

Saint John of the Cross
edited by Mirabai Starr

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Praise to you, Saint John of the Cross, whose loving embrace of the mystery teaches me to find sweet refuge in the unknown and the unknowable.

You quietly labored to drain the cup of self so that the Beloved could fill you.

Gentle monk, with flames leaping in your heart, light my way through the dark night of my soul.

Let doubt become my ally, and longing my friend.

Burn whatever stands between me and union with the Beloved.

Thank you.

Amen.

— Mirabai Starr

Devotion, Prayers, and Living Wisdom

Saint John of the Cross

The Dark Night of Prison

Juan de la Cruz was twenty-nine years old and madly in love with God. The great living saint Teresa of Avila had recognized a rare sanctity and brilliance in this humble young friar and placed him in charge of her first reform convent. Then, late one night, threatened by this movement to return the order to the contemplative path embodied by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the mainstream Carmelites whisked him away and imprisoned him in Toledo.

His cell was a tiny closet that had formerly served as a latrine. There was not enough room to lie down, and the only window was far above his head. Through it, he could chart the course of three or four stars at a time as they passed slowly through space. Mostly, he sat very still in the darkness, shivering through the cold months, sweltering in the heat.

Twice a day, the friars took him out and flogged him. "Denounce Teresa!" they demanded. "Renounce the heresy of this so-called reform!" But he would not betray the dream. The dream of a life of voluntary simplicity, solitude, and silence. A contemplative life based on the Gospel teachings of poverty of spirit and charity of heart. A life of stripping away, rather than accumulating. Of relinquishing power and seeking nothing. Of nothing but loving friendship with the Divine and loving service to his creation.

When he was back in his cell, they would say terrible things in a stage whisper outside his door. "Did you hear?" one friar would hiss to another. "Teresa of Avila has been arrested and her followers have all abandoned her. The reform has collapsed." They were lying.

Other times, they would mock the prisoner: "I guess your friends don't care about you after all, Father. Not a word from anyone. It appears you have been entirely forgotten, as if you never existed at all." More lies.

He was not concerned about being remembered by human beings. But as the months ground by, he began to fear that he had been abandoned by the Holy One. For the first time in his life, he questioned the existence of a God he could no longer feel or remember. And, as his soul dried up, he found he could no longer even conceive of this God to whom he had dedicated everything. Whenever he tried to pray, all he encountered was a cavernous emptiness. He cried out, "Where have you hidden, my Beloved?"

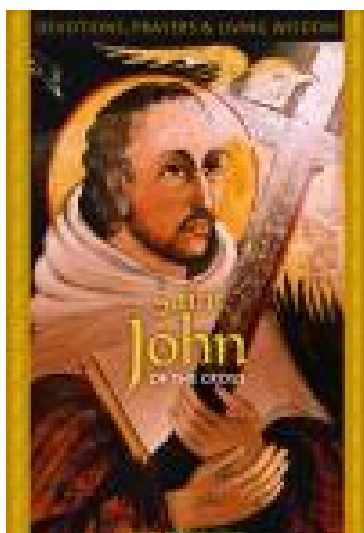
Echoing from this cry came an outpouring of love poetry to God. He committed each poem to memory and recited them all again and again until they were etched on his heart. His poems became simultaneously a call to and a response from his Beloved.

Little by little, into the darkness of his isolation, the love of God flowed, illuminating his shattered heart and filling him with quiet joy. At last, one dark night, a sympathetic guard turned the other way as the frail friar made his escape. Taking refuge among the sisters in a nearby convent, he fell into an ecstatic state, from which he never recovered.

The Darkness that is Light

Even though this holy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to light up everything.
— St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*

Sometimes in the spiritual life, if you are very lucky, the Holy One slams the door shut and plunges you into darkness. This may occur when you are at your best, basking in the glow of tender feelings of devotion in prayer and practice, when, all at once, the ancient teachings of the masters make perfect sense. You find your old ego has become less cantankerous and is giving you more moments of peace. You are beginning to entertain notions of being a guide to others. People seem to be drawn toward your natural equanimity and inspiring way with words. But,



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Love greatly those who speak against you and do not love you, because in this way love will come to birth in a heart that has none.

That is what God does with us: he loves us, that we might love him, through the love he has for us.

— St. John of the Cross

suddenly, God bores you. Suddenly, you do not have any idea who this God even is.

Spiritual practice turns out to be more tedious than a teeth-cleaning, and just about as holy. Studying sacred literature feels like reading an economics textbook from the 1950s. Where not long ago you sat in the cathedral singing to God, tears of joy streaming down your face, now your heart has turned to stone and you have stopped going to church. You used to be able to meditate for an hour and it felt like five minutes. Now you watch the clock as the minutes limp by and finally decide to get up off the cushion and go back to bed.

What's happening here? You suspect you have been very bad and God is punishing you, if he even exists at all, which is beginning to seem more and more unlikely. You resign yourself to abandonment. If you were God, you would give up on you, too, worthless wretch that you are.

You decide to confide in a couple of spiritual people you know. They smile knowingly and assure you that everyone grapples with periods of dryness and obscurity along the spiritual journey. They affirm your basic goodness and remind you that you are not so special that God would forsake you and nobody else. They quote from the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Heart Sutra*. Their words only make you feel worse. It's obvious that they have never felt what you are feeling and do not understand you at all.

You withdraw into yourself. Which is exactly where God wants you.

Even though it impoverishes her, emptying her of natural inclinations, it is only so she will reach out for the divine and freely enjoy the fruits of all things, of above and of below.

— **St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul***

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