

Turning to the Mystics



Teresa of Avila: Session 4
with James Finley

Jim Finley: [music] 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 mystics and Teresa of Ávila who help us deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. Focusing our attention now in this session on the fifth Mansion, or the fifth dwelling place of the soul, she helps us begin to understand this heightened state of realized intimacy with God by contrasting it to the fourth Mansion. We're distinguishing it from the fourth Mansion. And so, she says in the first chapter:

“Do not think it is a state, like the last--” (like the fourth Mansion we’ve just explored) “--in which we dream; I say ‘dream’ because the soul seems to be, as it were, drowsy, so that it neither seems asleep nor feels awake. Here--” (that is, here now in this fifth Mansion) “--we are all asleep, and fast asleep, to the things of the world, and to ourselves (in fact, for the short time that the condition lasts, the soul is without consciousness and has no power to think, even though it may desire to do so). There is no need now for the soul to devise any method of suspending the thought. Even in loving, if it is able to love, it cannot understand how or what it is that it loves, nor what it would desire; in fact, it has completely died to the world so that it may live more fully in God. This is a delectable death, a snatching of the soul from all the activities which it can perform while it is in the body; a death full of delight, for, in order to come closer to God, the soul appears to have withdrawn so far from the body that I do not know if it has still life enough to be able to breathe. I have just been thinking about this and I believe it has not; or at least, if it still breathes, it does so without realizing it. The mind would like to occupy itself wholly in understanding something of what it feels, and it has not the strength to do this, it becomes so dumbfounded that, even if any consciousness remains to it, neither hands nor feet can move; as we commonly say of a person who has fallen into a swoon, it might be taken for dead. Oh, the secrets of God! I should never weary of trying to describe them to you, if I thought I could do so successfully. I did not mind if I write any amount of nonsense, provided that just once in a way, I can write sense, so that we may give great praise to the Lord.

“I said that there was no question here of dreaming, whereas in the Mansion that I’ve just described--” That is, again, the fourth Mansion.” --the soul is doubtful as to what has really happened, until it has had a good deal of experience of it. It wonders if the whole thing was an imagination, if it had been asleep, if the favour was a gift from God, or the devil had transformed it into an angel of light. It retains a thousand suspicions, and it is well that it should for, as I said, we can sometimes be deceived in this respect, even by our own nature. For, although there is less opportunity for the poisonous creatures to enter, a few little lizards, being very agile, can hide themselves.”¹

So, I'd like to reflect on this opening passage. See, I think it helps for a minute to see that the trajectory that she's kind of tracing out here from a state where we didn't even know we had a soul, so kind of thrown into the external events and circumstances and struggles and all that of our life, to finding our way into the first Mansion where for the first time God becomes personally meaningful to us, where God's relationship with us becomes personally a matter of our concern, a matter of knowing this is where we are to find the meaning to our life. But our heart is divided. We're still conflicted by the tumult. So, we pray, but it's hard to find the time to pray, and so on. We go deeper into the second Mansion, and the struggle is

1 St. Teresa of Avila (author), E. Allison Peers (editor and translator), Interior Castle (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.) 65-66.

heightened by realizing we're traumatically bonded to these compromises, to giving ourselves over to this love that completely gives itself over to us, and we struggle with that and wrestle with that and work through that, which brings us into the third Mansion, as we evolve towards a state of psychological spiritual maturity, in this state. And saying that this is a great gift to reach a state of maturity, both to ourselves and to our ministry and service to the world, and so on.

So, we might say then in the third Mansion, that this is our life of faith. That is, in the third Mansion, we know God as in a mirror darkly, kind of an obscure certainty in our heart, habituated in this stance of faith of God's oneness with us, in Scripture, and in prayer, and inspirations, and so on. We know the measure of this faith life, of God's oneness with us, is love, and in this faith and in this love, we live by hope. That is, when death comes, when we pass through the veil of death, it won't be more of this. Paradise is not to be understood as kind of a sublimated or rarefied sense of these mediated ways of knowing God, through inspirations, and insights, and consolations, and so on, but rather when we cross over into God, God will be all in all, that there will be a kind of a transsubjective, infinite communion of a oneness with God, and sharing in God's life in some graced way as perfectly and completely as God shares in God's own life as our destiny, like the divinity of our destiny in the generosity of God.

But here, what we're suggesting then, beginning with the fourth Mansion, is that we begin to realize that this state of heaven; that is, a state of this transsubjective communion which is our destiny in God, is somehow already present in us in the seventh Mansion of our own soul. The state of a transsubjective communion, or a oneness in the innermost, hidden center of ourself as a *capax Dei*, or capacity to be realized as we journey ever closer to it, as God leads us and empowers us to do so by these infusions of grace.

And so, this is what starts to happen in the fourth Mansion as a kind of a foreshadowing of eternal life, that there is a God as we intimately realize in the midst of our reflective prayer, in our intentions, that God is kind of sweetly and ever so delicately being the very intimate presence of God and is intimately infusing itself into the intimate immediacy of our very soul that is the very substance of our very subjectivity, and we're moved then to a state of quiet. That is, we hold very quiet so as not to disturb or disrupt this amazing, delicate realization of this infused contemplation, the beginnings of this infused contemplation, evoking a state of absorption. And in that absorption, then, the transformations occur, which we walked through in the fourth Mansion. For example, realizing that our heart is being enlarged to divine proportions of the love that's flowing into it, and so on.

So, now, let's say that we're living this way. That is, let's just say in our own way, this is given to us to do so. We're becoming more and more acclimated to this fourth level. Notice the first three levels of the ego illumined by faith are still there; that is, we still need intentional consciousness for this, in this state of absorption that is not yet divine union. And so, we still need to choose when we get sleepy or get distracted, we need to kind of reinstate the sustained attentiveness infused with love, which is becoming the essence of our prayer, really, the essence of our life. And as we get more and more acclimated to this, then this is where the fifth Mansion emerges.

How I understand it to be this way in terms of the imagery of sleep, is it is the influx of

the Divine Presence becomes more and more intimately diffused throughout the substance of our very soul, our very totality of our subjectivity, that this refined state of attentiveness in the midst of this transformative grace, is this stance in which we're subtly aware of it in reflective intentional consciousness, since being finite, it's finite. It cannot be the recipient of this infinite union with the infinite that is now beginning to flow into us, or to awaken us to this infinite union with the infinite utterly beyond the finite boundaries of the self being so awakened. And, therefore, this reflective self goes into a kind of a sleep. That is, it comes to the edge of itself and to its edges; and, therefore, it goes into a deep sleep because being finite, it can no longer be the recipient of the infused grace of God's presence flowing into our life.

And as a matter of fact—Mary Frohlich, again, turning to her insightful insights into all of this, too, is that it's so true, too—is that from the vantage point of the graced-ego self in the fourth Mansion that enters into this sleep, it would seem as if we became unconscious. That is to say, when the moment passes, when the moment of union passes, and we're able to once again get our bearings, we can look around where we are, and we come back to ourself in reflective, intentional consciousness. We don't know whether anything happened, but maybe we were unconscious? But then she says what happens, though, is the fourth-Mansion experience of the self that was so transcended as that unitive event washes over us, we are then in the light of the self now so strangely transcended by this union that's given to us that realizes something did happen to us because we're different. We're different.

And so, she's saying then the task is now to discern the signs by which we can recognize the state of the graced, awakened, transcended-self living in the state of the realization of the union that transcended it washing over us, and through us, and illuminating us. Like, "What is this like?" And again, I think we can appreciate Teresa for the guidance given here in these matters that are so subtle and so delicate as we turn to her trustworthy guidance in this.

So, she's looking for a metaphor now to convey this ever-so-subtle state, and this is in the Chapter II of the fifth Mansion. And here she turns to her metaphor, this classic text here, on the silkworm and the butterfly:

"You will have heard of the wonderful way in which silk is made—a way which no one could invent but God—and how it comes from a kind of seed which looks like tiny peppercorns." Here she's looking at her own understandings at the time on the biology of the silkworm, and the spinning of the cocoon, and so on, so that, "When the warm weather comes--" and the silkworm eats the mulberry leaves that are laid down for it until its sustenance on which it feeds to the point of growth where it begins to spin a cocoon and the spinning of the cocoon, then, is that "When it is full-grown, then, as I wrote at the beginning, it starts to spin its silk and to build the house in which it is to die." That is, it is to die to itself as a caterpillar. "This house may be understood here to mean Christ. I think I read or heard somewhere that our life is hid in Christ, or in God (for that is the same thing), or that our life is Christ."³

2 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), Interior Castle, 70.

3 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), Interior Castle, 71.

So, let's look at this together. Just as, following the metaphor, the silkworm eats and eats and eats and eats as a silkworm, and reaches a point of fullness of growth, which is the fullness realized in the fourth Mansion of the soul, the silkworm begins to spin a cocoon about itself and it disappears from view just as in the sleep of the fifth Mansion we disappear from our own finite eyes. And having disappeared in this cocoon, which is Christ, our life is hidden with Christ in God, the caterpillar dies to itself, the silkworm dies to itself, as a silkworm. And in that mysterious process of metamorphosis then it emerges amazingly enough as a butterfly. And she says this is how we can understand that something did happen to us, and we can start to recognize the affinities between what's qualitatively different now as we emerge from this process.

Here's another way of putting it, maybe, which I think might help: Imagine a silkworm hears about metamorphosis, and the silkworm decides it wants to prepare for its metamorphosis. And so, it starts reading books on how to metamorphosize. It goes on retreats to prepare for its metamorphosis. It decides maybe that it's going to take with it a journal so I can journal about it; maybe publish later; go on tour: "My Metamorphosis." But when the metamorphosis begins, something happens that the caterpillar did not anticipate. Its very brain—that is, the very mind of itself as a caterpillar is the first thing that begins to metamorphosize—that is, the place from which it was going to observe the process of its metamorphosis is the first thing that begins to metamorphosize, for a butterfly is not a caterpillar with wings just as the resurrection is not the resuscitation of a corpse. And here is a sense, then, of the depth of this sweet death that we realize has occurred in this hidden state. And we realize the sweet death of the self now transformed in the fruit of that death is this radically new way to be in the world, this new way to be with God in this fifth-Mansion state.

Another way of looking at it that helps me is to think of it as what we're really asking again is, "What happens when we die?" That if, as we were saying earlier, we don't, when we die, cross over into more rarefied versions of our life in reflective consciousness. It isn't that that's not going to be there, too, like the eternity of all things, everything real is forever, but rather we've died to everything less than an infinite union with infinite love to that one life that is at once God's and our own in which God is all in all.

And here's the mystic insight, this mystery in God where God is all in all, that even now God is all in all in the innermost seventh Mansion of the soul as a capacity to be actualized. That is, there is within us this communion, this communal life, that's actualized by God awakening us to it and moving and inspiring us to say yes to it and lean in close to it that we might be unraveled and set free from everything that's less than this union that's within us.

So, what we might say, then, in this imagery, we might say that we realize we're a butterfly with tattered wings. And Teresa writes, again this is Chapter II, "*To see, then, the restlessness of this little butterfly though it has never been quieter or more at rest in its life! Here is something to praise God for—namely, that it knows not where to settle and make its abode. By comparison with the abode it has had--*" That is, the comparison that it had in the caterpillar phase of the third Mansion and also still at the cusp of

crossing over into the fourth Mansion where we were still there more identified with the self-reflective, intentional self. All that was gained there, all that was lost there, that whole way of understanding ourself, that “--everything it sees on earth leaves it dissatisfied, especially when God has again and again given it this wine which almost every time has brought it some new blessing.”⁴

So, you’re sitting there in this reflective state and then again you disappear from yourself. And each time you reemerge again, you reemerge re-quickened, reawakened, re-deepened in this newly discovered divinized existence to which everything else pales in comparison; it’s nothing. So, “*It sets no store by the things it did when it was a worm—*”⁵ That is, when we were still in this reflective state of temporal consciousness, illumined by grace, and so forth.

“It is not surprising, then, that, as this little butterfly feels a stranger to the things of this earth, it should be seeking a new resting-place. But where will the poor little creature go? It cannot return to the place it came from, for, as has been said, however hard we try, it is not in our power to do that until God is pleased once again to grant us this favour.” (That carries us yet deeper forward into this new homecoming in God.) *“Ah, Lord! What trials begin afresh in this soul!”*⁶ That as a soul, this is not the beloved; this is not the beloved, everything suffers from not enough-ness. Everything in time and space, everything in our earthly life, is qualitatively, infinitely less than the oneness with God that now having tasted, alone will be enough for us.

I want to give an image of this. I would use this. This came to me some years ago, but I could use it now with my wife, Maureen, who just, in her death, but I’ll stick with my original version here, but it’s the mystical mystery of widowhood as another metaphor for this, I think. Imagine a woman who was blessed, her and husband, with many, many years of very loving, many ups and downs that brought them to this really amazing state of years and years together. And her husband dies, and on the night of the funeral, one of their adult children brings her back to the house, maybe the house that they were raised in, and they bring their mother into the house, and say, “Mom, are you going to be all right?” And she says, “I’ll be all right.” And she hears the car start up in the driveway, and it drives off.

And now she’s alone in an empty house filled with things, and she cannot sleep. And she walks from one darkened room to the other, each piece of furniture, touching each piece in the memories—remembering when they got this piece, and this piece, and this piece, and the configuration of this. And if she could, if she could give all that away and the house along with it to have one more moment with the beloved, she would do it, and it doesn’t lie in her power to do it. And so it is in the fifth-Mansion person, the restlessness. The restlessness in a less tangible way, but more atmospheric or all-pervasive way, one lives in this restlessness “For the Son of Man,” Jesus said, “has nowhere to lay his head” save in the bosom of the Father and the bosom of God, and there’s nowhere spacious enough or gracious enough but to our homecoming, resting in the bosom of God now that God has been infused into us, giving us a taste of that oneness, and this is our state.

So, we’re like betwixt and between here, again, in a new way between two worlds. We can’t go back to the way we used to experience things. For now, we know by experience it’s

4 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), *Interior Castle*, 72.

5 (ibid. p. 72)

6 (ibid. p. 73)

infinitely less, and yet we don't know how to move on either. But if we don't panic, that is, if we don't panic and we're very quiet and we trust in God, we begin to discover the graces that arise in this state. "Why it is that we're more at peace than we've ever been in our lives," she says. And one of these graces is the grace of certainty. I'd like to reflect on this, this certainty.

This is at the end of Chapter I, the fifth Mansion: "*Do not make the mistake of thinking that this certainty has anything to do with bodily form—with the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ, for example, unseen by us, in the Most Holy Sacrament.*" (in the Eucharist) "*It has nothing to do with this—but only with His Divinity.*" (That is, with God as God.) "*How, you will ask, can we become so convinced of what we have not seen? That I do not know; it is the work of God. But I know I am speaking the truth; and if anyone has not that certainty, I should say that what he has experienced is not union of the whole soul with God but only union of one of the faculties or someone of the many other kinds of favour which God grants to the soul. In all these matters we must stop looking for reasons why they happened; if our understanding cannot grasp them, why should we try to perplex [ourselves over] it? It suffices us to know that He Who brings this to pass is all-powerful, and it is God Who does it and we, however hard we work, are quite incapable of achieving it, let us not try to become capable of understanding it either.*"⁷

"*Let us not try to become capable*": I'd like to reflect on this certainty. And here again, as quoted earlier on the reflections on Merton, see, where Merton says, "*There are some things we simply have to accept as true, or we go crazy inside, and they're the very things that we are unable to explain to anybody, including ourselves.*" Or Dan Walsh, who taught medieval metaphysics at the monastery, "*I know what I know, that I know that I know, but the trouble is, it's I who know that I know it. And when I try to tell you what it is that I know, I don't know what to say. But that for which I can find no words is that of which I am certain.*"

So, the certainty then is a graced certainty. It's not a certainty of an assertion but the certainty of a humble submission to an inner clarity, or a certainty that you were in God and God was in you as the granting of an explainable certainty within your heart. And she also says that if this unitive experience happened only once, the fruits of it linger on through over the years, for every time it's recalled again, the certainty is there as if it had just happened. Even though it's clouded over and covered by many things, perhaps, it gets reinstated in a certainty that never diminishes deep down, through the thing. So, what we're trying to do here in the fifth Mansion is to keep the certainty alive through daily fidelity to prayer and meditation, to let it stabilize and let it become more and more habitual, or more and more abiding certainty in the midst of our inability to explain it, same as St. John of the Cross, "*To have no light to guide you except the one that burns in your heart.*" And it's a grace of certainty.

So, we are this butterfly with tattered wings. The butterfly with tattered wings, there is this aloneness, this poverty, and it's in the very poverty deeply accepted that the infusion of the beloved beyond the abilities of our finite ego to grasp it keeps washing over us and transcending us so unexplainably.

Next, she says that really, and this, maybe, seems to be more at the heart of what she's getting at here, because what she's getting at here is we realize that what starts to happen is a more kind of all-pervasive, kind of atmospheric, qualitatively new way to be present in the world not just in our prayer, certainly, but in our day-by-day life and the very way we approach

7 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), Interior Castle, 69.

things, and understand things, and live by things in this transformed state. And so, she says, this again is in Chapter II, toward the end of Chapter II. She's speaking of the peace: *"I do not mean that those who attain to this state have no peace: they do have it, and to a very high degree, for even their trials are of such sublimity, and come from so noble a source that, severe though they are, they bring peace and contentment. The very discontentment caused by the things of the world arouses a desire to leave it, so grievous that any alleviation it finds can only be in the thought that its life in this exile is God's will."*⁸

She says somewhere, I think in *The Life*, she says, *"When I was first starting to be graced with these things, I asked God for the grace to die so I could be with God in heaven, and I realized the only reason I was still alive was it was God's will for me to be alive. Therefore, it's my desire to be one with God's will that I be alive, and when it's God's will for me to die, it is my will for me to die."* So, we're aligning ourself, like Jesus, the food I offer is to do the will of God in all things. We're being aligned to this all-pervasive trustworthy nature of God's will in the unfolding of our daily life.

She continues, *"And even this is insufficient to comfort it--"* That is, one's willing to be here as long as God wills one to be here. *"And even if this is insufficient to comfort it, for, despite all it has gained, the soul is not wholly resigned to the will of God--"* (because we're still a work in progress) *"--as we shall see later. It does not fail to act in conformity with God's will, but it does so with many tears and with great sorrow of being unable to do more because it has given no more capacity."*⁹ But there is a sorrow that one cannot more deeply respond to the love that is so deeply giving itself to us, and our sorrow is we can't give more because we can't give more until we're empowered by God to give more. So that even the inability is at the edge of the presence of God, it is its own mystery of God in our life.

She continues, *"Whenever it engages in prayer, this is a grief to it."* (That I can't do more; it can't give itself more deeply.) *"To some extent, perhaps, it is a result of the great grief caused by seeing how often God is offended, and how little esteemed--"*¹⁰ One looks out at the world and sees the sorrow of, we might say you realize your unconsummated longings for God are an echo in your heart, of God's unconsummated longing, not just for you, but for all of humanity, and it gives us a new sense of how we look at the world and see the people of the world.

*"Have you not heard concerning the Bride (I said this a little while back, though not without reference to the same matter) that God put her in the cellar of wine and ordained charity in her? Well, that is the position here. That soul has now delivered itself into His hands, and His great love has so completely subdued it that it neither knows nor desires anything save that God shall do with it what He wills. Never, I think, will God grant this favour save to the soul which He takes for His very own. His will is that, without understanding how, the soul shall go thence sealed with His seal. In reality, the soul in that state that does no more than the wax when the seal is impressed upon it—the wax does not impress itself; it is only prepared for the impress: that is, it is soft--"*¹¹ In the Mansion, to receive the imprint of God's own presence configuring itself as this qualitatively new and deeper way to be present in the world.

And as a last reflection, she says, and here she's echoing, I think, CG's *"What is the greatest commandment? To love God with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole soul."* And then, *"your neighbor as yourself."* And she says, *"So ask Our Lord to grant you this perfect love for your neighbour, and allow His Majesty to work, and, if you use your best endeavours and strive after this in every way that you can, He will give you even more even than you can desire. You must do violence to your own will, so that your sister's will be done in everything, even though this may cause you to forgo your own rights and forget your own good and your concern for theirs, and however much your physical powers may rebel. If the*

8 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), *Interior Castle*, 73.

9 (ibid. p. 73)

10 Avila (author), Peers (editor and translator), *Interior Castle*, 73.

11 (ibid. p. 74)

opportunity presents itself, too, try to shoulder some trial in order to relieve your neighbour of it. Do not suppose it will cost you nothing or that you will find it all done for you. Think what the love which our Spouse had for us cost Him,” referring here to the cross “when, in order to redeem us from death, He died such a grievous death as the death of the Cross.”¹²

If I could, I'd like to end by reflecting on this. She certainly doesn't mean here that we would be so concerned about other people that it would in any way compromise our fidelity to the love of God. Because, as you see, we're not being conformed to the love of God. So, it's not a matter of compromising our principles, or compromising insofar as these principles are principles of love, and so on. But she's saying this; here's one way I would put it: Let's say you're in a situation where you're facing a task to be done. This could happen in a marriage, or with a family, or in a community, or at work. And let's say you have your way, that it seems to you this would be the best. And, certainly, it would be the best for you, because you can draw on it, and use it, and you pitch that as best you can. But you see that there's somebody else that has another idea, and you can see that it means a lot to them. And so you learn to divest yourself of being overly entrenched in ideological insistence on your own way, to put it aside, not just to go along with and be there for the other person's way, to join them in it, but even support them in it. And if you'd do this, you will gain even more of this love pouring into you because it'll be an echo of how God's love is poured into us, as revealed in Christ, for he did not consider his equality with God a condition to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant in this dying to all things but love, the mystery. So, this is the fifth Mansion of the soul for Teresa.

And so, let's bring this to meditation, sit in meditation. Again now, just for a few moments sitting, and so that on your own, as you're so inclined, you can extend this renewed and deepened openness to your practice and throughout your day, I Invite you then to sit straight, and 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. [three bell chimes followed by silence]

[bell] Bow. 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.

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.