

The Book of Her Life

The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila

Volume One

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Chapter 7: Treats of the ways by which she lost the favors the Lord had granted her and of how distracted a life she began to live. Speaks of the harm that results when monasteries of nuns are not strictly enclosed.

1-Since I thus began to go from pastime to pastime and from **vanity to vanity**, from one occasion to another, to place myself so often in very serious occasion, and to allow my **soul** to become so spoiled by many vanities, I was then ashamed to return to the search for God by means of a **friendship as special** as is that found in the **intimate exchange of prayer**. And I was aided in this vanity by the fact that as the sins increased I began to lose joy in virtuous things and my taste for them.

This was the most terrible trick the devil could play on me, under the guise of humility: that seeing myself so corrupted I began to **fear the practice of prayer**...It seemed to me that it was better to...recite what I was obliged to vocally and **not practice mental prayer** and so much intimacy with God...It seemed to me that I was deceiving people since exteriorly I kept up such good **appearances** ...In my craftiness I strove to be **held in esteem**...

2-The fact that they did not consider me so bad was due to their seeing me so young...often withdrawing into solitude to pray and read, speaking much about God, fond of having his image...put up in many places...not engaging in fault-finding ... I gave the appearance of virtue ...As a result they gave me as much and even more **freedom** than they gave to the older ones. And they had great confidence in me...

3-That's why it seems to me it did me great harm not to be in an **enclosed monastery**... a monastery of women that allows freedom is a tremendous danger...a step on the way toward hell rather than a remedy for their weaknesses...

4-...There is so much difficulty in getting to know one's obligations that the Lord really needs to intervene in the matter...

5-...**True religious life** is practiced so little that the friar or nun who is indeed about to follow wholeheartedly his call must fear those of his own

house more than all the devils...he must be cautious and dissimulating in speaking about the friendship he desires to have with God ... I don't know why we are amazed that there are **so many evils in the Church** since those who are the models from which all might copy the virtues are so obscurely fashioned that the spirit of the saints of the past has abandoned the religious communities...

6-...I engaged in these conversations thinking ...my soul would not receive the harm and distraction I afterward understood comes from such companionship ... While I was once with a person, the Lord ... desired to make me understand that those friendships were not proper for me ...With great severity, **Christ appeared** before me, making me understand what he regretted about the friendship. I saw him with the **eyes of my soul** more clearly than I could have with the eyes of my body. This vision left such an impression on me that, though more than twenty-six years have gone by, it seems to me it is still present. I was left very frightened and disturbed and didn't want to see that person any more.

7-It did me much harm not to know that it was possible to see in other ways than with bodily eyes...although the feeling always remained with me that it was from God... But since the vision was not to my liking I tried to conceal it from myself... and the devil returned assuring me that it was not wrong to see such a person so I returned to the conversation ... For many years I took part in this ... recreation... But no other friendship was as much a distraction as this one...I was extremely fond of it.

8- Once at another time, when with this same person, we saw something coming toward us...something that looked like **a large toad**, moving much more quickly than toads usually do...Oh, the greatness of God! With how much care and pity you were warning me in every way ...

9-There was a nun there, a relative of mine...she also warned me...not only did I not believe her, but I was annoyed with her...I deluded many persons, telling them that these recreations were not wrong...and through the bad example I gave them...I was the cause of many evils, not realizing I was doing so much wrong.

10-...during those first days...I had the greatest desire to help **others improve**, a very common **temptation of beginners**...Since I loved my father so much, I desired for him the good I felt I got out of the practice of prayer. It seemed to me that in this life there could be **no greater good** than the

practice of prayer... so I began to strive to get him to pray...Since he had such virtue...he settled into this practice so well that within five or six years he was very advanced...Very severe were the trials he had; all of them he suffered with the deepest conformity to God's will. He came often to see me, for it consoled him to speak of the things of God.

11-After I had begun to live in such havoc, and without practicing prayer...I could not bear to let him be deceived... I had gone a year or more without prayer...This was **my greatest temptation**...it was a bitter thing for me to see this blessed man so deceived...so I told him that **I no longer practiced prayer**., but didn't give the reason...I brought up my illnesses as making it impossible for me...

12-My father believed that my illnesses were the reason for my not praying ... (I saw clearly that there was **no excuse for giving up prayer**), I told him that I was doing a great deal by being able to keep up with the choir duties. But this was not sufficient cause to set aside something for which **bodily strenght is not necessary but only love and a habit...prayer is an exercise of love**, and it would be **incorrect** to think that if there is **not time for solitude there is no prayer at all...**

13-But my father...believed everything I said; in fact, he pitied me. But since he had already reached so sublime a state, he did not afterward spend as much time with me but would leave after a brief visit; for he said it was **time lost**. Since I wasted time on other vanities, I cared little about losing time...But, from the time I began to pray...I had this desire that others serve God...through me. I lived in terrible blindness, I was allowing myself to get lost and striving to save others.

14- At this time ...**my father died**...In losing him I was losing every good and joy, he was everything to me...I loved him dearly.

15-...he gave us counsel...he told us to always serve God and to reflect on how **all things come to an end**.

16-... reciting the creed...he died...his confessor—a Dominican...said ...that my father had gone straight to heaven...

17-This **Dominican father** ... profited me a great deal. For I went to confession to him and he took it upon himself ...to make me understand the **perdition** that I was bringing on myself... I discussed my prayer with him. He told me not to let it go...I began to return to it ... and never abandoned it again ... In prayer I understood more

clearly my faults. On the one hand **God was calling me**; on the other, **I was following the world**. All the things of God made me happy; those of the world held me bound. It seems I desired to harmonize these two contraries...I was having **trouble in prayer**...not able to shut myself within myself (**which was my whole manner of procedure in prayer**)...Thus I passed many years...I am surprised how I could have put up with both and not abandon either the one or the other...but to abandon prayer was no longer in my hands, for he held me in his, he who desired to give me greater favors.

18-...the Lord was covering my evils and uncovering some little virtue...making it great in the eyes of others sometimes though my vanities leaked out, but they were not recognized since what appeared good was noticed instead...

19- O Lord of my soul ... when I offended you... you chose the most delicate and painful punishment. **With wonderful gifts you punished my sins**...and seeing myself receiving favors ...after paying so badly for those received was a terrible torment for me...

20-...had I had someone to **talk all this over with** it would have helped me...so I would counsel those who practice prayer to seek, at least in the beginning, **friendship with others having the same interest**...I believe that he who discusses these joys and trials for the sake of this friendship with God will benefit himself and those who hear him.

21-...Since this spiritual friendship is so extremely important for souls not yet fortified in virtue...I don't know how to urge it enough...

22-...There is so much sluggishness in matters having to do with the **service of God** that it is necessary for those who serve him to become **shields** for one another that they might **advance**...If someone begins to give himself to God, there are so many to criticize him that he needs to **seek companionship to defend himself** ... he will find himself in much difficulty. It seems to me this must be why some saints used to go to the deserts. It is a kind of **humility not to trust in oneself** but to believe that through those with whom one converses God will help and increase charity while it is being shared. And there are a thousand graces I would not dare speak of if I did not have powerful experience of the **benefit** that comes from this **sharing**...If the Lord had not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could talk with persons who practice prayer...I would have

ended by throwing myself **straight into hell**...May he be blessed forever and ever. Amen.

Chapter 8: Treats of the great good it did her not to turn from prayer completely and thereby lose her soul, and of what an excellent practice. Tells it is so highly profitable and that even though one may abandon it again, there is a great value in giving some time to so great a good.

1-...I dwelt at length on this period of my life...where I **failed God** by not seeking support from this strong pillar of prayer.

2-I voyaged on this tempestuous sea for almost twenty years... This is one of the most **painful lives**, I think that one can imagine; **I neither enjoyed God nor did I find happiness in the world**. When I was experiencing the enjoyments of the world, I felt sorrow when I recalled what I owed to God. When I was with God, my attachments to the world disturbed me...I see clearly the mercy God bestowed on me; for though I continued to associate with the world, I had the **courage to practice prayer**...I do not know what would require greater courage ...than to betray the king and know that he knows it and yet never leave his presence. Though we are always in God's presence, it seems to me the manner is different with those who practice prayer, for **they are aware that he is looking at them**.

3-...Few days passed without my devoting long periods to prayer, unless I was very sick or very busy... for more than eighteen of the twenty-eight years since I began prayer, **I suffered this battle and conflict between friendship with God and friendship with the world**. During the remaining years...the cause of the war changed...

4-I have recounted all of this at length...so that one might understand **the great good God does for a soul that willingly disposes itself to the practice of prayer**...and if the soul perseveres in prayer...I hold as certain; the Lord will draw it forth to the **harbor of salvation**...

5- The good that one who practices prayer possesses has been written of by many saints and holy men; I mean mental prayer---and in spite of any wrong he who practices prayer does, he must not abandon prayer since it is the means by which he can **remedy the situation; and to remedy it without prayer would be much more difficult**...Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good...

a person will come to understand the **road leading to heaven**. And if he perseveres, I trust in the mercy of **God, who never fails to repay anyone who has taken him for a friend**. **For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us**. In order that love be true and the friendship endure, the wills of the friends must be in accord...if you do not yet love him as he loves you it is because you have not reached the degree of **conformity with his will**, you will endure this pain of spending a long while with one who is so different from you when you see how much it benefits you to possess his friendship and how much he loves you.

6- O infinite goodness of my God...**you wait for the other to adapt to your nature and in the meanwhile you put up with his**...why is it that everyone does not strive to reach you through this **special friendship**...to allow you to be with them at least **two hours each day** ...through this effort made to remain in such good company...you give them victory over the devils and sustain the life of the body with more health and you give life to the soul.

7-I don't know what they fear who fear to begin the **practice of mental prayer**...I thought of how I have offended God, and of the many things I owe him, and of what leads to hell and what to glory, and of the great trials and sufferings the Lord endured for me....**This was my whole method of prayer**... And very often for some years, I was more anxious that the hour I had determined to spend in prayer be over than I was to remain there and more anxious to listen for the striking of the clock than to attend to other good things. And I don't know what **heavy penance** could have come to mind that frequently I would not have gladly undertaken **rather than recollect myself in the practice of prayer**...so unbearable the sadness I felt on entering the oratory...I had to force myself...After I had made this effort, I found myself left with greater quiet and delight than sometimes when I had the desire to prayer.

8- Now, then, if the Lord put up with someone as miserable as myself for so long a time...what person, no matter how bad he may be, has reason to fear...I certainly pity those who serve the Lord at their own cost, because for those who practice prayer the Lord himself pays the cost since through

their little labor he gives them delight so that with the help of this delight they might suffer the trials. 9-...prayer is the door to favors ...if the door is closed I don't know how he will grant them...if we place many stumbling blocks in his path...how will he be able to come to us?...

10-... it did me great good not to abandon prayer and reading...there are so many enemies to war against us and so many weaknesses of our own.

11-...my confessors saw my good desires and my devotion to prayer, they thought I was doing a great deal...but my soul understood that it was doing what it was obligated to do for him to whom it owed so much...it was a pity that ... so little help was found anywhere, except in God...

12-...After I had begun the practice of prayer, speaking of God or hearing others speak of him hardly ever tired me. On the one hand I found great comfort in sermons...but understood that I wasn't what I should have been ...I begged the Lord to help me...but I did not put all my **trust** in his Majesty and lose completely the trust I had in myself. I searched for a remedy...all is of little benefit if we do not take away completely the trust we have in ourselves and place it in God...

Chapter 9: Treats of the means by which the Lord began to awaken her soul and give it light amid such thick darknesses and strengthen her virtues that she might not offend him.

1-...It happened to me that one day entering the oratory I saw a **statue** they had borrowed for a certain feast to be celebrated in the house. It represented the **much-wounded Christ**...beholding it I was utterly distressed in seeing him that way, for it well represented what he suffered for us. I felt so keenly aware of how poorly I thanked him for those wounds that, it seems to me, **my heart broke**.

Beseeching him to strengthen me once and for all that I might not offend him, I threw myself down before him with the greatest outpouring of tears. 2-I was very devoted to the glorious **Magdalene** and frequently thought about her **conversion**, especially when I received **communion**. For since I know the Lord was certainly present there within me, I, thinking that he would not despise my tears, placed myself at his feet... I commended myself to this glorious saint that she might obtain pardon for me.

3-...I placed all my trust in God I think I then said that I would not rise from there until he granted me

what I was begging him for...from that time I went on improving.

4-This is the **method of prayer** I used: since I could not reflect discursively with the intellect, I **strove to picture Christ within me**, and it did me greater good—in my opinion- to picture him in those scenes where I saw him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as a person in need, he had to accept me. I had many simple thoughts like these. The scene of his prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me; I strove to be his **companion** there... I desired to wipe away the sweat he so painfully experienced, but I... never dared to do it...I remained with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to, for there were many distractions that tormented me. Most nights, for many years before going to bed ... I always pondered for a little while this episode of the prayer in the garden...**I began to practice prayer without knowing what it was**...the custom became so habitual that I did not abandon it, just as I did not fail to make the sign of the cross before sleeping.

5-...about the **torment my distracting thoughts** gave me, this torment is a characteristic of the method in which you proceed without discursive reflection on the part of the intellect. For such a method requires the soul be very advanced or lost; I mean **lost with regard to discursive reflection**... it advances a great deal because it advances in love. But to reach this point the **cost is very high**, except in the case of persons whom the Lord desires to bring quickly to the prayer of quiet...those who follow this path of no discursive reflection will find that a book can be a help for recollecting oneself quickly. It helped me also to look at fields, or water, or flowers...they awakened and recollected me and served as a book and reminded me of my ingratitude and sins...

6-I had such little ability to **represent things with my intellect that if I hadn't seen the things my imagination was not of use to me**...I could only think of Christ as he was as man, but never in such a way that I could picture him within myself...**I was like one who was blind or in darkness**; he speaks with a person and sees that that person is with him because he knows he is with certainty that he is there (I mean he understands and believes he is there, but does not see him); such was the case with me when I thought of the Lord...

7- At this time they gave me *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. It seems the Lord ordained this...I am very fond of St. Augustine, because the convent

where I stayed as a lay person belonged to his order; and also, because **he had been a sinner**...I found great consolation in sinner's whom the Lord brought back to himself. It seemed to me I could find help in them and that since the Lord had pardoned them he could also pardon me. But there was one thing that left me **inconsolable**...and that was that the **Lord called them only once, and they did not turn back and fall again**; whereas in my case I had turned back so often that I was worn out from it...

8-...I was unable to resolve to give myself entirely to God. As I began to read the *Confessions*, it seemed to me **I saw myself in them**. I began to commend myself to this glorious saint. When I came to the passage where he speaks about his **conversion** and read how he **heard that voice in the garden**... it only seemed to me... that it was I the Lord called. I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears...I marvel at how I could have lived such great affliction...

9-...He must have heard my cries and taken pity on so many tears. The inclination to spend more time with him began to grow. I started to shun the occasions of sin...I clearly understood that I loved him; but didn't understand ...**what true love of God consists in**...his Majesty began to favor me again...what others strive for with great labor, the Lord gains for me only through my desire to receive it. I did not beseech him... never would I do that. **I only begged him to pardon my great sins and to give me the grace not to offend him**... only once in my life, when in great dryness, do I recall asking for a spiritual delight... I felt the tears I shed were womanish...since I didn't obtain by them what I desired. But still, I believe they were valuable for me because...after two instances of compunction or tears...over my sins, I began to give myself more to prayer and to become less involved in things that harmed me...the spiritual graces went on increasing in the manner I shall tell...

Amen