opens out to a rich place. Here we

find the words: 'I brought you unto the land of Carmel to eat of its fruit and good things.' (Jr 2:7) Only the honour and glory of God dwells on this Mount. At the summit of the Mount there is nothing left but the law of love. Here there is no longer any way because for the just person there is no law as they are now a law unto themselves. It is obvious what John is saying here: the law exists only for those who are likely to break it. For the just person it is not the law that stops them from stealing etc., but their own virtue.

The right-hand path is marked: 'The way of the imperfect spirit in goods of the earth.' The left-hand path is marked: 'The way of the imperfect spirit in goods of heaven.' Written on the path of earthly goods are the words: 'The more I desired to seek them the less I had.' On the path of heavenly goods are written the words: 'The more I desired to possess them the less I had.'

It is easy to think that desiring heavenly goods is indeed praiseworthy, but not in John's eyes. To cling to little bits of spiritual insight or emotional sweetness holds up our progress in the present. John wrote: 'The fly who clings to honey hinders its flight, and the soul that allows its attachment to spiritual sweetness hinders its own liberty and contemplation.' (p. 87) He also says that if people are seeking spiritual consolation or favours from God they might have what he called a 'spiritual sweet tooth'. 'They still feed and clothe their natural selves with spiritual feelings and consolations instead of divesting and denying themselves of these for God's sake.' (p. 170)

The image of ascent as used in the Bible is always at a time when some transformation is about to take place. In Exodus, Moses ascends the mountain to speak to God and to receive the ten commandments. In the New Testament the Sermon on the Mount begins: 'And seeing the multitudes he went up into a mountain.' The transfiguration takes place when 'Jesus took Peter, James and John up into a high mountain'. John says the soul has to ascent 'to the summit of the mount, that high state of perfection we call union of a soul with God'. (p. 113)

The narrow path leading up to the top of the mountain is marked by the Spanish word *nada*, meaning 'nothing'. For John

'nothing' means giving up all desires. The only valid desire is for union with God. From his sketch, it is clear that to reach the summit all attachments have to be surrendered. It is important to realise that it is the attachment that has to be surrendered; whether it is to family, wealth, talents, etc. The attachment is the cause of the pain.

We are not talking about giving up things, because that does not strip the soul, if its affective drive remains set on things. We are talking about stripping away the cravings for gratification in things. That is what leaves the person free and empty in their regard, even though they still own them. Because it is not the things of this world that take up space in the person and do them harm. No, it is the will and the hunger for them that dwells inside them.³

So John can write: 'To reach satisfaction in all desire satisfaction in nothing.' (p. 150) The path of the perfect spirit is simply: nothing, nothing. This means 'For the soul, all things are nothing to her. In her eyes, she herself is nothing. For her, only her God is everything.' (p. 655)

There is no doubt we would never start on a journey that meant giving up more for less. The word 'nothing' of itself would not lead anyone into action. If, however, we can have faith that the space created by the surrender of attachment will be filled with God, then the rewards are great indeed. So the answer is to put God first. John is not preaching a gospel of hatred for the creation, but he is saying that attachment to anything, whether good or bad, will keep us from reaching the summit.

We also need to realise what John means when he uses the term 'dark night'. John encourages us to view all the struggles and difficulties of life as coming from the hand of God, for the person's good.⁴ Suffering can indeed be awful and in many cases comes through no fault of our own; however, 'all suffering can be seen as healing and in fact a great blessing; when you are burdened you are close to God, your strength, who abides with the

3. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 40.

4. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 78.

afflicted.' (p. 86) When speaking of the interior or exterior trials which God gives us, John says: 'We should accept them all as from God's hand as a good remedy and not flee from them.' (p. 669) We can learn that in our most difficult moments when we turn to God we are given renewed strength as we receive God's inflow of love and grace.

John explains that 'this dark night is an inflow of God's grace into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorance and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology.'⁵ For John, when it comes upon us, the night is a place which leaves us with no control and brings us into a place of not knowing. He associated the night as a place where we encounter mystery. This encounter is 'in the night not after the night'. No matter how it might feel to us, 'night' is seen by John as being the place of 'sheer grace' where God does his work of completely transforming the soul.

John's imprisonment and escape in Toledo is a demonstration in the physical world of what was happening to him in his spiritual world. All familiar things were stripped away. Yet he never lost faith. From his poems and writings it is clear that he was transformed spiritually during his imprisonment. When, after long struggle, he eventually made his escape he carried with him poems he had written during this time of transformation. The echo of this is in each line of the poem *The Dark Night*. John was able to acknowledge that the darkness was indeed 'sheer grace'. The poem sings of his faith, his love of God; his acknowledgement that in the night God was working to bring about his escape, escape from the world of the senses to union with God. The final line of the poem shows that his escape was complete on all levels as he writes: 'with all my cares among the lilies cast.'

John gives us a clear system of how the prayer life of the individual evolves. For John, all prayer is good and any method is good as long as it engages with Jesus. So he says we can use any prayer we want in any location we choose. 'One thing only is

5. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 179.

necessary: knowing how to deny yourself truly for Christ.⁶ In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* John teaches that there is a time to allow prayer to simplify and become a 'loving attentiveness'. After many years of praying and meditating the time may come when the practices seem 'dry'. Something else is necessary but we do not know what. John teaches that 'dryness is now the outcome of fixing the senses on subjects that formerly provided satisfaction'. (p. 189) There comes a time when all forms of prayer and concepts must be left behind in favour of silence. As a relationship with another person deepens there is less and less need to speak or even to ask for things. Just being with them is enough.

Through John's words we can appreciate it is the same with our relationship with God. If the desire is to be still, then this is what is needed. Stillness is not idleness but a willingness to allow for a deeper communion with God. 'They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God. All desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful, quiet, and sweet idleness of the contemplation that is being communicated to it.' (p. 382)

Through John's teaching we may come to recognise this level of prayer; a level where we do nothing but appreciate that the present moment is the presence of God. Realising, as John says, that 'Images cannot be an adequate, proximate means to God'. (p. 186) What is needed is attentive love, a desire just to be with Jesus, to be with him, loving him. John writes: 'They should just sit in the loving attention of God, without making specific acts. They should conduct themselves passively without efforts of their own but with a simple, loving awareness, as when opening one's eyes with loving attention.' (p. 686)

In this way we can be more ourselves in prayer, more in touch with what is really in our heart. All that is necessary is to be present and to realise the truth of John's words: 'Preserve a loving attentiveness to God with no desire to feel or understand any particular thing concerning him.' (p. 92) Night can indeed seem to be a dark place but with faith we can understand that there is

6. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 99.

somewhere to go and that only God can take us there. In this way prayer can happen at any time or in any place once the mind and heart are turned to God.

The Living Flame of Love

John wrote *The Living Flame of Love* for Dona Ana de Penalosa, a lay woman who was receiving spiritual direction from him. Having received the poem she asked him to write a commentary on the stanzas. The commentary which followed is, for many, John's finest mystical work. This is his poem to the Holy Spirit. John uses it to express his total love for and faith in God. He ardently wants to share this with others, to show how we are all called to union with God. He believed God helped him write the commentary as there were so many souls eager for this knowledge. In the poem John describes The Holy Spirit as a flame burning the soul; he likens the soul to a log of wood. As the flame ignites the wood; the wood in turn becomes flame. The commentary then states that the soul is now burning in the flame of love.

As he writes this commentary John is aware of how it will be received by some: 'I do not doubt that some people, not understanding this nor knowing the reality of it, will either disbelieve it, or think it exaggerated, or reckon it less than it in fact is.'⁷ God's otherness is total, any description of him 'falls so far short of the goal that any 'like' has to be qualified with a greater 'unlike'.⁸ Nothing can be said that would in any way define him.'

We have to accept that we cannot know God in the way we know other people or things. As scripture says, 'Something greater than the temple is here.' 'Christ is an unfathomable mine, with seam after seam of treasures.'⁹ If God is so other then his friendship has to be given, it cannot be conquered. A Christian must wait until God gives them what they seek when he so desires.¹⁰ This concept is not easy to accept; in fact, to accept it we must have total humility, the humility to simply wait. God is

7. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 33.

8. *ibid.*, p. 70.

9. *ibid.*, p. 71.

10. *ibid.*, p. 71.

totally transcendent, totally other. Yet there is something in our heart which cries out for God and like Augustine will not rest until it rests in him.

The Living Flame of Love

1. O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest centre! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! If it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

2. O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.

3. O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours
the deep caverns of feeling
once obscure and blind
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.

4. How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.

As a spiritual director John had the great gift of empathy. The pain that had moulded him had also endowed him with an extraordinary capacity to enter the heart of the other, and understand it. John was known as a 'listener'. He disapproved of those masters who spent all their time lecturing their novices, instead

of recognising their level and guiding them accordingly. 'Those who guide souls should realise that the principal agent and guide and motive force in this matter is not them, but the Holy Spirit.'¹¹

He listened because he wished to learn. His favourite way of teaching was to ask questions and draw the person further along the line of their answers. He said, 'God carries each person along a different road, so that you will scarcely find two people following the same route in even half of their journey to God.' Each person is 'a most beautiful and finely made image of God'.¹² 'If a person is seeking God, much more is her Beloved seeking her. The soul, then, should know that God is the principal agent in this matter. 'He acts as guide of the blind, leading the soul by the hand to the place it knows not how to reach (to supernatural things of which neither its intellect nor will nor memory can know the nature).' (p. 684) This journey is totally unique for each person, which means that we cannot know how another is being lead, all we have to do is follow faithfully the road God is leading us on, and trust that he will care for all others in the same way.

John further tells us that God is always gazing on the creation, and for God to gaze is to love. For the Christian this is the way to understand how God acts towards us. 'When the Father gazes, he gazes through his Son. The Son is his face, smiling upon the world.'¹³ 'John's understanding is that God goes right into the deepest part of each of us and fills us with himself. God is always seeking us and 'intends to pursue his seeking to the very limit'.¹⁴

These words show how we have things the wrong way around: God is seeking us; we are the ones that are being sought. It is through God's grace that we have the desire to pray and the desire to know and love him. This makes it possible to begin to acknowledge that God's desire is to give good things to us. As John writes: 'The desire for God is the preparation for union with him.' (p. 683) All that is required of us is to believe, 'believe that God does want to give us himself, that he is giving us himself and that he means to pursue that gift through to its ultimate

11. *ibid.*, p. 61.

12. *ibid.*, p. 14.

13. *ibid.*, p. 30.

14. *ibid.*, p. 31.

consequences.'¹⁵ Keeping our desires within realistic limits is not John's advice but rather, 'making God's generosity not my poverty the measure of my expectations.'¹⁶

'Passing beyond all that is naturally and spiritually intelligible or comprehensible, souls ought to desire with all their might to attain what in this life could never be known or enter the human heart.' (p. 161) It is indeed impossible for our mind to comprehend that God is seeking us. However, we can trust and resolve not to stop trusting, and make 'a lavish God, who does not hesitate, a horizon within which we choose to live our life'. (p. 34) Knowing that God is, indeed, seeking us means that turning to God in prayer and gratitude is the most natural thing in the world.

St John of the Cross died in December 1591. The world has changed since that time – as far as the physical world is concerned John would not recognise it were he to return today. The ideas and concepts which we take for granted and the knowledge gained over the last four hundred years are so completely different from what was accepted and known in the sixteenth century. So the question arises: how can reading the words of St John of the Cross be of any value to us in the twenty-first century? The answer may be that the spiritual world does not change and is not subject to the passing of time; so reading and reflecting on what John has to say is as relevant for us as we make our spiritual journey towards God as at any time during the last five hundred years.

Reading the words of St John of the Cross can be challenging and require patience and perseverance on our part. He is a spirit on fire with the love of God, and writes from intimate personal knowledge of the states he describes. For those of us who have not reached these spiritual heights, his message may sound incredible when we look at ourselves and the world around us using our finite heart and intellect. John tells of a God who has only one desire: the desire to give himself completely to each and every one of us.

15. *ibid.*, p. 32.

16. *ibid.*, p. 33.

Passages for reflection from the writings of St John of the Cross

Preparation for reflection:

- Choose a time when you are not likely to be disturbed.
- Sit in a comfortable position with the body relaxed.
- For a minute or two follow the exercise that John recommends: They should just sit in the loving attention of God, without making specific acts. They should conduct themselves passively without efforts of their own but with a simple, loving awareness, as when opening one's eyes with loving attention.

(p. 686)

Do not look for any results from this exercise or make any judgement on yourself. It provides an opportunity for the mind and heart to simply acknowledge the presence of God. Through this acknowledgement gratitude may arise; and gratitude is said to be the way to open the heart.

Read the words of the passage for reflection very slowly, this will give a better opportunity for the words to be heard. While reading the passages be aware of your inner responses. Ask yourself: do I agree with what is being said? If so take a moment to acknowledge this. If you do not understand, or disagree with something, also mark this.



1st Passage for Reflection

John sums up his teaching in the following way:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything
desire to have pleasure in nothing

In order to arrive at possessing everything desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything desire to know nothing.¹⁷

17. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 36.

Exercise:

What is your immediate response to the above lines?

Do you think that personal possessions are important?

Do you value your knowledge?

Could you live like this?

2nd Passage for Reflection

What more do you want, o soul! And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfaction and kingdom – your beloved whom you desire and seek? Desire him there, adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and you won't find him, or enjoy him more than by seeking him within you. (p. 480)

Exercise:

Where do you normally look for God?

When praying what usually distracts you?

What does it mean to seek Jesus within?

3rd Passage for Reflection

The following passage is long, so it will require time to read and reread in order to become familiar with it. This represents John at his most sublime, as he describes for us how through the grace of the Holy Spirit our souls becomes united with God.

The Living Flame of Love: Stanza 1

The soul's centre is God: When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest centre in God, it will know, love, and enjoy God with all its might. When it has not reached this point it still has movement and strength for advancing further and is not satisfied. Although it is in its centre, it is not yet in its deepest centre, for it can go deeper in God.

It is noteworthy, then, that love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it

with God. The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centres itself in him. We can say that there are as many centres in God possible to the soul, each one deeper than the other, as there are degrees of love of God possible to it. A stronger love is a more punitive love, and we can understand in this manner the many mansions the Son of God declared were in his Father's house.

Hence, for the soul to be in its centre – which is God, as we have said – it is sufficient for it to possess one degree of love, for by one degree alone it is united with him through grace. Should it have two degrees, it becomes united and concentrated in God in another, deeper centre. Should it reach three, it centres itself in a third. But once it has attained the final degree, God's love has arrived in the soul in its ultimate and deepest centre, which is to illuminate and transform it in its whole being, power, and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God.

When light shines on a clean and pure crystal, we find that the more intense the degree of light, the more light the crystal has concentrated within it and the brighter it becomes; it can become so brilliant from the abundance of light received that it seems to be all light. And then the crystal is undistinguishable from the light, since it is illumined according to its full capacity, which is to appear to be light. (p. 645)

Exercise:

Having become familiar with the passage, start by marking words or sentences which stand out for you.

What meaning does this passage have in your life?

Do you accept that 'love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God'?

4th Passage for Reflection

Apophatic theology, negative theology, is a theological system that attempts to describe the nature of God by focusing on what God is not rather than on what God is. It is believed that as God transcends human understanding the only way that we can get close to saying anything about the nature of God is to say what God is not.

St John of the Cross, whose writings are very much in the apophatic tradition, writes: '*The Dark Night* is the dark night of faith when images and concepts are stripped from the intellect as part of its preparation for union.'¹⁸ This theme of 'unknowing' is found in many of his poems, for example his poem concerning the ecstasy experienced in high contemplation.

Poem concerning the ecstasy experienced in high contemplation

1. I entered into unknowing,
yet when I saw myself there,
without knowing where I was,
I understood great things;
I will not say what I felt
for I remained in unknowing
transcending all knowledge.
2. That perfect knowledge
was of peace and holiness
held at no remove
in profound solitude;
it was something so secret
that I was left stammering,
transcending all knowledge.
3. I was so overwhelmed,
so absorbed and withdrawn,
that my senses were left
deprived of all their sensing,
and my spirit was given
an understanding while not understanding,
transcending all knowledge.
4. He who truly arrives there
cuts free from himself;
all that he knew before
now seems worthless,
and his knowledge so soars

18. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of The Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 184.

that he is left in unknowing
transcending all knowledge.

5. The higher he ascends
the less he understands,
because the cloud is dark
which lit up the night;
whoever knows this
remains always in unknowing
transcending all knowledge.

6. This knowledge in unknowing
is so overwhelming
that wise men disputing
can never overthrow it,
for their knowledge does not reach
to the understanding of not
understanding,
transcending all knowledge.

7. And this supreme knowledge
is so exalted
that no power of man or learning
can grasp it;
he who masters himself
will, with knowledge in
unknowing,
always be transcending.

8. And if you should want to hear:
this highest knowledge lies
in the loftiest sense
of the essence of God;
this is a work of his mercy,
to leave one without
understanding,
transcending all knowledge.

(p. 53)

St John of the Cross

Exercise:

As the poem is so rich in meaning it will be necessary to take one verse at a time for reflection.

St John of the Cross says this poem is written to describe the ecstasy experienced in high contemplation.

First verse for reflection:

I entered into unknowing,
yet when I saw myself there,
without knowing where I was,
I understood great things;
I will not say what I felt
for I remained in unknowing
transcending all knowledge.

Exercise:

How can you understand great things and remain in unknowing?

Why would you not be able to say what you felt?

Continue with each verse in this way; asking questions which arise from the reflections.

5th Passage for Reflection

It is better to be burdened and in company with the strong than to be unburdened and with the weak. When you are burdened, you are joined to God. He is your strength, and he is with people who suffer. When there is no burden, you are just with yourself, your own weakness. It is in the difficulties which test our patience that the virtue and strength of the soul is increased and affirmed.
(p. 85)

Exercise:

Is what John is saying in this passage within your own experience?

Can facing difficulties strengthen our spiritual life?

6th Passage for Reflection

Who can free themselves from lowly manners and limitations if you do not lift them to yourself, my God, in purity and love? How will human beings begotten and nurtured in lowliness rise up to you, Lord, if you do not raise them with the hand that made them?

You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire. Hence I rejoice that if I wait for you, you will not delay. (p. 87)

Exercise:

Is it possible to acknowledge that we can do nothing to raise ourselves to God?

Can you trust that God will give you all you desire?

7th Passage for Reflection

Have a great love for those who contradict and fail to love you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for he loves us that we might love by means of the very love he bears towards us. Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love.

Exercise:

When you are in a situation where there is a lack of love might remembering these words help to change things?

Finally:

As you complete the study of the reflections on the writings and teachings of St John of the Cross, consider how they may help you on your personal spiritual journey.



For Further Study:

The Collected Works of St John of the Cross, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991)