

The Book of Her Life

The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila

Volume One

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Prologue

1- Since my confessors commanded me and gave me plenty of leeway to **write about the favors and the kind of prayer the Lord has granted me**. I wish they would also have allowed me to tell very clearly and minutely about my great sins and wretched life. This would have been a consolation. But they didn't want me to. In fact, I was very much restricted in those matters. And so, I ask, for the love of God, whoever reads this account to bear in mind that my life has been so wretched that I have not found a saint among those who were converted to God in whom I can find comfort. For I note that after the Lord called them, they did not turn back and offend him. As for me, **not only did I turn back and become worse**, but it seems I was like someone who sees that he is obliged to serve more yet understands that he can't even pay the smallest part of his debt.

2- May God be blessed forever, he who waited for me for so long! I beseech him with all my heart to give me the grace to present with complete clarity and truthfulness this account of my life which **my confessors ordered me to write**. And I know, too, that even the Lord has for some time wanted me to do this, although I have not dared. May this account render him glory and praise. And from now on my confessors knowing me better through this narration help me in my weakness to give the Lord something of the service I owe him, whom all things praise forever. Amen.

Chapter 1: Treats of how the Lord began to **awaken this soul to virtue** in her childhood and of how helpful it is in this matter that parents also be virtuous.

1-To have had **virtuous and God-fearing parents** along with the graces the Lord granted me should have been enough for me to have led a good life... My **father** was fond of reading good books...thus he had books in Spanish for his children to read. These books together with the care my **mother** took to have us pray and be devoted to our Lady and to some of the saints began to awaken me...at six or

seven...to the **practice of virtue**... My **father** was a man very charitable with the poor and compassionate with the sick and even towards servants...nobody was ever able to convince him to accept slaves...He was very honest. No one ever saw him swear or engage in fault-finding...

2- My **mother** also had many **virtues**. She suffered much sickness during her life. She was very modest...gentle and very intelligent...Great were the trials she suffered in this life; her death was truly a Christian one.

3-We were in all **three sisters and nine brothers**. **All** resembled their parents in being **virtuous** ... **with the exception of myself**- although I was **most loved by my father**...I am **ashamed** when I recall the good inclinations the Lord gave me and how poorly I knew how to profit by them.

4-...I had one brother about my age. We used to ...read the lives of the saints... When I considered the **martyrdoms** the saints suffered for God, it seemed to me the price they paid for going to enjoy God was cheap...I desired to die in the same way... to get to enjoy...the wonderful things I read were in heaven... My brother and I agreed to go off to the land of the Moors and beg them to **cut off our heads**... Having parents though seemed to us the greatest **obstacle**... We took great delight in often repeating: **forever and ever and ever**. As I said this over and over, the Lord impressed on me in childhood the **way of truth**.

5-When I saw it was impossible to go where I would be killed for God, we made plans to be **hermits**...**We made hermitages** in a garden in our house...It gives me devotion that God gave me so early what I then **lost through my own fault**.

6-... I **sought out solitude to pray** my devotions ...When I played with other girls we pretended we were nuns in a monastery...

7-...My **mother died** when I was about twelve years old ... I went before an image of **our Lady** and asked her with many tears to be my mother...since I have **found favor** with this sovereign Virgin **in all I have asked of her** and in the end, she has drawn me to herself...

8-... You have determined to save me, Lord...but don't you think it would be good **if the inn where you have so continually to dwell were not to get so dirty**? It wearies me ... for I know the whole fault was mine... As I grew older...I began to make use of my many **natural attractive qualities** to offend him, as I shall now tell.

Chapter 2: Treats of how she **lost these virtues** and of how important it is in childhood to **associate with virtuous people**.

1-...I sometimes reflect on the damage parents do by not striving that their children see virtuous deeds of every kind... Though my mother was virtuous, I did not imitate her good qualities and her bad ones ...**books of chivalry**... did me much harm...We used to read them together in our free time...Our reading weighed much on my father...but I began to get into the habit of reading these books...and I didn't think it was wrong to waste many hours... in such a useless practice...

2- I began to **dress in finery**... taking great care of my hands and hair and perfumes...for I was very **vain**...I had some first cousins who often came to our house...They were about my age...and we always went about together. They liked me very much, and I engaged in conversations with them about all the things that pleased them...I exposed my soul to that which caused all its harm.

3-...I would tell parents that when their children are this age they ought to be very careful about whom they associate with...because our **natural bent** is toward the worst rather than towards the best...I imitated all that was harmful in a relative who spent a lot of time at our house... she encouraged me in all the pastimes I desired and shared with me her conversations and vanities. Until I began to associate with her at fourteen...I don't think I could have abandoned God by a mortal sin...as the fear of losing my honor was stronger than me which gave me strength not to lose my **reputation**...

4- I was extreme in my vain desire for my reputation...It frightens me to think of the harm a bad companion can do...especially during adolescence...the conversation with my cousin changed me so that I hardly had any virtue left in my **naturally virtuous soul**...

5- I had completely lost the fear of God...I only had the fear of losing my reputation. I dared to do many things against my honor and against God.

6- ...From all these occasions and dangers God delivered me...it seems he **strove against my will** to keep me from being completely **lost**...My father ended up bringing me to a **convent**... he waited until my sister was married when it seemed no longer good for me to stay at home without a mother.

7- ...My father was unable to believe there was much wrong with me...and I fearing so much for

my honor used every effort to keep my actions secret...I never considered though that one can never do this with one who sees all things... Great evils would be avoided if we understood that the whole matter lies in **guarding ourselves against displeasing you**.

8- The first eight days I felt very unhappy in that convent school...and that they knew about my **vanity**...I had great fear of God when I offended him trying to go to confession at once...All were pleased with me for the **Lord gave me the grace to be pleasing wherever I went, and so I was much loved**. Although I was against becoming a nun, it made me happy to see such good nuns...My soul began to return to the good habits of early childhood...

9- One thing...that could have mounted to some excuse for me...was that the friendship with one of my cousins was in view of a possible marriage...

10- There was a **nun** in care of the dormitory...It was by means of her it seems that the Lord wished to begin to **give me light**, as I shall now tell.

Chapter 3: Treats of how **good companionship** played a part in the **awakening** once again of her good desires and how the Lord began to give her some light on the mistake she had been making.

1- Beginning to like the **good and holy conversation of this nun**, I was glad to hear how well she spoke about God, she was very discreet and saintly. There was no time it seems to me when I was not happy to hear about God. She began to tell me how she arrived at the **decision to become a nun** by reading what the Gospel says: *many are the called and few the chosen*. She told me about the reward the Lord grants those who give up all for him. This good company...turned my mind to the desire for eternal things and for some freedom from the antagonism I felt about becoming a nun...For so hard was my heart I could have read the Passion without shedding a tear. This pained me.

2-After a year and a half of the convent school I was much better...but still had no desire to become a nun, and I even asked God not to give me this vocation; although I feared marriage... By the end of this period ... I was more favorable to becoming a nun...and I had a **good friend** in another convent...if I were to become a nun it would be in the convent where she was... I looked more to pleasing my vanity than to what was good for my soul...but I could not be persuaded to be one.

3- During this time...the **Lord was determined to prepare me for this state**...so he sent me a **serious illness** that made me **return to my father's house**. When I got better, they brought me to visit my sister...

4-...along the way lived my **uncle, a friar** ... I stayed with him a few days and he asked me to read good books to him...

5-...because of the good company and the strength the word of God—both heard and read—gave my heart, I began to understand the **truth** I knew in childhood (**the nothingness of all things, the vanity of the world, and how it would soon come to an end**) and to fear that if I die I would go to hell... I saw that the **religious life was the best and safest state**...little by little I decided to **force myself to accept it**.

6- I was engaged in this **battle within** myself for three months forcing myself with this **reasoning**: that the trials and hardships of being a nun could not be greater than those of purgatory and I had merited hell; that it would be not so great to live as though in purgatory; but I would later go directly to heaven...The devil on the other hand was suggesting I would not be able to suffer the trials of religious life because I was too pampered. I resisted with the thought of the trials Christ suffered...and that I could suffer some for him as he would help me bear them...

7-At that time I had both a high fever and fainting spells...My fondness for good books was my salvation. Reading the *Letters of St. Jerome* I decided to tell my father about my **decision to take the habit**...but so great was his love for me that in no way was I able to obtain his permission...the most we could get from him was after his death I could do whatever I wanted... I couldn't wait so long. I tried to do it another way, as I shall now tell.