

John of the Cross

IV. Spiritual Canticle

36-40

Desire for perfect union and
transformation in glory



John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 36 (Stanza 35 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Bride]

Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty,
to the mountain and to the hill,
to where the pure water flows,
and further, deep into the thicket.

I shall be You in Your beauty, and You will be me in Your beauty, because Your very own beauty will be my beauty, so that we will behold each other in Your beauty' (36.5).

'The thicket of God's wisdom and knowledge is so deep and immense that no matter how much the soul knows she can always enter it further' (36,10).

'The soul is happy to enter all the afflictions and trials of the world, however difficult and painful, even the anguish and agony of death, to see herself further within her God' (36,11).

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[Bride]

Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty,
to the mountain and to the hill,
to where the pure water flows,
and further, deep into the thicket.

'The gate entering the riches of God's wisdom is the cross, which is narrow. Few desire to enter it, but many desire the delights obtained from entering there'(36,12-13).

'All my things are your, and yours mine'(John 17:10).

'O the height of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how incomprehensible are his judgments, and unsearchable his ways'(Romans 11:33).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 37 (Stanza 36 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Bride]

And then we will go on
to the high caverns in the rock
which are so well concealed;
there we shall enter
and taste the fresh juice of the pomegranates.

'In eating a pomegranate, one juice alone is tasted from its many seeds. Similarly, from all these infused wonders and grandeurs of God, there redounds to the soul one fruition and delight of love, which is the drink of the Holy Spirit. With glowing tenderness of love, she at once offers this drink to her God, the Word, her Spouse. She had promised Him this divine drink in the Canticle, if He would lead her into this lofty knowledge: There you will teach me; and I shall offer you spiced wine to drink, and juice from the pomegranate' (Song 8:2). (37,8).

'Arise, make haste my love, my beautiful one, and come into the clefts of the rock and into the caverns of the wall' (Song 2:13-14).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 38 (Stanza 37 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Bride]

There You will show me
what my soul has been seeking,
And then You will give me,
You, my Life, will give me there
what you gave me on that other day:

'God will show the soul how to love Him as perfectly as she desires . . . Transforming the soul into his love, God gives her his own strength by which she can love Him. As if he were to put an instrument in her hands and show her how it works by operating it jointly with her, He shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so'(38,4).

'God has revealed to us, through the Spirit.: 'What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love Him'(1 Cor. 2:9-10; Isaiah 64:4)

'To him who overcomes, I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of my God'(Apocalypse 2:7; John adds 2:10; 2:17; 2:26-28; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21-22).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 39 (Stanza 38 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Bride]

The breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its living beauty
in the serene night,
with a flame that is consuming and painless.

‘The soul calls it the breathing of the air, because it is a most delicate touch and feeling of love which habitually in this estate is caused in the soul by the communication of the Holy Spirit. Breathing with his divine breath, he raises the soul most sublimely, and informs her, that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father.’(39.3)

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Stanza 39 (Stanza 38 in the first version of the Canticle)

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The breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its living beauty
in the serene night,
with a flame that is consuming and painless.

After quoting and commenting on John 17:20-24 and 2 Peter 1:2-5, he continues: 'O souls, created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing? How are you spending your time? Your aims are base and your possessions miseries! O wretched blindness of your eyes! You are blind to so brilliant a light and deaf to such loud voices, because you fail to discern that insofar as you seek eminence and glory you remain miserable, base, ignorant, and unworthy of so many blessings!' (39,7).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 39 (Stanza 38 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Bride]

The breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
The grove and its living beauty
in the serene night,
with a flame that is consuming and painless.

'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.' (Song 2:10-14).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 40 (Stanza 39 in the first version of the Canticle)

[Chorus]

**No one looked at her,
nor did Aminadab appear;
the siege was still;
and the cavalry,
at the sight of the waters, descended.**

Aminadab = Devil Siege = passions Cavalry = senses now sharing in the communion

Waters = union

'In this state of spiritual marriage, the sensory and lower part of the soul is so purified and spiritualised that it attracts the sensory faculties and natural strength to the inner recollection where the soul is drinking, so that they may thereby share in and enjoy in their own fashion the spiritual grandeurs which God is communicating in the inwardness of the spirit'(40,5).

‘The soul shines brightly with the warmth of love ... It is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air. The movements and radiance of the flame are not from the air alone, nor from the fire of which the flame is composed, but from both the air and the fire. It is the fire which causes the air which it has enkindled to produce the movements and the radiance. We can consequently understand how the soul with its faculties is illumined within the radiance of God. The movements of these divine flames which are flickering and flaring up are not produced only by the soul that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of both the soul and the Holy Spirit ... This activity of the flames is inspired in the soul by the Holy Spirit’ (Living Flame 3.9-10).

'Love wounded me and took away my heart.
I begged love to take my life since it had so wounded me.
I threw myself in its fire, knowing that it burned.
I was dying in myself, breathing in you alone.
I died within myself for you, and for you I came back to life
Because remembering you gave life and took it away'
(from Romance on psalm 137).

‘So few attain this high state of perfect union with God, not because God wishes it so; He would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. God tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification. And so, not finding them strong and faithful in small matters in which he favoured them by beginning to hew and polish them, he realises that they will be much less strong in greater trials. He proceeds no further in purifying them. They were in need of greater constancy and courage than they showed’ (Living Flame 2.27).

We conclude our journey with the words of John Climacus, abbot of the monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, in the seventh century:

‘Do not hurry to contemplation at the wrong time. Rather, let it come to you, seeking out the beauty of your lowliness, ready to join you for a long time in a spotless marriage’(The Ladder of Divine Ascent Step 7).

‘You cannot learn to see just because someone tells you to do so. For that you require your own natural power of sight. In the same way, you cannot discover from the teaching of others the beauty of prayer. Prayer has its own special teacher in God, who grants the prayer of the person who prays. It is for each of us to listen to the call of love in our own hearts and, in the company of Jesus our brother and friend, to dare the purifying journey into the embrace of God’(Step 28).