

John of the Cross

Spiritual Canticle 8-11



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

Stanza 8

How do you endure  
O life, not living where you live?  
And being brought near death  
By the arrows you receive  
From that which you conceive of your Beloved?

- 'Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?'(Romans 8:24, referred to in 8.2).
- 'The soul lives through love in the object of her love'(8.3).
- 'In him we live and move and have our being'(Acts 17:28, referred to in 8.3).
- 'That which has come to being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people'(John 1:3-4, referred to in 8.3).

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Stanza 9

Why, since you wounded  
This heart, don't you heal it?  
And why, since you stole it from me,  
Do you leave it so,  
And fail to carry off what you have stolen?

- 'She does not possess her heart but has given it to the Beloved'(9.2).
- 'She can know clearly whether or not she loves God purely. If she loves God, her heart or love will not be set on herself or her own satisfaction or gain, but upon pleasing God and giving God honour and glory. In the measure she loves herself, that much less does she love God'(9.5).

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Stanza 9

Why, since you wounded  
This heart, don't you heal it?  
And why, since you stole it from me,  
Do you leave it so,  
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- 'The soul longs for nothing else but more love, until the perfection of love is reached'(9.7).
- 'The soul that loves God must not desire or hope for any other reward for her services that the perfect love of God'(9.7).

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Stanza 10

Extinguish these miseries  
Since no one else can do so;  
And may my eyes behold You  
Because You are their light  
And I would open them to You alone.

- 'Though she cannot help being occupied with other things, she always has her heart fixed on God'(10.1).
- 'Her will is inclined immediately to seek and enjoy her Beloved in everything that happens and in all her occupations, without looking for any satisfaction or concern of her own' (10.2).
- Mary of Magdala suffers torment when she cannot find Jesus (10.2).

## Pope Gregory the Great

"Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary continued seeking him when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking . . . At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: 'Mary' . . . as if to say: 'Now recognise the one who recognises you'... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him."

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Stanza 10

May my eyes behold You  
Because You are their light  
And I would open them to You alone.

- 'Possessing nothing that might withhold her from God, she cannot remain long without a visit from the Beloved'(10.6).
- 'The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb'(Apocalypse 21:23; referred to in 10.8).

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Stanza 10

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And I would open them to You alone.

- 'She wants to keep her eyes for Him alone. Longing to focus the eyes of her will upon the light of something outside of God, she is justly deprived of the divine light insofar as the spiritual powers which she has for receiving God's light are occupied with this other light. So also, if she closes her eyes to all things in order to open them to God alone, she is ready to welcome the illumination of divine light'(10.9).



## Discerning God's presence in suffering

'On that glad night  
In secret, for no one saw me  
Nor did I look at anything  
with no other light or guide  
than the one that burned in my heart'(Dark Night Stanza 3).

'If we resolutely submit to carrying the cross, if we resolutely want to find and endure trial in all things for God, we will discover in all our trials great relief and comfort'(Ascent II.7.7).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘In the patience and forbearance practised in these times of emptiness and dryness, and through perseverance in spiritual exercises without consolation or satisfaction, a person practises the love of God, since she is no longer motivated by the attractive and savoury gratification which she finds in what she does, but only in God. She also practises the virtue of fortitude’(Dark Night I.13.5).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘How amazing and pitiful it is that a person be so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon a person, but only touches her – and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant favours not chastise’(Dark Night II.5.7).

- In Dark Night II.7.2-3 John quotes from Lamentations chapter 3 and goes on to state how we should be very gentle and compassionate towards anyone who is suffering in the dark night.

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘You walk securely in the darkness of the dark night because you are advancing by suffering. Suffering is a surer and even more advantageous road than that of joy and action. First, in suffering God gives us strength, whereas in our deeds and joys we exercise our own weakness and imperfections. Second, in suffering virtues are practised and acquired and we are purified, made wiser and more cautious’(Dark Night II.16.9).

‘The gate entering into the riches of God's wisdom is the cross. It is narrow, and few desire to enter by it, though many desire the delights obtained from entering’(Spiritual Canticle 36.13).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘It ought to be pointed out why there are so few who reach this high state of perfect union with God. It should be known that the reason is not because God wishes that there be only a few of these souls so elevated. He would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few who will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since he 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, it follows that, not finding them strong and faithful in that little in which he favoured them by beginning to hew and polish them, he realises that they will be much less strong in these greater trials. As a result he proceeds no further in purifying them and raising them from the dust of the earth through the toil of mortification. They were in need of greater constancy and mortification than they showed’(Living Flame 2.27).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘In tribulation, immediately draw near to God with confidence, and you will receive strength, enlightenment and instruction’(Sayings of light and love 63).

‘Let Christ crucified be enough for you, and with him suffer and take your rest, and hence annihilate yourself in all inward and outward things’(Maxims 13).

‘Have great love for trials and think of them as but a small way of pleasing your Spouse, who did not hesitate to die for you’(Maxims 15).

‘Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved’(Maxims 36).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘It is right for us not to go without the cross, just as our Beloved did not go without it, even to his dying of love. He directs our sufferings in the love of what we most desire that we might make greater sacrifices and be of greater value. But everything is brief, for it lasts only until the knife is raised’(Letter 28<sup>th</sup> January 1589).

## Discerning God's presence in suffering

‘When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in these times of darkness that God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for God watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that God leaves you alone; that would be an affront to Him’(Letter Pentecost 1590).

‘Do not seek Christ without the cross’(Letter Segovia 1590).



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Stanza 11 (later addition)

Reveal Your presence  
And may the vision of Your beauty be my death;  
For the sickness of love  
Is not cured  
Except by Your very presence and image.

- 'Truly, whoever touches you, touches the apple of my eye'(Zechariah 2:8, referred to in 11.1)
- 'Before they call I will answer, while they are still speaking, I will hear'(Isaiah 65:24, referred to in 11.1).

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'The many ways in which God is present  
{by essence – natural presence;  
by grace – spiritual presence;  
by intimate communion – loving presence}  
are all hidden, for in them God does not reveal Himself  
as He is, since the conditions of this life will not allow  
such a manifestation'(11.3).

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- 'You have said: "I know you by name and you have found favour in my sight". If I have found favour in Your sight, show me Your ways so that I may know You and find the grace which I desire fulfilled in Your presence'(Exodus 33:12-13, referred to in 11.5).
- 'You cannot see My face, for no one can see Me and live'(Exodus 33:20, referred to in 11.5).
- She prays to die so as to see her Beloved (11.5).

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- Paul would like to be 'clothed over' with the risen body that can see Christ, but if this is not to be he wants to leave this life and be with Christ (see Philippians 1:23, referred to in 11.9).
- 'True love receives everything that comes from the Beloved – prosperity, adversity, even chastisement – with the same evenness of soul, since they are His will. For they afford her joy and delight'(11.10).

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And may the vision of Your beauty be my death;  
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- 'When she possesses some degree of love of God, no matter how little, she is alive, but very weak and infirm because of her little love'(11.11).
- 'The Bridegroom is the image into which she desires to be transformed through love'(11.12).
- 'Feeble in love, she is too weak to practise heroic virtue'(11.13).
- 'She who feels this sickness shows that she has some love'(11.14).