

03. Contemplation



The Gift of Contemplation

Teresa compares the soul to a garden. We go out to a well, as it were, and do our best to draw water up from it, which we then bring to the garden to water it as best we can.

In contemplative prayer we experience water gushing up from within.

We receive contemplation ‘from the spring which is God himself, who produces delight in the very interior part of ourselves ... This delight fills everything, overflowing through all the dwelling places and faculties and reaching the body. It begins in God and ends in ourselves, and our whole exterior enjoys this spiritual delight and sweetness ... This is not something we can imagine for ourselves, and no matter how hard we strive, we cannot acquire it.’

(Interior Castle IV.2.3-4).

In can happen that while we are praying in our accustomed way ‘we sense a gentle drawing inward’ (*Interior Castle* IV.3.3). The garden of our soul is refreshed from a spring hidden in the depths of the garden itself. These are the first experiences of infused, supernatural or contemplative prayer.

‘The first prayer that I experienced that in my opinion was supernatural (a term I use for what cannot be acquired by effort or diligence, however much one tries, Although one can dispose oneself for it, which would help a great deal) is an interior recollection felt in the soul’ (*Spiritual Testimonies* 59.3).

Her mystical experience began with a feeling of the presence of God that ‘would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was with me or I totally immersed in Him’ (*Life* 10.1).

‘When God grants this favour it is a great help to seek Him within where He is found more easily and in a way more beneficial to us than when sought in creatures, as Saint Augustine says after having looked for God in many places. Do not think that this recollection is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself. Such efforts are good and an excellent kind of meditation because they are founded on a truth, which is that God is within us. But this is not the Prayer of Recollection because it is something which each of us can do - with the help of God, as should be understood of everything. What I am speaking of comes in a different way. Sometimes, before even beginning to think of God ... one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward ... This does not come when we want it, but when God wants to grant us this favour’(*Interior Castle* IV.3.3).

‘When the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean the soul and place it in a state of contemplation.

‘Some quickly accommodate their senses and appetites to God and, in their activity, pass on to the spirit which God works in them. This happens when the soul’s discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as its initial sense of satisfaction and fervour, and it is unable to practice discursive meditation as before, or find any support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses’ (Flame 3.32).

‘We should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. We should conduct ourselves passively without efforts of our own, but with a simple, loving awareness, as with eyes open in loving attention’ (Flame 3.33).

‘When it happens that we are conscious of *being placed in solitude and in the state of listening*, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening’ (Flame 3.35).

‘Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God.
If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love’ (Night I.10.6)

‘Pure contemplation lies in receiving’ (Flame 3.36).

‘Contemplation: prayer where I am no longer a tourist, where sense has shifted to spirit – where plenty of insights and aspirations have given way to a less picturesque, more total form of togetherness with God’ (Iain Matthew page 56).

Teresa offers advice for us when we first experience being drawn into moments of contemplation.

1. It is foolish to try to bring about contemplation (*Interior Castle* IV.3.5).
2. We should simply leave ourselves in God's hands (*Interior Castle* IV.3.6).
3. We should continue to meditate (imagine and think and respond) until God draws us into communion. It is not for us to suspend the activity of the mind ourselves (*Interior Castle* IV.3.6).
4. We won't advance in prayer by neglecting to reflect on Jesus.
Move away only when God moves you away (*Interior Castle* V.6.12).
5. Don't use techniques to suspend the mind and achieve a 'dreamy state' (*Interior Castle* V.1.3).

We should not adopt a passive state in an effort to induce contemplation by our own efforts.

‘What I say we must not do is to presume or think that we can suspend the activity of our faculties ourselves; nor must we allow it to cease working’ (*Life*, 12; see *Interior Castle* IV.2).

‘Without hiding our legitimate desires for close union with God, we should submit ourselves to the humble labour of our faculties (imagination, memory, understanding and will) until God stoops down to raise us to loving passive attention.’

(Marie-Eugène, page 84)

There is much for us to do.

It is up to us to clear debris that is blocking a spring,
but then we have to wait for the water.

The silkworm spins the silk, but then has to wait
for the time for the emerging of new life.

A sailor must unfurl the sail, but then must wait for the wind.

A surfer has to struggle out to the deep beyond the breakers,
but once there s/he must wait for the wave.

So it is with prayer. Ultimately it is a process of waiting, but in
prayer we know in faith (even if we do not experience it) that
God is certainly offering Himself to us.

Obedience

‘What does it profit you to give God one thing if he asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined’ (Sayings of light and love 73).

‘The union of love of God is an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (Spiritual Canticle 28,10).

‘Want only what God wants’(*Interior Castle* II,I,7).

‘The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and do not forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare oneself with determination and every possible effort to bring one's will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity. ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good’ (*Interior Castle* II,I,8).

‘Obedience brings us the sooner to perfection and is the best means of attaining it’ (*Foundations* 5).

‘The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our souls so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realise that he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might’(*Foundations*, 23.2)

‘The soul has now surrendered itself into God’s hands and God’s great love has so completely subdued it that it neither knows nor desires anything save that God shall do with it what God wills’(*Interior Castle* V.2.12)

‘The surest sign that we are keeping the two commandments of love is that we are really loving our neighbour ... Be certain that the farther advanced you find yourself in love for your neighbour, the more advanced you will be in your love for God’(*Interior Castle* V.3.8).

‘It is in the effects and deeds following afterwards that one discerns the true value of prayer’ (*Interior Castle* IV.2.8).

‘Stranded and starving, somebody has to get packed up and sent off into the unknown to search for food, taking what water is left, hacking a way through the undergrowth, hoping somehow to forge a path to something somewhere.

But then comes the noise of a helicopter, and rescue approaching.

That changes everything. The one thing needed now is some space, so that what is coming can come’ (Iain Matthew page 35).

‘Making space for God in order to receive’ (Flame 2.27).

Make space to receive God’s gift which is nothing less than God’s Self.

‘If you are seeking God,

much more is your Beloved seeking you’ (Flame 3.28).

Iain Matthew “The Impact of God”, pages 37-38

‘Progress will be measured, less by ground covered, more by the amount of room God is given to manoeuvre.’

‘space’, ‘emptiness’, are key words;
or, as John puts it, *nada*.’

‘Empty hands, cupped to receive God.’

‘The summit of the mountain is a huge space – ‘and on the mountain, nothing’ – because it holds a total Presence.’

‘The crucial question is not “What must I achieve?”, but “What stands in his way?”

If we are serious about prayer we must be resolute in turning away from sin, for it blocks out the light of God and opens our souls to darkness.

We will need a resolute will to detach ourselves from whatever is cluttering up our lives and holding us back.

This will vary from person to person, and according to each one's state of life.

If we are serious about prayer we must try to live virtuous lives in obedience to God's will as revealed to us through the ordinary means of God's providence.

‘It is denying, not the thing or the person, but one’s dependence on the thing or the person, so clearing a space for genuine communion.’ Iain Matthew, page 43).

- A bird held by a thread.

‘The issue is affirming a greater love, and transcending one’s cravings for the sake of that love’ (page 43).

‘Say No to your desires and you will discover what your heart really desires. What makes you think your longings are God's longings?’ (Sayings, 15).

Experiencing God

‘When John seeks “an experience of God”, he does not mean “feeling” as opposed to “not feeling”; he means “reality” as opposed to “mere theory”. He is not looking for a shot in the arm to brighten a dreary day; he is looking for a person with whom he is content to be, even if the day stays dreary ... His search is not for a feeling of encounter, but for encounter ... He wants, not just perfection, but nothing less than union’ (Matthew page 95).

Jesus, the Experience of God

- *Todo* ‘Heaven will be that:
a total entry into the caverns of Christ’s heart,
an infinite space for the Father’(page 127).
 - *Nada* ‘It is not enough for Jesus to have said “night”;
it is important in John’s view that he should have
experienced it, since “he is our example and our light”(page 129).
- ‘On the cross, the heart of Jesus became
a massive space for the fire of the Spirit to burn –
free to blaze out “more intense than all the fires in the world”
in Resurrection’ (page 131).

- In the prison cell John composed the Spiritual Canticle (completed 1582-1584). (Version as sung by John Michael Talbot)

Where have you hidden Beloved?

Why have you wounded my soul?

I went out to the wilderness calling for you
but you were gone.

Oh shepherds keeping your watch in the hills,
if by chance you meet with my Love
tell Him I suffer in my lonely grief
and I soon will die.

But I have searched for my Love in the mountains,
I have searched among the meadows and the fields.
He has poured out a thousand graces in them
so my heart might be healed.
Yet my heart is not healed.

‘The power unleashed on John of the Cross in the *Living Flame* is identified as the vitality of the Risen Christ –

“I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Flame 2.34; Galatians 2:20).

The letting-go discussed in *Ascent* has one motive and model:

“love for Jesus Christ” whose only food was “doing the will of his Father” (Ascent I, 13.4).

The one who enters the space of the purified soul in *Ascent* is named as the “Son of God” (Ascent II.15.4).

And the desperate longing which fuels the pain of night is disclosed as a need for the Easter Jesus, on the model of Mary Magdalene anxious at the sepulchre’ (see Night II.13.6-7).

A Deepening of Contemplation: Transforming Union



‘The union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they gave is one. The wicks and the wax and the light are all one. Yet afterwards the one candle can be perfectly well separated from the other and the candles become two again’ (*Interior Castle* VII, 2).

A Deepening of Contemplation: Spiritual Marriage

‘In spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river. All is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea. There is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows. Although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one’ (*Interior Castle* VII.2.4).

John Michael Talbot

O living flame of love, tenderly wound my soul
to its deepest inner heart, without oppression.
Come, consummate our love,
tear through the veil of our union.
If it be your will come and rend the veil of the temple.

O lamps of fire in deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscured and blind
Are now leading in the warmth
and the passion of Your love.

Yet gently your hand does wound
as you rend through the veil of my temple.
Come and take this life that I give,
So that I might come to live in this our dying.

