

The Book of Her Life

The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila

Volume One

Chapter 11-13, First Degree of Prayer

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Chapter 11: Tells of the reason for the failure to reach the perfect love of God in a short time. Begins to explain through a comparison four degrees of prayer. Goes on to deal with the first degree. The doctrine is very beneficial for beginners and for those who do not have consolations in prayer

1- Well, let us speak now of those beginning to be **servants of love**. This means to **follow** resolutely ...by this **path of prayer**, Him who has loved us so much. ...When a soul is determined to love You... to leave all and occupy itself in this divine love, why don't You desire that it enjoy soon the **ascent to the possession of perfect love**?...The whole **fault is ours** if we don't soon reach the enjoyment of a dignity so great, for the **attainment of this true love of God brings with it every blessing**. We are...so **slow in giving ourselves entirely to God** ... His Majesty does not desire that we enjoy something as precious without **paying a high price**, we do not fully **prepare ourselves**.

2-But if we do what we can to avoid becoming **attached to any earthly thing** and let all our care and concern be with **heavenly things**, and...we prepare ourselves completely... I believe...in a very short time...this **blessing** will be given to us. But it seems to us that we are giving all to God, whereas the **truth** is that we are...giving Him the fruits and keeping...the **root**. We resolved to be poor...but then very often turn back to being anxious about possessing not only the necessities but superfluities as well... we are thereby placed in a state of greater anxiety...about not being in want than we were before...It also appears to us that we are renouncing our **status** when we become religious...but no sooner is some little point of etiquette concerning our status brought up than we forget we have

already offered it to God; and we desire to **take it right back** out of his hands... so it is with **everything else**.

3-What a charming way to seek the love of God ... with our hands full ... to have many spiritual consolations along with attachments is incongruous...Since we do not succeed in giving up everything at once, this treasure is not given to us all at once. May it please the Lord that He give it to us drop by drop, even though it cost us all the **trials** in the world.

4-...God does not deny Himself to anyone who perseveres. Little by little He will measure out the courage sufficient to attain this victory...If the beginner ...struggles to reach the summit of perfection He will never go to heaven alone; he will lead many people along after him. The devil puts so many difficulties into the beginner's head that... courage is necessary not to turn back—along with a great deal of assistance from God.

5-...the greatest labor is in the **beginning** ...the beginner works while the Lord gives the increase. In the **other degrees of prayer**, the greatest thing is enjoying ...but on this path all bear their **crosses** ... for all who follows **Christ**...must walk along this path He trod. And blessed be the **trials** ...that even here in this life are repaid.

6-...The beginner must realize...he is starting to **cultivate a garden on very barren soil, full of weeds**. His Majesty pulls up the weeds and plants good seed. Keep in mind that this is already done by the time a soul is **determined to practice prayer** ... And with the help of God we must strive like good **gardeners** to get these plants to grow and take pains to water them so ...they come to bud and flower and give a most pleasant fragrance to **provide refreshment for the Lord**...then He will often come to take delight in this garden and find His joy among these **virtues**.

7-But let us see how it must be watered to understand ...the labor this will cost us...It seems to me the **garden can be watered in four ways**. You may **draw water from a well** which is a lot of work. Or you may get it by means of a **water wheel**. Or it may flow from a **river or a**

stream...as the ground is more fully soaked, and there is no need to water so frequently...Or the water may be provided by a great deal of **rain**.

8-These **four ways of drawing water** to maintain the garden—because without water it will die—are applicable to explaining the **four degrees of prayer**.

9- **Beginners** in prayer... are those who draw water (**grace**) from the well...It's a lot of work...and they tire themselves trying to **recollect their senses** ...and get accustomed to being **distracted** ...It requires much effort. They need to get accustomed to caring nothing at all about seeing or hearing, to practicing the hours of prayer, and to solitude and withdrawal –and to thinking on their past life...In the beginning such reflection is painful...they do not understand if they are repentant of their sins ...They must also consider the life of Christ and the intellect grows weary. These are the things we can do of ourselves...with God's help because without this help...we cannot even have a good thought...

10- But what will he do...after many days...of nothing but **dryness**... if he doesn't recall that doing so serves and gives pleasure to the Lord ...he will **abandon** everything...This **discursive work** with the **intellect** is what is meant by fetching water from the well. ...His intention must not be to please himself but to please the Lord...This gardener helps Christ carry the cross...he doesn't ...abandon prayer ...and is determined, even though the dryness may last his whole life, not to let Christ fall with the cross...the Lord will repay him all at once ...

11-These labors take their toll...but...God does not leave one ... without a large reward...I am of the opinion...that the Lord often gives these **torments**...to try His lovers and to know if they will be able to drink the chalice and help Him carry the cross before He lays great treasures within them. ...The favors that come afterward are of such great worth ...that he desires we see by experience ...our own worthlessness so that what happened to Lucifer will not happen to us.

12-...Spiritual persons...who have been placed in so high a degree as to desire to commune in solitude

with God and abandon the pastimes of the world, the most has been done. Conceal from your eyes the thought about why He gives devotion to one after a few days and not to you after so many years. Let us believe that all is for our own greater good...Let your will be done in me in every way and may ...your love not be given to anyone who serves you only for consolations.

13- ...the soul that begins to walk along this path of mental prayer with determination and pays little attention to whether the Lord gives it consolation or not, has travelled a great part of the way.... However much it stumbles, it should not fear it will turn back, because the building has been started on a solid foundation ...The love of God...consists in serving with justice and fortitude of soul and in humility ...

14- If His Majesty doesn't give devotion, it isn't necessary; and we should be masters of ourselves...Our desire for consolation is a fault...It suggests imperfection and a lack of freedom of the spirit ...

15-...It is very important that beginners have such freedom and determination...There are many who begin...and never reach the end...because they fail to embrace the cross from the beginning; thinking they are doing nothing, they become afflicted. When the intellect ceases to work they cannot bear it. But it is then perhaps that their will is being strengthened and fortified, although they may not be aware of this...**Determination** is what He desires...

16-...Experience is a great help in all, for it teaches what is suitable for us; and God can be served in everything. His yoke is easy...it is very helpful not to drag the soul along...but to lead it gently...

17-...it is very important not to be distressed...over dryness or noisy and distracting thoughts. If a person wishes to gain freedom of spirit and not always be troubled, let him begin by not being frightened by the cross, and he will see how the Lord helps him carry it and he will ...profit from everything...when there is water, draw it out because the Lord multiplies the virtues by this means.

Chapter 12: Continues the discussion of the first stage. Tells how far we can get, with the help of God, through our own efforts, and about the harm that results when the spirit desires to ascend to supernatural things before the Lord grants them.

1-What I tried to explain ...was the work we can do through our own effort and how in obtaining this **initial devotion** we can help ourselves...In thinking about the glory we hope for, the love the Lord bore us, and His Resurrection, we are moved to a joy that is **neither entirely spiritual nor entirely of the senses**... It is very good for the soul ...to refrain from striving to ascend further ...for otherwise the soul wouldn't make any progress but would suffer harm.

2-In this state (intellect is at work) the soul can make many acts to awaken love...to make the virtues grow...The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity. It can keep Him ever present and speak with Him, asking for its needs and complaining of its labors...trying to speak with Him, not through written prayers but with words that conform to its desires and needs. This is an excellent way of making progress, and in a very short time. I consider that soul advanced who strives to remain in this precious company and to profit very much by it, and who truly comes to love this Lord to whom we owe so much.

3-...We shouldn't care at all about not having devotion...but thank the Lord who allows us to be desirous of pleasing Him....This method of keeping Christ present is beneficial in all stages and is a very safe means of advancing in the first degree of prayer, of reaching in a short time the second degree of prayer, and of walking securely against the dangers the devil can set up in the last degrees.

4- Keeping Christ present is what we can do. Whoever desires to go beyond this point and raise the spirit to an experience of spiritual consolations not given would lose both...these consolations belong to the supernatural. If the intellect is not active, the soul is left very dry, like a desert. Since this edifice is built entirely on humility, the closer

one comes to God the more progress there must be in this virtue; if there is no **progress in humility**, everything is going to be ruined...I am not saying this about an ascent by means of reflection...a background of studies is like a treasure ...if the studies are accompanied by humility.

5-...the intellect ceases to work because God suspends it...He gives it that which holds its attention and makes it marvel...Trying to keep the soul's faculties busy and thinking you can make them be quiet is foolish...and this effort to suspend the intellect is not very humble. ...Humility has an excellent feature: when present in a work, it doesn't leave a feeling of frustration in the soul...May the Lord by means of experience open the eyes of those who read this...

6-Many years passed by where I read a lot of things and didn't understand anything of what I read. For a long time, even though God favored me, I did not know what words to use to explain His favors; this is no small trial. In a way amazing to me, when He desires He teaches me everything is a moment ...His Majesty has always been my Master...He gave me in a moment a completely clear understanding so that I knew how to explain His favor. It amazed me and my confessors...and so what the Lord has not taught me I don't strive to know unless it touches on matters of conscience.

7-Once again I counsel that it is very important for the spirit not ascend unless the Lord raises it up... Since this path of beginners is much travelled and the counsels I have given are very important...I have enlarged on them very much.

Chapter 13: Continues with this first state and gives advice concerning some temptations the devil at times causes. This advice is very helpful.

1-It has occurred to me to speak about some **temptations** I have observed in **beginners** ... and to give certain **advice** that seems to me is necessary. Now strive in the beginning to walk with joy and freedom... for some think the devotion will go away if they become distracted. It is good to walk in fear of self so as to avoid trusting in oneself either

little or much. This fear is necessary until we are **whole in virtue**...it is good to know our miserable nature... discretion is required in everything.

2-...Believe in God that if we try we shall little by little...reach the state the saints did with His help.... His Majesty wants this **determination** and He is a friend of courageous souls if they **walk in humility** and without trusting in self... I marvel at how important it is to **strive for great things** along this path...

3-...St. Augustine says; *give me, Lord, what You command, and command what You desire*...The first acts of **determination** are very important, although in this initial stage it is necessary to hold back a little and be bound by discretion and the opinion of a spiritual master...Let **humility** always go first to understand that this strength does not come from ourselves.

4- It is necessary that we know what humility is. I believe the devil harms...and prevents people who practice prayer from advancing by causing them to **misunderstand humility**. He makes it appear that it's prideful...to want to imitate the saints ... as deeds of the saints are for admiration, not imitation...With God's help we can strive for contempt of the world, disesteem of honor, detachment from our possessions. We have stingy hearts...and fear to neglect the body a little for the sake of the spirit. It seems to help toward recollection to be secure in the possession of **necessities**...we have so **little confidence in God** and so much self-love...Yet in our judgment we presume we are spiritual!

5-It seems that this manner of procedure is a desire to preserve rest here below and enjoy God above. And if we walk in justice and cling to virtue, this will happen...but at the speed of a hen! Never ...will one reach freedom of spirit.... I have tried it...never would I have moved if the Lord...had not taught me another **shortcut**.

6-...I have always had great desires, I strove ...to **practice prayer and to live for my own pleasure**. I believe that if I had had someone to make me fly, I would have turned the desires into deeds more quickly...But on account of our sins and spiritual

masters who are excessively discreet in these matters I believe it is one of the **main reasons why beginners do not advance more rapidly to high perfection**.

7- We can imitate the saints in seeking solitude and silence and many other virtues that will not kill these bodies...the devil makes us think everything is going to kill us and injure our health...I determined to pay no attention to the body or to my health... I said: What difference does it make if I die ...**I no longer need rest but the cross**...It is very important in the initial stages of prayer not to be intimidated by thoughts...and I know it through experience ...

8- Another **temptation** is very common...the desire that **everyone else be spiritual**...I strove to get others to practice prayer...they observed my **poverty in the virtues**...it was a source of temptation and confusion for them...they considered what was wrong to be all right because they saw that I sometimes did it.

9-This confusion is the work of the devil...In many years only two or three profited from what I said to them. And later when the Lord gave me more **strength in virtue**, many profited within two or three years. There is another disadvantage...a gradual **backsliding on the part of the soul**. The most we strive for in the beginning is to care for oneself alone and consider that there is nothing on earth but God and oneself and that this practice is beneficial.

10-The devil tempts them in another way through distress over the **sins and failings of others**...He puts it in their heads that this distress comes from the desire that **God not be offended**...and so next they seek a remedy and this disquiets them so much that it hinders their prayer; and the greatest harm lies in their thinking this distress amounts to virtue, perfection, and great zeal for God...But the safe path for the soul that practices prayer will be not to bother about anything or anyone and to pay attention to itself and to pleasing God...But let us strive to look at virtues and good deeds in others and **cover their defects** with the thought of our own

great sins. This manner of acting gradually gains for us a great virtue, that is: **considering all others better than ourselves**. In this way with the help of God one begins to acquire this virtue, necessary in all things; and when it is lacking, all our efforts are useless. Let us beseech Him to give us this virtue, for he will not refuse it to anyone who does his best.

11-This advice should be kept in mind by those who reason with the intellect...they should not pass the whole time thinking...they should **put themselves in the presence of Christ** and, without tiring the intellect speak with and delight in Him...

12-I want to explain myself further because these matters of prayer are all difficult and hard to understand...Let's begin to think about the Passion ...when Our Lord was bound to the pillar...This method of prayer with which all must begin, continue, and finish, is a very **excellent and safe path** until the Lord leads one to other supernatural things.

13-I say all but there are many souls that benefit more by other meditations than those on the sacred Passion. For just as there are many mansions in heaven, there are many paths ... as long as one often reflects on the **Passion and life of Christ from which has come and continues to come every good**.

14-The **beginner** needs counsel...for this reason a master is very necessary providing he has **experience**. If he doesn't...the master afflicts soul and body and obstructs progress...

15-This **path of self- knowledge** must never be abandoned, nor is there on this journey a soul so much a giant that it has not need to return often to the stage of an infant...and this should never be forgotten...There is **no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn't necessary to return often to the beginning**. Along this path of prayer, self - knowledge and the thought of one's sins is the bread with which all palates must be fed no matter how delicate they may be...

16- So, it is very important that the master have prudence—I mean **good judgment**—and **experience**; and if he has **learning**, so much the

better. But if one cannot find all three qualifications, the **first two are more important**...if the **learned men do not practice prayer their learning is of little help to beginners**...May God deliver us from foolish devotions...

17-...every Christian should strive to speak if he can with someone who has gone through studies; and the more learned the person, the better. Those who walk the path of prayer have a greater need for this counsel; and the more spiritual they are, the greater the need.

18-...I've always been a friend of men of learning...I hold that the devil will not deceive with illusions the person of prayer who consults learned men...because devils fear learning accompanied by humility and virtue...

19-...It will be a great help to consult with learned men...**God will enable them to explain what they must teach**—He will even give them **spiritual experience** so that they might help us. I do not say this without having experienced it...if a person belongs to the laity, let him praise God that he can choose someone to whom he **may be subject** and not lose this very **virtuous freedom**. Let him postpone having a master until a **suitable person** is found, for the Lord will provide one if all is founded upon **humility** and the desire to do the right thing.

22-I have wandered greatly from the subject.... But everything is a subject for beginners that their journey on so lofty a road might begin on the true road. Now returning to what I was saying about Christ bound at the pillar: it is good to **reflect** awhile...But one should not always **weary** oneself...but just remain there in His **presence** with the intellect quiet. And if a person is able he should **occupy himself in looking at Christ who is looking at him**, and he should speak, and petition, and humble himself, and delight in the Lord's presence, and remember that he is unworthy of being there. When he can do this, even though it may be at the beginning of prayer, he will derive **great benefit**; and this manner of prayer has many advantages—at least my soul derived them. Amen

