

great delight and glory, even in the outermost joints of the hands and feet. The body experiences so much glory in that of the soul that in its own way it magnifies God, feeling in its bones something similar to what David declares: *All my bones shall say: God, who is like to you?* [Ps. 35:10]. And because everything that can be said of this unction is less than what it is, it is sufficient to say in reference to both the bodily and the spiritual experience, "that tastes of eternal life."

and pays every debt!

23. The soul affirms this because in the taste of eternal life, which it here enjoys, it feels the reward for the trials it passed through in order to reach this state. It feels not only that it has been compensated and satisfied justly but that it has been rewarded exceedingly. It thoroughly understands the truth of the promise made by the Bridegroom in the Gospel that he would repay a hundredfold [Mt. 19:29]. It has endured no tribulation or penance or trial to which there does not correspond a hundredfold of consolation and delight in this life; and it can truly say: "and pays every debt."

24. To know the nature of these debts for which the soul feels compensated here, it should be noted that ordinarily no one can reach this high state and kingdom of espousal without first undergoing many tribulations and trials. As is said in the Acts of the Apostles, *It is necessary to undergo many tribulations to enter the kingdom of heaven* [Acts 14:22]. In this state these tribulations are ended; the soul being purified suffers no more.

25. The trials that those who are to reach this state suffer are threefold: trials, discomforts, fears, and temptations from the world; and these in many ways: temptations, aridities, and afflictions in the senses; and tribulations, darknesses, distress, abandonment, temptations, and other trials in the spirit. In this way a soul is purified in its sensory and spiritual parts, as we mentioned in discussing the fourth verse of the first stanza.

The reason these trials are necessary in order to reach this state is that this highest union cannot be wrought in a soul that is not fortified by trials and temptations, and purified by tribulations, darknesses, and distress, just as a superior quality liqueur is poured only into a sturdy flask that is prepared and purified. By these trials the sensory part of the soul is purified and strengthened, and the spiritual part is refined, purged, and disposed. Since unpurified souls must undergo the sufferings of fire in the next life to attain union with God in glory, so in this life they must undergo the fire of these sufferings to reach the union of perfection. This fire acts on some more vigorously than on others, and on some for a longer time than on others, according to the degree of union to which God wishes to raise them, and according to what they must be purged of.⁹

26. Through these trials in which God places the spirit and the senses, the soul in bitterness acquires virtues, strength, and perfection, for virtue is made perfect in weakness [2 Cor. 12:9] and refined through the endurance of suffering. Iron cannot serve for the artificer's plan, or be adapted to it without fire and the hammer; as Jeremiah says of the fire that gave him knowledge: *You have sent fire into my bones and have instructed me* [Lam. 1:13]. And Jeremiah also says of the hammer: *You have chastised me, Lord, and I was instructed* [Jer. 31:18]. Hence Ecclesiasticus says: *What can anyone know who is not tried? And the one that has no experience knows little* [Ecclus. 34:9-10].

27. And here it ought to be pointed out why so few reach this high state of perfect union with God. It should be known that the reason is not that God wishes only a few of these spirits to be so elevated; he would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since he tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification, it follows that not finding them strong and faithful in that little [Mt. 25:21, 23], in which he favored them by beginning to hew and polish them, he realizes that they will be much less strong in these greater trials. As a result he proceeds no further in purifying them and raising them from the dust of the earth through the toil of mortification. They are in need of greater constancy and fortitude than they showed.

There are many who desire to advance and persistently beseech God to bring them to this state of perfection. Yet when God wills to conduct them through the initial trials and mortifications, as is necessary, they are unwilling to suffer them and they shun them, flee from the narrow road of life [Mt. 7:14] and seek the broad road of their own consolation, which is that of their own perdition [Mt. 7:13]; thus they do not allow God to begin to grant their petition. They are like useless containers, for although they desire to reach the state of the perfect they do not want to be guided by the path of trials that leads to it. They hardly even begin to walk along this road by submitting to what is least, that is, to ordinary sufferings.¹⁰

9. Cf. F. 1. 24 and note 9. In a number of places throughout his writings John compares this purification to purgatory; cf., e.g., A. 1. 4. 3; N. 2. 6. 6; 10. 5; 20. 5; F. 1. 21, 24.

10. Here John gives his answer, thus far partially avoided, to the question of why only a few reach this union with God, the goal of life. The vessel must be a strong one in order to hold a full measure of God's self-communication. God wants to give more; humans tend to balk at the strengthening process. The strengthening comes not through the trials in themselves but through the growth of the theological virtues.