



God Alone is Enough

*A Spirited Journey with
Teresa of Avila*

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God Alone Is Enough: A Spirited Journey with Teresa of Avila

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To Terry Behimer, my soul friend

I have found nothing that compares to the magnificent beauty
of a soul, and its marvelous magnitude.

— Teresa of Avila

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It's silly to think that my words could be meaningful to anyone other than my friends, but if one person reads this and praises my Beloved a little more, God will be granting me a great favor. He knows I'm not interested in anything else. If I manage to say something well, my friends understand that this doesn't come from me; there would be no foundation for it unless the Lord gives it to me! If they're wrong about this, it will be because they're as ignorant as I am incapable. Only God in his mercy gives such things to us. ¹

—Teresa of Avila

Author's Note

Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed that easily.

— Dorothy Day

This may be a bit brassy of me, but for our purposes here—with no disrespect to the canonized—I'm going to pretty much ditch the word *saint*.⁷ Not that it's a bad word. It's a good, solid, biblical one. The apostle Paul used it, and that means it's okay. It's even in the Apostles' Creed. But Dorothy Day was right. For some, the word and all it conjures is easy to dismiss. Because of that, many people miss out on the immense spiritual treasures the *you-know-who*'s offer.

Let's be honest, the 's' word makes some of us uncomfortable. We may prefer to think of s----- as simply being upstanding Christians, the kind of people who could sit right beside us on the pew on Sunday mornings, and definitely not the long-gone souls who have been officially canonized. We might even make a few allowances for honoring the previously-pious-but-passed-away, so long as no one asks them to do anything. Like pray for us.

This kind of skittishness is understandable. Not everyone grew up regaled by the inspiring—albeit often horrifying—stories of the officially canonized. There were no icons on their

walls opening windows to heaven. No plaster statue of the Virgin Mary stood like a serene sentry on their chest of drawers. There wasn't even a blissful, concrete Francis—complete with birds perched on his shoulders—poised in the garden.

Some of us believe the godly dead are gone for heaven's sake. Literally. They're gone for *heaven's* sake, and accoutrements of devotion to them such as medals, holy cards, and candles are at best extra-biblical, or downright superstitious.

We won't get into any of that here.

I'm not asking you to read a book about or admire a s----. I'm inviting you to get to know a trusted friend who has already walked, run, or inched baby step by baby step into the arms of God, exactly where you want to be. A pilgrimage is so much more enjoyable when you share it with someone who's been there, and Teresa of Avila is much safer than a person you could meet online or speed-dating.

So relax. We'll simply pray some of her prayers and stroll with her on the path to God that she paved for us. Her winsome voice will only speak through the writings she left behind.

I've gently paraphrased and condensed her words for our journey, but I encourage you to pick up her books and read them for yourself. They're as remarkable as she is. Let this book simply serve as a disarming introduction to her teachings.

With that said, let's meet our illustrious guide for this pilgrimage. We're going to have such a grand adventure.

An Opening Prayer
by Teresa of Avila

From silly devotions and sullen _____,
deliver me, O Lord!¹ Amen.

That potentially inflammatory 's' word (*saints*) has been removed.

Introduction

My Invitation and Yours

Winter always calls on me in the middle of August. It's just a whisper of the season, an unmistakable chill slashing like a knife through the heat, but its cold breath never fails to startle me. Despite my ardent desire to remain in denial, I brace myself. Soon the temperature will drop. The leaves will brown on their solemn branches and my mood will nosedive. Before the end of November I'll be trapped in an inner terrain akin to Dante's third circle of hell, where the poor souls are forced to lie in a loathsome slush made of black snow, glacial rain, and battering hail.

Doctors call what I experience seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. To me it feels like hypothermia of the soul. The wretched scourge freezes me in place, usually in my bed, until approximately the end of April. Completing simple tasks such as getting dressed requires Herculean effort, which exhausts me so much that I have to take those clothes right back off and crawl into bed for the next four, five, or forty-eight hours. Added to my agony is the baffling, crippling pain of fibromyalgia syndrome. Sometimes, between the fatigue, depression, and body aches, the lights begin to flicker in my inner world and I'm sucked into a spiritual black hole that feels utterly void of God's presence. In that unforgiving darkness I

grope for him like a blind woman in a strange environment, without her guiding cane.

It's not only darkness I experience in these times, however. Sweet moments of God's presence inexplicably return, like a maddening lover prone to disappearing acts. His wooing leaves me breathless. Then *blam!* That door so full of grace slams shut and it's midnight again, so dark in my soul that my prayers become colorless variations of "Why have you forsaken me?"

In one of those times of impenetrable night I met John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila's contemporary and friend. His poems, *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Spiritual Canticle*, assured me that this man, who lived some 500 years before me, was a kindred spirit. John wrote:

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling, and you were gone.¹

Not only did John speak to the longing for God so familiar to me, he also addressed the respites of solace that pierced the darkness and filled me with sudden joy. And he did so in language that was infinitely appealing. Rather than sounding lofty and religious, John wrote using exquisitely romantic metaphors that fired my love for my Beloved. This stanza from *The Dark Night*

of the Soul hints at the complex relationship between spiritual darkness and the intimacy with God it can shape.

O you guiding night!
 O night more kindly
 than the dawn!
 O you night that united
 Lover with beloved,
 the beloved in the Lover
 transformed!²

“Yes!” I thought, “I know this night!” and promptly fell in love with the starry-eyed God-lover given to such soaring verse.

You don’t have to hang around John long before the sound of Teresa of Avila’s laughter steals your attention. I slowly began to look at her published work, too. She emerged from the page immediately as a hoot. The woman was known to tease John mercilessly about his height, which was about the same as a toy action figure. Upon recruiting him and Antonio de Heredia to her cause she quipped to her nuns, “Thanks be to God, daughters! I have found a friar and a half to start the Reform with.”³

I believe her buoyant personality balanced John’s somewhat dour disposition. She reminded him that although joy could be found in the dark night, it’s much easier to spot during a walk in the sun.

John showed me how to recline my face on the breast of the Beloved in my bed of affliction, but it was Teresa who charged

into my room and flung the drapes open. She assured me that she knew all about being sick and sad, and like her I could overcome all through Christ. In fact, once she had become so ill that her family thought she'd already died and began to prepare her body for burial! There go all my excuses to wallow. No one ever shipped me off to a mortician to be embalmed, although like Teresa I do a remarkable imitation of the dead. I began to trust the funny nun.

Through her prolific writing, Teresa told me about adventures in prayer and God that I hadn't begun to dream of, and what's more, she persuaded me that our good Father God was willing to give *me* these kinds of glorious encounters with him. Her wise words convinced me to take her hand, and she would show me the way to the diamond inside of myself: brilliant, precious, and full of exciting facets to explore.

I had my doubts. She was a nun, and I was married and the mother of a sizable brood. She lived five centuries ago. I was thoroughly postmodern. She was considered a leader of the Counter-Reformation movement. I was born and bred thoroughly Protestant and, despite my love of John of the Cross, had an almost pathological fear of most things Roman Catholic. Teresa led a life of poverty, but I had hundreds of spiritual books, cable television with four different Christian networks, and unlimited wireless Internet access. Yet, I still felt lost most days. How could her centuries-old teachings possibly calm the screeching wilderness within me?

Teresa shushed me. Generally I hate it when people I'm reading shush me, but I suspected she had something important to say. So I quieted myself and continued to read until I came upon her famous bookmark prayer. The words washed over me in waves of peace:

Let nothing upset you,
 let nothing startle you.
 All things pass;
 God does not change.
 Patience wins
 all it seeks.
 Whoever has God
 lacks nothing;
 God alone is enough.⁴

God alone is *enough*? Now that was a fresh idea for me, a woman who perpetually felt like “enough” was a little more than whatever I had. I found myself not only wanting to *know*—in every way such a concept could be known—that yes indeed, God alone is enough, but I also wanted to know the woman, so unlike myself, who was bold enough in one of the most volatile times in Christian history to say so.

Maybe you, too, are a soul child of the Reformation and never thought you'd show an interest in anyone whose name is commonly preceded by the prefix *St.* Maybe you view *mystical* as yet another word that is best avoided in a Christian vocabulary,

or even find the ‘m’ word a little silly, but you picked this book up because the idea that God alone is enough speaks to a yearning deep inside of you. Are you willing to put any misgivings you may have aside and give Teresa a chance, if only because she possessed the kind of patience and forbearance to say “Let nothing upset you” and mean it?

If you want to live with such grace-infused assurance, prepare to meet my friend Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, a woman responsible for revolutionizing the prayer lives of millions. More important, prepare to meet Christ, Teresa’s Beloved, in new, exciting ways. As we travel together, may you find yourself held tightly in his everlasting arms.

Let’s pray.



A Prayer

O God,
you taught your beloved Teresa the way of perfection;
Nourish us by her delectable teachings.
Set us ablaze, dear one, with desire to know you
as our loving friend.

When our spirits have grown cold,
send us the warmth of the Holy Spirit.
Rekindle the flame of love within us.

Give us soul friends for our pilgrimage,
who will pray with us and share our journey
of learning to enjoy and give you pleasure.
Set our feet on the path of joy and delight,
and help us to shine with holiness
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.





1

Teresa's Sparkling Life

“My Lord, you seem determined to save me. I beseech Your Majesty to let it be so.”

Whether you're fabulous enough to boast of your own reality television show or so rarely sought after that your mother keeps giving you copies of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, you're in for a treat. Our guide for this spirited journey enjoyed immense popularity.

The ever-enchancing Teresa of Avila was a stunning beauty. Think dark hair, generous curves, and eyes as black and luminous as obsidian. She was redolent of talent, dancing, singing, and charming her way into the good graces of crowds of admirers who clamored to be near her. As if she didn't have enough unfair advantages, she was a prolific writer, possessing a brilliant theological mind. And God gave her *visions*. Good ones.

THE EARLY YEARS

Teresa wriggled her way into the world in the village of Avila, high amid the mountains of Sierra de Gredos in central Spain. The year was 1515, at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. Although born of noble blood, Teresa's grandfather was a *converso*, a Jew forced to convert to Christianity under threat of torture. At one point he and his sons were made to parade around town dressed in the *sambenitillo con sus cruces*, a knee-length yellow garment marked with black crosses, while bystanders, compelled out of loyalty to the Church, showered them with stones and spittle. For seven consecutive Fridays they donned the humiliating costumes. Teresa's father, Alonso, never forgot the horror of it. The family lived under constant scrutiny after that.

When Teresa writes about her father in her autobiography, she describes him as a principled, scrupulous man. Serious and devout, Don Alonso was a man who, despite the social and racial tensions prevalent in his day, refused to keep slaves. He married Teresa's mother, Beatriz de Ahumada, an extremely beautiful, bright girl, after the death of his first wife. Beatriz could read and write in the Spanish vernacular—although not in Latin, which was the language of schools and the Church. It's likely that it was she who taught Teresa to read and inspired her lifelong love affair with books. It's doubtful Teresa would have been the writer and thinker she became without her mother's influence.

One of thirteen children, Teresa enjoyed the advantages of being a favored child. Her parents doted on her, perhaps

because of her gregarious nature, or maybe because from her earliest years Teresa was touched with an inner flame that cast a warm and happy glow on everyone around her.

She learned to read at an early age. Heroic stories of faith and martyrdom deeply affected her. When she wasn't playing hermitage in her orchard, the bossy abbess-to-be made monastics out of all the neighborhood kids. Imagine being her childhood buddy.

“Teresa, wanna play Barbies?”

“Barbies are lame. Let's run away to Africa and preach the gospel to the Moors!”

“But... um... they'll cut our heads off.”

“Yes, but we'll go *straight* to heaven!”

Even if Teresa's station in life allowed her the best toys on the block, I'd dare say no one was interested in the toys alone. She had to be the go-to girl for excitement. In fact, Teresa was so compelling that at a mere seven years old she convinced her little brother Rodrigo to steal away with her on a daring spiritual adventure. They planned to beg their way to the Dark Continent, like the poor friars she'd read about, and in Morocco achieve the glorious martyrdom she dreamed of at the hands of infidels. When Dona Beatriz discovered her children were missing, fraught with anxiety she sent several servants out into the streets to look for the little zealots. Their uncle finally found the pair, not too far from home, and snatched them off

the fast track to heaven. He promptly escorted them back to their grateful mother's arms.

Teresa was close to her mother. They devoured books, especially chivalrous tales, which her stern father, who preferred they'd read about the lives of the holy people, disapproved of. "Our reading romance novels bothered my father so much we had to sneak around so he wouldn't catch us."¹ When Teresa was a teen—reports vary, but she was between twelve and fourteen—her cherished mother died during childbirth, leaving her bereft.

"When I began to realize what I had lost, I was overcome with grief. In my misery I threw myself at the feet of an image of our Lady. Weeping, I pleaded with her to be my mother. I have found her to be a kind and merciful ally whenever I've asked for her help. And in the end, she's drawn me to herself."²

A girl needs a mother.

Her father tried his best to ease her suffering. He sent for a female cousin to help her manage the choppy waters of bereavement. The girl distracted Teresa with the wholly superficial. They devoured more romance novels until what was once a harmless indulgence became an unruly habit for Teresa. She wasted countless hours hiding from her father, absorbed by the books. "I didn't think I could be happy without a new one." By her own admission, her desire to live a virtuous life grew cold during this time. In her autobiography she wrote: "I longed to please people and began to obsess about how I looked. I had to have the latest fashions, perfumed my skin, and took great care to pamper my hands, and fuss with my hair."

In other words, she became a teenage girl.

She didn't have to work so hard at gilding the proverbial lily. Teresa was quite fetching, and her allure didn't go unnoticed. However, the poor, motherless girl, like many of us, had difficulty grasping exactly how lovable she was.

She knew she was charming; by now she'd become an accomplished flirt. She understood she was "desirable" on many levels, even at such a young age, but that doesn't necessarily satisfy a girl's need to be known and loved for who she authentically is. Poor Teresa. She wanted so badly to live like the heroines she read about, ravished by a devastating lover. Between the books and her neediness she was practically asking for trouble, and eventually she got it.

When Teresa was fifteen or sixteen she fell in love. Using her cousins and maids as accomplices, she smuggled passionate letters to her paramour and swooned over his replies. Accounts of her life during this time give only the sketchiest details, but most scholars agree this was a mild flirtation. That doesn't mean it was without controversy. People in town began to talk, and Don Alonso, still scarred by his childhood experiences of being publicly humiliated, resolved to stave off disaster and protect his daughter's reputation. He promptly shipped Teresa off to a convent that served as a finishing school for well-to-do girls. Augustinian nuns took the lovesick teen in, intent on quenching the fire within her.

Inner fire is difficult to quell, and Teresa's vivaciousness was a brilliant purchaser of favors. Teresa used her gifts of persuasion

to convince the unsuspecting nuns to allow her freedoms that other girls at the convent did not enjoy, although she was much more constrained than when she was at home.

But it was also here with the Augustinian nuns that Teresa began to experience deeply satisfying solitude. That and the positive influence of the nuns rekindled her childhood zeal. Her obsession with romantic love began to fade like a conversation she'd lost interest in, and Teresa blessed the Lord for putting up with her foolishness for so long.

As much as she had begun to enjoy her life as a boarder at the convent, she had no desire to be a nun herself. In fact, she was so strongly against the idea that she prayed God would not give her a vocation. She'd formed an amorous attachment to a distant cousin and flirted with the idea of marrying him, but Teresa feared marriage. One source notes, "It is interesting that she later told her nuns how fortunate they were to have avoided [marriage's] drawbacks—which she gave as having to submit totally to a man, and run the risk of an early death through too much childbearing."³ Surely watching her mother suffer and die in childbirth shaped these ideas.

Toward the end of her time with the Augustinian nuns, Teresa warmed to the idea of being a nun, wondering if perhaps she could do it on her own terms. The willful young woman considered choosing a less austere house. A dear friend was a nun at another convent. She told herself if she ever did take vows—although convinced she wouldn't—maybe she'd join her friend's community.

Her thoughts on the matter weren't altogether frivolous. As Teresa's spiritual life improved she began to debate the question—to be or not to be a nun—so intensely it left her physically ill, and then a series of fortuitous events led Teresa to believe that her sickness was a nudge from God designed to align her with his will. Her sister Maria and her husband sent for her. Halfway between her sister and her father, her virtuous widower uncle Pedro resided. He asked Teresa to visit with him for a short time.

Don Pedro had two favorite topics to talk about: the ways of God and the vanity of the world. When he wasn't waxing eloquently on spiritual truths, he spent much of his time reading inspiring books. He asked Teresa to read to him while she was there. These were no romance novels; the contents sobered Teresa and stirred her to profound introspection. She began to understand that everything is nothing; the world is vanity, and soon enough it will all come to an end. Examining her life she found it wanting and began to fear that if she died she'd go to hell.

She may not have loved the idea of being a nun, but she'd seen some fine examples of godly women at the convent. Teresa reasoned that religious life would probably be the best and safest place for her. Although initially she hated the idea, over a three-month period little by little Teresa forced herself to accept what she'd fought so hard against. She would indeed become a nun, sadly motivated by fear, rather than by love and devotion.

Having made her decision, negative thoughts assailed her, and she wondered if she'd be able to endure the trials of religious life

because she'd been so pampered most of her life. Worrying over these matters with such intensity only exacerbated her health problems. High fevers and fainting spells became the norm, which scholars now attribute to being caused by malaria. But she had books. Teresa always kept those reliable guides by her side. "My fondness for good books was my salvation. Reading the *Letters of St. Jerome* encouraged me so much I decided to brave telling my father about my decision to put on the habit. I was the kind of person whose word was solid. If I told him I was going to do it, nothing would turn me back."⁴

Don Alonso's reaction was less than enthusiastic; he was adamantly against it! The best she could get out of him was that when he died, she could do whatever she wanted.

The more resistance Teresa encountered, the more her determination swelled. A sense of urgency propelled her now, and she knew she wouldn't be able to wait until her father died. She had to find a creative solution to the challenge her father posed. Being a young woman with powerful natural ambition helped. She'd find a way to stay in the convent, so help her God.

A VOW IN THE MAKING

It's ironic that Teresa's one obstacle to becoming a nun was the person who sent her to a convent in the first place. He had wanted her time there to be a teenage version of a "time-out." Teresa was to get a little education, not a lot—too much education for a girl was considered ruinous. Then she would come back home purged and refreshed, and marry well—Don

Alonso hoped. And now this! What was a girl desperately seeking sacred vows to do?

Run away, of course. Teresa had more smarts than she had at seven, and she didn't have to drag her little brother Rodrigo along this time. As Clare of Assisi did before her, Teresa eloped with God, defying the wish of her beloved father that she be a nun, literally, over his dead body.

Despite her resolve, leaving him was the most difficult thing she'd ever done. For the most part, her father believed the girl he doted on was incapable of any serious character defect. She knew he'd be shocked by her actions. Because she loved him so, she hated to disobey and disappoint him. But she knew what she must do, and at the age of twenty Teresa entered the Monastery of the Incarnation, even though it caused her tremendous pain.

"When I left my father's house I felt the separation so acutely that I don't think it could have been greater if I were dying. It was as if every bone in my body was being torn apart. My love for God at that time was nothing compared to the love I had for my family. Oh, how my heart constrained me, so that if the Lord had not helped me, I wouldn't have been able to carry on."⁵

Teresa's spiritual elopement did not mean she was a happy bride of Christ. The fact remained: she'd forced herself to enter the convent, motivated by fear of hell and a desire to escape God's displeasure. But her Groom was far more winsome than she believed him to be. A year after she entered the convent, almost immediately after she was clothed in her habit, something shifted inside her.

“The Lord revealed to me how kind he is to those who force themselves to serve him. Within an hour I was so happy with my choice that the feeling never left me, even to this day. Everything about the religious life delighted me. Sometimes, I’d sweep the floor and remember the hours I wasted indulging myself in trivial things like looking good, and I realized I was free from all that now! The joy I experienced amazed me.”⁶

Not all nuns were enclosed, or cloistered, in those days. Convents were more like fancy hotels, with vast parlors. They took in affluent girls whose families had no idea what to do with them. The wealthy maidens brought their servants, jewels, and lap dogs with them. Because food was scarce at the convents, scads of visitors were encouraged to join them on the weekends, bearing gifts.

The Monastery of the Incarnation enjoyed this kind of mitigated rule and teemed with social activity. Teresa, with her keen intellect and talents combined with her startling good looks, quickly became a parlor favorite.

Men visited regularly. These devotees would come ostensibly for spiritual guidance, but they found Teresa irresistible. The motherless woman-child bloomed before their admiration. She responded to their favor by falling in love with one after another of them.

Teresa pined for visiting days when she could revel in enrapturing her admirers. But as much as she craved being the center of attention, she began to feel guilty about all the time she

spent engaged in social discourse. Guilt prodded reflection, and Teresa turned a critical eye on herself.

She did not like what she saw. Because she was an extremist by nature, Teresa began to accuse herself mercilessly, which did nothing for her health. Her fainting spells caused by the malaria increased, joined now by mysterious and severe chest pains. Doctors also diagnosed her with tuberculosis and severe nerve damage, although they seemed powerless to help her. Teresa wrote in her autobiography that she had many other illnesses, which could have included epilepsy. In any case, her first year in the convent was consumed by poor health.

Teresa's father sought relief for her. In his desperation he took her to a nearby curandera, a well known folk healer.

On her way to see the woman, Teresa received from her uncle a book by Francisco de Osuna called *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. It taught a method of mental prayer that intrigued Teresa, called recollection. "I didn't know how to proceed in prayer, and so I was very happy with this book, and determined to follow that path with all my strength."⁷

The premise of the Franciscan mystic's book was that friendship and communion with God are possible by entering your heart, resting in loving stillness, and finally rising above even the heart to God alone. You might know this kind of prayer by another name, "contemplative prayer." For nine months *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* was Teresa's constant companion, but she had no one to teach her beyond its pages. Her progress was minimal, but God began to grant her lovely gifts as she toddled along on this path.

Sometimes God surprised her with a peace-infused sense of quiet, unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Other times, she'd feel a spectacular melding with him, and she would freefall into his arms so completely that her soul would become utterly absorbed. In this happy union with God all her concerns would vanish, even though her body remained sick.

The curandera only made matters worse. In truth the woman was the sixteenth-century equivalent of a quack. Her harsh regime of purgatives, emetics, and herbal remedies were harder on Teresa's body than her illnesses were, but Teresa remained with the woman for almost a year. While there, Teresa became convinced that her illness was of a spiritual nature and sought out a confessor to aid her in finding her sick soul's cure.

There was just one problem: the only priest in town was burdened by a weakness for the fairer sex. As it was, the young priest had spent seven years involved in an affair with a bewitching local woman. Literally, the woman bewitched him with a copper amulet that she made him promise to wear as a token of their love. This priest to whom Teresa spent so much time confessing her sins turned and confessed *his* to *her*. Bright Teresa identified the amulet as a primary source of his woes, and at her urging the smitten priest banished the object from his person. Then, he wasted not a moment transferring his immense love to Teresa.

Teresa returned his affection, but not seriously. She was more in love with God and credits the first inklings of devotion she'd gained in prayer as keeping her out of harm's way. She insisted

the priest keep his mind on heavenly things instead of earthly pleasures, something she admitted she would have found hard to do in another, less prayer-full time in her life. Our Teresa was growing up.

Since the besotted priest failed to give her proper spiritual direction, she didn't find any relief from her suffering, even spiritually. To make matters worse, the curandera's dubious methods almost killed her. Teresa's fevers soared, and nausea prevented her from eating. Ravaged by disease, she began to waste away. And how her body hurt. Fiery nerve pain shot through her body, causing unbearable pain. Her father brought her home to die.

For three or four months Teresa languished. Her beloved books helped; reading focused her attention and drew her back to the peace-infused quiet and extraordinary sense of union with God she'd previously experienced, but near the end of this time, a coma dimmed her bright light. She became so gravely ill that her breath and heartbeat diminished until they were undetectable. Her family dug her grave.

"They administered the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, and from hour to hour and moment to moment, they expected me to die. Again and again they recited the Creed to me. As if I could understand them! At one point they were so sure I was dead, they waxed my eyelids shut."⁸

She may not have been dead, but she was in a terrible state. "I had bitten my tongue to pieces. I was so weak my throat could not so much as swallow water. All my bones seemed out

of joint, and my head was a jumble of confusion. I'd curled up like a ball, no more able to move my arms, feet, hands or head than a corpse. I think I could manage to flick a single finger on my right hand. That was it."⁹ But Teresa insisted on returning to the convent, where she remained gravely ill for eight months and partially paralyzed for the next three years. When she could finally crawl on her hands and knees, Teresa praised God for his goodness.

"I suffered those years with gladness," she said, taking no credit for her tranquility. "If that patience hadn't come from the hand of His Majesty, it would have been impossible to be suffer so much with so great contentment."¹⁰

MEETING THE BELOVED

When her health was restored, life in the convent continued much as it did the first time. Teresa the social butterfly returned to the parlor and flitted about from visitor to visitor on the wings of the attention they lavished on her. And just as she had before, she berated herself about her intense need for praise. She hadn't yet grown the courage to follow God without the luxurious feelings of acceptance she'd come to depend on from the parlor people. It seems the death of her mother had left a cavernous hole in her soul, rendering her powerless to avoid the place where she felt such an outpouring of affection, even if her reliance on the attention—her craving for it—ultimately hurt her. In her mind she was like the greatest of deceivers: outwardly devout, and inwardly in

shambles. She became disgusted with herself, until even her semblance of virtue slipped. More and more she engaged in petty sins. The joy she felt in doing good faded, and her taste for virtue waned.

“This was the worst trick the devil could play on me. Seeing myself as wicked, I was afraid to pray. A host of vanities spoiled me, and I was ashamed to return to God in the special friendship I’d found with him through prayer.”¹¹

It was easier for her to simply recite the obligatory rote prayers she learned at the convent than to enjoy the intimate experience of prayer she’d stumbled upon in reading *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. She blamed her illness for her spiritual inertia and let a whole year lapse without praying in the way that had become so meaningful to her. Only a short time later, Teresa would suffer another devastating blow. Her father became ill with what was most likely bone cancer. She left the convent to care for him but found his dying excruciating. She reflected:

“I loved that man so much that as I saw his death approaching, I felt like my soul was being torn from my body.”¹²

Having your soul ripped out has to hurt like the dickens, and Teresa had already suffered the thorny pain of losing her mother. This was too much for her to bear. She began to shut down her fragile emotions and returned to the convent after her father’s death feeling about as solid as gas. She remained that way, cut off from feeling, an airy, chatty, worldly nun, until some twenty years later—when a statue, of all things, rocked her world.

It was an ordinary day, although busy. The not quite forty-year-old prioress was engrossed in getting the convent ready for a festival. Another monastery had loaned the sisters a statue. It had arrived in one piece—thankfully—and Teresa, entering the oratory, stumbled upon the image of the Suffering Christ, the *Ecce Homo*. This was no placid work of art. It was a gut-punching, graphic, deeply disturbing representation of a brutalized Christ, with three-dimensional, torn, and bloody wounds. Think Mel Gibson's *Passion of Christ*, in a single statue.

“The sight of it utterly destroyed me, wrenching the deepest devotion from me. I felt keenly, painfully aware of what Christ had suffered for us, and how little thankfulness I offered him in return. I threw myself at his feet, my heart broken, and begged him to give me the strength, once and for all, to never forsake him again.

“I had no more trust in myself, and placed every ounce of faith I had in God. I think I told him right then that I would stay there, wrapped around his feet, weeping profusely, until he gave me what I wanted.”¹³

She suddenly realized: she wanted so much more of *him*.

Teresa indeed stayed there, baptized in tears of penance, letting the waters of her contrition begin to transform her into a woman who would come to know Christ so intimately she'd call him her Beloved. The wounded Christ, savagely scourged, had touched her to her core in a way the Christ of her past, whom she perceived as constantly judging her, had not. The way she prayed began to change again. “Since I couldn't seem to

make reflections with my intellectual understanding, I visualized Christ within me.”¹⁴

Now in her innermost being she would look for his face, bloodied by a crown of thorns. She felt best when she meditated on the mysteries of his life when he was most lonely, and she came to a profound conclusion: “It seemed to me that when he was alone and afflicted, like someone in a lot of trouble, Christ would need me. He *had* to accept me.”¹⁵

Teresa imagined herself being a friend of Jesus as he prayed in the garden. If she could, she'd think of his blood-stained sweat and his agony in knowing he'd be the Passover lamb for the whole world. “I desired to wipe his brow, but I never did. I was too sinful, but I stayed with him as long as my thoughts allowed me to.”¹⁶

For years to come she would ponder those images before she fell asleep at night. She didn't exactly know what she was doing, but the practice became as habitual to her as making the sign of the cross.

Although she was progressing, she lacked fellow pilgrims to travel with who understood her. She was given a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*. Teresa was already fond of his writings, but now she identified with the famous former sinner. Like her, Augustine had a keen intellect and considerable appetite for that which was not so good for his soul. “As I begin to read the *Confessions*, I found my own story there. When I came upon the passage about how he heard the child's voice in the garden saying, “Take and read,” and was in that moment converted,

I felt in my heart that the Lord was calling *me*. Overcome by emotion, I dissolved into weary tears.”¹⁷

Not only was God reaffirming the message that he *desired* Teresa, and not in the way that men or even other people who enjoyed her attention had, he was teaching her that he gives grace. For all her poverty of spirit, God was passing out spiritual riches. He expected the moments of intimacy he lavishly bestowed upon her to be received with joy rather than guilt. To deny them would be false humility.

“One day while I was in prayer, the Lord wanted to show me only his hands, which were so incredibly beautiful I could never begin to describe them!”¹⁸ The vision frightened her, as all these new experiences of intimacy with Christ did initially, but she knew the vision was authentic. A few days later he showed her his divine face. It left her completely consumed.

And sometime later, “he granted me the favor of seeing his entire self! I couldn’t understand why he showed me himself, little by little. I realized later that he’d given me all I could handle at one time. So much glory all at once would have been unbearable to one as lowly and wretched as I.”¹⁹

Jesus appeared—no pun intended—to love Teresa very much. Their divine/human romance was so riveting, so irresistible, that her most famous vision—the wounding of her heart—became the inspired subject of Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini:

Exhibit A: the words of Teresa:

“Sometimes love, like an arrow, is thrust into the deepest part of the heart and the soul doesn't know what has happened or what it wants, except all it wants is God. The soul feels as if the arrow has been dipped in a poisonous herb that makes it despise itself for love of him. This pierced soul would gladly lose its life for him. You can't explain this. It's impossible to exaggerate the way God wounds the soul, or the agony this causes, for the soul forgets itself. Yet this pain is so exquisite—so delightful—that no other pleasure in life gives greater happiness.

“Oh, how many times in this state do I remember the words of David: ‘As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.’ I experience it literally when he wounds me.

“Sometimes in this state I saw a vision: an angel in bodily form, standing very close to me on my left side. The angel was not large, but small and very beautiful. His face was so aflame that I thought he must be a cherub, one of the highest order of angels, who seem to be made of fire.

“I saw that his hands held a great golden dart, and at the end of the iron tip fire plumed. The angel plunged the flaming dart through my heart again and again until it penetrated my innermost core. When he withdrew it, it felt like he was carrying off the deepest part of me away with him. He left me on fire, consumed with the immense