

# The Life of Teresa of Jesus (The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila)

St. Teresa Ávila (1515-1582)

## Chapter 11 selections: The Garden

The beginner must think of themselves as someone setting out to make a garden in which the Lord will take delight, yet in soil that is barren and full of weeds. God uproots the weeds and will plant good seeds in their place. Let us suppose this is already done -- that a soul has resolved to practice prayer and has already begun to do so. We have now, by God's help, like good gardeners, to make these plants grow and water them carefully so they won't die, but will produce flowers that send out wonderful fragrance to refresh our Lord, so that He may often come into the garden to take pleasure and delight among these virtues.

Let us now consider how this garden can be watered, so we may know what we need to do, what effort it will cost us, whether the gain will outweigh the effort, and how long we must continue this work. It seems to me the garden can be watered in four ways: by drawing water from a well, which costs us great effort; or by a water-wheel and buckets, when the water is drawn by a windlass (I have sometimes drawn it this way: it's less work than the other and gives more water); or by a stream or brook, which waters the ground much better, since it soaks in more thoroughly and there's less need to water often, so the gardener's work is much less; or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it without any effort from us, a way incomparably better than any of those I've described.

And now I come to my point, which is applying these four methods of watering to keep the garden fertile, for if it has no water it will be ruined. It has seemed possible to me to explain in this way something about the four degrees of prayer to which the Lord, in His goodness, has occasionally brought my soul.

## Chapter 11 selections: The Well

Beginners in prayer, we may say, are those who draw water from the well. As I've said, this is very hard work, because it exhausts them to keep their senses focused, which is difficult since they're used to a life of distraction. Beginners must train themselves to ignore what they see or hear, and they must practice this during prayer time. They must be alone and in solitude think over their past life -- all of us, whether beginners or advanced, must do this frequently.

At first it causes distress, because beginners aren't always sure they've truly repented of their sins (though clearly they have, since they've sincerely resolved to serve God). Then they have to try to meditate on Christ's life, and this tires their minds. This far we can make progress by ourselves -- of course with God's help, for without that, as we all know, we cannot think a single good thought.

This is what it means to begin drawing water from the well -- and God grant there may be water in it! But that doesn't depend on us: our task is to draw it up and do what we can to water the flowers. And God is so good that when, for reasons known to Him -- perhaps for our great benefit -- He allows the well to be dry, we, like good gardeners, do all we can, and He keeps the flowers alive without water and makes the virtues grow. By water here I mean tears -- or if there are none, tenderness and an interior feeling of devotion.

What then will someone do who finds that for many days they experience nothing but dryness, dislike, distaste, and so little desire to go draw water that they would give up entirely if they didn't remember they are pleasing and serving the Lord of the garden? It will often happen that they can't even move their arms -- meaning they can't think a single good thought, for working with the understanding is the same as drawing water from the well. What then, I ask, will the gardener do here? They will be glad and take heart and consider it the greatest privilege to work in the garden of so great an Emperor. And since they know they're pleasing Him by working (and their purpose must be to please Him, not themselves), let them give Him great praise for trusting them so much.

These trials bring their own reward. I endured them for many years, and when I could draw only one drop of water from this blessed well, I thought God was granting me a favor. I know how difficult such trials are and I think they need more courage than many other trials in the world. But it has become clear to me that even in this life, God doesn't fail to reward them generously. For it's absolutely certain that a single hour in which the Lord has let me taste His presence has seemed to me later a reward for all the suffering I endured over a long period while keeping up the practice of prayer.

## Chapter 14 selections: The Water Wheel

This state, in which the soul begins to collect itself, borders on the supernatural -- something it could never reach by its own efforts. True, it sometimes seems the soul has been exhausted by its work at the windlass -- laboring with the understanding and filling the buckets. But in this state the water is higher, so much less work is required than for drawing it from the well. I mean the water is nearer, because grace reveals itself to the soul more clearly. This state is a gathering of the faculties within the soul, so that it may more deeply enjoy this contentment. But the faculties aren't lost, nor do they sleep. Only the will is

occupied, in such a way that, without knowing how, it becomes captive. It allows itself to be imprisoned by God, as one who knows well that it's the captive of the One it loves. Oh, my Jesus and Lord, how much Your love means to us now! It binds our own love so tightly that in that moment it leaves us no freedom to love anything but You.

The other two faculties help the will to become more and more capable of enjoying such great blessing, though sometimes when the will is in union, they greatly hinder it. When that happens, it should ignore them and remain in its joy and quiet. For if it tries to control them, both the will and they will suffer.

Everything that happens now brings the greatest consolation, and so little effort is involved that even if prayer continues for a long time, it never becomes tiresome. For the understanding now works very gradually and draws much more water than it drew from the well. The tears God gives here flow joyfully; though the soul is aware of them, it does nothing to cause them.

This water of great blessings and favors that the Lord gives in this state makes the virtues grow much more than in the previous one -- beyond all comparison. For the soul is already rising from its miserable condition and gaining some small preview of the joys of glory. This, I believe, makes the virtues grow and also brings them nearer to God, that true Virtue from whom all virtues spring. For God begins to communicate Himself to this soul and wants it to be aware of how He's doing this. As soon as it reaches this state, it begins to lose its craving for earthly things. And small credit to it, for it sees clearly that on earth it cannot have a moment of this joy; that there are no riches, positions, honors, or pleasures that suffice to give such satisfaction even for the blink of an eye. For this is true joy, and the soul realizes that this is what gives genuine satisfaction. Those of us on earth, it seems to me, rarely understand where this satisfaction lies.

## Chapter 16 selections: The River

Let us now speak of the third water that irrigates this garden -- running water from a river or spring. This waters the garden with much less trouble, though some effort is still needed to direct it. But the Lord is now pleased to help the gardener, so that He may almost be said to be the gardener Himself, for He does everything. This state is a sleep of the faculties, which are neither completely lost nor can they understand how they work. The pleasure, sweetness, and delight are incomparably greater than in the previous state, for the water of grace rises to the very neck of the soul, so that it cannot go forward and doesn't know how to, yet neither can it turn back. It desires only to enjoy this exceeding great glory.

The faculties retain only the power to be completely occupied with God. Not one of them seems to dare to move, nor can we make any of them move except by trying very hard to fix

our attention on something else, and even then I don't think we could entirely succeed. Many words are spoken during this state in praise of God, but unless the Lord Himself puts them in order, they have no orderly form. The understanding certainly counts for nothing here; the soul would like to shout praises aloud, for it's in such a state that it cannot contain itself -- a state of delightful restlessness. Already the flowers are opening: look, they're beginning to send out their fragrance. The soul would like everyone to see it now and become aware of its glory, for God's praise, and help it sing His praises.

Oh God, what must that soul be like when it's in this state! It wishes it were all tongue, so it might praise the Lord. It utters a thousand holy follies, always trying to please the One who possesses it. I know a person who, though no poet, composed verses in a very short time that were full of feeling and wonderfully described her pain. They didn't come from her understanding, but to better enjoy the bliss that came from such delightful pain, she complained of it to her God. She would have been glad to be cut to pieces, body and soul, to show what joy this pain caused her. What torments could be set before her at such a time that she wouldn't find delightful to endure for her Lord's sake? She sees clearly that when the martyrs suffered their torments, they did hardly anything themselves, for the soul knows well that strength comes from somewhere outside itself.

## Chapter 18 selections: The Rain from Heaven

Speaking now of this rain that comes from Heaven to fill and saturate the whole garden with abundant water, we can see how much rest the gardener would have if the Lord never ceased to send it whenever necessary. And if there were no winter, but eternal warm weather, there would never be a lack of flowers and fruit, and we can imagine how delighted he would be. But during this life, that's impossible, and when one kind of water fails, we must always be thinking about getting another. This rain from Heaven often comes when the gardener least expects it. Yet it's true that at first it almost always comes after long mental prayer: as one degree of prayer follows another, the Lord takes this little bird and puts it into the nest where it may rest. Having watched it fly for a long time, striving with mind and will and all its strength to seek and please God, He is pleased, while it's still in this life, to give it its reward. And what a great reward! For even a moment of it is enough to repay the soul for all the trials it could possibly have endured.

While seeking God this way, the soul becomes aware that it's fainting almost completely away, in a kind of swoon with exceedingly great and sweet delight. It gradually stops breathing and all its bodily strength begins to fail: it cannot even move its hands without great pain; its eyes close involuntarily, or if they stay open, they can hardly see. The person can hear but cannot understand what they hear. They can grasp nothing with the senses, which only hinder the soul's joy and thus harm rather than help. It's useless to try to speak:

the mind cannot form a single word, nor, if it could, would there be strength to pronounce it. For in this condition all outward strength vanishes, while the soul's strength increases so it may better enjoy its bliss. The outward joy experienced is great and clearly recognized.

This prayer, however long it lasts, does no harm. At least, it has never harmed me, nor do I remember feeling any ill effects after the Lord granted me this favor, no matter how unwell I was before. Indeed, I'm generally much better for it. What harm could possibly come from so great a blessing? The outward effects are so remarkable that there can be no doubt something great has taken place. We experience a loss of strength, but the experience is so delightful that afterwards our strength grows greater.