

# Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Session 7

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Jim Finley: Greetings, everyone, and welcome into our time together turning for guidance to the teachings of the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross. In the previous session, I, in a sense, summarized *The Dark Night*, this transformative way of life which St. John of the Cross says we come to perfect union with God in so far as possible on this earth through love. And in this session, I want to move on from *The Dark Night* to the mystical union with God that blossoms in this night as it comes to fruition. So backing up a bit to put this into a context, remember in the opening session on John of the Cross when we were just starting out, we spoke of his life at that point where he was ordained to the priesthood in the Carmelite Order. And he was approached by Theresa of Avila, soon to be St. Mary's of Avila, who was a cloistered nun with the sisters in the Carmelite Order, same order that he was in.

Jim Finley: It says she felt called to reform the Carmelite Order and return to the primitive observance of a return to simplicity, prayer, and poverty and asked would he be willing to join her in reforming the houses of the men in a primitive observance. He prayed over it in a discerned call to do that. He informed the priest of his intentions to do this. They strongly objected and told him to cease and desist. He said he couldn't stop. He felt called by God to do it. So they imprisoned him in a room there is a monastery. Kept him prisoner there for nine months with extremely harsh treatment. And during those nine months, the physical stress of it, the emotional stress, and the spiritual crisis of it in terms of such brokenness within the church. He was with a priest, might assume [inaudible 00:02:24] taught him scripture, theology, and ordination preparing for ordination in the seminary, and that all caved in on him to the point that he lost the ability to be sustained by the presence of God overcome by such loss.

Jim Finley: And out of that utter loss and darkness there was arose in him a profound experience of his soul and a mystical communion with Christ and this love and this mystical love. And the expressions of this unity and love poured out of him as poetry, poetry and a poem entitled Stanzas *Between The Soul and the Bridegroom*. When he escaped from the prison and showed the poem around the people who read it were so moved by the depth and beauty of it they asked him if he would write a commentary on it. And so he did, which is the *Spiritual Canticle*. So this work of John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, is a commentary on that poem. And in that commentary, I then quoted passages from Thomas Merton's book, *The Inner Experience*, because that's the reason we started with Merton in this series. It is because he's a contemporary. He speaks to these things in a way that is more direct for us and more accessible to us.

Jim Finley: And so in *The Inner Experience*, Chapter Six, *Infused Contemplation*, he speaks to this union now that John of the cross is speaking of as infused contemplation. In Article Six of that chapter, "*Infused contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge.*" This is Merton. "*Contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure infused by him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experiential contact with him. Mystical contemplation is an intuition of God born of pure love. It is a gift of God. It absolutely transcends all the natural capacities of the soul.*" And so what I would like to do here is to turn to some passages in St. John of the Cross and the Canticle to see how he speaks of this mystical union. And the first passage that I want to share with you, I'm sharing it because I really see it as the essence of the matter, really. There's so many passages in the Canticle and in the

*Living Flame* that are like this, but he gives some sense of how he speaks of this.

Jim Finley: He speaks to this mystical union with Christ born out of this darkness as a sweet drink of God. He uses that poetic imagery. And he says in his commentary on the *Canticle*, this is his commentary on Stanza 27, Article Six. “In this sweet drink of God that is this mystical love born out of The Dark Night, in that sweet drink of God, in which the soul is imbibed in him, she, that is the soul, will most willingly and with intense delight surrender herself holy to him in the desire to be totally his and never to possess in herself anything other than him. God causes in this union the purity and perfection necessary for such a surrender.” So the soul is so moved by love as to completely give all that she is, all that the soul is, so that there is in the soul nothing but God. It’s emptied of everything but God. And then not only is there this love, but then also God is the one who empowers her and moves her to make such a self donation of herself to God in love.

Jim Finley: And since he transforms her in himself, he makes her entirely his own, that is God accepts the offer and makes the very essence the totality of the soul entirely God’s and God empties her of all that she possesses other than God. So completely emptied out so there’s just nothing in you anymore other than God. Hence, not only in her, not only in her will, but also in her works, she is really and totally given to God without keeping anything back. Just as God has freely given himself entirely to her, this union is so affected that the two wills are mutually paid, surrendered, and satisfied, and that neither fails the other in anything with the fidelity and stability of an espousal. I’d like to reflect on this, what this is. This is a state in which what the person experiences are very subjectivity, that is the very essence of who we are. Our very subjectivity is experienced as subsisting like light subsistent flame in a trans subjective communion with the very subjectivity of God being holy poured out and given to us as our very subjectivity in our nothingness without God, this communion of love.

Jim Finley: Next. Another key theme you see running through the *Canticle* and the *Living Flame* is this highly poetic language of this union is hidden. And so when we turn to how so is it hidden? And St. John of the Cross writes, this is the first stanza of *The Canticle*, he begins here by reminding us of the ministry of the divine indwelling revealed to us in faith. The kingdom of heaven is within you. Recall from St. Theresa of Avila on the seventh mansion of the soul, “The God whom the whole universe cannot contain is inside of you.” And St. Augustine, “Oh beauty ever ancient, ever new. I sought you without and you were within,” that deep within the hidden center of ourself is this very fullness of union with God that we’re searching. For St. John of the Cross says in commenting on stanza one, this is on the stanza of the poem, “Where have you hidden beloved and left me moaning?” It says, where it’s hidden is inside of you.”

Jim Finley: Article Eight, Stanza One, “It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a soul in mortal sin. How much less from one in a state of grace? What more do you want, oh soul, and what more do you search for outside when, within yourself, you’ve possessed the riches, delights, satisfactions, fullness and kingdom of your beloved, whom you desire and seek? Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection of Him, for you have Him so close to you. Desire Him there, adore Him there. Do not go in pursuit of Him outside of yourself. You will only become distracted and wearied, thereby. You shall not find Him or enjoy him more securely or sooner or more intimately than by seeking Him within you. There is but one difficulty, that even though He does abide within

you, He is hidden.

Jim Finley: Article Nine. The reason that He is hidden is He remains concealed, and you do not also conceal yourself in order to encounter and experience Him. Anyone who is to find a hidden treasure must enter the hiding place secretly and once He is discovered, He will be hidden, just as the treasure is hidden. Come then, oh most beautiful soul.

Jim Finley: Article 10. See? Since you know now that your desired beloved lives within your heart, strive to be really hidden with Him, and you will embrace Him within you and experience Him with loving affection.

Jim Finley: I'd like to reflect on this, hidden. I gave an image, I think, in an earlier talk, the image here. Imagine that God is hidden back in the darkness of a cave and we're standing outside of the cave and we're praying and aspiring to help others to live in a Christ-like way so that, in our devotional sincerity, we might coax God to come out of the cave and give us a big hug.

Jim Finley: And God does give us a hug. That as God does come forth and reveals himself, reveals herself to us, and so that God's infinite presence is revealed to us in our finite minds illumined by faith. The reading of the scripture, the words of Jesus, and the infinite presence of God comes out and is revealed in our finite capacity for love, to be loved. And it touches us with consolations within our assurances, with the felt sense of God's nearness, and so on. See?

Jim Finley: And these expressions or realization of God's oneness with us that moves us to respond and give ourselves to God is through the finite faculties of our soul, illumined by faith, efficacious under holding us. This is how we live our life. See? And then we believe, then, hold, that when we die and pass through the veil of death, the presence of infinite presence of God mediated incarnate in these finite ways of experiencing infinite presence of God will pass away.

Jim Finley: We will pass through the veil of death into an infinite union with the infinite mystery of God, sharing with God's life is perfectly as God shares in God's life and our nothingness without God in the light of glory. And so John of the Cross is saying, the God in a sense is the charism in which God doesn't wait until we're dead to begin this process. And that's the dark night, but the dark night of the soul as God weans us off our dependency on these finite ways of experiencing the infinite presence of God by rendering us powerless to experience him.

Jim Finley: Do you remember the three signs in meditation? And the felt sense of God's nearness is gone. The understanding, oh God, it's gone. And in that powerlessness, there begins to slowly emerge, not at first because it's so delicate, a general loving awareness without regard for anything in particular, that quiet, subtle, luminous attentiveness at empty-handed attempted newness is the opening through which this mystical union with God occurs as we continue on through the dark night.

Jim Finley: And Thomas Merton then clarifies [the dark] is hidden. To whom is it hidden? It's hidden from us in so far, as we're still identified with the powers of our finite soul in our powers to reflect, to comprehend, to grasp, to seize, hold up, to have on our

terms. As long as we're still at that finite level, it remains hidden. So what happens here in the grace of the Canticle is not just God's presence mediated through our finite senses and the faculties of the soul, but it's the unmediated presence of God passing right through those abilities into the innermost center of our soul, granting us a taste of union beyond thought, beyond word, beyond feeling, a foretaste of paradise, whereas in heaven, it's in glory, in the light of glory. But here, it's very obscure, very hidden, very subtle, very deep, the very precious, vast and true.

Jim Finley: And this is why Merton said, again, going back to Thomas Merton and the inner experience ... So this, he makes clear about to whom is it hidden. It's an intuition that, on a smaller level, transcends the senses. So it's hidden from us in so far, as we were dependent on the senses to feel God's presence. And when it's higher level, it transcends our intellect in so far, as we're depending on trying to understand God, comprehend God in our beliefs and so forth.

Jim Finley: Hence, number two, it is characterized by quality of light and darkness, knowing an unknowing. It is beyond feeling, beyond concepts. And in this contact with God, article three, in darkness, there must be a certain activity of love on both sides. On God's side, it's already taken care, but the infinite love of God is infinitely giving itself away, holding complete to you, as the beloved, as the one God created to have someone to completely give God to.

Jim Finley: And on your side, you're to respond by withdrawing from attachments to all that is less than that love. So when sitting in prayer, it isn't as if one might not have a feeling of God's presence, but you realize that feeling of God's presence, as real as it is, is infinitely less than the unmediated infinite love, quietly, secretly pouring into you, infinitely beyond that feeling. It isn't as if, sitting there in prayer, you don't have an insight into the things of God. It isn't that that isn't a gift, but that insight being an insight of your finite mind, illumined by faith, is infinitely less than the infinite wisdom of God, being secretly and unexplainably poured into you and given to you as your own wisdom and your nothingness without God.

Jim Finley: So this is the feeling of this. See? So what is this like? You're still living your life. You're just you. You live your day-by-day life. And when you sit in prayer, you've come to a certain place where, fairly quickly, it falls into this gentle simplicity. And in this gentle simplicity, you sense that this love is being poured into you or infused into you in a way that you, yourself, can directly experience it, even though you're the one that it's happening to. That is your observing self. So you can tell that something amazing is happening, something vast and precious, oceanic in all directions. See?

Jim Finley: And the aura of it kind of shines out in your reflections as a kind of a state of amazement, or maybe it might be the gift of tears, or it might be the deepening of the quiet, but it's not there for the having. See? It's the outer [boundy 00:19:08] of God being poured out and given to us in this way.

Jim Finley: Next is that this love he says, another example of this love, is that this love renders God a prisoner of love. And this is The Canticle, Chapter 32, and the commentary on stanza 32. This is the introduction to stanza 32. The power and tenacity of love is

great, for love captures and binds God, himself.

Jim Finley: "... for love, captures and binds God himself. Happy is the loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner, and he is surrendered to her in all her desires. God is such that those who act with love and friendship toward him will make him do all that they desire. But if they act otherwise, there will be no speaking to him, there will be no speaking to him or power with him, even though they go to extremes. Yet by love, they bind him with one hair." And the text that's being commented on here is you considered that one hair fluttering at my neck, you gazed upon it. You gazed it upon my neck and it captivated you. And one of my eyes wounded you." That is to say. And he says, "This hair fluttering on the neck of the beloved, which is you, is the fortitude of your love."

Jim Finley: Let me give it another example. Remember in an earlier talk, we were talking about how this fullness of love rains down into and is fully present in the very least for stirrings of the ordinariness of love. And I think what we're talking here about then, in human terms for us let's say, is an experience where in a marriage, say where the love for the beloved, or say the love for the child, or to say the teacher's love for the student, or let's say when committed to healing, in the work of healing with those they seek to heal in the community, that the love is so deep that you give your whole self to it as a vocation or kind of a calling. So to with the artists, or to with the poet, with the solitary and this utter fortitude of love, you expend yourself and give yourself in love. And the more you give yourself in love to the beloved, the more the love flows back into you.

Jim Finley: And so he says this is a kind of an echo of God. So God is rendered a kind of a prisoner, it's like how to learn to die of love at the hands of love to the point that there's nothing left in you but love. And because there's nothing left in you but love, and because God is love, you are then held prisoner by that love, which is the infinite freedom of God. The paradoxical freedom of God, that God is our prisoner.

Jim Finley: I love this quote by Mechtild, we'll be looking at her later, one of the Beguine mystics. And she says God has revealed to her that God has so freely chosen to be so hopelessly in love with her. God honestly doesn't know if he could handle being God without her. And she says, "Take me home with you. I'll be your physician forever."

Jim Finley: Here, I'd like to go back to something here on this, the subtlety of this love is that... Remember in *The Ascent To Mt. Carmel*... Let me find it right here. In *The Ascent To Mt. Carmel*, stanza five, he's talking about the dark night. See, which is this purgation, this dryness and emptiness in which we're being weaned off our dependency on these finite means of experiencing the infinite presence of God. And he says of this night, stanza five, see, "O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn! O night that has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the Beloved in her Lover." And so we are transformed by our infinite lover, in to the infinite love of the lover, transforming us into itself. This kind of deification through love.

Jim Finley: But here, I want to suggest to you here by being God's prisoner, there's something else, I was talking to Mirabai Starr about this, say poetically, that while that's true, that is true, can we also say that if in Philippians, in Kenosis, if speaking of Christ, if he did not consider his equality with God a condition to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking the form of a

servant, is it possible, could we say, that God so freely chooses to not consider his equality in being God a condition to be clung to, but empties himself in this love as the beloved? And so empties himself in this love, empties herself in this love... It isn't just that the lover is transformed in the lover, but rather the beloved and the lover are transformed into each other.

Jim Finley: There's a kind of a mystical mutuality and reciprocity in the emptiness of God being emptied of infinity through love for this infinite communion of love of an equality or mutuality in God through love. While at the same time, through all eternity, remaining forever nothing without God. And God... Although totally surrendering over infinity to this love, this love bond with us, which is our destiny in love, and also the fulfillment of God's will for us is that while pouring out completely in this union with us, God remains forever infinitely more besides.

Jim Finley: You can kind of see then... I want to end here, that first of all, this highly poetic language, there's going to be another session with Kirsten with your questions and also her questions, because sometimes out of that dialogue helps to get our bearings. But I want to suggest two final thoughts. The first thought is that, let's say you've come to a place where you're drawn to sit with this, and clearly, you're not sitting with it to understand it, because that would be your finite understanding. This is words in the service of, that embody and evoke cannot be understood. But notice, although it's a union that cannot be understood, there's a certain understanding, which are the words of St. John of the Cross, which are the words of the mystics, there is a language that bodies forth and evokes and sustains that which is beyond what words can say.

Jim Finley: So my thought, if you're inclined to do this at all, and say that you would sit and read John of the Cross, like as a prayer, or as if you're listening to music, and you'd read it very slowly. And when you're struck with a single sentence, see, by the beauty of it, you would stop and sit in the silence and let the beauty of the word silence you in the deepening of this love. And then pick up where you left off and read again until you find a word that silences you. You know that along the way, there's a lot you don't understand. You let it go for now. Of course, that's okay. But you're drawn by the music of a language so that the language somehow embodies the sustained, ever so delicate, ever so subtle communion in love that you treasure.

Jim Finley: John of the Cross is one of these people that God has empowered to speak to us in such a way that it accesses our heart, and we're moved by the intimate beauty of the incomprehensible. And we learned this wordlessly resting in God, resting in us unexplainably, and then carried out throughout the day.

Jim Finley: One last thought. Again, returning back to the beginning, that they're on this earth, this is obscure and subtle. You pass through death, and it's in the light of glory, it's a foretaste of eternal life. Somehow, already intimately here, unexplainably in all directions in some hidden way we can't explain. And the fjord is beyond the darkness of this world, but it is a darkness... It transcends the darkness of this world by radicalizing our presence in it, because so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son. So the evidence, or the fruit of the authenticity of this union, is the concreteness which the such an awakened person lives this out day by day.

- Jim Finley: And remember the stories in John of the Cross we shared, that in one of the journals, one of the friars kept... When they would go off for their little walks, they would go out in small little groups. One said, "We're always hoping that John of the Cross would join our group, because he always makes us laugh." And remember too, the deep affection he had for Teresa, and Teresa for him, and the deep love they had for this other, this very intimate [animas 00:29:56] mystical friendship with each other.
- Jim Finley: And also, there's John of the Cross, since he was raised in poverty, his sensitivity to the poor. And also when he died.
- Jim Finley: Oh, there's noise of the construction next door, right on time.
- Jim Finley: And then when he died, there was one of the friars that was a superior of the house he was dying in. He invited them in to his sick bed. And he said, "Whatever I've done to contribute to the problems between us, I apologize." And the superior was so moved by it, he said he came out crying.
- Jim Finley: And so, the paradox of this all is, it comes full circle into the radicality of this love is expressed in the deepening, almost childlike simplicity of the person. And that's why you sense it to be in their presence, you're in the presence of God. Because as someone who has been so surrendered over into God, and they have returned by giving themselves to God, in that reciprocity, that's the reality of it.
- Jim Finley: And then imagine you could have John of the Cross as your spiritual director. That my sense, I'm thinking of Thomas Merton here for me, is I'm convinced, if you could sit with John of the Cross, you would feel that you're in the presence of a very present person. You would also sense you're in the presence of someone who is extremely attentive to everything that you've said. And opened everything, and one with everything. And would join you in your dilemma, with your question.
- Jim Finley: And would join you in such a way that the presence of the person would help you become more present to the unexpected nearness of God in the midst of where you are right at that moment. And you'd come away grateful for the encounter with him. And because he wrote out of his heart, his words embody his deathless presence. See, the deathless presence of the mystic teacher.
- Jim Finley: And so, when we read John of the Cross, all these mystics, in a childlike, sincere way, we can feel John of the Cross helping us, and assisting us, and guiding us in our own journey. And so, we'll end here with a meditation.
- Jim Finley: I invite you to sit straight, and fold your hands and bow. By the way, if you can hear that hammering next door, see, this is the infinite love of God being poured out as the intimate immediacy of that hammering. And that person who's hammering away to make a living, to feed his family, to make the home that a person's going to be living in, and God is present in it.
- Jim Finley: And in our work, we're trying to heighten our sensitivity to the divinity of the immediacy of such things. Fold your hands and bow. Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am.

Be still and know. Be still. Be. [silence 00:33:34].

Jim Finley: Our father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen. Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. Saint Theresa of Ávila, pray for us. Saint John of the Cross, pray for us.

Jim Finley: Blessings till next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So if you have a question, please email us at [podcasts@cac.org](mailto:podcasts@cac.org), or send us a voicemail. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.