

# *St. John of the Cross*

## The Ascent of Mt. Carmel, (Book I):

- It was sheer grace to be placed by God in this night that occasioned so much good. The soul would not have succeeded in entering it, because nobody is able alone to empty himself of all his appetites in order to reach God (74).
- To undertake the journey to God the heart must be burned and purified of all creatures with the fire of divine love. Such a purgation puts the devil to flight, for he has power over a man attached to temporal and bodily things (75).
- All creatures in contrast to God are nothing, and a man's attachments to them are less than nothing, since these attachments are an impediment to and deprive the soul of transformation in God...neither will a person attached to creatures be able to comprehend God. Until a man is purged of his attachments he will not be equipped to possess God, neither here below through the pure transformation of love, nor in heaven through the beatific vision (78).
- God did not give the children of Israel the heavenly manna until they exhausted the flour brought from Egypt...For God thought it shameful for them to crave other foods while He was giving them heavenly food (82).
- For in God, or in the state of perfection, all appetites cease...The road and ascent to God, then, necessarily demands a habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites; the sooner this mortification is achieved, the sooner the soul reaches the top. But until the appetites are eliminated, a person will not arrive, no matter how much virtue he practices. For he will fail to acquire perfect virtue, which lies in keeping the soul empty, naked, and purified of every appetite (83).
- The soul will be clothed in God, in a new understanding of God (through the removal of the understanding of the old man), and in a new love of God in God---once the will is stripped of all the cravings and satisfactions of the old man. And God vests the soul with new knowledge when the other old ideas and images are cast aside. He causes all that is of the old man, the abilities of the natural being, to cease, and attires all the faculties with new supernatural abilities. As a result a man's activities, once human, now become divine. This is achieved in the state of union where the soul in which God alone dwells has no other function than that of an altar, on which God is adored in praise and love (83).
- The only appetite God permits and wants in His dwelling place is the desire for the perfect fulfillment of His law and the carrying of His cross (84).
- A new form cannot be introduced into a subject without expulsion of the form already there (85).
- The appetites are wearisome and tiring for a man. They resemble little children, restless and hard to please, always whining to their mother for this thing or that, and never satisfied. Just as a man who digs covetously for a treasure grows tired and exhausted, so does he

who strives to acquire the demands of his appetites become wearied and fatigued. And even if he does finally obtain them, he is still always weary because he is never satisfied (86).

- In the person possessed by his appetites we find fulfilled even in this life what is said of Babylon in the Apocalypse: "In the measure of her desire for self-exaltation and fulfillment of her appetites, give her torment and anguish." A man who lets his desires capture him suffers torture and affliction like an enemy held prisoner (88).
- All you going about tormented, afflicted, and weighed down by your cares and appetites, depart from them, come to me and I will refresh you; and you will find the rest for your souls that the desires take away from you (89).
- A man's intellect, clouded by the appetites, becomes dark and impedes the sun of either natural reason or supernatural wisdom from shining within and completely illumining it. "My iniquities surrounded me and I was unable to see." (Ps. 40:12) And due to the darkening of the intellect, the will becomes weak and the memory dull and disordered in its proper operation. The appetite blinds and darkens the soul because the appetite as such is blind. It is blind because of itself it has no intellect. Reason always acts as a blind man's guide for the appetite. Consequently, every time a man's appetite leads him, he is blinded, just as we might say that when a blind man guides someone who has good eyesight both are blind. "If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into the ditch." (Mt. 15:14) A moth is not helped much by its eyes, because, blinded in its desire for the beauty of light, it will fly directly into a bonfire (89-90).
- The ignorance of some is extremely lamentable; they burden themselves with extraordinary penances and many other exercises, thinking these are sufficient for the attainment of union with the divine wisdom. But these practices are insufficient if a person does not diligently strive to deny his appetites. If these people would attempt to devote only a half of that energy to the renunciation of their desires, they would profit more in a month than in years with all these other exercises. As the tilling of soil is necessary for its fruitfulness-- untilled soil produces only weeds-- mortification of the appetites is a requisite for man's spiritual fruitfulness. I venture to say that without this mortification all a man does for the sake of advancement in perfection, and in knowledge of God and of himself, is no more profitable than seed sown on uncultivated ground. Accordingly, darkness and coarseness will always be with a soul until its appetites are extinguished. The appetites are like a cataract on the eye or specks of dust in it; until removed they obstruct vision (90).
- Oh, if men but knew what a treasure of divine light this blindness caused by their affections and appetites deprives them of, and the number of misfortunes and evils these appetites occasion each day when left unmortified! They must not rely on their sharp intellects nor upon the gifts received from God as to believe that their attachments or appetites will not blind, darken, and cause them to grow gradually worse. Who would have thought that a man as perfect in the wisdom and gifts of God as Solomon could, when he was old, have sunk into such blindness and torpor of will as to construct altars to countless idols, and then worship them himself? Yet this was caused by nothing else than his affection for women and his neglect to deny the appetites and delights of his heart (91).
- Inordinate appetites for the things of the world do all this damage to the beauty of the soul,

and even more. So great is the harm that if we try to express how ugly and dirty is the imprint the appetites leave in the soul we find nothing comparable to it-- neither a place full of cobwebs and lizards, nor the unsightliness of a dead body, not the filthiest thing imaginable in this life (92).

- The appetites sap the strength needed for perseverance in the practice of virtue. Because the force of the desire is divided, it becomes weaker than if it were completely fixed on one object. If the desire of the will extends to something other than virtue, it grows weaker in the practice of virtue. A man whose will is divided among trifles is like water which, due to some leakage, will not rise higher and consequently becomes useless. This is why the patriarch Jacob compared his son Ruben, who had given rein to his appetites in a certain sin, to spilled water: "You are like poured out water, grow not." (Gen 49:4). Hot water quickly loses its heat if left uncovered, and aromatic spices when unwrapped eventually lose the strength and pungency of their scent. So the soul that is not recollected in one appetite alone, the desire for God, loses heat and strength in the practice of virtue (94).
- It is sad to consider the condition of the poor person in whom they dwell. How unhappy he is with himself, how cold toward his neighbors, how sluggish and slothful in the things of God! The appetites for the creature render the practice of virtue burdensome and saddening to a man. Ordinarily, the reason many people do not have diligence and eagerness for the acquisition of virtue is that their appetites and affections are not fixed purely on God (95).
- I am speaking of the voluntary appetites, because the natural ones are little or no hindrance at all to attainment of union, provided they do not receive one's consent nor pass beyond the first movements in which the rational will plays no role. For to eradicate the natural appetites, that is, to mortify them entirely, is impossible in this life (96).
- Here we have the reason for stating that two wills become one. And this one will is God's will which becomes also the soul's. If a man should desire an imperfection unwanted by God, this one will of God would be destroyed because of the desire for what God does not will. If anyone is to reach perfect union with God through his will and love, he must obviously first be freed from every appetite however slight. That is, he must not give the consent of his will knowingly to an imperfection, and he must have the power and freedom to be able, upon advertance, to refuse this consent (96).
- It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord. For even if tied by thread, the bird will be prevented from taking off just as surely as if it were tied by cord-- that is, it will be impeded from flight as long as it does not break the thread. It is regrettable, then, to behold some souls, laden as rich vessels with wealth, deeds, spiritual exercises, virtues, and favors from God, never advancing because they lack the courage to make a complete break with some little satisfaction, attachment, or affection (which are all about the same), and thereby never reaching the port of perfection, which requires no more than a sudden flap of one's wings to tear the thread of attachment, or the rejection of the clinging remora. It is a matter for deep sorrow that, while God has bestowed on them the power to break other stronger cords of attachment to sins and vanities, they fail to attain so much good because they do not become detached from some childish thing which God has requested them to conquer out of love for Him and which amounts to no more than a thread or hair. What is worse, they not only fail to advance but they turn back because of their small attachment, losing what they have gained in their journey at the expense of so

much time and effort. Everyone knows that not to go forward on this road is to turn back, and not to gain ground is to lose (97). "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters." (Mt. 12:30).

- The attainment of our goal demands that we never stop on this road, which means we must continually mortify our appetites rather than indulge them. For if we do not mortify them all completely, we will not wholly reach our goal (98).
- An act of virtue produces in a man mildness, peace, comfort, light, purity, and strength, just as an inordinate appetite brings about torment, fatigue, weariness, blindness, and weakness. Through the practice of one virtue all the virtues grow, and similarly, through an increase of one vice, all the vices and their effects grow (100).
- I am not speaking here of the other natural, involuntary appetites, nor of thoughts that do not pass beyond the first movements, nor of other temptations in which there is no consent. These temptations do not give rise to any of the evils previously mentioned. Though the passion and disturbance they momentarily cause make it seem to a person that he is being defiled and blinded, such is not the case; rather, they occasion the opposite good effects. Insofar as a person resists them, he wins strength, purity, light, comfort, and many blessings, as our Lord told St. Paul: "Virtue is made perfect in weakness" (2Cor 12:9).
  - But the voluntary appetites bring on all these evils, and even more. That is why the chief concern of spiritual directors with their penitents is the immediate mortification of every appetite. The directors should make them remain empty of what they desire so as to liberate them from so much misery (101).
  - Some counsels are in order now that the individual may both know the way of entering this night and be able to do so:
    - First, have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with His. You must then study His life in order to know how to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would.
    - Second, in order to be successful in this imitation, renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God. Do this out of love for Jesus Christ. In His life He had no other gratification, nor desired any other, than the fulfillment of His Father's will, which He called His meat and food.
    - For example, if you are offered the satisfaction of hearing things that have no relation to the service and glory of God, do not desire this pleasure or the hearing of these things. When an opportunity for the gratification of looking upon objects that will not help you come any closer to God, do not desire this gratification or sight. And if speaking there is a similar opportunity, act in the same way. And so on with all the senses insofar as you can duly avoid this pleasure. If you cannot escape the experience of this satisfaction, it will be sufficient to have no desire for it. By this method you should endeavor, then, to leave the senses as though in darkness, mortified, and empty of pleasures. With such vigilance you will gain a great deal in a short time (103).
  - Endeavor to inclined always:
    - -not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;

- -not to the most delightful, but to the harshest;
- -not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
- -not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
- -not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
- -not to the most, but to the least;
- -not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
- -not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing;
- -do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and desire to enter into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everthing in the world.
- You should embrace these practices earnestly and try to overcome the repugnance of your will toward them. If you sincerely put them into practice with order and discretion, you will discover in them great delight and consolation (103).
- As a conclusion to these counsels and rules it would be appropriate to repeat the verses presented in, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, which are instructions for climbing to the summit, the high state of union.
- To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing.
- To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing.
- To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.
- To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing.
- To come to the pleasure you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
- To come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not.
- To come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not.
- To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not.
- When you turn toward something, you cease to cast yourself upon the all.
- For to go from all to the all, you must deny yourself of all in all.
- And when you come to the possession of the all, you must possess it without wanting

anything.

- Because if you desire to have something in all, your treasure in God is not purely your all.
- In this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest.
- For in coveting nothing, nothing raises it up and nothing weighs it down, because it is in the center of its humility.
- When it covets something, in this very desire it is wearied (103).
- A love of pleasure, and attachment to it, usually fires the will toward the enjoyment of things that give pleasure. A more intense enkindling of another, better love (love of one's heavenly Bridegroom) is necessary for the vanquishing of the appetites and the denial of this pleasure. By finding his satisfaction and strength in this love, a man will have the courage and constancy to deny readily all other appetites. The love of one's Spouse is not the only requisite for conquering the strength of the sensitive appetites; an enkindling with longings of love is also necessary. For the sensory appetites are moved and attracted toward sensory objects with such cravings that if the spiritual part of the soul is not fired with other more urgent longings for spiritual things, the soul will neither be able to overcome the yoke of nature nor enter the night of sense; nor will it have the courage to live in the darkness of all things by denying its appetites for them (105).
- Until slumber comes to appetites through the mortification of sensuality, and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the spirit, the soul will not walk out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved (106).