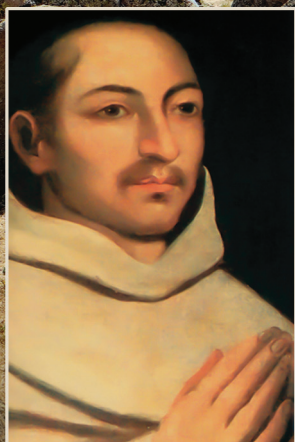


# *The Prayer of Loving Attention*

SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

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*“Seek in reading and you will find in meditation;  
knock in prayer and it will be opened  
to you in contemplation.”*

*—Sayings of Light and Love, 158*

# St. John of the Cross

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St. John of the Cross was born to a poor family in Fontiveros, Spain, in 1542. At the age of 21 he entered the Carmelite friars and was ordained a priest in 1567. Desiring a more contemplative life and thinking of joining the Carthusians, he eventually met St. Teresa of Ávila as she was inaugurating her reform movement. She convinced him to help her establish a male branch of the Discalced Carmelite reform. In 1568, John

and another friar founded the first monastery of Discalced Friars in Duruelo, Spain. There, the friars began to live according to Teresa's vision, devoted to both contemplative prayer and apostolic service.

Later, John was imprisoned by the Carmelite friars who were hostile to the reform. During his nine months in a dark, narrow cell, he experienced profound graces of intimacy with God. These experiences deeply shaped his later spiritual writing. After a dramatic escape from his imprisonment, John spent his remaining years living a humble life of prayer in different monasteries throughout Spain. Throughout these years, he ministered to his brother friars, the Carmelite nuns, and the lay people of the local communities. He held various positions of leadership and wrote the poems and spiritual treatises that he is so well-known for today.

St. John of the Cross died in 1591 at the age of 41. Except for his brothers and sisters among the Carmelites, as well as the recipients of his poems and writings, his writings were largely unknown at the time of his death. However, after his writings were first published in 1618, he became more widely known and today is heralded as among the greatest poets of the Spanish language. He was beatified in 1675 and canonized in 1726. In 1926, he was named the twenty-sixth Doctor of the Church. His writings have since influenced many in the subsequent centuries since his life, from saints like St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Edith Stein, and Pope St. John Paul II, to artists like British-American poet T. S. Eliot, Spanish painter Salvador Dalí, and Scottish composer James MacMillan. Today, the writings of St. John of the Cross can help all of us to find intimacy with God in prayer.

# The Prayer of Loving Attention

## No Universal Method

John did not teach a universal method of prayer to be used by everyone because he knew that “God leads each one along different paths so that hardly one spirit will be found like another in even half its method of procedure” (*Living Flame* 3.59).

John understood that everyone approaches prayer with a certain peace, freedom, and knowledge that “if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more” (*Living Flame* 3.28).

Prayer, more than being a work that a person does, is a loving response to the God who loves everyone. Ultimately, God “is the principal agent in the matter” (*Living Flame* 3.29).

## A Loving Inflow of God

John’s focus was to guide souls to contemplation, a type of prayer which he defines as “a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God” (*Dark Night* 1.10.6), or a passive reception of “God’s self-communication” (*Ascent* 2.14.12). This is a simple, yet profound encounter in which a person comes into direct contact with God in the most intimate part of his soul and is transformed by His love.

When a person is responding to God’s invitation to contemplation, the more active forms of his prayer give way to a simpler way of praying. A person finds himself incapable of and no longer desiring to pray in the way he used to. Instead, he only wants to sit peacefully and silently in the presence of God (see *Ascent* 2.13)

Before, the person was working with his mind or imagination to receive the graces God was offering. Now, this work seems futile, for God has become the primary actor in his prayer.

“Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language he hears is the silent language of love.” —Letter 8



## Responding to God's Invitation

It is here, when the soul is being invited by God into contemplation, that John offers not so much a method of prayer but an attitude or disposition to bring to prayer. He refers to this disposition by various names throughout his writing: “loving attentiveness,” “simple, loving awareness,” or “passive loving attention.”

Although John presents this disposition to souls whom God is beginning to place in contemplation, its general qualities of receptivity, simplicity, and patience can be applied more universally to all types of prayer.

## Being Present to God

There may come a time when you find that you cannot pray actively as you once did. Active forms of prayer like *lectio divina*, imaginative prayer, or the rosary may seem laborious or difficult. Instead, your desire to pray is simply a desire to dwell silently in God's presence. This may be a sign that God is inviting you to the prayer of loving attention.

During the prayer of loving attention, you set aside active forms of prayer, and choose not to work with your mind or imagination. Instead, you choose simply to be present to God who is present within you, not so much by thinking about him, but by loving him and receiving his love.

If you find that your mind begins to wander during contemplative prayer, gently make an act of love in choosing to return your awareness to God's loving presence.

# Reminders

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## Contemplation is the work of God

Contemplation is the work of God, not something we can achieve by our own efforts. The prayer of loving attention is a response to God's invitation to a quieter, simpler form of prayer. John of the Cross tells us that "meditation must be discontinued only when the soul is placed in that peace and quietude" (*Ascent* 2.13.2). As long as we continue to draw fruit and satisfaction from more active forms of prayer (such as *lectio divina*, imaginative prayer, devotions, etc.), we should continue in these valuable practices.

## Dryness and distractions are normal

Dryness and distractions are normal, even within this state of quiet and peace. John writes, "I am not affirming that the imagination will cease to come and go — even in deep recollection it usually wanders free" (*Ascent* 2.13.3). Our distractions do not limit God's ability to work within us as long as we continue, to the best of our abilities, to offer him our love.

## The usefulness of a spiritual director

A spiritual director or confessor who is knowledgeable about contemplative prayer can help us to discern more objectively the ways in which God is guiding us in prayer. The sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession are essential supports in this spiritual journey.

**Works of St. John of the Cross  
for further reading**

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2,  
chapters 12–15

*The Dark Night*, Book 1, chapters 8–10

*The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, par. 32–55

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