

Distress and Dereliction Lesson

Up until now, we have mostly been talking about the attempts of mystics over the centuries to develop a closer intimacy with God, and we have seen their efforts to describe what those moment of intimacy, or spiritual union, are like. We have been able to see some common threads tie these different experiences of different mystics together, but we have also been able to see how each experience is utterly unique.

In this session, we turn away from these experiences of union to their opposite: experiences of distress and dereliction, or what really amount to experiences of the absence of God. In many ways, these experiences of absence are just as powerfully part of the mystical tradition as are the experiences of presence.

In Matthew's Gospel (27:46), as Jesus is being crucified, he calls out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", which is a quote of Psalm 21:2. Many mystics who have experienced divine absence find some comfort in this verse, which they take to be a reference to Jesus' own experience of divine abandonment just before his own death. If the Son of God can have a moment in which he experiences distance from God, then regular people could expect to have these experiences, as well.

For most of the mystics who wrote about this experience of divine absence, they were trying not simply to describe these experiences but to make them meaningful in some way. Often, it was understood to be something like sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Some found inspiration in a verse from Romans, in which Paul suggests that he would be willing to be accursed by God and separated from Christ if that meant that his people, the Jewish people, could be saved. Perhaps, some of them thought, their participation in the suffering of Christ through this experience of divine absence could somehow serve a purpose for others.

The selection of writing that we have before us today covers a span of 13 centuries, from Gregory the Great in the late 6th and early 7th centuries to Therese of Lisieux at the end of the 19th century.

Gregory the Great

Gregory is, of course, someone we have heard from before. This passage is from his commentary on the book of Job, written between 586 and 591. For Gregory, human beings need to be "pierced" by compunction in order to truly begin the path that leads back to God. This comes in two forms: the compunction of fear when God strikes us with a sense of our sinfulness and the need to repent, and the compunction that comes when we realize how deeply God loves us, and that love draws us toward God. This idea of the "compunction of love" is really just another term for contemplation, what

Gregory understood to be that attentive interior gaze that toward God that he believed was the purpose of human life.

Thus at one time [God] pierces us with love; at another time with terror. Sometimes he shows us how little present reality is and lifts up our hearts to desire the eternal world; sometimes he first points to the things of eternity so that temporal things may grow worthless in our eyes. Sometimes he discloses to us our own evil deeds and from there draws us on to the point of feeling sorrow for the evil deeds of others; sometimes he presents to our eyes the evil deeds of others and reforms us from our own wickedness, pierced with a wonderful feeling of compunction.

Therefore, so long as we are beset by the corruptions of the flesh, we in no way behold the brightness of the divine power as it abides unchangeable in itself. This is because in the eye of our weakness we cannot endure that which shines above us with intolerable luster from the ray of his eternal being. And so when the Almighty shows himself to us by the chinks of contemplation, he does not speak to us, but whispers, in that though he does not fully make himself known, yet he reveals something of himself to the human mind. But then he no longer whispers at all, but speaks, when his appearance is manifested to us in certainty. It is for this that the Truth says in the Gospel, "I shall show you plainly the Father" (Jn 16:25).

But we must bear in mind that in proportion as the soul being lifted up contemplates his power, so being held back, it fears his omnipotence.

For the higher the elevation, where the mind of man contemplates the things that are eternal, so much the more, terror-struck at her temporal deeds, she shrinks with dread in that she thoroughly discovers herself guilty, in proportion as she sees herself to have been out of harmony with that light that shines in the midst of darkness above her. Then it happens that the enlightened mind entertains the greater fear, as it more clearly sees by how much it is at variance with the rule of truth. And she that before seemed as it were more secure in seeing nothing, trembles with grave fear at her very own success. Yet whatever her progress in virtue, she does not as yet understand anything of eternity in a clear way, but still sees under a kind of dark imagining. And hence this is called a "vision of the night." For as we have said above, in the night we see doubtfully, but in the day we see steadily. Therefore, because in contemplating the ray of the interior Sun the cloud of our corruption interposes itself and the unchangeable Light does not burst forth such as it is to the weak eyes of our mind, we still behold God as it were "in a vision of the night," since we most surely walk the way under shadowing contemplation.

Angela of Folgino: The Memorial

Angela lived from about 1250 to 1309. We are not sure if Angela was actually her name, but we do know that she was born in Umbria into a middle-class family. She

was married with two children, and she experienced a conversion in 1285 through the intervention of St. Francis. Soon after, her husband and children died, and she was subsequently received in to the third order of the Franciscans in 1291. In that same year, she experienced a public ecstasy while on pilgrimage to Assisi, an event that brought her to the attention of one of the friars, who began to write about her life and experiences. She related her mystical path to him, and he tried to put it into some sensible order in a work called "The Memorial".

Angela's path is a complicated one, and the scribe had difficulty relating it. Her early mystical stages contain many visionary and erotic manifestations of Jesus, but the final steps of her path pass beyond this visionary dimension. I have shared with you part of the description of the sixth step, which is a rather searing account of an experience of mystical dereliction.

The sixth step is a martyrdom of multiple and intolerable suffering and martyring, both through bodily ills and through countless horrible torments of soul and body stirred up by many demons in a horrible way.

In brief, concerning the sufferings of her body, I heard from her that there was not a single part of her body that did not suffer in a horrible way.

Concerning the torments of soul that she suffered from the demons, she was able to come up with no better comparison than that of a person hung by the neck, with his hands bound behind his back and blindfolded, who is hung by a rope on the gallows and yet lives, who remains without any aid, any kind of support or help. And she added that she was even more desperately and cruelly tortured by the demons.

Christ's faithful one spoke as follows. I behold the demons hold my soul up in suspension in such a way that, just as a hanged person has no support, so too there seems to be no support left for my soul. All its virtues are overthrown while the souls sees, knows, and looks on. Then, when the souls sees that all the virtues have been overthrown and departed, and that she can do nothing about it, there is such great pain – such desperate pain as well as anger of the soul – that I am scarcely able at any time to weep over this desperate sorrow and anger. There are times that I cry without being able to stop. There are times when such great anger ensures that I am scarcely able to stop from totally tearing myself apart. There are also times when I can't hold myself back from striking myself in a horrible way, and sometimes my head and limbs are swollen. When the soul begins to see all the virtues fall down and fall away, then there is fear and lament, and I speak to God, calling out again and again to God without letup, saying to him, "My Son, my Son, do not leave me, my Son!" (Mt 27:46).

Christ's faithful one said: While I am in the most horrible darkness of the demons it seems that any kind of hope of the good is lacking – it is a terrible darkness. The vices that I know were dead in my soul are brought back to life, and the demons

rouse them up in the soul from the outside – and they even raise to life vices that were never there. They did the same in the body (where I suffer less) in three places, that is, in the sexual places. There was so great a fire there that I used to use material flame to extinguish the other fire until [her confessor] forbade it. For the time during which I am in that darkness, I believe that I would rather be burned than to suffer those pains; indeed, I would then call out and shout for any kind of death that God would give me.

John Tauler: Sermon 3 – for the 12th Day of Christmas

John Tauler lived through some of the most difficult years of the 14th century, being witness to climate change, natural disasters, endemic warfare, persecutions of the Jews, and the Black Death that killed almost half the population in large parts of Europe. His sense of the necessity for suffering on the path to God, however, does not appear to be a reaction to these external ills. Rather, it was his experience as a preacher and spiritual guide among both religious women and men that moved him to explore the role of inner dereliction and suffering. He tries to make clear that, in his view, the purpose of these trials is to cleanse a person of all self-reliance and pride in accomplishments and to teach pure and disinterested reliance on God.

The kings offered myrrh, incense, and gold. Take, first of all, myrrh, which is bitter and indicates the bitterness that is involved in a person's finding God – when a person first turns away from the world to God, but before he drives out all desires and pleasures. For it is necessary that everything a person possessed with desire must be driven out. This is at first very bitter and very hard. All things must become bitter for you to the degree that you found pleasure in them.

There is another kind of myrrh that by far transcends the first kind. This is the myrrh that God gives, whatever kind of suffering it might be, interior or external. The person who accepts this myrrh in love and out of the ground from which God gives it – what a blissful life might be born in such a person! Also, what joy, what peace, what a noble thing that would be! Indeed, the least and the greatest suffering that God lets befall you issues forth from the ground of his inexpressible love, a love so great that it is the loftiest and best gift that he could give you or ever did give. If you only know how to accept it, it would be of very great advantage to you. Indeed, all suffering, the smallest bit of hair that ever fell from your head that you didn't even notice – our Lord says, "A single hair shall not go uncounted" (Mt 10:30) – never can suffering, be it ever so small, befall you that God has not noticed from eternity, loved, and intended it; and so it comes to you.

All the myrrh that God gives is rightly ordered, so that he might lead a person to great things through suffering. He has arranged it that all things vex humankind.

Now, there is one kind of very bitter myrrh that God gives: interior affliction and darkness. If a person becomes aware of this and accepts it, it eats away at his flesh, blood, and nature, and this internal struggle changes his appearance much more

than external penitential practices do. For God visits upon him horrible trials in strange and unusual ways that no one notices except the person going through it.

But if a person is not aware of the great love with which he gives this myrrh, it causes such incredible harm that no one's laments can do it justice.

John of the Cross: The Dark Night of the Soul

It is common for John of the Cross and his work, The Dark Night of the Soul, to be seen as the mystic most associated with the idea that mystical purification demands suffering and inner dereliction, though as we have seen, this theme was firmly established prior to John, who lived from 1542 to 1591. John had a more deeply theological and systematic approach to understanding this experience than that of many mystics.

This night, which as we say is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons two sorts of darkness or purgations corresponding to the two divisions of man's nature into sensual and spiritual. Thus the first night or purgation will be sensual, in which the soul is purified according to the senses, subjecting them to the spirit. The other is that night or purgation that is spiritual, in which the soul is purified and stripped in the spirit, and which subdues and disposes it for union with God in love.

The first night or purgation is bitter and terrible to sense. The second is not to be compared with it, for it is horrible and frightful to the spirit, as I shall soon show.

The dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which cleanses it of its ignorances and imperfections, habitual, natural, and spiritual. Contemplatives call it infused contemplation, or mystical theology, by which God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in the perfection of love, without effort on its own part or understanding how this happens. Insofar as infused contemplation is the loving wisdom of God, it produces two special effects in the soul, for by both purifying and enlightening it, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God in love.

But it may be asked: Why does the soul call the divine light that enlightens the soul and purges it of its ignorances a dark night? The answer to this is that for two reasons this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness, but also pain and torment. The first is because the divine wisdom is so high that it transcends the capacity of the soul, and therefore in that respect is darkness. The second reason is based on the meanness and impurity of the soul, and in that respect the divine wisdom is painful to it, afflictive, and also dark.

To prove the truth of the first reason, we take for granted a principle of the Philosopher, namely, the more clear and evident divine things are, the more dark and hidden they are to the soul naturally [Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.2]. Thus the more

clear the light the more it blinds the eyes of the owl, and the stronger the sun's rays the more it blinds the visual organs, overcoming and overwhelming them in their weakness. So too the divine light of contemplation, when it strikes on a soul not yet perfectly enlightened, causes spiritual darkness, because it not only surpasses its natural strength, but also blinds it and deprives the soul of its natural perception.

The second way in which the soul suffers pain comes from its natural, moral, and spiritual weakness, for when this divine contemplation strikes it with a certain vehemence in order to strengthen it and subdue it, it is then so pained in its weakness that it almost faints away.

The soul under the burden of this oppression and weight feels itself so removed from God's favor that it thinks – and correctly so – that all the things that consoled it formerly have utterly failed it, and that no one is left to pity it. It is amazing and pitiful that the soul's weakness and impurity is so great that the hand of God, so soft and so gentle, should now be felt to be so heavy and oppressive. For God's hand neither presses nor rests on it, but merely touches it, and that mercifully; for he touches the soul not to chastise it, but to grant it favors.

Therese of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul

*Therese lived from 1873-97, so she died quite young. In her writing, we see an example of the way this experience of dereliction can serve as a temptation to surrender one's faith. She was a Carmelite, and in 1997 was declared by Pope JP II as only the third woman to be a Doctor of the Church. She was born to a very religious French family, and entered the monastery in 1888. While she lived a contemplative life, she also expressed a desire for a more active life that would "enlighten souls", feeling that she has something of the vocation of an apostle. Ultimately, she contracted tuberculosis and suffered greatly with it prior to her death. Mother Agnes, who was the prioress of Therese's monastery, had encouraged her to write about her early life and her life as a nun, and these memoirs were ultimately made into a book after her death called *The Story of a Soul*, published in 1898. It was popular, and made her famous. Controversy continues to surround the book, since the discovery of the original version of her writings make it clear the Mother Agnes altered them in the book to conform to 19th century ideas of piety. The original documents speak to us of a person who was stronger, and somewhat stranger, than what comes across in the book. The way in which she struggled with her faith, reflected in this passage, are an example of an aspect of her life that was downplayed in the book.*

At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear faith, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith. I believed they were actually speaking against their own inner convictions when they denied the existence of heaven, that beautiful heaven where God himself wanted to be their eternal reward. During those very joyful days of the Easter season, Jesus made me feel that there were really souls who

have no faith, and who, through the abuse of grace, lost this precious treasure, the source of the only real and pure joys. He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. One would have to travel through this dark tunnel to understand its darkness. I will try to explain it by a comparison.

I imagine I was born in a country that is covered in thick fog. I never had the experience of contemplating the joyful appearance of nature flooded and transformed by the brilliance of the sun. It is true that from childhood I heard people speak of these marvels, and I know the country I am living in is not my true fatherland, and there is another I must long for without ceasing. This is not simply a story invited by someone living in the sad country where I am, but it is a reality, for the King of the fatherland of the bright sun actually came and lived for thirty-three years in the land of darkness. Alas! The darkness did not understand that this Divine King was the Light of the world (Jn 1:5,9).

Your child, however, O Lord, has understood your divine light, and she begs pardon for her brothers. She is resigned to eat the bread of sorrow as long as you desire it; she does not wish to rise up from this table filled with bitterness at which poor sinners are eating until the day set by you. Can she not say in her name and in the name of her brothers, "Have pity on us, O Lord, for we are poor sinners!?" (Lk 18:13). Oh! Lord, send us away justified. May all those who were not enlightened by the bright flame of faith one day see it shine. O Jesus! If it is needful that the table soiled by them be purified by a soul who loves you, then I desire to eat this bread of trial at this table until it pleases you to bring me into your bright kingdom. The only grace I ask of you is that I never offend you!

I was saying that the certainty of going away one day far from the sad and dark country had been given me from the day of my childhood. I did not believe this only because I heard it from persons much more knowledgeable than I, but I felt in the bottom of my heart real longings for this most beautiful country. Just as the genius of Christopher Columbus gave him a presentiment of a new world when nobody had even thought of such a thing, so also I felt that another land would one day serve me as a permanent dwelling place. Then suddenly the fog that surrounds me becomes more dense; it penetrates my soul and envelops it in such a way that it is impossible to discover within it the sweet image of my fatherland; everything has disappeared! When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds it by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles; it seems to me that the darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: "You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness."

When I sing of the happiness of heaven and of the eternal possession of God, I feel no joy in this, for I sing simply that I WANT TO BELIEVE. It is true that at times a very small ray of the sun comes to illumine my darkness, and then the trial ceases for *an instant*, but afterward the memory of this ray, instead of causing me joy, makes my darkness even more dense.