

6. John the Escapee

Again we reflect upon the words of St. John of the Cross: "Who can free themselves from lowly manners and limitations if you do not lift them to yourself, my God, in purity of love" (Sayings, 26). In this topic, we will follow John on his journey after his escape from prison. Emerging from his imprisonment a changed man, John grew deeper in his awareness of God's lavish love.

I. John's Escape from Prison: The city of Toledo is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. During the stifling summertime, in fact, in the days after the Feast of the Assumption, August 16, 1578, John executed what he must have been planning for some time: an escape from his squalid cell. Perhaps his new, kindly jailer made it easier for him to manage such a daring escape.

John's confinement over nine months must have seemed to him interminable. But, then, almost in cinematic style, John made his way past two sleeping visitors, out a window, letting himself down the steep embankment with the aid of bed clothes, and looking all the time down to the Tajo River below.

After jumping down along various walls, John made his way to the monastery of Discalced nuns, founded some nine years before by Teresa. The solicitous nuns gave John a warm welcome. John shared with the nuns poems he had composed in prison. He would do the same with other monasteries of Carmelite nuns, who in turn asked John questions. This led to his composing commentaries on his poems.

II. Leaving Toledo: John would have been easily detectable had he remained with the Carmelites nuns. They arranged for John to be taken to the Hospital de Santa Cruz, where Don Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza was the administrator. This kindly canon of the Toledo Cathedral took John in and provided him with care and a cover for six weeks. Don Pedro wanted John to stay with him longer so that he could gain back his health, but John insisted that he must be on his way to one of his own convents.

Don Pedro would not let the fragile friar travel alone, so he sent two of his servants to accompany John of the Cross, who was intent on attending a meeting of Discalced Carmelites at Almodovar del Campo.

Teresa was unhappy that John left his refuge in Toledo: "It grieved me deeply to learn of what Fray John had to suffer and that they are allowing him, as sick as he is, to go down there right away. Please God he doesn't die on us. Be sure, as a favor to me, that they take good care of him in Almodovar and that he doesn't go

any further (sic). Don't fail to give the necessary orders. And be careful not to forget. I tell you that you would have few like him, if he were to die" (Teresa, Letter 267).

Teresa could make much happen, but she did not sway the Discalced chapter from appointing John of the Cross as prior of the Carmelite Convent at El Calvario (Calvary) in Andalusia, where he would spend the next decade of his life, a region in Spain where he always felt himself an exile. Castile was home to John of the Cross.

With the help of Don Pedro's servants, the still weakened friar set out for El Calvario. On his way, he made a memorable stop at the monastery of Discalced Carmelite nuns at Beas de Segura, which would become a very important place for his ministry of spiritual guidance. At Beas, he impressed the nuns with his thoughts on what suffering can do for one's spiritual life. It seems to me, for John and for much of the Carmelite tradition of suffering and pain, while not good in themselves, can bring one into greater consciousness of God's loving presence as if there were only a thin veil between one who suffers and God, the God who seeks always and everywhere to enter more deeply into the consciousness of the human person.

The community of friars at El Calvario was only two years old when John arrived. Some ruins of the convent are all that are left, but the view of the mountains facing the convent are now and were then spectacular, a view that John would have in mind as he thought about the commentary he would write entitled *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

III. God's Lavish Love: As the new prior, John replaced a superior who was caught up in extreme penitential practices. Once again, John brought balance and sanity to a community. It cannot be said too often that John rejected the penance of the "beasts." John's asceticism is of the heart.

No amount of physical penance can do what only God can do with God's lavish love. In his "The Living Flame of Love" (FB 3.28), John would remind his readers: know this you who search for God, God searches for you much more. (FB 3.28) John of the Cross wanted those he directed to struggle to be free of whatever was an obstacle to God's love. John knew that one's heart can be held bound by the most trivial attachments. He puts it this way: "It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord." The effort and grace to become empty for God is John's doctrine of nakedness and poverty of spirit.

For John, Bridal Mysticism provided the imagery of God's lavish love. John wants one to be free so that one may receive that love and enter into a loving relationship with God. Thus, in "The Spiritual Canticle" (27), John offers a poetic version of that love: "There he gave me his breast/there, he taught me a sweet and living science; / and I gave myself to him, / keeping nothing back; /I promised to be his bride."

Review Questions

1. What do you think gave John of the Cross the courage to undertake an escape from his prison cell in Toledo?
2. What reaction do you have to the proposal that suffering can bring one into a closer and more intimate relationship with God?
3. Do you find it convincing that John of the Cross favored an asceticism of the heart rather than an emphasis on overly rigorous physical asceticism?