

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Session 4
with James Finley

- Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley, welcome to Turning To The Mystics.
- Jim Finley: Greetings everyone. And welcome to our time here together, turning for guidance to the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross. How he tries to help us to discern, and to cooperate with the dark night, through which we pass, into perfect union with God, insofar as possible on this earth through love.
- Jim Finley: And we began with *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book Two*, Chapter 13. Where he gives some guidelines on how to discern the presence of the dark night as it begins to appear in meditation and prayer.
- Jim Finley: This sense of powerlessness to be consoled or nurtured by the presence of God is a way that God weans us off our dependency on these grace, but finite ways of experiencing and responding to God.
- Jim Finley: God might lead us into the beginnings of this deeper sense of an infinite union, with the infinite mystery of God far beyond words.
- Jim Finley: And then we saw how this night has an active aspect and a passive aspect. It's passive that it happens to us, it's an act of God interiorally at work in the depths of ourself. But then it's active in the ways we freely choose to cooperate with it. That we assent to it. And a way of staying open to and trusting in God in this transformative process beyond our own understanding, beyond our own abilities.
- Jim Finley: Then we turn to the previous session then, on *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book One*, where he takes this active night, that is this active cooperation, and extends it throughout the day as a an attitude toward the gratification that comes to us through the senses. And since the senses are finite, and the gratification that comes to us through the senses is finite, the gratification that comes to us through the senses is infinitely less than the gratification we long for, to be infinitely gratified in the depths of God. And therefore, these gratifications, they rise and fall, they're part of life. But we don't land there, we don't stay there. We don't cling to those, but rather, look through those things and beyond those things as a way to keep our hearts freed up to move ever closer to this infinite union with the infinite as a kind of a foreshadowing of our eternal destiny and passing through the veil of death, but beginning now in us, still on this earth as a mysterious, subtle, transformative process is achieved through the night.
- Jim Finley: And so now we turn, in reflecting on the dark night, as it occurs in the senses and the appetites, as it occurs in the intellect through faith. And this *The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book Two*, on the active night of faith. And actively cooperating with this passive event of how we're being transformed. And he begins with the first stanza, the same stanza that he began book one with the purification of the appetites. Presents it as the purification of the intellect through faith, the stanza reads, "*In darkness and secure by the secret ladder disguised, all the sheer grace and darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled.*" And then he says in Article One, Chapter One, "*The secret ladder represents faith, because all the rungs or articles of faith are sacred to, and hidden from both the senses and the intellect. Accordingly, the soul lived in darkness, without the light of the senses and the intellect, and went out beyond every natural and rational boundary to climb the divine ladder of faith that leads up to and penetrates*

the deep things of God.” First Corinthians 2:10.

Jim Finley: So, I'd like to begin there, trying to experientially get into what he's trying to help us understand as it pertains to God where there's a awakening of mystical union. Then I want to give some practical examples of how this same dynamic is at work in the interior dimensions of our love for each other.

Jim Finley: So first then, the ladder. This imagery helps me to see it. Imagine, as in a kind of waking dream, that you are all alone in a vast countryside, there's a full moon out, and in the middle of this big expanse of grass, this big, huge field, there's a ladder. And the ladder is grounded on the earth, but it ascends up through the air, higher, higher, up to the clouds up. It ascends up to the deep things of God. And you approach the ladder, and the rungs of the ladder are the articles of faith given to us in The Creed. And so you put your foot starting with The Creed. I believe in God, so you put your foot on the ladder. I believe in God. And so you put your foot on your understanding of who God is as revealed to us through scripture, revealed to us through Christ, revealed to us through the church, revealed to us through our own experience. We have a certain internalized understanding of God.

Jim Finley: And then, [inaudible 00:06:26], for the father, father mother, a big God is the origin of all things. So God is... Jesus is a loving father, Abba Father, God lovingly creating all things. Let there be light, let there be stones and trees and stars, and God this perpetual self giving act of God being poured out as the world, and nature and of all things.

Jim Finley: An Almighty, then we understand what does that mean? What is this, God is Almighty, that there is no limit to the power of God because it's infinite. And then Jesus, who is Jesus? Jesus says in the Gospels, *“Who do you say that I am?”* And so we've internalized our understanding of Jesus, and who Jesus is, and who Jesus revealed himself to be, as we understand it in our growing understanding within the faith, and so on. So on. And likewise each of the rung, then each of the teachings of Christ, the Beatitudes, the teachings, the parables, teachings, teachings, teachings, climbing up to the rungs of the ladder.

Jim Finley: And then when you're way, way, way up there, above the clouds, it suddenly dawns on you that you don't know what these things mean. You don't know what they mean? That faith comes through hearing. You know they exist, through the power of faith, you know they exist, but what these things... What these words allude to, the mystery that God is as God, we don't know what it means, so then he clarifies what he means by this. This is chapter three of this.

Jim Finley: *“If a man born blind.”* Man or woman, or a person born blind, *“Were told about the nature of the color yellow, he would understand absolutely nothing, no matter how much instruction he received. Since he never saw these colors, nor their like, he would not have the means to form a judgment about them. Only their names would be grasped, since the names are perceptible through hearing, but note that the former image, because these colors are never seen by him.”*

Jim Finley: Article Three. *“Such is faith to the soul. It informs us of matters that we have never seen or known, either in themselves or in their likenesses. In fact, nothing like them exists. The light of natural knowledge does not show us the object of faith, since the object is unproportionate to any of the senses, because the object is infinite, but the senses are finite. Yet we come to know it through*

hearing, by believing what faith teaches us. Blinding our natural light, and bringing it into submission. St. Paul says, "Faith comes through hearing." Romans 10:17. "This amounts to saying that faith is not a knowledge derived from the senses, but an ascent of the soul to what enters through hearing, which is infinitely beyond the senses."

Jim Finley: *"Faith, moreover," Article Four, "far exceeds what these examples teach us. Not only does it fail to produce knowledge and science, but as we said, it deprives a blind person, of any other knowledge or science by which he may judge it. Other knowledge is acquired by the light of the intellect, but not the knowledge that faith gives. Faith nullifies the light of the intellect, and if this light is not darkened, the knowledge of faith is lost."* Accordingly, Isaiah says, *"If you do not believe, you will not understand."* The key term in St. Augustine.

Jim Finley: So, let's look at this. I want to go back for a minute to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book One*, and this is... Turn to it... Remember in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book One*, he talks about the elegance of this world compared to the elegance that is God. This crude, and ugly, and so on. And the beauty of this world. And so compared to the infinite. And so he says in chapter four of book one, *"All the world's wisdom and human ability, contrasted with the infinite wisdom of God, is pure and utter ignorance, as St. Paul writes to the Corinthians. 'The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.' First Corinthians 3:90lkj."* Anyone, therefore who values his knowledge and ability as a means of reaching union with the wisdom of God, is highly ignorant in God's sight, and will be left behind, far away from this wisdom." I love this. *"Ignorance does not grasp what wisdom is."* And in God's sight, those who think they have some wisdom are very ignorant. For the Apostle says of them, in writing in Romans, *"Taking on to themselves wise men, they become fools."* Romans 1:22.

Jim Finley: *"Only those who set aside their own knowledge, and walk in God's service, like unlearned children, receive wisdom from God."* I'd like to reflect on this.

Jim Finley: Yes, you know it is true that faith comes through hearing, and when we hear that God is love, and we take that in and by way of analogy, we know something of what that means because we know what love is in us. But to say that God is love is infinitely more than what we know God is in us through analogies of how we love each other. Because God is infinite love, Octis [Plurisimisi 00:12:41], overflowing fullness of love itself.

Jim Finley: Again, you can't get the ocean into a thimble, but you can drop the thimble into the ocean, and we are that thimble. And so the boundary-less expanse of God's love is infinitely beyond what we are able to... We know that God is love, because of faith, through hearing, and assent to. Like the person born blind who has no substantive knowledge of what the color yellow is. We have no substantive knowledge of what the infinite love of God is. And therefore, by faith that God is love, we're beyond ourself. So that faith in, it's not the knowledge that comes through faith. It doesn't come to the intellect. It doesn't mean, like St. Augustine says, *"Faith seeking understanding."* That we can keep deepening, and exploring it, but in essence, the essence of the explorations keep opening out upon. And therefore, through a faith is a kind of a paradoxical knowledge of a knowledge that passes beyond the frontiers of

what the intellect can comprehend. But although it is beyond what the intellect can comprehend, through the gift of faith, we know it's true in some obscure, intimate manner.

Jim Finley: And so God is presence, so God is trinity, so God is eternal, so God is mercy. So too are the things of God. And therefore there's a certain comfort level, as well there should be in how we've internalized our understanding of God, through the scriptures, and through liturgy, and through reflection, and through prayer, and through reading spiritual books. All this is real, it's important. But he's now saying that God is inviting us out beyond this grace and real knowledge of God, as in a mirror darkly, or veiled in these mediations, into an unmediated, infinite knowledge, and which requires of us then, that we not depend on, or identify with what we're capable of understanding, but rather identify with what we're incapable of understanding, which is drawing us to itself, unexplainably in ways we don't understand.

Jim Finley: I'd like to share an image of this, because this is obscure, this is subtle, he's saying here. I'd like to say again, there is a sense in which he's referring to this, at the summit of this dark night opening out upon mystical union, and mystical knowledge of God. This deeper way to understand what it means to understand. And I'd like to try to hopefully make it a little more accessible intuitively, so we can relate to what he's trying to help us with here.

Jim Finley: Some images. Here I am sitting here, and I have my understanding through my faith, and my past, and my faith tradition, whatever. There's that. But see, but can I learn in my understandings of God, can I learn in prayer, in life, can I learn to join God, in God's understanding of me, of who I am, hidden with Christ in God before the origins of the universe? And can I join God in understanding who God understands me to be? This call to this infinite union with the infinity of himself, the infinity of herself, as the very foundations of my identity, my destiny in love. And I want to go deeper too. Can I join God helping me to understand God's way of understanding God? The God creates me as the beloved.

Jim Finley: God creates me as the beloved. He creates me as the beloved, John of the Cross says, as his infinite love that creates you, as the one that God can completely give himself to, give herself to, whole and complete in a self donating, self emptying through love poured out and given to you, whole and complete as your very life in your nothingness without God. That's why God created you to have someone to be given to.

Jim Finley: And could you, in being touched by this love, that you were on to God's beloved, could you then, in being touched to this love, realize that God desires you to desire God. God desires you to see that God is your beloved, so that in seeing how you are God's beloved, God giving to you as the beloved, that you then would give yourself in love to the love that gives itself to you in this reciprocity of this boundary-less love.

Jim Finley: When we pass through the veil of death, through all eternity in glory, this is our destiny. But now John of the Cross is saying, in subtle, subtle, subtle, intimate ways,

there are already the stirrings that it might begin. Not to wait until we're dead to begin this consummation of this divinity of ourselves as our ultimate destiny in our nothingness without God. And this is, kind of, the poetics of... And this is happening very subtly in our heart. In our heart like subtle stirrings like this... And then, He's helping us to be sensitive and to honor and be attentive to them.

Jim Finley: By the way, it's the attentiveness, and what we spoke of in meditation and prayer, remember, that's how we began? That you're sitting there in your reflective prayer, and God started weaning you off your ability to be nurtured by the presence of God in reflective prayer. And in that lack of nurturance, in that lack of nurturance, if you don't give up and walk away, and you sit there like an unlearned child, open handed and surrendered over to God in your helplessness to experience, or to grasp or understand God. In that kind of quietness, inner quietness, there begins to grow in you, a general loving awareness, so subtle, subtle, subtle So extremely delicate as the gate of heaven.

Jim Finley: And so this faith then, is the faith intimately realized in prayer, that is now... We seek to actively cultivate it and habituate it into an habituated underlying way of our deepest understandings throughout the day, like a transformation of this understanding and to this divinized understanding. In this poverty, and in this simplicity, like the interiority of it.

Jim Finley: That God is infinitely in love with you. And you realize through the grace of God, you're falling in love with God. And these are the guidelines to consummate the union's destiny.

Jim Finley: I had to hopefully clarify this, by reflecting a little bit on how this summit of this love, the transformative energies, like rain falling down and soaking into the lowest of places, these same energies can be seen in the way that we love, and love each other. And I'd like to reflect on this as kind of a sacrament of his love.

Jim Finley: Again, imagine then that you meet someone, and when you first meet them, you see them, and you hear their voice, and you see them just like everyone around you sees them. And as you start talking, and get to know each other, you begin to go deeper in understanding the person, by the way they share themselves with you, and reflect with you, and how their mind works, and the things they see. So there's a kind of a deepening interior knowledge of the person in that deepening process, you realize you are starting to fall in love with the person. And as you fall in love, there is the knowledge, borne of love.

Jim Finley: And I put it poetically this way. As your love deepens, that then you're in love, you're able in some sense, see into the depths of their soul, past appearances, past what you can explain, into the preciousness of their soul essence as the beloved. That through love, through the eyes of love, you can peer down into the depths, and see the infinitely lovable soul essence of who they are. But notice though, in this seeing, you don't see the love that empowers you to see it. That as you see the person, you see how the deepening awareness of your oneness with the person reverberates in your touch, and in your attentiveness, and in your sharing with each other.

Jim Finley: But the love itself, but the love itself remains unseen, and empowers you to see this. Furthermore, you don't really see the innermost essence of the person. Because in the innermost depths, depths of God, the person belongs completely to God, and is of God.

And has a value that cannot be calculated. And you sense the intonations of the divinity or the mystery of their presence. And in sensing this, you realize, that your present understanding of who they are in your love, that love always calls you to go beyond that. That you're grateful for it, how sensitized you are to the subtleties of their movements of their being. But then you see, from the vantage point of that love, a yet deeper oneness with the mystery of who they are, and you're a perpetual exodus, you're being called by love into this ever deeper oneness like this.

Jim Finley: There remains less, and less, and less explainable to anybody. If you tried to explain this to someone, you wouldn't know where to start, because you don't understand it yourself, and you don't comprehend it yourself. Because the knowledge borne of love, it's a trans conceptual knowledge borne of love.

Jim Finley: And, imagine too then, the beloved, in seeing that they're seen, that in your love for them, you reveal them to themselves as unexplainably precious and lovable, which is an echo of how God sees them, as unexplainably, ineffably lovable. Created by God in the image and likeness of God. And they in being so seen, and so revealed to themselves, they then return the favor, by then seeing you past the appearances, past their thoughts, past the things seem ever deeper in the deepening of love, where they see the depths of you, unexplainably. And the depths of you is abyss like. That is, the deeper it goes, it's an ascent, and opens out upon the bottomless abyss of God, welling up and giving itself as the intimate immediacy and the miracle, and the preciousness of you as the beloved, beloved, as they to you.

Jim Finley: And you reveal yourselves to each other in this reciprocity of love. And life, once graced, and once tasted, you realize how impoverished life is without this overflowing fullness of love in which all the rhythms of life then find their meaning in fidelity to that, in the sharing of that.

Jim Finley: Likewise, we said earlier, this also holds true of where you can... And the same thing can occur in art. In the beautiful, and surrendering to the beautiful. Can be given in poetry, Roca. You must ask yourself in the stillest hour of your darkest night, "Must I write poetry?" And if the answer is a clear and simple, "Yes." You must build your whole life in fidelity to that inner imperative. And the deeper you go into the beauty of the poetry, the more unexplainable, what's happening to you becomes, as the beauty of poetry is transforming you into itself, open out about us being ultimately divine. So the way of the artist, the way of the poet, the one who serves the poor, the one who is called to solitude, the solitary wanderer. The one who's called in service to a community. That all these are potential modalities of being enraptured by this knowledge beyond concepts. This living heart knowledge, borne of love.

Jim Finley: And then in the context of this, John of the Cross is saying then, "*There is the gift then, of how God is present in all of these ways, the sacraments of this love, that you're being drawn in the prayer, that you're falling in love with God.*" Not as you know God as mediated to you through faith, through your insights, and consolations, and reassurances. All that's holy and real, but you're being weaned off a dependency on that toward this infinite union. And He's helping us to pass through that, which is like a dark night unto us. It's dark because we're blinded by its infinite light. And blinded by its infinite light because in this light, we also see how impoverished our finite ways of experiencing God are, and in this paradoxical knowledge,

trans conceptual knowing beyond what can be comprehended, that is, He's leading us interiorally on this path.

Jim Finley: You can see how subtle these teachings are, I think, because how foolish it would be if I were to say, "I'm trying to be so clear that I want to explain it." But insofar as I could explain it, it would be infinitely less of what the teachings are about. That the teachings, and the rhythms and cadences of the mystic's voice, they access our heart with intimate intimations of the unexplainable, which in some way, we recognize. And we recognize it as what's touched us, and is drawing us to itself. And in this way, John of the Cross guides us like this.

Jim Finley: I was so grateful to be with Thomas Merton at the monastery, because I saw him as a living embodiment of these mystical traditions, these lineages. And it was Merton who introduced me to John of the Cross. I would go out in the woods and sit under... At a tree, and I would read these things I'm reading to you. And it was the same voice. This ancient voice of the lineage down through the ages from awakened heart to awakened heart. And so, the deathless presence of John of the Cross, can help us in our heartfelt sincerity of living in the poetic richness of this so intimately realized.

Jim Finley: I'd like to share a passage, a couple of passages here that I think are particularly profound and lovely here on this. This is chapter four, article five. So let's say you're on this road, and just let's say you're being carried along unexplainably, by the unexplainable taking you to itself. A knowledge utterly transcending all that you can comprehend. "As regard to this road to union, entering on the road means leaving one's own road, or better, moving on to the goal, and turning from one's own mode implies entry into what has no mode, that is God." So there are modes of being, but God has no mode. God is the infinite reality that is the infinite reality of all modes of being. But God as God is literally beyond all these specific modes. "A person who reaches this state, this mode-less mode, no longer has any modes or methods, still less is he, nor can he be attached to them. I'm referring to modes of understanding, taste and feeling. Within himself though, he possesses all methods, like one, who though having nothing, yet possesses all things." 2 Corinthians 6:10.

Jim Finley: By being courageous enough to pass beyond the interior and exterior limits of his nature, he enters within supernatural bounds. Bounds that have no mode, yet in substance possess all modes. To reach the supernatural bounds, a person must depart from his natural bounds. And these so far off in respect to his interior and exterior limits in order to mount from the low state to the highest.

Jim Finley: And you know my sense of this, this is so personal, each of us might experience this. It's insofar as we're touched by the beauty of it. The very fact we're touched by the beauty of it bears witness that it's already happening to us. In the midst of our wayward ways, and the mists of the unresolved matters of our mind and heart, in the childlike sincerity, I realize there is unfolding within me, intimations of this infinite love taking me to itself unexplainably. In the intimate unfoldings of my body, my mind, my emotions, my life, in birth, and death, and joy and sorrow, it's all becoming infused with the divinity that rises and falls in the cadences of these modes, transcending all modes.

Jim Finley: Back in the good old days when I was holy, it all seemed so clear. The chapter and verse clarity. But now, for quite some time now, I become perplexed, like delightfully perplexed in

this enigmatic darkness, and on the ungraspability of this deep divine understanding being conveyed to me in this night.

Jim Finley: Article Six, Chapter Six. *“Passing beyond all that is naturally, and spiritually intelligible, or comprehensible.”* When I read this at the monastery, it just so got to me right here. *Passing beyond all that is naturally and spiritually intelligible or comprehensible, a person ought to desire with all his might, to attain, what in this life is unknowable and unimaginable. And parting company with all he can or does taste and feel, temporally, and spiritually. He must ardently long to acquire what surpasses all taste and feeling. To be empty and free for this achievement of this, he should by no means seize upon what he receives spiritually or sensitively. But consider it of little import. The higher rank and esteem a man gives to all his knowledge, experience and imaging, whether spiritual or not, the more he subtracts from the supreme good, and the more he delays in his journey toward him. And the less he esteems of what he possesses, relative to the supreme good, however estimable it may be, the more he values and prizes God, and consequently, the closer he comes to God. In this way, in obscurity, a man swiftly approaches union by means of faith, which is also dark. And in this way, faith gives him wondrous light. Obviously, if a person should desire to see, he would be in darkness as regards to God more quickly than if you opened his eyes to the blinding light of the sun.”*

Jim Finley: I'd like then, to end with two images. One I gave in an earlier session. [inaudible 00:35:04] Merton, I can't remember what's he saying here? In the presence of Christ, what if we could all close our eyes right now. And with our eyes closed, we would be interiorally awakened so that when we opened our eyes we would see through our own awakened eyes, what Jesus saw, and all that he saw, what would we see? We would see God.

Jim Finley: Because Jesus saw God in all that he saw. And what's so amazing about it, when you reflect on it, it didn't make any difference whether Jesus saw his own mother, or a prostitute. It didn't make any difference whether he saw the joy of those gathered at a wedding, or the sorrow of those gathered at the burial of a loved one. It didn't make any difference whether he saw a person of great wealth and power, or a widow dropping her last coin in the box. It didn't matter whether he saw his disciples or his executioners. It didn't matter whether he saw a bird or flower or a tree, Jesus saw God in all that he saw. And Jesus said, *“You have eyes to see, but you do not see.”*

Jim Finley: And our prayer then is, “Lord that I might see. See how might I see in all that I see, what you saw in that you saw. That I might see God being poured out, and utterly given away as the intimate immediacy of a gift and the miracle of my very life, and my nothingness without God. The very miracle of the whole world in its nothingness without you, as your manifested presence. And I think this is where John of the Cross, as he's trying to invite us, and be attentive to this, and be patient and open.

Jim Finley: Last imagine. A somewhat silly image maybe, but it came it me, so I'll share it, some time ago. Imagine you're sitting in prayer, devotional sincerity, and as you are sitting there in prayer, you begin to be interiorally awakened to the presence of God radically deeper, or richer or beyond anything you've ever experienced in your life. And amazed by it, amazed by it, you hear God silently say within you, “But that's not the point.” You sit a little bit longer and the awareness gets deeper, and you start to levitate off the floor. In levitating off the floor, you hear God silently say to you in the mist of your amazement, “But that's not

the point really.” It gets a little bit deeper, and the room is filled with celestial light. And there are angels and saints surrounding you. And in an amazement of the celestial space you hear God say within you, “But that’s not the point.” Because the point is not really anything attained or unattained.

Jim Finley: It isn’t anything gained or lost, the point is the infinity of myself. Being utterly poured out and utterly given to you, whole and complete as a gift in miracle of who you are as my beloved. That you might, in being so awakened, in the poverty of your spirit, in the midst of your wayward ways, with childlike sincerity, you might see me as your beloved. And we would give ourselves to each other unexplainably, so that your destiny in me, and my will for you might be fulfilled. And so I think then, that the beauty of these teachings is the sense of which there’s intonations, and intimations of the intimacy of what cannot be explained, that stirs within our heart so that we might be encouraged and surrender ourselves over to it. And knowing that what really matters is not, “Will I ever get there, like some far off thing?” Maybe, maybe not, I don’t know.

Jim Finley: But how can I realize that the fullness of what I’m saying is getting itself to me in the context of who I am right now in this situation. See how could I ask God to help me to see the divinity that’s sustaining me unexplainably, pouring itself out as this love nature of all things. So that by seeing it, I might give myself to that, and give to that, I might share it with others. “By this you’ll know you are my disciples, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.” And so, we’ll end there.

Jim Finley: And then with this set, with the meditation. I advise you to sit straight, and fold your hands, and 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.

Jim Finley: (silence)

Jim Finley: And bow. Always say the Lord’s Prayer together.

Jim Finley: 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, and the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen

Jim Finley: Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. St. Theresa of Avila, pray for us. St. John of the Cross, pray for us.

Jim Finley: Blessing 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 forward slash voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We’ll see you again soon.