

We begin with something John says to us in *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, book 2, chapter 28:1. We're well into the book and he makes this important statement. 'The discreet reader must always keep in mind my intention and goal for this book:' and here's his intention and goal. 'to guide the soul in purity of faith through all its natural and supernatural apprehensions, in freedom from deception and every obstacle, to divine union with God'. There in one sentence John tells us what all his writings are about, everything he wants to write and teach summed up in that sentence; but he's not just summing it up for us there, he's also giving us a very important principle for reading his writings. We must keep before our eyes the goal. Where is this going to? That's something John tells us a number of times in different ways, it's a fundamental for the spiritual life. St. Teresa also puts this very strongly, 'If you set out on this road, you must have your eyes upon the end of the road, not the beginning, not the middle, you must be focused on the end'. She puts it very strongly at times 'Keep going to the end of the road, no stopping anywhere on the way'. And to understand John's writings we'll need to keep this principle in mind; always where is he going with this? Sometimes his writings can be difficult, sometimes we think 'What is he talking about here?' But we keep in mind, where's this going to, what's the purpose of this? So 'The discreet reader', and John puts it in at this particular stage of the *Ascent* because he realises that this is the place where people can really lose track of where this is going. He pulls us back to the purpose of this. So it's his intention, it's why he writes and it's the goal and most of this we have seen in various ways already. But the person, the soul, is guided in purity of faith, that is the only way to make this journey. In purity of faith, there can be no other way, we only make progress through faith, by living in faith. So it is always walking in faith.

If we look at his poem *The Dark Night*, one sees there that the entire spiritual journey is within this dark night of faith. There doesn't come a stage when one is no longer in the dark night, as we've seen one is in deeper and deeper darkness. Every stage of the spiritual life is living in faith. The guidance is always in the darkness of faith, that's the guidance that's given, how to live within the darkness of faith and what it is. Through all its natural and supernatural apprehensions, that's everything a person could ever see, hear, receive, experience, in everyday life in one's person, or whether it is supernatural visions, revelations, ecstasies, whatever one might be having, whatever it might be, natural or supernatural, whether from the devil or from God, or from life experience or imagination, or whatever it is that the person is perceiving, knowing, experiencing, everything, the person must be guided through in purity of faith, nothing else.

‘In freedom from deception’, because anything can deceive as St. Paul said even the devil can turn himself into an angel of light; everything can deceive, even things that are very good, ‘and from every obstacle’ whatever the obstacle might be, and of course the greatest obstacle is always oneself, and one’s incomplete understanding of things, or one’s appetites; so whatever the obstacles might be; ‘freedom from deception and every obstacle to divine union with God’. Nothing less than that, union with God; or as we’ve seen that’s John’s preferred way of expressing the goal at the end of the spiritual life. He prefers that to sanctity or other terms that are often used.

Union with God, John has already defined what he means by that, and I think it would be worth perhaps looking at it. It’s in the Ascent, book 2 chapter 5. One of the things one notices about the Ascent is that it might be at some level the most difficult of John’s four main works to read, or to follow his arguments at times. It’s the book that contains so many essential pieces of advice that one needs to understand John’s thinking; to understand his overall way of seeing things and this term union with God. Here he defines for us what he means by that. He speaks about it many times in his writings, it’s everywhere, union with God. But here is the one place that he actually defines what he means by it; and it’s in book 2, chapter 5:3. Really the whole chapter is what’s meant by it, but the kernel is here at paragraph 3. ‘To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it He conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist.’ He then goes on to say that this isn’t the union we’re talking about but is a very important union in John’s way of thinking, and the way that he sees the other person and the way that he sees the whole of nature, of creation. God lives substantially and that’s the word he uses, in every person, even the greatest of sinners, even those who have very explicitly rejected God, rejected a relationship with God, He dwells substantially in them. He is in relationship with them. God never ceases to be in relationship with a person, though a person may cease to be in relationship with God, God never ceases to be in relationship with the person. And that’s a very important fundamental for how John sees the human being, for the whole way that John ministered to people. Every human being is somebody in whom God dwells, and God is in relationship with them, and is sustaining that person in being, because for the whole of life we are dependent upon God.

But, he says, that is not what we are now speaking about, we’re speaking about a different kind of union, and the union that we’re speaking about, he said, is the ‘soul’s

union with and the transformation in God that does not always exist except where there is likeness of love'. That's the key to it all. It's union with a transformation in God. In other words not only is one united with God now, but one is transformed, changed; transformed through a process of growth and maturing that only exists where there is likeness of love. That is the key, where love now goes in both directions, not just in one direction; God always loves the person, but this union with God exists when the love is reciprocal. And as we see in the *Spiritual Canticle*, it is impossible for a human beings love to be equal to God's love; but John says there that the very nature of love is that the person wants to respond with a love equal to the love received; but that is impossible when it is the divine and the human, because no matter how much the human being loves, the person is always going to be limited, compromised, distorted, incomplete, because of the human nature. In the *Spiritual Canticle* (Stanza 38) we see that the Bridegroom so transforms the bride that He gives the bride the instruments with which to love. Therefore the Bridegroom puts into the bride the very ability to love reciprocally, so that the person now has the capacity to love with a love equal to the love that God gives, which is God's own love. This reciprocal love is what John of the Cross calls God by participation.

Sometimes over history that term has been misunderstood in John of the Cross' works, he's not saying that the person becomes a god or an equal to God, but rather that God gives the person the capacity to love with a love that is beyond the limits of human nature. With a love that is bigger than the limited capacity that a human being has. A love that is something of the love of God. That's what he means by being transformed into God's love. So where there is likeness of love, it's when a person loves with the love that God has given her, the capacity for love that God has given her. John goes on then just to clarify what he means by that. 'We will call it the union of likeness; and the former, the essential or substantial union. The union of likeness is supernatural; the other natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love'. So that's the process of spiritual growth, everything that's repugnant, everything that's opposed, everything that's not in conformity with God's will, with God's love, that has to be healed, purified, and transformed, so that the person is transformed into God through love. So that's how John defines what he means by union with God, and that's something that we must always keep in mind, that's where it's going to, and that's the process.

And so John's teaching is all about helping the person to make this journey; and John's purpose most particularly is to help the person at the time when the person is in most need.

The key word to describe the experience of prayer of the person is contemplation, and in the traditional understanding of the word. It's used differently nowadays, that's why it can confuse people sometimes; for John it's what God does in prayer; prayer is a dialogue between God and the person, contemplation is God's part of the dialogue. It is supernatural, it's what God does. And the journey is one of conforming oneself to what God is doing.

Just want to look briefly at the Dark Night, book 2, chapter 5, where John defines contemplation for us. Another key definition of John's writing and thinking. There a few other texts where John defines contemplation, but one is enough for us. To set the scene for that, let us look at chapter 4:2 where he defines the journey for us, before he begins to speak on contemplation. He's commenting now on the first stanza of the poem the Dark Night for the third time in John's writings, each time from a different perspective. The entire Ascent of Mt. Carmel is one commentary, the Dark Night book 1, and chapter 3 of book 2; and now the third time beginning of chapter 5. In chapter 4:2 he sets the scene for us. 'This was a great happiness and a sheer grace for me, for through the annihilation and calming of my faculties, passions, appetites and affections, by which my experience and satisfaction in God were base, I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God's operation and way of acting'. From everything that is base to God's way of acting, God's way of seeing things, nothing less than that is happening. That's this total transformation of the person, from a human way of acting, according to one's faculties, passions, appetites and affections, by that he means the whole person, every way that we act, operate and perceive things. All of that now has been calmed and annihilated and the person sees things in God's way.

He further defines it saying, 'My intellect departed from itself, changing from human and natural to divine. For united with God through this purgation, it no longer understands by means of its natural vigour and light, but by means of the divine wisdom to which it was united'. The mind of a person is adapted, and John tells us that it doesn't mean that the person stops using the knowledge that they have and the experience they've acquired or anything like that, it's that the light of God's wisdom now shines upon it. So when the person uses scientific knowledge, yes, they're using the scientific knowledge the person has learned and acquired, but God's wisdom is now shining on it. It's not a rejection of any earthly and human knowledge, because that also comes from God, but it's now seeing it in a completely different way, through the light and wisdom of God.

And then, 'the will departed from itself and became divine', that's loving as God united with divine love. 'The memory too has changed into eternal apprehensions of glory. And

finally, all the strength and affections of the soul, by means of this night and purgation of the old self, are renewed with divine qualities and delights'. The whole person, that's the transformation of the whole person, and that's taking place at this point in the Dark Night, and it's here now, that John reminds us of what contemplation is; gives another key reminder of what is going on, when a person most needs to be reminded; because a person doesn't know what is going on as we've already seen and is in the deepest darkness here.

So, the beginning of chapter 5:1. This is John's key definition of contemplation, 'This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul'. And that's a wonderful expression, this inflow, the flowing in. Elsewhere he describes it as a river that saturates everything. Water reaches everywhere as we know when there's a flood, there is no stopping water, it goes everywhere; so this divine inflow goes everywhere in the person. By soul, of course we have to be careful with that; nowadays we tend to understand soul in a more restricted way than John did, John had a broader understanding of the term soul, for him it's the whole person, or the true person, the person as God created them to be. When he says here that it's an inflow of God into the soul, he means that the grace of God, this life of God has reached every dimension of the person. For as he has shown earlier on, all transformation is spiritual, it's the spiritual that effects the whole person; it's the work of the Spirit and therefore it completes the spiritual transformation of the whole person. So that's the inflow of God reaching everything in the person; and that includes the person's relationships, outlook, ways of seeing things, the whole person in every sense of the person.

And now he defines what happens. It purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, we've already seen the cleansing and purging of everything, at a natural and spiritual level. We're now talking about infused contemplation and mystical theology, terms that were very much used in John's time, 'Through this contemplation then, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love, without it doing anything or understanding how this happens'. This knowledge we've been speaking about, this life that comes in, a whole new way of being and seeing things. So God teaches secretly and instructs in the perfection of love; that's what God is always doing, teaching always about love and perfecting love. And the teaching is secret, in other words it's secret from the mind, the intellect, it's secret from the heart, it's secret from all the ways the human will perceive something. But at another level, of course, it's not secret at all, because the person becomes aware in some way of the change that has happened. That may take a long time to adapt to, this different way of seeing things. The effects of this teaching is that the person has changed but doesn't know how they have changed; the

person knows but doesn't know how they know. This knowledge is there. The way John describes it is that the knowledge is there without knowing how it has come, or where it has come from. Most things that we know someone has told us, or we've read it, or we have seen it, or experienced it, with this there is none of that, but the knowledge is there. So He instructs secretly without us doing anything or understanding how it happens. And that can be very difficult for us as we like to be involved, we like to have control and feel that it is our project, and that we're doing it. This can be one of the great struggles within the person, I'm not doing this! But without doing anything it doesn't mean that the person is idle, or in a term that John uses here, is passive.

The passive night, he's all the time using this word passive, but the person is not passive in the ordinary sense of the word; it's not like lying in an operating theatre and something is being done to you, that's not how it is. To be passive in a spiritual sense is to be wholly and one hundred percent involved. All one's prayer now is one of receiving. He tells us in The Living Flame it's a passivity that is giving one's consent, it's receiving, it's not being an obstacle, or getting in the way. The person is as committed or more committed than ever, and that's what is seen in the new way the person is living. The person has no awareness or even only the slightest hint that something of this may be going on in them; but what they may be aware of, and others aware of, is that this person is very committed to charity, to their Christian lives, to their prayer life, to everything in life: there's a level of commitment and self giving and the fruits of this; the person is not living some kind of idle or passive way of life, but is more active than ever. But that activity may not be great big works, with some people it might be but it's simply being faithful

The Dark Night chapter 5:1 second paragraph, 'Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining,' it purges and cleanses, it takes away, it cuts off, and it gives light, and by purging and illumining it 'prepares the soul for union with God through love'. That's what it's doing. And in order to be united with God, one has to become like God, and he then tells us 'Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and illumines the blessed spirits purges and illumines the soul here on earth'. John's teaching on purgatory. What happens here if it's not done in this world, God gives the opportunity in the next world for it to be done, because every person who comes face to face with God must be healed, purged and transformed by this loving wisdom of God. So whether it happens here or in the next life, it's the same process, it's the same preparation for coming face to face with God, preparation for complete union with God.

So that's what John is setting out to teach and to guide the person along this road, and it's a journey of love, of growing in love, of being transformed in love, it is love that changes a person. For John the human being is only changed by love. Nothing else changes the human being, no rules, coercion, persuasion or anything else changes the human being, only love does. Those other things might change external practices, but only love fundamentally changes the human being, because it's only love that changes from within. Love changes from the deepest place within and works outwards. Any other attempt to change starts from outside and works inwards and that ultimately doesn't work, because it doesn't change and transform the deepest place within. Only love can bring about irreversible, fundamental change in the person. Only the love that changes and transforms the person and it is always God's love or human love transformed by God's love; only that can bring about that fundamental change in the deepest place within, that place where God dwells, where the true human person is.