

Into the Desert

Deep Calls to Deep · Praying the Scriptures with St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila

What We Found

In Scripture the wilderness is where God leads those he loves: "the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart" (Deuteronomy 8:2), "as a man disciplines his son" (8:5). He even courts in the desert: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:14). And the Spirit led Jesus himself into the desert (Matthew 4:1), where he answered the tempter from Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone" (4:4).

St. John of the Cross gives three signs that dryness in prayer can be God's work, weaning us from sweetness to feed us more directly: no satisfaction in God or in creatures; an anxious, loving care toward God; and a quiet drawing to remain with him when ordinary meditation fails (The Dark Night I.9). The Church holds both honest possibilities: dryness can be "the moment of sheer faith," and it can be rocky soil calling for conversion (CCC 2731).

Dryness is not the same as depression; darkness that floods all of life deserves a doctor as well as a confessor, and the two helps do not compete. In every case the counsel of St. Teresa stands: never leave prayer. God was never absent in her dry years, and he is not absent in yours.

Voices of the Church

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

John gives three signs that dryness in prayer is God at work and not the soul's fault: the soul finds satisfaction neither in God nor in creatures; it turns toward God with anxious care, fearing it is failing him; and it can no longer meditate as before, yet is inclined to remain alone in loving attentiveness. Where all three meet, he teaches, God has begun to feed the soul directly, without the sweetness of sense: the dryness is not abandonment but weaning, the beginning of stronger food.

The Dark Night, Book I, ch. 9.

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa testifies that for many years her own prayer was a battlefield of distraction and dryness; she sometimes dreaded the hour of prayer more than any penance, and for a time she abandoned mental prayer altogether, a decision she afterward counted among her worst. Her counsel from the far side is blunt and kind at once, in substance: never leave prayer, whatever it feels like; carry the cross of dryness without forcing consolations; God was at work in the dry years and repaid the fidelity, and he was never absent in them.

Summarized from The Life, chs. 8 and 11.

ST. TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS (EDITH STEIN)

A brilliant Jewish philosopher and an atheist in her youth, Edith Stein picked up St. Teresa's autobiography one evening at a friend's house and read it through the night; by the account preserved in that first biography, she closed it saying, in substance: this is the truth. She entered the Church, then Carmel, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, and spent her last years writing her unfinished Science of the Cross on St. John's doctrine before dying at Auschwitz in 1942. The desert doctrine of Carmel was not theory to her; she carried it into the darkest night of her century and found it held.

Her final, unfinished work was The Science of the Cross, a study of St. John of the Cross (1941-42); the reading story is from the first biography of her, written by her prioress, Teresia Renata Posselt.

Live It This Week

- Keep the fifteen-minute appointment every day this week even if (especially if) it feels like sand. Fidelity is the whole assignment.
- On one dry day, pray Psalm 63:1-8 slowly and mean the first verse as your own.
- Bring Take-Home 1, sealed, without fail next week. If you lost it, rewrite your original answer this week and seal it.

MEMORY VERSE · HOSEA 2:14

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her."

Before next session: Read Psalm 22 in one sitting, start to finish. Bring your sealed Take-Home 1 sheet: we open it together next session.

Catechism references for this session: CCC 2729, 2731, 2015.