

The Book of Her Life

Chapters 4,5,6

St. Teresa of Avila

Chapter 4

Tells how she was helped by the Lord to force herself to take the habit and of the many illnesses his Majesty began to send her.

1-...I persuaded one of my brothers to become a friar, telling him about the **vanity of the world**. We both agreed to go one morning very early to the convent where my friend was...this **final decision** was about going to where I thought I could **serve God** more...already thinking more of a **remedy for my soul**...

...when I left my father's house I felt that separation so keenly that the feeling will not be greater, I think, when I die. For it seemed that every bone in my body was being sundered...if the Lord hadn't helped me, my reflection would not have been enough for me to continue on. In this situation he gave me such courage against myself that I carried out the task.

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2- As soon as I **took the habit**, the Lord gave me an understanding of how he favors those who use force with themselves to serve him...Within an hour, he gave me such great **happiness** at being in the religious state of life...and changed the dryness my soul experienced into the greatest tenderness. All things of the religious life delighted me ... sometimes while sweeping, during the hours I used to spend in self-indulgence and self-adornment, I realized that I was free of all that and experienced a new joy which amazed me.

When I recall this, there is no task...no matter how hard, that I would hesitate to undertake...If I strive with **determination** to do it...His Majesty pays the soul...with joy that only he who has experienced it understands...He may desire since the task is for him alone that the soul feel **fear** before beginning ...but the greater the fear it starts out with, the greater the merit...never fail out of fear to put a good inspiration into practice when it arises repeatedly ... as he has the power to accomplish all.

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3-...O my supreme Good and Repose...you brought me by your mercy through so many roundabout ways to so secure a state and to a house where there are many servants of God I might imitate...I cannot speak of this without tears; ...but the sentiment would not make up for the way I offended you afterward ... But I see that my deeds were such that it may be more clearly seen who you are, my Spouse...Many times the feeling of my great faults is tempered by the happiness experienced in the thought ... that your mercies may be known.

5-The change in food and the life-style did injury to my **health**; and although my happiness was great, this was not enough. My fainting spells began to increase, and I experienced heart pains... I passed the **first year with very poor health**...My father was painstaking in looking for a remedy...he brought me to a place famous for the **cure** of other sicknesses; they thought mine could be cured.

6- I remained in that place for almost a **year**, and for three of those months suffered ...from the **harsh cures**... While I was waiting for the cure to begin in the summer, I stayed at my sister's house in a nearby hamlet.

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7- On the way, my uncle who lived along the road gave me *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* which teaches the **prayer of recollection... I did not know how to proceed in prayer or how to be recollected.** And so, I was very happy with this book and **resolved to follow this path...** The Lord had already given me **the gift of tears...** I began to take time out for **solitude**, to **confess** frequently and to **follow that path**, taking the **book for my master.** For ... twenty years... I did not find a **master**, I mean a **confessor**, who understood me, even though I looked for one. This hurt me so much that I often turned back and was even completely lost...

His Majesty began to grant me **many favors** during these early stages...I was not free from offending him...it seemed impossible to be so on guard. I kept from committing mortal sin...as for venial sins, I paid little attention; and that is what destroyed me... At the end of this time there, the Lord granted me the **prayer of quiet** and sometimes I arrived at **union**, although I did not understand them or how much they were to be prized... This union lasted about the time of a Hail Mary. But I was left with some effects so great...and even though I was no more than twenty, it seemed I trampled the world under foot...

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7-cont'd. **I tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ, our God and our Lord, present within me, and that was my way of prayer.** If I reflected on some aspect of his Passion, I **represented him within**. But most of the time I spent reading good books...God didn't give me talent for discursive thought or for a profitable use of the imagination...I never succeeded even to think about and represent in my mind--- as hard as I tried – the humanity of the Lord... but if one perseveres, one reaches contemplation more quickly along this way of **inability to work discursively with the intellect**, this **way** is nonetheless most **laborious and painful**.

For if the **will** is not occupied and **love** has nothing present with which to be engaged, the soul is left as though without support or exercise, and the **solitude and dryness** is very troublesome, and the **battle** with one's **thoughts** extraordinary.

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8-...anyone who reflects discursively ...defends oneself from thoughts...But anyone who **cannot** ...will derive more profit from spending a good deal of time **reading**...without the help of reading...they will do harm to their health if they persist, for discursive reflection is a difficult thing to practice. Reading is very helpful for **recollection** and serves as a necessary substitute—even though little may be read—for anyone who is unable to practice mental prayer.

9-Now it seems to me that it was the Lord's providence that I not **find anyone to instruct me** not being able to reflect discursively. It would have been **impossible** to have **persevered for the eighteen years** I suffered this trial, and in that great dryness. In all those years, except the time after Communion, I never dared to begin prayer without a **book**. My soul was as fearful of being without it as it would have been should it have had to **battle with a lot of people**...it was like a **partner or a shield** by which to sustain the blows of my many **thoughts**, I went about consoled...

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9-cont'd. because **dryness** was usually not felt but was always felt when I was without a book... It seemed to me at this initial stage that having books and solitude there was little danger of me being drawn away from so much good...If the devil had attacked me openly I think I would not have returned to serious sin...the days I served the Lord enabled me to **suffer the terrible illnesses** I had with the extraordinary patience that his Majesty gave me.

10- I often marveled at the great goodness of God... he does not fail to repay every good desire...He improved, perfected and gave value to my deeds and hid the evils and sins...He makes virtue shine that he put in me---almost forcing me to have it.

11- But I want to return to what they ordered me to write about...may he be blessed forever who put up with me for so long. Amen.

Chapter 5

Continues to treat of her great illnesses, of the patience the Lord gave her, and of how he draws good out of evil, as is seen in something that happened to her in that place where she went to for a cure.

1-...In the novitiate year...I was accused of things not my fault...but because of the great happiness I felt in being a nun all passed away...I was fond of everything about religious life but ...I liked to be esteemed. I was meticulous about everything I did. It all seemed to me to be virtue...ignorance is no excuse...

2-There was a nun afflicted with a serious and painful illness...there were holes in her abdomen...and I envied her patience...so I asked God ... to give me illnesses by which he would be served...as I was so set on gaining eternal goods... But I didn't have any love of God then as I did when I began to practice prayer but a light that made all coming to an end of little value to me...while those gained by love of God of great value as they were eternal...His Majesty heard my prayer because within two years I became ill and it lasted three years.

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3- When the cure was to begin, I had been waiting at my sister's, I was brought there by my father, sister and my friend...There was a cleric ...in that place where I went to be cured...I began to confess to him for I was always fond of learning. Half-learned confessors have done my soul great harm ... but I have never been misguided by a truly learned man...

Those others said venial sin was no sin at all, and what was mortal sin, they said was venial...And then I misled many others by telling them what these confessors told me. I went on in this blindness for more than seventeen years until a Dominican father enlightened me.

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4-...This cleric became extremely fond of me...we conversed a great deal. I was so fascinated with God and what pleased me was to speak of the things of God. Since I was so young it threw him into confusion...He began to **explain to me his bad moral state**...as for about seven years he had been living in a dangerous state because of his affection and dealings with a woman in that place and he was saying Mass. The association was so public that he had **lost his honor and reputation**, and no one dared admonish him. It seemed a pity as I loved him deeply...It seemed to me a virtue to be grateful and loyal to anyone who loved me. Damned be such loyalty that goes against the law of God!

5-...the unfortunate woman had put some **charms** in a little copper idol she asked him to wear around his neck out of love for her...women can be trusted in nothing; for they will stop at nothing to hold on to a friendship and passion the devil has placed in them...

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6- Once I knew about these charms, I began to show him more love. My intention was good...I used to speak with him often about God. This must have profited him, although I rather believe that it prompted him to love me greatly. For in order to please me, he finally gave me the little idol, which I then threw in a river. Once he got rid of this, he began-like someone awaking from a deep sleep—to recall everything he had done during those years. And being frightened ... and grieving over his bad moral state, he at last began to abhor the woman. Our lady must have helped him...he never tired of thanking God for having given him light.

Exactly one year from the first day I met him, he died... I am certain that he is on the path of salvation...It seems the Lord desired that by these means he would be saved.

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7-...I spent three months in that place, for the cure was too harsh for my constitution...I found no rest either by day or night—a very deep sadness.

8- Seeing such poor results, my father brought me back to where doctors could come to see me. They all gave up hope for me...The pains exhausted me ...I remained in this excruciating state no more than three months...I consider the **patience** His Majesty gave me, a great favor from the Lord...It greatly profited me to have read the story of Job in St. Gregory's *Morals*. For it seems the Lord prepared me by this means, together with my having begun to **experience prayer**...to be able to bear the suffering with so much conformity to his will...

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9-Then the feast of our Lady came in August ... I hastened to go to confession... that night I suffered a paroxysm in which I remained for four days... They gave me the sacrament of the anointing of the sick...they thought I was going to die...they were so certain I was dead ... that wax was put on my eyes.

10-...the **grave** in my convent was open for a day and a half awaiting the arrival of the body, and the **funeral rites** were already celebrated at a monastery of our friars outside the city, the Lord allowed me to return to consciousness. Immediately I desired to confess. I received communion with many tears...

11-...apparently the Lord **raised me from the dead...** if out of love you do not give up offending him, may you do so out of fear lest on any other of a thousand occasions he might let you die in a more dangerous state... May he be blessed forever> may it please his Majesty that I die rather than ever cease to love him.

Chapter 6

Treats of how much she owes the Lord for having given her conformity to his will in the midst of such severe trials, and how she took the glorious St. Joseph for her mediator and advocate, and of the great good he did for her.

1-...The result of the torments of those four days was that I was unable to stir, not an arm or a foot, neither hand nor head, unable to move as though I were dead; only one finger on my right hand it seems was able to move. Since there was no way of touching me, because I was so bruised that I couldn't endure it, they moved me about in a sheet...This lasted until Easter. My only relief was that if they did not touch me, the pains often stopped...I was fearful I would lose patience...

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2-Right away I was in such a hurry to return to the convent that I made them bring me back as I was...the body, worse than dead, a pity to behold. The **paralysis**, which gradually got better, **lasted three years**. When I was able to go on hands and knees, I praised God. With great conformity to his will, I suffered all those years ... with great gladness... It seems to me that all my longing to be cured was that I might remain alone in prayer as was my custom...I went to confession often...They were all amazed at the **patience** the Lord gave me...which allowed me to suffer with great **contentment**.

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3-It was a great thing that he had granted me the **favor in prayer** which he did, for this made me understand the meaning of love for him. And within that short time, I saw some new **virtues** arise in me, although not strong since they were unable to sustain me in righteousness: **not speaking evil of anyone**, no matter how slight ... avoiding all fault- finding ... I was very cautious in this ... although not so perfectly that I did not sometimes fail a little ...but ordinarily I was faithful. And thus, I so persuaded those who associated with me that they acquired the habit. It **became generally known** that where I was present there was not talking behind anyone's back.

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4-There remained in me the **desire for solitude** and a fondness for conversing and **speaking about God...** I felt the deepest repentance after having offended God. For often I did not dare pray, because I feared...the very bitter sorrow I would feel at having offended God. This went on increasing...it was a torment...I became extremely vexed at the many tears I was shedding over my faults...

The **whole trouble lay in not getting to the root of the occasions ...** Oh, God help me, how I desired my health so as to serve him more, and this health was the cause of all my harm.

5- Since I saw myself so crippled and still so young...**I resolved to go for aid to the doctors of heaven that they cure me.** For I still desired my health, even though I bore the illness with much happiness...But nonetheless I thought I would be **able to serve God** much better if I were in good health. This is **our mistake:** not abandoning ourselves entirely to what the Lord does, for he knows best what is fitting for us.

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6-...I took for my advocate and lord the **glorious St. Joseph** and earnestly recommended myself to him. I saw clearly that as in this need so in other greater ones concerning honor and loss of soul this father and lord of mine came to my rescue in better ways than I knew how to ask for. I don't recall up to this day ever having petitioned him for anything that he failed to grant. It is an amazing thing the great many favors God has granted me through the mediation of this blessed saint, the dangers I was freed from both of body and soul...he helps in all our needs and the Lord wants us to understand that just as he was subject to St. Joseph on earth-for since bearing the title of father, being the Lord's tutor, Joseph could give the Child commands -so in heaven God does whatever he commands... This has been observed by other persons...many who experience this truth renew their devotion to him.

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7- I endeavored to celebrate his feast with all the solemnity possible. But, in my desire to do so very carefully and well, I was filled with more vanity than with spirituality...May the Lord pardon me.

Because of my impressive experience of the goods this glorious saint obtains from God, I had the desire to persuade all to be devoted to him. I have not known anyone truly devoted to him...who has not advanced more in virtue. For in a powerful way he benefits souls who recommend themselves to him. It seems that for some years I have asked him for something on his feast day, and my petition was always granted ...

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7- cont'd. ... I only ask for the love of God anyone who does not believe me to try and he will see through experience the great good that comes from recommending oneself to this glorious patriarch and being devoted to him. Especially persons of prayer should always be attached to him. For I don't know how one can think about the Queen of Angels and about when she went through so much with the Infant Jesus without giving thanks to St. Joseph...Anyone who cannot find a master to teach him prayer should take this glorious saint for his master, and he will not go astray...he brought it about that I could rise and walk and not be crippled...

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9- Who would have claimed I would so quickly fall after so many gifts from God, after his Majesty had begun to give me virtues...after I had seen myself almost dead ...after having been raised up body and soul...Must we live in so dangerous a life? For in writing this it seems to me that with your favor and mercy I can say what St. Paul said....I no longer live but Christ lives in me...I do not desire the world ... nor does anything make me happy unless it comes from you...the rest seems a heavy Cross.

...Although I abandoned you, you did not abandon me...always holding out your hand to me. And often I did not want it; nor did I desire to understand how often you called me again, as I shall now tell.