

St. John of the Cross

Allow me to introduce you to a very pleasant, unassuming monk who lived in Spain during the tumultuous 16th century. His name is Juan de Yepes y Alvarez, known to the world as “John of the Cross”. A devout Roman Catholic, he nevertheless set his mind to reform his church and even elements of his Carmelite Order, which ultimately cost him dearly. He therefore became a strange bedfellow with the great Protestant reformers, with whom he was a contemporary.

John loved God. Loving God, I hope, is not all that unusual among us. What is unusual about John, however, is the passion, intensity, and intentionality of his ardor. Indeed, he had to resort to poetry to express himself. Imagine this little man standing less than 5 feet tall, opening his giant heart to the Eternal One, uninhibited, tongue aflame with words glowing of intimate encounter. His passion lifts his lines to the very summit of Spanish poetry. There he stands alone in a land known for its latin lovers. Do you remember, reader, the intoxicating rush of romantic love when young and naive to the harsh realities of rejection. Rather than hardened by the disappointments of love lost and dreams ruined, John discovered the romance for which we were all created. Do you long to walk about love-struck? Can you imagine being constantly caressed by God through the air that moves about you, or being enthralled by Soul touching soul, stimulated by the mere gaze upon a leafy bough or field of flowers? Does such reckless abandon seem strange, or even unhealthy? Has life hardened you? Maybe you are you afraid. Perhaps you, like me, do not naturally take to intimacy, although we talk much about the love of Christ. Truth be known, most of us could learn a thing or two about the art of love from this strange celibate.

As mentioned above, John found that poetry was the best medium to express his theology. His great treatise on spiritual growth, called the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, is a commentary inspired by two stanzas of his famous poem *The Dark Night*. This last title serves to dishearten most of us, especially in our culture where such imagery is more likely associated with Saturday afternoon horror matinees. What John means by this imagery of darkness is that we by nature depend so absolutely on our senses, reason, memory, and will, that we cannot break through to the splendid divine realities beyond them. Indeed, to move beyond them would be like closing our eyes and walking about in traffic - absolutely frightening. Likewise, to learn to trust in God rather than our faculties and abilities, one must pass through the dark experiences of “blindfolding” ourselves to the things we so instinctively lean on to cope with life. This is passing through the dark night. Let us take a short look at a few of his lines to see into the heart of this man.

One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

Before we pursue further the “dark night” imagery, let us look into the second and third lines of this poem. For John, the life of holiness and spiritual growth, the life of union with God, is not essentially about doing the “right” things and abstaining from the “wrong” things, or the performance of certain spiritual disciplines. He views the process of sanctification as a love encounter, a rendezvous with God, so to speak. The heart is drawn to the death of self (the dark night), fired by love’s urgent longings. Do you feel the passion here? The more we attempt anything for God out of obligation, works righteousness, to become a “saint” or spiritually powerful, or to become anything at all, the further we move from John’s heart. The deeper the love, the more perfectly we travel through the darkness of our own death, leaning solely on God. Moreover, the fact that we can love God at all is by the “sheer grace” of God. Do not despair, reader, that you find your love is cold toward God. Love is a gift, one God freely gives us for the asking. Beg God, therefore, to fire us up with love by His grace, that we may have the courage to step out into the darkness and trust Him alone.

But how do we enter this night? Again, our monk has a great sense of the grace and sovereignty of God, and would be the last to say that we can obtain intimacy with God by our own efforts. Nevertheless, he suggests five ways that we can actively participate in conquering our appetites which will open the way for the Spirit’s work. These ways are very biblical; John never strays far from his Bible.

John begins with the principle of studying the life of Christ not for reasons we normally do, i.e. to “learn” more, or to get a spiritual dose of warm fuzzies, or because we find the Gospel stories more interesting for devotionals than other parts of Scripture. Rather, we must intentionally read with the express purpose of imitating Christ in all that we do. The imitation of Christ, of course, is very basic, and no Christian will deny it. Therefore, John stresses a second principle to obtain our goal. We must renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God. Let us be very careful here. Our sensuality is not evil! Indeed, Jesus Himself lived a fully human life, and we cannot understand the incarnation apart from the senses. Sensuality only becomes evil if we directly attach ourselves to things apart from God. Sensuality becomes pure and holy when we sense things through Jesus, or in other words, if we exercise our senses out of love and obedience to our Lord. By this, we invite Jesus into all of our experiences because we love Him, and all of life becomes a sacred feast! Reader, John would even say that the simplest sensory experience, like eating an ice cream cone, is evil if Christ is not in the event; there must be no immediacy between your soul and the things of this world. Otherwise, we become like animals, grasping, clawing, and devouring.

The third principle involves the biblical concept of “reversals”. By our fallen nature, we are tossed upon the stormy seas by our four great passions: joy, hope, fear, sorrow. All of our actions are motivated by these passions, which instinctively draw us to pleasant things, and repel us from unpleasant things. We must mortify these inclinations by reversing our natural tendencies. Do you incline towards the easiest, most delightful,

most gratifying, restful, and consoling? Rather, go to the most difficult, the most distasteful, the least pleasant, hard work, and to the unconsoling. Behind this strange advice is the deep suspicion of our ability to choose what is right for ourselves. Rather than trust our natural inclinations, which are at war with God, we can be fairly confident that the right thing is opposite of what we instinctively grasp for. Scripture shows us that God continually counters human expectations by doing the direct opposite of what we think is best. We tend to self distract when left to ourselves; God leads us by ways unknown to fullness and satisfaction.

The fourth principle is really an extension of the third, but John gives it a separate category, perhaps because it involves our most fundamental human flaw - pride. Rather than think well of ourselves, and wish others to do so (we do this by nature), we must think poorly of ourselves, and wish others to do so as well. John is not talking about some “false humility” here. Rather, he is talking reality. In reality we are nothing in and of ourselves, and to wish that others think we are something would be false. It is a strange fact that truly great Christians are totally unaware of the fact that they are great, and feel uncomfortable with praise (beware when people speak well of you - Luke 6:26). The deepest desire of the gracious heart is that the glory of God will shine forth at its own expense. This is the passionate selflessness of the loving heart.

Finally, John invites us to embrace paradox. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places, John affirms that we have basic human needs, but he encourages us to approach them apart from our natural way of attaining them. To reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing. John accepts that we need satisfaction, to possess things, and to know. Like our Master he takes seriously the fact that “he who gains his life will lose it, and he who loses his life will gain it”. We must be intentional about our detachment from all things so as to be exclusively attached to God. Once we are attached to God, we find that we have gained the whole world.

But look how the gentle poet ends his stanza! Oh the freedom and exquisite beauty of “going out unseen”. No longer do we need others to pay attention to us and give us praise; the thought sickens us. No longer do we need to be something in the minds of others, but live in obscurity in the heart of God. It is safe there. Satan himself, for all his power, cannot see those who live in the “secret place of the Most High”, for it is darkness to him. He only sees those who trust in their own ability to determine reality by their own light. Satan gives them no rest, and their house is not “stilled”.

John is a master of the spiritual life; you may trust him to guide you to Christ. For those of you who may be leery of his Catholicism, consider these words written by a Catholic biographer:

Beatified in 1675, he was canonized in 1726; two hundred years later, in 1926, declared a Doctor of the Universal Church. Rome, in fact, set up this

extraordinarily free mystic, this poet of love, this man who never said a word about her religious practices, whose works could have been written - in almost every paragraph - by a Protestant - Rome set him up as the supreme authority on the profoundest religious experience...¹

Like all deep souls, it is difficult to put him in a box. He criticizes his fellow Catholics for their over dependence on ceremony and statues. If he were alive today, he would object to those of us who are fundamentalists who believe we have captured the essence of God with our orthodoxy, for our theological formulations have become a subtle form of idolatry. He would be extremely uncomfortable with those of us who seek and demand for signs and gifts to authenticate our experience, for these things become idols as well. In every case he beats the same drum; nakedness of spirit which to him means profound humility. The more empty one is of things both physical and spiritual, the deeper one experiences God. Such simplicity of soul is refreshing! I invite you, reader, to acquaint yourself with St. John of the Cross; once you get beyond some of his strange language, you will find yourself drawn to this humble hermit.²

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¹Robert Sencourt, *Carmelite and Poet* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 237.

²For a recent translation of his works, see K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).