

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila: Session 3

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to The Mystics. [bell]

Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together. Turning to the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Ávila as she guides us in a journey through our own soul as a way to help us deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. We began with Teresa with the first mansion of the soul, and continued on in the next session into the second mansion, and she continues on in the same way in the third mansion, in which these first three mansions are the phases of cultivating psychological, spiritual maturity.

And now in this session, I want to begin the fourth mansion, in which she's attempting to help us to discern or to understand the stirrings, what she calls "special favors," or the stirrings of a more unitive, contemplative, or mystical dimensions of experiencing and responding to God's presence. And she does this by comparing spiritual experiences as they're experienced in the first three mansions, you might say ego consciousness illumined by faith, as those same experiences are realized at a qualitatively new way in the first stirrings of the mystical in the fourth mansion.

In this first contrast, she compares the soul to a basin filling with water. So, the soul is likened to a basin and God's presence flowing into us is likened to water flowing into our soul, into the space of our soul, and compares that to the basin of our soul experienced as God's presence flowing into us in this new mystical way. So, Teresa writes:

*"These two large basins can be filled with water in different ways: the water in the one comes from a long distance, by means of numerous conduits and through human skill; but the other has been constructed at the very source of the water and fills without making any noise. If the flow of the water is abundant, as in the case we are speaking of, a great stream still runs from it after it's been filled; no skill is necessary here, and no conduits have to be made, for the water is flowing all the time. [. . .]"*¹

*To the other fountain the water comes direct from its source--" which is the beginning of the mystical, the focus of the fourth mansion, this other fountain, "--the water comes direct from the source, which is God, and, when it is His Majesty's will and He is pleased to grant us some supernatural favour, its coming is accompanied by the greatest peace and quietness and sweetness within ourselves—I cannot say where it arises or how. And that content and delight are not felt, as earthly delights are felt, in the heart—I mean not at the outset, for later the basin becomes completely filled, and then this water begins to overflow all the Mansions and faculties until it reaches the body. It is for that reason that I said it has its source in God and ends in myself. But whereas in the first Mansion, with God's grace, it begins with us and reaches out to God."*²

So, I'd like to begin there by reflecting on this. I think she's speaking here, imagine we're sitting in prayer and in devotional sincerity with our Lectio Divina, taking in God's word in our discursive meditation, in this kind of loving exchange between ourself and God, and in the prayer of the heart, asking for the grace to be faithful to this love and to this presence in our daily life. And so, in this sense, we have the sense of praying to God, see, "Our Father who art in heaven" or calling out to God like, "Hear my prayer." And, also, we pray to God

1 St. Teresa of Ávila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (Minneola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2007), p. 53.

2 Ibid.

in some sense as being beyond us. It's coming to us through conduits formed by the means of seeking God, means of meditation, means of prayer, means of devotion, means of service. And these conduits formed by these means requires effort on our part. It requires the grace desire to be faithful to these efforts that embody the means through which we experience the presence of God flowing into us, into our lives.

Jim Finley: And she says, as we're sitting in prayer, that's how we experience our prayers, that we're sitting there in this effort to be faithful to meditation, to not be done in by distractions, to just whatever's going on in our meditation practice. And she says in the very midst of it, something else starts to happen. And at first it might be so subtle, you don't notice it at first. It might be quite dramatic. This often is very, very subtle and delicate. And there is a sense, first of all, you don't sense anymore that God's presence is flowing into you from afar, but rather the basin of your soul is filling with the grace of God from some deep interior, hidden place deep within yourself. The imagery here to my mind is that, as we descend ever deeper into the depths of our soul, we discover that our soul opens out upon and drops down into the bottomless abyss of God, here in ever so subtle ways is welling up and pouring itself out into our soul.

Furthermore, not only is this grace then flowing from somewhere deep within us, but it's also flowing into us without effort. Another word for this among some of the other mystics is beginning of infused contemplation. That is, it's not the contemplation that arises from discursive meditation, you know, emerging into a kind of a contemplative, quiet attentiveness as a way to pray, but rather in the whole midst of that process, it's God accessing us, God flowing into us, God seeking us, God being given to us, desiring us and being united with us in this unexplainable, intimate, delicate stirrings of a union.

And so, now it's not simply praying to God, "Our Father who art in heaven," but the sense of "The kingdom of heaven is within you," as Jesus says. That it's deep in the hidden depths of yourself and God, from the seventh innermost mansion, is flowing in a more intimate and more direct way in this kind of intimate presence-ing in the depths of yourself. And so,, we can say too, it seems to me then, that the prayer then becomes a kind of surprising, delicate, obediential fidelity, or a kind of subtle, delicate attentiveness to the first stirrings of this kind of unitive event that's unexplainably beginning to happen within the interior depths of yourself in prayer.

She's going to say, too, that no skill is required here in essence because it's an influx of God, but in the fourth mansion, we're still at the cusp of the first three mansions and intentional consciousness. And so, we still have to freely choose to renew the quiet attentiveness. If we drift off into distractions or into half-heartedness, we have to freely choose this kind of paradoxical activity of this subtle, free, passivity in the presence of what God's beginning to achieve in us.

The second distinction that she makes in the fourth mansion, is she makes the distinction between in different English translations, and Peers which is the translation I'm using, as a distinction between sweetness and consolations. In sweetness, which are experienced in the first three mansions, we might say are the graced moments of experiencing the inner warmth of God's presence, like the solace or the consoling sense of God's nearness with us or a sustaining presence guiding us and helping us in our prayer and in our life as a graced

emotional state.

But here beginning in the fourth mansion, the sweetness gives way to a qualitatively different sense of affect, and the libidinal affect sense of ourselves. And so, Teresa writes in chapter 2, the fourth mansion, she says so what happens, we realize is that what's happening in the consolation, she says quoting from the Psalms, that our heart is being enlarged to divine proportions. There's a dilation of our heart in the consolation of the fourth mansion.

Jim Finley: So, she says returning to this verse, what it says about the enlargement of the heart may, I think, be of some help to us: *"For apparently, as this heavenly water begins to flow from this source of which I am speaking—that is, from our very depths—[in the inner most seventh Mansion of the soul] it proceeds to spread within us and cause an interior dilation and produce ineffable blessings, so that the soul itself cannot understand all that it receives there."*³

And so, there is this sense that the presence of God is flowing into the water, the flowing up present. And as the water flows into the basin of your soul, imagine a basin, that it fills up with water to the point that it starts to overflow. But imagine a basin, as it begins to fill with water, the basin keeps getting larger and larger and larger to kind of accommodate the water that's flowing into it. And she says you begin to realize that that's what's happening to your soul. That is the love is flowing into you, there's a dilation. Your heart is being enlarged by infinite love and to divine proportions. It's this experience, you're sitting there in the presence of God flowing into you without effort unexplainably. And as it flows into you, the love of God is transforming you into itself through a process of your heart being enlarged into the proportions of infinite love that's flowing into you.

And so, the prayer then becomes a way of letting this love that's transforming you into itself, have its way with you. It's like an intimate act of trust or of surrender. And then she says, *"--it proceeds to spread within and cause an interior dilation and produce ineffable blessings, so that the soul itself cannot understand all that it receives there."*⁴

She's going to say elsewhere in the fourth mansion, that in a sense, both the intellect and the will are here united in a single flow of grace transformation, but in a certain sense, the emphasis of the union is in the will. That is, it's in the love such that even as the dilation of the heart is occurring, we ourselves cannot understand what's happening to us, that something's happening to me, the subtle, delicate, intimate, vast, and pure, and I know not what to make of it. That is I'm not capable of comprehending what it is that God's beginning to achieve in me in the kind of quiet, delicate attentiveness and sincerity of my prayer, which little by little is spilling over into every moment of my life.

She says that in this process, and this is why she calls this prayer The Prayer of Quiet

3 St. Teresa of Ávila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (Minneola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2007), p. 54.

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for she says in this prayer of quiet, she says, the time has come to think less and to love more. And in this surrender over of ourselves in love to the love that's flowing into us. She says you can begin to experience within yourself. gain, she's trying to help us discern or put words to what it is we can recognize in some ways happening to us, that we realized that in response to this yielding, that we're gradually retiring within, the people experiencing this are gradually retiring within themselves. *"Anyone who experiences this will discover what I mean. I cannot explain it better. I think I have read that they are like a hedgehog or a tortoise drawing into itself; and whoever wrote that must have understood it well. These creatures, however, enter within themselves whenever they like; whereas with us it is not a question of our will—it happens only when God is pleased to grant to us this favour. For my own part, I believe that, when His Majesty grants it, He does so to people who are already leaving the things of the world."*⁵

Jim Finley: And so, this withdrawing is you're sitting there in this state of quiet, and the quiet, as you find yourself drawing into yourself, like, drawing inward and downward as a kind of a spatial, a metaphorical way of drawing in closer to the center, the hidden center in the seventh mansion of God's indwelling presence in you from which this influx of God's presence is coming from some hidden place within yourself, like a turning within, like this.

And in this sense then, she's then introduces a term. She says that what we notice in the first three mansions, and it also goes on in this mansion, is that thinking tends to be fast, but understanding tends to be slow. And the understanding is a kind of a pausing, like an experiential understanding of the influx of this loving oneness with us that we cannot conceptually understand.

And so, as thinking yields to the understanding, the understanding gives way to this withdrawing into ourself in this deepened attentiveness, and the deepened attentiveness gives way to a state she calls absorption.

Teresa writes, this is the fourth mansion, third chapter, *"Anyone who is conscious that this is happening within himself should give God great praise for he will be very right to recognize what a favour it is; and the thanksgiving which he makes for it will prepare him for greater favours. Our preparation for listening to Him as certain books tell us, [as listening to God] is that we should contrive, not to use our reasoning powers, but to be intent upon discovering what the Lord is working in the soul; for, if his Majesty has not begun to grant us absorption, I cannot understand how we can cease thinking in any way which will not bring us more harm than profit."*⁶ I'd like to reflect on this.

There is thinking, there is a thinking that moves as kind of a process of discursive meditation toward this quiet state of the influx of this presence of God into the soul in the fourth mansion. In the quieting of our understanding, in the influx of this presence pouring into us silently from deep within ourself, gives way to a state of absorption.

5 Ibid, pp. 57-58.

6 St. Teresa of Ávila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (Minneola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2007), p. 58.

She describes absorption, and I'm going to follow, I very much like the wording of Mary Frolich in her work, *The Inner Subjectivity of the Mystic: Teresa of Avila*, that absorption is a semi-voluntary state of fascination. I want to give some examples of absorption. In an art museum, notice you can see people moving quietly from piece to piece. You see people pausing in silence before a work of art. They're in a state of absorption, or absorption is going along, and all of a sudden you realize you're in the presence of a particularly stunning sunset, and you pause to give yourself over to the beauty of the setting sun giving itself over to you. You're in a state of absorption. Or a parent goes in to make sure that their child is covered up at night before they go to bed, and they pause there in the dark looking at their sleeping child, and they are so taken by the beauty of this child or the gift of this child in their life, they pause there in a state of absorption.

Jim Finley: Absorption is a state of quiet fascination in which we instinctively move into a kind of a hiatus from sequential thought. We let sequential thought fall into the background, and this sustained, non-conceptual attentiveness beyond what thoughts can attain or adequately do justice to. She says, this state of absorption we might think of is not yet divine union, but it's a heightened sense that we might think of it." As Gabriel Marceau would say kind of an availability. That we're more and more available to yet more unitive mystical states as we kind of move beyond the gravitational field of conceptual thought and paradigmatic consciousness.

She also says in this fourth mansion, this is characteristic of this mansion, we're still at the cusp between these two realms of the first three mansions and the beginning of the mystical, that in this fourth mansion to have an intentional consciousness, you still have to freely choose to sustain this subtle state of absorption because you'll find yourself drifting off into distractions, or into half-heartedness, or whatever, so in a way there's like the intention to be available to this state in which is crossing beyond the boundaries of what your own intentions can acquire, but are pouring into you so quietly, and so sweetly, and so subtly in this state of prayer.

There's a parallel phrase here in Buddhist teaching on meditation, which I think parallels, is the Buddhist book of this state is neither perceiving or not perceiving. That is, it isn't that you're not perceiving. You're not in a trance. We're going to see later for her an ecstatic rapture state and trance states occur. It isn't as though you're not perceiving, but neither are you perceiving in a way in which any of your perceptions, regardless of how astute or accurate that might be, are adequate to account for or to be the basis of what it is that's happening to you in this state.

I chose this as one last little thing here, end on this note, which I think is very significant to us. She says in the same third chapter, just kind of in passing, she said, "*I do not mean that people who are married must actually leave the world-- they can do so only in desire: His call to them is a special one and aims at making them intent upon interior things.*"⁷ I'd like to reflect on this as a parting thought for a minute. Teresa of Ávila, she was a cloistered nun, just like Thomas Merton was a cloistered monk. And most of us here listening to this are joining in these reflections, but we don't live in a cloistered monastery. We're out here in the midst of the world, and we're out here in the midst of the world as a single person, or a married

7 St. Teresa of Ávila (Author), E. Allison Peers (Translator), *The Interior Castle* (Minneapolis, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2007), p. 58.

person, or a married person with children, as a divorced person, whatever our situation is in the midst of things.

So, she's saying that in this married state, first of all, in this married state, the person so called would in their prayer, experience this happening to them in the interiority of their heart, but they would also then see their marriage as a sacrament in which fourth-mansion consciousness would manifest itself in their deepening loving union with their spouse. The marriage itself could move toward the possibility of a mystical marriage in which their deepening union with each other would be an incarnate sacrament of God's infinite union with each of them drawing them towards God and their deepening union with each other.

So, too, with their parenting with the children. Thomas Merton once said at the monastery, "We can't love and live on our own terms." And, therefore, we can begin to feel the givens of our situation, whatever the situations might be, as modalities of this unitive fourth-dimensional unitive state of experiencing God's presence in our life.

Jim Finley: And so, we end then with this note then in the fourth mansion. It's true as we start to hear her talk like this, we realize that she's starting to talk about things maybe we've never experienced, but it's consoling and reassuring to know that such things can and do happen.

Also, it's reassuring to know that in the spiritual order, that what happens to one of us in the order of grace belongs to all of us in the mystical body. And also, and lastly, I think this is important, that maybe this wondrous unitive state she begins to describe, we might be closer to it than we think. Or put it this way, she says we need to know more than we think. Maybe if we look real close, it could already be occurring within us, but we don't notice it because we haven't yet calibrated our heart to a fine enough delicate scale to be attuned to this effort so subtle influx of the divine presence pouring into us deeper than thoughts can grasp or words can adequately express.

So, let us end then by bringing this to meditation and quiet. And, again, for now, just for a few minutes, to kind of symbolically here be together where we return to the meditative prayerful state in which this union occurs. But then, also, as you're so inclined on your own to continue your meditation daily prayer practice with a kind of heightened sensitivity to these matters that Teresa's inviting us to recognize and explore. So, with this, then I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer, and bow.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. [bell tones followed by silence beginning at 00:26:22]

[bell 00:31:00] Bow and 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.

[music] 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.