

ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

JOHN OF THE CROSS

Foreword by Claudia Mair Burney

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION

BY HENRY L. CARRIGAN, JR.



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FOREWORD

I first encountered St. John of the Cross while battling a formidable depression. Many of the writers I loved found him a consoling ally, and through the veil of their works, he comforted me. In their books I discovered “the dark night of the soul” and christened my experience with the same name, mostly because I thought it suited me. I had no idea what the dark night really was, but I can tell you why the enigmatic mystic appealed to me.

St. John of the Cross, like the Savior he adored, was a man of many sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He was persecuted because of his work with St. Teresa of Avila to reform their religious order. Soon his Carmelite brothers confined him to a dank, sixteenth-century prison cell. They let him out only to beat him mercilessly. This gentle soul, more lover than fighter, never recovered from the injuries inflicted on him. Eventually, an infection from one of the old wounds on his leg killed him.

Ironically, while I connected deeply with John of the Cross’ suffering, I hadn’t actually bothered to read his writing myself. That is, until fibromyalgia and seasonal affective disorder slammed me hard. I couldn’t find God if I had a map charting my course directly to heaven. I needed some reliable guides through my maze of pain, allies who had known this kind of night. Then I remembered John of the Cross, and desperately sought out his poetry. I found this ardor-filled verse in *The Spiritual Canticle*:

“Where have you hidden yourself,
abandoning me in my groaning, my Beloved.
You fled like a deer after wounding me.
I ran after you, weeping; but you were gone.”

Be still my heart! He’d created his own version of the Song of Songs, and there was more. From his dark night of the soul emerged these lines:

“On a dark night, aroused in love with yearnings—
oh, happy chance!—
I went out without being observed, since all in my
house were asleep.”

John of the Cross wrote about being concealed in darkness, having no light except the one, “burning in my Heart.” Yet, that night was “more lovely than the dawn.” It “joined Beloved with Lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!” This was no mere clinical depression; this was more like the soul’s transfiguration. He described a process of being changed by God into someone more beautiful and spiritual than you were before. Not once did he use religious terms. John of the Cross spoke the language of love.

What you hold in your hands is a gift, my friends, and if you’ll allow him to, St. John of the Cross, through this masterful work, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, will take you on an unforgettable journey. In these pages, like the romantic he is, he’s reaching for your hand, to steal away with you into the night. It’s a night of stark contrasts: the black darker than midnight, and the bright light more radiant than dawn.

I must warn you, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is a dangerous journey. You can die on it like a seed that falls to the ground does, then dwells in darkness before it grows and flowers. It's possible that you could lose yourself, in the way one does when lost in glorious ecstasy.

Your wanderings will be costly, for whatever you brought with you when you set out on this trip, John of the Cross will insist that you let go of it. I mean every little thing that keeps you from union with God, and that, you will see, is more than you may have realized.

It's interesting to note that John never finished his discourse on the meaning of his poem in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Perhaps he realized that there are some matters of the soul that even his soaring language can't describe, or, just maybe, he laid down his quill to cavort with God. I don't know. This is what I can assure you of, however, if you go the distance on this journey—oh, happy chance that you even have the privilege to!—you will find yourself in the arms of God. It's a good place to be, my friends. Not everyone makes it there.

Traveling mercies.

—*Claudia Mair Burney*

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton called John of the Cross “the greatest of all mystical theologians.” Merton’s judgment is certainly accurate, for John’s writings—along with those of Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and Hildegard of Bingen—continue to offer illuminating spiritual counsel for twenty-first century spiritual pilgrims.

Although John’s struggles to reach spiritual union with the Divine occurred within the context of the Christian faith, he uses philosophical and spiritual language in his mystical writings that would appeal to people of all faiths. Indeed, John’s ability to focus in an orderly and systematic fashion on the self’s stripping itself of all worldly attachments and distractions in order to lose itself in the Divine makes his work even more appealing.

When Pope Pius XI made John a Doctor of the church, he wrote, “He points out to souls the way of perfection as though illumined by light from on high, in his limpid, clear analysis of mystical experience. Although his works discuss difficult and hidden matters, they are nevertheless replete with such lofty spiritual doctrine and are so well adapted to the understanding of those who study them that they can rightly be called a guide and handbook for the person of faith who proposes to embrace a life of perfection.”

The life of perfection is not an easy one to embrace, according to John’s writings. The soul that wishes to reach divine union, or union with the Beloved, must actively submit itself to a dark night of the senses. In this night, the soul willingly detaches itself

from all sensual desires, for such desires impede the progress of the soul on its journey. Once the soul has passed through this night, it finds itself in the night of faith, where it must give up its knowledge and understanding in order to embrace God's love, knowledge, and understanding. Finally, once the soul has given up both sensual and rational desires, God begins his active work of grace as the soul gives itself up to him. Though the journey is arduous, the divine union is blissful.

John's most famous work, *Dark Night of the Soul*, has perhaps been his most misunderstood. Many religious and nonreligious people use the title phrase to describe a particularly bad moment in their lives. Perhaps they have been through a divorce, the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, and they struggle with despair and depression as a result. Yet this use of the phrase is not what John had in mind. He experienced his own "dark night of the soul" when he was in prison and felt as if God had abandoned him. On release from his jail cell he found God waiting for him as if a bright light were waiting for him at the end of a long road. John realized then that God was in his dark night all along and had been guiding him to direct his will toward union with God. So, for John, the "dark night of the soul" is not simply a time of unrelieved suffering but one of the aspects of God's love.

John's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is his introduction of the theme of the dark night. Both works are spiritual commentaries on his poems and "stress the need for active asceticism as well as the far deeper purification of the soul by divine grace and by the unsought humiliations of external agents" (David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, third edition, New York: Oxford, 1992, p. 265). In all his writing, he combines the

theological and philosophical rigor of Thomas Aquinas and the spiritual discernment of his contemporary, Teresa of Avila.

B I O G R A P H Y

Juan de Yepes y Alvarez was born in the small town of Fontiveros, Spain, in 1542. Although his father was a nobleman by birth, he had been disinherited for marrying a woman below his class. Juan's father died shortly after Juan's birth, leaving the family in poverty. Even so, Juan's mother raised him and made sure that he had an education. He attended a poor-school at Medina del Campo and was apprenticed to a silk weaver. When he showed no aptitude for this trade, he went to a Jesuit college.

When he was twenty-one he joined the Carmelite Order and took the name Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross). By the time he was twenty-seven he had received a theological education at Salamanca and had been ordained. During this year he was introduced to Teresa of Avila; this meeting proved to be the turning point in his life.

Teresa had been actively trying to reform the Carmelite Order, working to restore it to a simpler and more deeply spiritual community. Teresa's principal concern was that the order did not encourage or honor solitude or poverty, two characteristics she thought absolutely essential to the lives of those seeking perfect contemplation and union with God. By 1571, after she had established the order of Discalced (barefoot) Carmelite nuns, she began to look for a man to establish Discalced Carmelite monasteries for men according to the same patterns of reform. When she met John they both recognized their mutual spiritual affinity.

As their relationship grew deeper, he became not only Teresa's spiritual director but also the first Prior at the community of Discalced Friars in Duruelo. Later in 1571 he became rector of Alcala, a study house that was part of the university, and from 1572 to 1577, he served as confessor to the nuns of Avila.

But the late sixteenth century in Spain was a time of great religious controversy, and John fell victim to the infighting within his own Catholic Church. Many Carmelites disagreed violently with the reform that John and Teresa were carrying out. In 1575, following a general meeting of Calced Friars in Piacenza, John was kidnapped by these unreformed friars and imprisoned in a monastery of theirs in Toledo. These friars treated John poorly, feeding him a diet of bread and water, and beating him regularly. During the time John was in prison he wrote some of his most accomplished and most beautiful poetry. After nine months, when he was close to death, John escaped from the prison under the cover of darkness. This escape provides the central image of the poem, that of the soul slipping out of the house at rest, that opens *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

Not long after John's escape, the Discalced groups were separated from the Calced groups. He served in a number of capacities from 1579 to 1588. He founded a college at Baeza and served as its rector until 1582. He became Prior at Granada in 1582, the year that Teresa died, and at Segovia in 1588. Even so, in the years after his incarceration John was caught continually in the petty squabbles and jealousies within the Discalced Carmelite order. In 1588 Nicholas Doria, the vicar-general of the Discalced Carmelites, stripped John of his positions and banished him to Ubeda in the province of Andalusia. In Ubeda, a leg wound

that John had suffered during his earlier imprisonment became infected. The Prior at the Discalced monastery there disliked John so much that he neglected John's care, and on December 14, 1591, John died in Ubeda, whispering the words: "Into your hands, Beloved, I commend my spirit."

John was beatified in 1675, canonized in 1726, and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926.

ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

During his imprisonment, John devoted himself to writing astonishing lyrical poetry that captured his spiritual struggles and triumphs. Both *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul* are extended treatises on his poetry, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* being the earliest of his spiritual treatises. Although John was probably writing this book at Granada in 1582, he left it incomplete. So he never fully deals with the Night of the Spirit in which God works his grace in our souls as they journey to the Divine.

This spiritual treatise follows the soul on its journey toward perfection, as it purifies itself and passes through the various parts of the dark night of the soul on its way to union with the Divine. John devotes attention to the early stages of the mystical life, realizing that during these stages the soul has its most difficulty throwing off the worldly attachments that hinder its progress to union. In an orderly and systematic fashion, John provides a road map to the soul's journey to the Divine.

In Book One of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John emphasizes that in order even to begin this journey to divine union, the soul

must purify itself and detach itself from its sensual desires. The soul, because it desires to be in union with God, actively works to cleanse itself from the impurities of the senses and reason. The soul must empty itself of all that is not God to prepare itself to be one with God. According to John, two opposite qualities—God’s love and love of worldly things—cannot coexist in the same heart. This purification John calls the “dark night of the senses.” This part of the journey is most like midnight because we are plunged into almost total darkness. Not only are we without the light of our senses or our reason to guide us, we are also without the light of God’s grace because we are preparing ourselves to receive it.

In Books Two and Three of *Ascent*, John focuses on what he calls the “dark night of faith” or the “dark night of the spirit.” Having purified itself from the senses and prepared itself to come into union with God, the spirit must now empty itself of understanding, memory, and will in order to prepare itself to receive the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Just as our senses hinder us from having a pure soul, the understanding hinders us from having a pure spirit. When the soul possesses the three theological virtues, it has moved from meditation to contemplation, that is, from a cerebral engagement with God to a more completely detached union with God.

In Book Three John describes the obstacles to union that the memory and the will present. The earlier chapters explore memory’s navigation of the dark night, while the rest describe the ways that the will, moved by love, traverses the dark night. As the will travels this night, joy, hope, sorrow, and fear attack the will, either leading the soul away from the purity of union with God

or leading it toward its desired divine union. In the third book, John identifies “six kinds of good” that result in rejoicing. Even though he says he will discuss these each in turn, he fails to do so, concentrating instead on a detailed exposition about the rites and rituals of the church.

Since John never completed the treatise, the journey through the “dark night” never reaches its destination, the full light of God’s glory and grace. Even so, he provides an illuminating guide for the soul whose most fervent desire is to reach glorious and blissful union with the Divine.

A WORD ABOUT THE TEXT

I have used E. Allison Peers’s translation of *Ascent of Mount Carmel* as the basis for the present text. The edition I used comes from an electronic edition found in the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org). Peers is one of the most respected scholars of Spanish mysticism, and her translations of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are literal and faithful to the original texts. Peers’s edition also includes helpful biographical information, as well as information about textual variants in the extant manuscripts of *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Her commentary also provides insight into John’s life and work and into the elements of John’s engaging writing style.

For biographical information, I have benefited from David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, third edition (New York: Oxford, 1992) and Robert Ellsberg’s excellent and inspiring *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

Because some of the passages in *Ascent* are repetitive, as they offer a summary of John's arguments in certain sections, I have omitted them. I have also omitted passages that deal particularly with John's religious community since these have too narrow a focus for the general reader. These passages are few and insignificant. This edition contains only Book One of John's *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Books Two and Three deal with issues particular to his time and community.

I have remained true to the spirit of John's text, even where I have modernized it. Mostly, my modernizations have come in two areas. I have replaced archaic words and forms of address with more modern ones. Thus, "thou" and its related pronoun forms, become "you" and its related forms. I have altered John's syntax and sentence structure to make it livelier and more understandable by a modern audience. Often this simply means casting sentences in the active rather than the passive voice.

The term "recollection" may not be familiar to all readers. Webster defines "recollection" as "quiet tranquility of mind and self-possession, especially religious composure."

Ascent of Mount Carmel offers one of the most enduring and lyrical accounts of the ways in which we can pursue a path that will lead to union with God. John's spiritual directions provide us even today with a map we can follow through our dark nights to bright and glorious union with the Divine.

—Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.

ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

This work explains how the soul may prepare itself in order to reach divine union in a short time. It provides profitable instruction to beginners as well as seasoned practitioners so they can know how to free themselves from all that is temporal. It instructs them not to perplex themselves with the spiritual, and to remain in the complete detachment from the world and in the freedom of spirit that are necessary for Divine union.

A R G U M E N T

All the doctrine I intend to explore in this *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is included in the following stanzas, and in them I describe the manner of ascending to the summit of the Mount. This summit is the high state of perfection called the union of the soul with God. Because all the arguments I make depend on these verses, I wanted to place the poem here in its entirety so that all my ideas can be seen and understood together. I will sometimes place a stanza at the beginning of a section before explaining it, and discuss individual lines as my argument requires. The poem runs as follows:

THE STANZAS ON WHICH THIS
BOOK IS BASED

The soul sings of the happy fortune it had in passing through the dark night of faith, detaching and cleansing itself as it moved to union with the Beloved.

1. On a dark night, aroused in love with yearnings—
 oh, happy chance!—
 I went out without being observed, since all in my
 house were asleep.
2. In darkness and secure, by the secret ladder,
 disguised—oh, happy chance!—
 Concealed and in darkness, since all in my house
 were asleep,
3. In the happy night, in secret, when no one saw me,
 Nor did I see anyone, without light or guide, except
 the light that burned in my
 Heart,
4. This light guided me more surely than the light of
 noon,
 To the place where he (well I knew who!) was
 waiting for me—
 A place where no one appeared.

5. Oh, night that guided me, oh, night more lovely
 than the dawn,
 Oh, night that joined Beloved with Lover, Lover
 transformed in the Beloved!
6. He slept soundly on my flowery breast, which I had
 kept wholly for him alone,
 And I caressed him, and the fanning of the cedars
 made a breeze.
7. The breeze blew from the turret as I parted his hair;
 He wounded my neck with his gentle hand, and
 suspended all my senses.
8. I remained, lost in forgetfulness; I lay my face on the
 Beloved.
 Everything stopped and I abandoned myself,
 forgetting my cares among the lilies.

PROLOGUE

1. I need far greater knowledge and experience than I have to describe this dark night through which the soul passes in order to reach the divine light of the perfect union of God's love. This darkness and these spiritual and temporal trials through which happy souls pass in order to be able to reach this high state of perfection are so numerous and so profound that human knowledge is not fully capable of describing them. The only persons who can describe this dark night are the ones who experience it, and even they cannot describe it accurately.
2. I trust the Lord to help me say a few words that will assist those who have set out on the road of virtue but make no progress as they pass through the dark night to divine union. Sometimes they have no desire to enter this journey; at other times they do not have competent spiritual advisers to guide them. It is sad to see so many souls to whom God gives both aptitude and favor with which to make progress, remaining in an elementary stage of communion with God for lack of will or knowledge, or because there is no one who will lead them in the right path or teach them how to go beyond the beginnings.
3. Although our Lord grants these souls such favor as to make them go onward without obstacles, they arrive at their goal much later and with greater labor, and yet with less merit, because they have neither conformed themselves to God nor

allowed themselves to be brought freely into the pure and sure road of union. They will not allow themselves to be led, so they make less progress because they resist the One who is leading them. They have fewer rewards because they do not apply their will, and because of this they often suffer more. Instead of committing themselves to God and making use of his help, they hinder God by their resistance.

4. In this book, with God's help, I will offer instruction so that seekers can understand God's will and allow him to lead them, for spiritual guides who have no understanding of this experience of the dark night often hinder rather than help seekers on the road to union with the Divine. God will lead the soul by a most lofty path of dark contemplation and dryness of soul, and the soul will seem to be lost. Because of this dark night, some will say that the soul is simply suffering from melancholy or low spirits. Others will say that the soul has been evil so God has forsaken it.
5. Some will tell the soul to start its journey over since it is finding no pleasure or consolation in the things of God as it once did. In this way they double the poor soul's trials. It may well be that its greatest affliction is that of knowing its own miseries and thinking itself full of evils and sins, for God gives it the light of knowledge in the night of contemplation. When a person finds someone whose opinion agrees with his own and who says that these things must be due to his own fault, his affliction and trouble increase infinitely and become more grievous than death.
6. With God's help we will examine the ways the soul should conduct itself during this dark night. We will help the soul

determine whether or not it is experiencing the cleansing of the soul during the dark night of the senses and spirit, or whether this is simply melancholy. Some may think that God is leading them along the road of this dark night of spiritual cleansing, whereas they may possibly be suffering only from some imperfection.

7. Some work hard yet make no progress. Others seek profit in what is not profitable. Still others are disturbed and make no progress precisely because of the favors that God grants so that they may make progress. Yet there are others who make great progress by remaining at rest and in quietness. There are many other things on this road that come to those who follow it—joys and afflictions and hopes and grief. Some come from the spirit of perfection and others from imperfection. We will say something about all these, so that each reader can learn something about the road one should follow to reach the mountaintop.

BOOK ONE

Book One describes the nature of dark night and tells how necessary it is to pass through it to divine union. In particular this book describes the dark night of the senses and the desire and the evils that these work in the soul.



CHAPTER 1

The first stanza is introduced.

“On a dark night, aroused in love with yearnings—
oh, happy chance!—I went out without being
observed, since all in my house were asleep.”

1. In this first stanza the soul sings of the happy fortune it experiences when it succeeds in getting away from the desires and imperfections of human sensuality. For a soul to reach the state of perfection, ordinarily it has to pass first through two principal kinds of night. Spiritual people call these “cleansings” or “purifications of the soul”; in this book we call them “nights,” for in both of them the soul journeys, so to speak, by night, in darkness.

2. The first night, or cleansing, is that of the sensual part of the soul. This we explore in the present stanza and will explore in the first part of this book. The second stanza examines the spiritual part of the soul, or the second night. The second and third parts of the book describe the soul's activity, and the fourth part of the book describes the soul's passivity.
3. The first night occurs when God brings new seekers into a state of contemplation. The second night, or purification, occurs when God desires to bring more proficient seekers into union with himself. This second night is a darker and more terrible cleansing.
4. In this stanza God is leading the soul that is aroused by God's love on a journey into the dark night of the cleansing and purification of all the sensual desires of the flesh and the will. All of this happens in the cleansing of the senses. In this stanza the soul says it escaped while the desires in its house—its sensual part—were asleep. No soul can get away until the desires are restrained and put to rest. This, the soul says, was a happy chance for it, that is, going out without being observed. No fleshly desire was able to keep the soul from going out.
5. The happy chance is that God leads the soul into this night, out of which it gains so much good. By itself the soul could not have managed this, for no one can succeed in emptying himself of all desires in order to come to God.

CHAPTER 2

The nature of this dark night.

1. There are three reasons for which the soul's journey to union with God is called night. The first has to do with the soul's starting point. It must gradually deprive itself of desire for all worldly things by denying these things to itself. Such denial and deprivation are night to the human senses. The second reason has to do with the road along which the soul must travel to this union, that is, faith, which also is as dark as night to the understanding. The third has to do with the point to which it travels—that is, God, who is equally a dark night to the soul in this life. The soul must pass through these dark nights so that it may come to divine union with God.
2. These three parts of the night are all one, but like actual night, they have three parts. The first part, that of the senses, can be compared to the beginning of night when things begin to fade from sight. The second part, which is faith, can be compared to midnight, which is total darkness. The third part is like the close of night near the light of day, which is God.

CHAPTER 3

The first cause of this night.

1. Night is the lack of every kind of pleasure that pertains to the desires. Even as actual night is nothing but the loss of light and consequently of all objects that can be seen only

with light, the denial of desire can be called night to the soul. When the soul is deprived of the pleasure of its desire in all things, it remains unoccupied and in darkness. When the soul quenches the pleasure of all things and ceases to desire, pleasure no longer occupies it and it remains in darkness.

2. Here is an example from each of the human faculties: When the soul deprives its desire of the pleasure of all that can delight the sense of hearing, the soul remains unoccupied and in darkness with respect to hearing. When it deprives itself of the pleasure of all that can please the sense of sight, it remains unoccupied and in darkness with respect to sight. When it deprives itself of the pleasure of all the sweetness of perfumes that can give it pleasure through the sense of smell, it remains equally unoccupied and in darkness with regard to the sense of smell. Moreover, if it denies itself the pleasure of all food that can satisfy the palate, the soul remains unoccupied and in darkness. Finally, when the soul restrains itself from all the delights and pleasures it can receive from the sense of touch, it remains, also, unoccupied and in darkness. So the soul that has denied and thrust away from itself the pleasures that come from all these things, and has mortified its desire with respect to them, can be said to be in the darkness of night, which is nothing but emptiness of all things within itself.
3. The reason for this is that as soon as God infuses the soul into the body, the soul is like a smooth, blank board on which nothing is painted. Except for the things that it experiences through the senses, nothing is communicated

to it from any other source. As long as it is in the body, it is like one in a dark prison who knows nothing except what he can see through the prison's windows. So the senses are the prison windows of the soul.

4. If the soul rejects and denies what it receives through the senses, it remains empty and in darkness because no light can enter it by any means other than the windows. One who desires to shut his eyes will remain in darkness, like a blind person who lacks the faculty of sight.
5. For this reason, King David says these words: I am poor and in labors from my youth. He calls himself poor, although he was rich, because his will was not set on riches. So it was as though he were really poor. But if he had not actually been poor in his will, he would not have been truly poor, for his soul, as far as its desire was concerned, would have been rich and full.
6. This kind of detachment from the world is night to the soul, for simply lacking goods does not imply detachment from the world if the soul still desires those goods. Rather, detachment from the world occurs when the desire for such goods leaves the soul free and empty of them. It is not worldly things themselves that occupy the soul or cause it harm—those things cannot enter the soul. It is the will and the desire for them that cause harm.
7. This first kind of night through which the soul must pass to reach union is this dark night of the senses.

CHAPTER 4

*The soul's interior darkness cannot
receive God's light.*

1. The soul must pass through the dark night of the senses because all the passions it feels for created things are pure darkness in God's eyes. When the soul is imbued with the passions, it lacks the capacity for being enlightened and possessed by God's pure and simple light. Light cannot agree with darkness. As John says: The darkness could not receive the light.
2. Two opposite qualities cannot coexist in one person. Darkness, which is passion for created things, and light, which is God, are opposites. As Paul said to the Corinthians: What communion can there be between light and darkness? The light of divine union cannot dwell in the soul if the passions are still present.
3. The passions and attachment the soul has for created things make the soul similar to these created things. The greater the passion, the greater the likeness between them. Love creates likeness between one who loves and the object of its love.
4. One who loves a created thing becomes as low as that created thing, and in some ways lower. Love not only makes the lover equal to the object of his love, but even subjects him to it. In the same way the soul that loves anything else becomes incapable of pure union with God and transformation in him. The low estate of the created

thing is much less capable of union with the high estate of the Creator than is darkness with light.

5. Everything on earth and in heaven compared with God is nothing, as Jeremiah says in these words: I beheld the earth, and it was empty, and it was nothing; I beheld the heavens, and saw that they had no light. When he looked at the heavens and saw no light in them, he says that all the bright stars in the skies, compared with God, are pure darkness. All created things are nothing and their passions are less than nothing, since they are impediments to transformation in God. The soul that expends its passions on created things will not be able to comprehend God, for until it is cleansed it will not be able to possess God, either on this earth through pure transformation of love, or beyond this earth with a clear vision.
6. All the being of creation, then, compared with the infinite Being of God, is nothing. In the same way the soul that spends its passion on the being of creation is nothing in God's eyes, and indeed less than nothing. Love makes for equality and even sets the lover below the object of its love. Such a soul will not in any way be able to reach union with the infinite Being of God.
7. The beauty of created things compared with the infinite beauty of God is the height of deformity, as Solomon says in the Proverbs: Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain. The soul that is passionately attached to the beauty of any created thing is the height of deformity in God's eyes. Therefore this deformed soul cannot be transformed in beauty, which is God, since deformity cannot aspire to beauty. Compared

with God's grace, all the grace and beauty of created things are the height of misery and ugliness. The soul that is ravished by them cannot experience God's infinite grace and loveliness, for that which has no grace is far removed from that which is infinitely gracious.

8. In comparison with God's infinite goodness, the goodness of the created things of the world can be described as wickedness. "For there is nothing good, except only God." Therefore the soul that sets its heart on the good things of the world is supremely evil in God's eyes. Just as wickedness cannot comprehend goodness, such a soul cannot be united with God, who is supreme goodness.
9. All the wisdom of the world and all human ability, compared with God's infinite wisdom, are supreme ignorance. As Paul writes: The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Any soul that makes use of its knowledge and ability so it can come to union with God's wisdom is supremely ignorant in God's eyes and will remain far removed from that wisdom. In God's eyes, people who think they have a certain amount of knowledge are ignorant. Only those who lay aside their knowledge to walk in God's service with love acquire God's wisdom. As Paul taught: If anyone among you seems to be wise, let him become ignorant so that he may be wise; for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. In order to come into union with God's wisdom, the soul must proceed by unknowing rather than knowing. The dominion and freedom of the world, compared with the freedom and dominion of God's Spirit, is the most abject slavery, affliction, and captivity.

10. The delights and pleasures of the will in the things of the world, in comparison with God's delights, are supreme affliction, torment, and bitterness. One who sets his heart on them is considered in God's sight as worthy of supreme affliction, torment, and bitterness. He will be unable to gain the delights of embracing union with God. Compared to God's wealth, the wealth and glory of creation are supreme poverty and wretchedness. The soul that loves and possesses creature wealth is supremely poor and wretched in God's sight, and for that reason will be unable to gain the wealth and glory that is the state of transformation in God.
11. Divine Wisdom, grieving for such souls who make themselves vile, low, miserable, and poor because they love the things in this world that seem so rich and beautiful, exclaims to them in Proverbs: O you mortals, to you I call, and my voice is to the children of mortals. Attend, little ones, to subtlety and wisdom; you who are foolish, take notice. Hear, for I have great things to speak of. With me are riches and glory, high riches and justice. Better is the fruit that you will find in me than gold and precious stones; and my generation—that is, what you will engender of me in your souls—is better than choice silver. I walk in the ways of justice, in the midst of the paths of judgment, that I may enrich those who love me and fill their treasures perfectly.
12. Here Divine Wisdom speaks to all who set their hearts and passions on anything of the world. She calls them "little ones" because they make themselves like what they love, which is little. Therefore she tells them to be subtle and to take note that she is dealing with great things and not with

little things like themselves, and that the great riches and the glory that they love are with her and in her and not where they think. The wisdom she creates in souls is better than the choice silver that they love.

CHAPTER 5

It is necessary for the soul to journey to God through this dark night.

1. There is a great distance between all that created things are in themselves and what God is in himself. Souls that spend their passions on any created thing are at as great a distance from God as created things are. Realizing this distance, Augustine records his conversation with God: Miserable man that I am, when will my littleness and imperfection be able to have fellowship with your uprightness? You indeed are good, and I am evil; you are merciful, and I am wicked; you are holy, I am miserable; you are just, I am unjust; you are light, I am blind; you, life, I, death; you, medicine, I, sickness; you, supreme truth, I, utter vanity.
2. The soul is ignorant to think it can reach union with God if it does not first empty itself of the desire for all things. There is enormous distance between transformation in God and our worldly state. When showing us this path, Jesus said: The one who refuses to renounce with the will all things he possesses cannot be my disciple. As long as the soul does not reject all things, it is incapable of receiving the Spirit of God in pure transformation.