

John of the Cross 1542-1591



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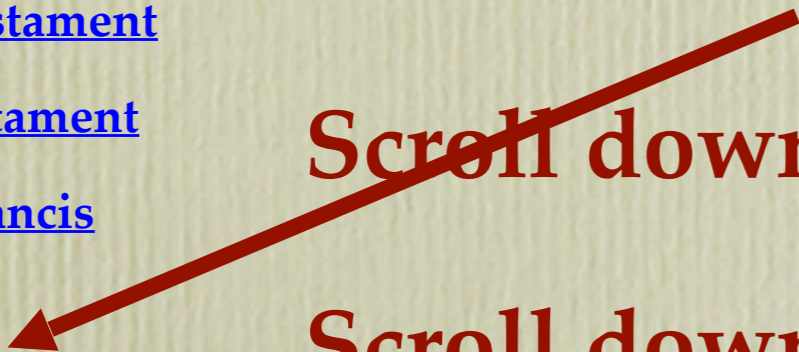
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John of the Cross 1542-1591



Luther, Saxony 1483-1546
(1517 95 Theses)

Ignatius, Loyola 1491-1556

Teresa, Avila 1515-1582

John, Fontiveros 1542-1591

1542 born youngest of 3 boys. Father died shortly after

1559-1563 work in hospital and school with Jesuits

1563 entered Carmelite Novitiate. Professed 1564

1564 University of Salamanca

1567 Priest. Met Teresa (He was 24. she was 42).

John of the Cross 1542-1591

1568 Set up first monastery of the reform at Duruelo

1572-1577 Vicar and Confessor at Convent of the Incarnation (Teresa)

1575 Carmelites resolved to stop spread of Reform

1577 December - 1578 August John was a prisoner to Toledo

Spiritual Canticle (poem)

1578 Prior of El Calvario monastery

Spiritual Director and confessor to nuns at Beas

Rector of Carmelite College in Baeza

Dark Night: poem (1579-1581)

Ascent: poem (1579-1585)

1582 Prior at Grenada **Living Flame:** poem (1582-1585)

1591 died

I. Introduction

Iain Matthew *The Impact of God* page 1

‘John of the Cross speaks to people who feel unable to change. We may have sensed in our lives a call to freedom, to wholeness, to more than what we are now. John felt this as a call to reach out for God. But within us an unvoiced fear can make change impossible. It is the fear that when we reach, we may not find ... If I give myself, will God fill me with his life?’

Our being hesitates to say ‘yes’ to a one-way track that may end only in wasteland. This is the undermining fear, and while we may not opt for a different track, we may never fully choose this one’.

‘Here John of the Cross has something helpful to say. Poet, pastor, mystic, John is first a witness to the impact of God in his life. He has taken the risk of surrender, and can speak with the authority of one who has been there. He testifies to a God who, precisely, is pressing in to meet, to change, and to fill us in our deepest need.’

‘John’s language is moulded to echo this impact. He wrote strongly in verse, and only weakly in prose. He wrote in the idiom of bride and bridegroom – the least inadequate image for the way he understands his God to be.’

‘John testifies to a God who is pressing in to meet me, to change me, to fill me where my need is deepest.’

Let us try to ‘sound John’s soul, and to recover there his witness to a self-bestowing God. Love changes people, and John’s witness to God’s love may help us to trust and to be brave.’

(Iain Matthew page 1).

‘When darkness is invading, when trusted patterns have broken down, when loss, failure, stress, and sin, remind us of the threat of chaos, John assures us that the darkness bears the Spirit of God, who broods over the waters of death and has power to work a resurrection’(pages 1-2).

- ‘His word came from experience. This experience gave him access to others at their point of need’ (page 13).
- ‘John’s greatest gift is not so much to tell us what to do, nor to pinpoint our place on the map, but to draw back the curtains and disclose the whole journey as real’ (page 16).
- ‘John has a word for us which is relevant and sensitive. But it is also urgent. If his writing is on fire at his end, the flame of his own experience, it catches fire again at our end, as he sees our potential’ (page 17).
- ‘John’s aim is not to extract yet more effort, but to open the path to what will genuinely meet the need’ (page 17).

- ‘His word is not so much “perfection”, as if it were only about me becoming myself. He prefers to call it “union” – “union with God”, the “union of love” (page 17).

It is for this union that we are created.

It is for this union that we long.

‘What excludes us from John’s writing is not our being too low down some scale of perfection. For John the point of departure is a sense of need, a recognition that our life will not be complete till God is at its centre’ (page 18).

‘We are excluded, not by where we are, but by an unwillingness to go farther. We are welcomed in when we wish to seek, to change, to be changed. We can hear John’s answer if we can share his question: “Beloved, where have you hidden?” (page 18)

2. Jesus

3. 'John's experience of impact and of darkness is in itself no guarantee that our own lives are open to the divine. Only if John's words speak to us of Jesus would it claim to be valid for all. In sounding John's soul it is Christ we are seeking' (page 3).

'In his darkness there was disclosed to him Christ's desire to love him'. He discovered a God who 'gives himself to the poor' (page 12).



‘Where God is concerned, love is never idle, it is in continuous movement’ (Flame 1.8).

‘God presence is like a song that is new, always new, wrapped round with joy and love’ (Flame 2.36).

‘Permeating the commentary is an awareness of a self-communicating God, a God whose plan is to fill us with nothing less than himself.’

(page 25)

‘The Flame is a person, “the Spirit of your Bridegroom”, the Breath of Christ’ (page 25).

3. Meditation

‘For a better understanding of this beginner’s stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with the imagination. Those in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world’ (Flame 3.32).

John's advice to novices, quoted by Iain Matthew on page 143,
from José de Jesús María Quiroga, *Don que tuvo San Juan de la Cruz*,
printed in Ruiz (1968) pp. 511-512)

'The first thing is to summon up the mysteries of Jesus by imagining them. Be present to Jesus as he sits wearied at the well, hot, alone, waiting (John 4). 'Imagine', not in detail, but impressionistically, as entering, not observing.

Then ponder in your mind the mystery you have evoked. Jesus is there, weary, for me ... He demands no expiation; he wants to quench thirst with living water ... He allows me to be with him,

Third, attentiveness to God in loving stillness: this is where the fruit of the other activities is plucked, and where the door of the mind is opened to God's light. Attentive in love; desire him there; adore him there; be with him in faith.

Longing

‘God’s favours and visits are generally in accord with the intensity of the yearnings and ardours of love which precede them’ (Spiritual Canticle 13,2).

‘God does not give grace and love except according to the soul’s desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives’ (Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

‘Since the soul lives with that driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatsoever is burdensome and disturbing’ (Spiritual Canticle 17,1).

‘The waters of inward delights do not spring from the earth. One must open toward heaven the mouth of desire, empty of all else that might fill it: “Open wide your mouth that I might fill it”[Psalm 81:10]’ (Letter, 18th November 1586).

4. The Initiative is God's

Iain Matthew page 24

‘All the initiative belongs to the Other.’

‘What we find filling John's mind
is a God who is, supremely, active.’

‘*You* are piercing, repaying, slaying, giving life, waking, breathing;
you did seem oppressive, but it was *you* who seemed it;
you may tear the veil but it has to be *you*.

If ‘my’ soul gives radiance it is because *you* shine on it;
and if ‘I’ love, it is because *your* love awakens it.’

‘John's God anticipates, initiates, gives, transforms, like a flame
entering till it engages the deepest centre. John's universe is
drenched in a self-outpouring God.’

‘As we sound John’s experience at its most authentic, we find this to be the reality he knew: a God who is pressing in to give God’s self’ (page 26).

‘I am yours, and for you, and I am pleased to be as I am that I may be yours and give myself to you’ (Flame 3.6).

‘If you are seeking God, know that much more is God seeking you.’
(Flame 3.28).

‘God’s purpose is to make the soul great’ (Flame 2.3).

‘When the deep caverns of the soul are empty and pure, the thirst and hunger and sense of spiritual longing is more than can be borne ... The capacity of these caverns is deep, because that which they can hold is deep and infinite; and that is God’ (Flame 3.18, 22).

‘If only, on your silvered-over face, you would suddenly form they eyes
I so long for, which I bear sketched deep within my heart’ (SC, 12)

In commenting on these lines, John states that ‘it seems that
the Beloved is now always looking at the one he loves’ (SC 12.5).

Later in Stanza 32 he writes: ‘When you looked at me, your
eyes imprinted in me your grace, so ardently did you love me.’

‘God’s gaze is his love, and his love does things.

God’s gaze works four blessings in the soul:

it cleanses, makes beautiful, enriches and enlightens’ (Matthew page 28).

5. Contemplation

‘When the appetite has been fed somewhat, and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things, and has acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean the soul and place it in a state of contemplation.

‘Some quickly accommodate their senses and appetites to God and, in their activity, pass on to the spirit which God works in them. This happens when the soul’s discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as its initial sense of satisfaction and fervour, and it is unable to practice discursive meditation as before, or find any support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses’ (Flame 3.32).

‘We should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. We should conduct ourselves passively without efforts of our own, but with a simple, loving awareness, as with eyes open in loving attention’ (Flame 3.33).

‘When it happens that we are conscious of *being placed in solitude and in the state of listening*, we should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness, so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of us. We should make use of that loving attentiveness only when we do not feel ourselves placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening’ (Flame 3.35).

‘Contemplation is nothing but a hidden, peaceful, loving inflow of God.
If it is given room, it will inflame the spirit with love’ (Night I.10.6)

‘Pure contemplation lies in receiving’ (Flame 3.36).

‘Contemplation: prayer where I am no longer a tourist, where sense has shifted to spirit – where plenty of insights and aspirations have given way to a less picturesque, more total form of togetherness with God’ (Iain Matthew page 56).

John of the Cross – The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 1 Flame, alive, compelling,
yet tender past all telling,
reaching the secret centre of my soul!
Since now evasion's over,
finish your work, my Lover,
break the last thread, wound me, and make me whole.

Stanza 2 Burn that is for my healing!
Wound of delight past feeling!
Ah, gentle hand whose touch is a caress,
foretaste of heaven conveying
and every debt repaying:
slaying, you give me life for death's distress.

Stanza 3 O lamps of fire bright-burning
with splendid brilliance, turning
deep caverns of my soul to pools of light!
Once shadowed, dim, unknowing,
now their strange new-found glowing
gives warmth and radiance for my Love's delight.

Stanza 4 Ah! gentle and so loving
you was within me, proving
that you are there in secret and alone;
your fragrant breathing stills me,
your grace, your glory fills me
so tenderly your love becomes my own.

6. Obedience

‘What does it profit you to give God one thing if he asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined’ (Sayings of light and love 73).

‘The union of love of God is an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (Spiritual Canticle 28,10).

7. What we can do

‘Stranded and starving, somebody has to get packed up and sent off into the unknown to search for food, taking what water is left, hacking a way through the undergrowth, hoping somehow to forge a path to something somewhere.

But then comes the noise of a helicopter, and rescue approaching.

That changes everything. The one thing needed now is some space, so that what is coming can come’ (Iain Matthew page 35).

‘Making space for God in order to receive’ (Flame 2.27).

Make space to receive God’s gift which is nothing less than God’s Self.

‘If you are seeking God,

much more is your Beloved seeking you’ (Flame 3.28).

‘Progress will be measured, less by ground covered, more by the amount of room God is given to manoeuvre’ (Matthew page 37).

‘space’, ‘emptiness’, are key words;
or, as John puts it, *nada*’ (page 37).

‘Empty hands, cupped to receive God’ (page 38).

‘The summit of the mountain is a huge space – ‘and on the mountain, nothing’ – because it holds a total Presence’ (page 38).

‘The crucial question is not “What must I achieve?”, but “What stands in his way?” (page 38).

‘It is denying, not the thing or the person, but one’s dependence on the thing or the person, so clearing a space for genuine communion’ (page 43).

- A bird held by a thread.

‘The issue is affirming a greater love, and transcending one’s cravings for the sake of that love’ (page 43).

‘Say No to your desires and you will discover what your heart really desires. What makes you think your longings are God's longings?’ (Sayings, 15; quoted page 34).

8. Experiencing God

‘When John seeks “an experience of God”, he does not mean “feeling” as opposed to “not feeling”; he means “reality” as opposed to “mere theory”. He is not looking for a shot in the arm to brighten a dreary day; he is looking for a person with whom he is content to be, even if the day stays dreary ... His search is not for a feeling of encounter, but for encounter ... He wants, not just perfection, but nothing less than union’ (Matthew page 95).

Night Iain Matthew p. 94

‘When John says ‘night’, what come to his mind is not so much suffering, even redeemed suffering, as presence.

‘John’s teaching has been directing us to:

- a God who gives himself [Flame],
- the space we make for the gift [Ascent],
- the opening God himself carves for the gift [Night],
- a project which stretches from God’s plan in eternity to its final fulfilment in heaven [Canticle].’

Jesus, the Experience of God

- *Todo* ‘Heaven will be that:
a total entry into the caverns of Christ’s heart,
an infinite space for the Father’(page 127).
 - *Nada* ‘It is not enough for Jesus to have said “night”;
it is important in John’s view that he should have
experienced it, since “he is our example and our light”(page 129).
- ‘On the cross, the heart of Jesus became
a massive space for the fire of the Spirit to burn –
free to blaze out “more intense than all the fires in the world”
in Resurrection’ (page 131).

- In the prison cell John composed the Spiritual Canticle (completed 1582-1584).

(Version as sung by John Michael Talbot)

Where have you hidden Beloved?

Why have you wounded my soul?

I went out to the wilderness calling for you
but you were gone.

Oh shepherds keeping your watch in the hills,
if by chance you meet with my Love
tell Him I suffer in my lonely grief
and I soon will die.

But I have searched for my Love in the mountains,
I have searched among the meadows and the fields.
He has poured out a thousand graces in them
so my heart might be healed.

Yet my heart is not healed.

‘The power unleashed on John of the Cross in the *Living Flame* is identified as the vitality of the Risen Christ –

“I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Flame 2.34; Galatians 2:20).

The letting-go discussed in *Ascent* has one motive and model:

“love for Jesus Christ” whose only food was “doing the will of his Father” (Ascent I, 13.4).

The one who enters the space of the purified soul in *Ascent* is named as the “Son of God” (Ascent II.15.4).

And the desperate longing which fuels the pain of night is disclosed as a need for the Easter Jesus, on the model of Mary Magdalene anxious at the sepulchre’ (see Night II.13.6-7).