

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila: Session 1

with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together. We'll be turning to the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Ávila to help us to deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. In the previous session, Kirsten and I engaged in kind of a dialogue and in the context of which I introduced Teresa of Ávila, a brief sense of her life, and then this book, *The Interior Castle*, which we'll be going through here, one of the great classics in Christian mystical literature.

In this session, I want to go over the same text I went to previously in that initial session, but looking at it in a more intimate way. I'll read the passage. So, this is *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Ávila, chapter one, first paragraph, the beginning of the second paragraph.¹

"While I was beseeching our Lord today that He would speak through me, since I could find nothing to say and had no idea of how to begin to carry out the obligation laid upon me by obedience, a thought occurred to me which I will now set down, in order to have some foundation on which to build. I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions. Now if we think carefully over this sisters, the soul of the righteous man is nothing but a paradise, in which, as God tells us, He takes His delight. For what do you think a room will be like which is the delight of a King so mighty, so wise, so pure and so full of all that is good? I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul and its great capacity. In fact, however acute our intellects may be, they will no more be able to attain to a comprehension of this than to an understanding of God; for, as He Himself says, He created us in His image and likeness. Now, if this is so—and it is—there is no point in our fatiguing ourselves by attempting to comprehend the beauty of this castle; for, though it is His creature, and there is therefore as much difference between it and God as between creature and Creator, the very fact that His Majesty says it is made in His image means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty."

"It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are."

I'd like to reflect on this. Now, let's say here that we're approaching Teresa, turning to her for spiritual direction, and we're coming to her saying that we want her to help us to deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our life, and we seek her guidance. How do we begin? How does she have us begin, see? How does she begin? With this first paragraph, how does she begin? Like, what's going on here in this first paragraph? Of all the ways to start, what is it that she starts this way?

Jim Finley: I think it's this, see, where are we to begin? We're to begin where we are. Where are we? So, how we tend to approach this is where we are is where we are in our experience of ourselves. I'm living my life. You're living yours. We're in the midst of a number of situations, some of them painful, some of them wonderful. There are challenges, and regrets, and struggles, and life. Life. Also where we are is we're living our life as a man or woman of faith. We have a sense of faith, and in the sense of faith we're turning to God and from this present situation

1 St. Theresa of Avila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), 15-16.

of our busy-ness, and our limitations, and our confusion, and all the rest of it, and we're seeking how can I enter into a deeper, habitual relationship with God, a deeper sense of God's presence in my life, my presence in God? I want to learn to do that. I want to deepen my spiritual life.

And so, this is where I begin. I begin from the midst of sensing how challenging this is, because I could say, "I don't know quite how to do this." See, how do I go about doing this? Because when I pray, there are questions about distractions, and how might I conduct myself, and what do I make of this, and what I make of that, all of that.

I think where Teresa is coming from is she listens to all that and she acknowledges that, but I think what she's doing here is she's suggesting although we are there, at a qualitatively deeper level we're also somewhere else other than that, and that's where she has us start. But she says let's begin where God tells us that we are in Scripture. If we take to heart what God reveals to us about the nature of who we are in our situation, let's start there. And so, where are we? Where are we?

We listen to her then as she says to us, you know, you're seeking union with God, which is a grace to desire this, but it is helpful to know in the light of faith that you and God are already one in the intimate and mysterious sense in which in God creating you is God's self-donating love. God makes your very soul, that is, your very essence of who you are as a person created by God in the image and likeness of God, to be a relational mystery with God. That you're at your very soul, the very mystery of who you are and the very mystery of who God is are already intertwined in an alchemy of a kind of transsubjective communion of a oneness.

When Jesus says, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly," the life is the one life that is at once God's and our own, that we're in a subsisting relation with God and that subsisting relation is our soul, which is our God-given godly dignity is our soul. So, in effect then, we're in a relationship with God seeking God. That is, we're in a subsisting relation of oneness, which is our very reality, because if God would cease loving you into the present moment at the count of three, at the count of three you'd vanish, for you're nothing, absolutely nothing apart from the love of God. She says because you're a creature and, therefore, without God you're absolutely nothing apart from God. Yet in your very nothingness without God, by the very generosity of God, your very presence is the presence of God, which is the mystery of your soul. Therefore, a place to begin then is by taking God seriously, as God reveals to us or invites us to reflect upon the stature and the mystery of our own soul.

She uses then this metaphor of a castle, that our soul then must have about it then, being such as it is created by God, that your own soul has a quality that it's elegant, it's vast, it's mysterious, it's graced, it's luminous, it's inherently holy. This is the mystery of your soul.

Furthermore, not only in reflecting on yourself in this way, on this mystery of your soul, not only that, but then God, whom the whole universe cannot contain and who's being poured out and given away in and as the mystery of your own soul and your nothingness without God, that God lives inside of you in the innermost hidden center of yourself. Therefore, if we think of heaven as where God lives and if God lives in you, then you're God's heaven.

That is that you're the one in whom God takes his delight. You're the one in whom God delights, that you are the beloved of God, God's heaven.

I think a way of maybe getting at this, too, is to say, you know what, say when two people like love each other very, very much, when we're in love with and deeply love someone, we might say that in our love for them, we see their soul. That is, we see in our love for them, we see the preciousness of who they are, like the innermost depths of the gift and the miracle of their presence. We also sense then that when we see the soul of a person, which is the preciousness of the person, then we see how grateful they are to be so deeply seen. They see that you see in them this preciousness, and that graces them or that gifts them with that.

Then when they return the favor, by seeing that self-same preciousness in you that is in their love for you, they see through the appearances. They see through past all that's real in its own right, but they see this kind of indescribable preciousness of you that they're empowered to see in you through their love. You can see that they see you. You can see that you're seen. This mutuality of seeing and being seen by and with each other in love, I think it's why the Church speaks as matrimony as a sacrament. But a sacrament of what, see? It's a sacrament that God sees you, that you're God's beloved, that God sees in you the God-given godly preciousness of you, in which the very depths of God by the generosity of God has been given to you as the very depths and reality of the mystery of your own soul in the presence of God, see. That God sees that. God sees that.

So, the next paragraph then, *"It is no small pity and should cause us no little shame that through our own fault we do not understand ourselves or know who we are,"* (Avila 2007, p. 16) because here then I think Teresa helps us by laying bare our situation: our situation is God. In God we live, and move, and have our being. God is our situation. The substance of our very soul is the generosity of God being poured out as this manifested presence of God is our own deepest identity, the mystery of our soul, our God-given godly nature.

But then going back to how we started out, asking for God's help, how am I ever going to be able to figure out how to find you? Now we're able to see that we tend not to see the God-given godly nature of ourselves subsisting in God, sustained in God. We tend not to see that.

Therefore, our dilemma then of not seeing this because it's not just that we're not imagining our challenges, and our problems, and our crises, and our struggles. I'm sharing this with you now in the midst of the pandemic going on and things in my own life, and life's hard, and there are all kinds of challenges and a lot's going on. It isn't that these aren't real. They are real. It's just that we go around imagining that these conditions that we're in have the final say in who we are. We tend not to see that love and love alone has the final say in who we are, because God is love being poured out, and self-donating love is the very mystery and gift of who we are as our soul. That's the issue.

And so, now our dilemma then becomes something intimate, for now we see our

tendency not to see the divinity of ourself that alone is real as a capacity to be actualized. That is, I am this because God says so. This is who I am. I am the beloved. God is seeing me here now. God's seeing you here now through and through and through and through and through, as precious as God is precious, as vast as God is vast, in your nothingness without God, in my nothingness without God. This is true.

But my situation is I tend not to see what's true. When I hear it, when I heard Teresa talk like this, it sounds so beautiful, and in my heart, I know it's beautiful because it's true. "Jesus loves me, as I know, for the Bible tells me so." This is the Good News. This is really true, but I'm kind of caught in my powerlessness to experientially see and habitually abide in who I know God knows me to be. This is my dilemma, see?

Teresa says what you're to do then is to realize this dilemma, which is the first mansion of the soul of the seven mansions. This is the first mansion, being a riddle to yourself in this graced way is a gift. It's a gift. When you go to prayer, when you go to prayer, and you commit yourself to a daily rendezvous with God asking God to help you and guide you to habituate yourself, to be more habitually aware of this love alone that is ultimately real of which you tend not to be so unaware, don't be disheartened if you're discouraged. Don't be disheartened if it's hard to be faithful to daily meditation. Don't be disheartened if the pressures of the day tend to intrude themselves upon your quiet time with God because this is the burden and the gift of being in the first mansion.

When she speaks of reptiles—later she's going to speak of these—we realize we get into this state and these reptiles, which we're looking at next time, these reptiles then are habits of the mind and heart that compromise union that we're looking for. I would say that for right now, one of the main reptiles is believing that what's possible for us with God is being determined by what is possible for us to attain. She says, Teresa says, "*For God's will is that no bounds should be set to his works.*" (Avila 2007, p. 17) "*Therefore, we should not give authority to our limitations as determining what's possible, but rather we should learn to trust in God's infinite love for us, revealing to us that even God is possible, and it's possible for us in the midst of our limitations.*" (Avila 2007)

So, here then it seems to me is where Teresa would have us start. I think she quietly asks of us that we would go to a daily quiet time with God, and she says the door through which we enter into this first mansion she says is, "*As far as I can understand, she says this in the first mansion, chapter one, 'the door of entry into this castle is prayer and meditation.'*" (Avila 2007)

Well, what is prayer? Prayer is the sincerity of asking for such things. When I come to prayer, she says that, "*When I go to prayer, she says, 'that prayer is being aware that one is talking to God and talking to God, being aware of who we're talking to.'*" (Avila 2007) So, when we talk to God, asking God for this gift that we're asking for, to know that God hears us. And so, to know that when we speak, God hears us and is infinitely interested in what we're saying because this longing for God is an echo of God's infinite longing for us, which is the grace of this very desire, like this.

I think what's being asked of us here then is a kind of a patience to let ourselves kind of slowly get acclimated into a very subtle but very delicate kind of wondrous way to begin to see ourselves and to understand ourselves, to be present in the presence of God seen in this way so that when we sit with the Scriptures or pray, we reflect upon things, we reflect upon this, this is our Lectio, reflect upon this. Bring this to God that in the daily rendezvous with God, when the prayer and meditation ends, ask God for the grace not to break the thread of such sensitivity so that as we go through our day we look for these little sideways glances, these little hints, these little intimations of this kind of subtle shift in a paradoxical state of realizing God's infinite oneness with us in our powerlessness and weakness, deeply accepted, to reciprocate to this love that's sustaining us breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat, and to place our trust in that, and to know that this is efficacious unto holiness. If we did nothing more than this, if we did nothing more than be a faithful first-mansion person as we're describing here, kind of soaked into you as the way you walk your walk, that would be an amazing thing, efficacious unto holiness, what a gift.

And so, then let's bring this to meditation. Again, in the meditation here, we'll be sitting in meditation just for a few minutes, but on your own, if you sit in your daily meditation time, you can extend the time for the meditation as long as time allows or as long as the inclinations of your heart move you to be in this intimate exchange between yourself and God loving you and accepting you just as you are. So, in this spirit then, I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer, bow, and repeat after me:

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Let's slowly say the Lord's Prayer together:

"Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and forever. Amen."

Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us. St. Teresa of Ávila, pray for us.

Blessings until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.