

THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER

*A general remedy against evil movements that arise in the heart
from the flesh, the world, and the devil*

AND then, when your enemies perceive that in spite of all they can say and do you do not become angry or depressed or irritated about anything, that you are determined to accept whatever may happen to you, comfort or discomfort, praise or the lack of it, and that you will give your attention to nothing but keeping your mind and your will on the love of God, they will be greatly disconcerted. But then they will tempt you with flattery, and false pleasure. They will put before you all your acts and virtues, and impress upon you that all men praise you and speak of your holiness, and that they love and honour you for your holy life. They will do this in the hope that you will believe them, and that you will take delight in this false pleasure and rest in it. But if you are wise, you will hold all such nonsense falsehood and flattery, that your enemy offers to you like a poisoned drink mixed with honey. Therefore refuse, and say that you will have none of it, but that you wish to be at Jerusalem. ✓

Such are the difficulties you will encounter, or others like them, whether from the flesh, the world, or the devil; more than I can tell you now. For as long as a man allows his thoughts to range about the world considering all sorts of things he feels few difficulties. But as soon as he concentrates all his thought and all his desire on one object, to possess it, to see and know and love it, and that object is Jesus, then he will encounter many painful hindrances. Whatever he feels that is not the object of his desire is a hindrance to him. I have given you some examples, and beyond this I say in general that whatever movement you feel, whether of the flesh or the devil, pleasant or painful, bitter or sweet, attractive

or terrifying, joyous or sad, if it draws your mind and your will from the love of Jesus to the vanity of the world, and puts an end to your desire of Him, so that it comes to occupy you fully, despise it, do not accept it, do not dwell on it.

But if it is a question of some external work that you have to do for your neighbour or for yourself, do it as quickly as you can so that it does not weigh on you. If it is something that is not necessary or is no affair of yours, do not undertake it or concern yourself with it. Do not get angry about it, do not fear it, do not take pleasure in it, but put it away altogether. Repeat, "I am nothing, I have nothing, I neither seek nor desire anything but the love of Jesus." Concentrate your mind on this desire, strengthen and foster it with prayer and other spiritual exercises so that you do not lose sight of it, and it will lead you on the right way and save you from all dangers. You may be very conscious of them, but they will not overcome you, and I am confident that this desire will bring you to the perfect love of our Lord Jesus.

On the other hand, any practice that furthers your desire, strengthens and nourishes it, and turns your mind from the desire of the world to seek the love of God with more fervour—whether it is praying or meditating, keeping silence or speaking, reading or listening, solitude or the company of others, moving about or keeping still—make use of it for as long as it helps you. And for your eating and drinking and sleeping, do these things as a pilgrim does, and with discretion, according to the advice and directions of your superior. For however much haste a pilgrim makes he must at times eat and drink and sleep. Do the same, for although it hinders you at one time, it will help you at others.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER

Of an evil day and a good night, and what they signify; and how the love of the world is compared to an evil day and the love of God to a good night

IF you want to know what this desire consists of, it is in truth Jesus. For He creates this desire in you, and it is He who desires in you, and who is also the object of your desire. He is everything and He does everything, if you could but realize. You do nothing but allow Him to act on your soul and consent with great joy of heart to what He deigns to do in you. You are nothing but His instrument, though you are endowed with reason. And therefore, when at the touch of His grace you feel your mind caught up by a strong desire to please Him and love Him, believe that you possess Jesus. For He is indeed the object of your desire. Consider Him earnestly, for He does not appear in bodily form, but invisibly by the inward presence of His power. See Him with the eyes of your spirit if you are able, or else with the eyes of faith, and follow Him wherever He leads, for He will lead you in the right way to Jerusalem, which is the vision of peace in contemplation. This was how the prophet prayed to the Heavenly Father: *Emitte lucem tuam et veritatem tuam; ipsa me deduxerunt in montem sanctum tuum, et in tabernacula tua* (Ps. xlii. 3). Father of heaven, send out your light and your truth, that is your Son Jesus; and He will lead me by desire to your holy hill and to your tabernacles, that is to the experience of perfect love and to the height of contemplation.

Of this desire the prophet says: *Memoriale tuum Domine in desiderio animae. Anima mea desideravit te in nocte, sed et spiritus meus in praecordiis meis* (Isa. xxvi. 8, 9). Lord Jesus, the memory of you is imprinted in the desire of my soul, for my soul has desired you in the night and my spirit has sought you in

all my meditations. And why the prophet said he desired God in the night, and what he meant by it, I will tell you. You know well that the night is a space of time between two days. For when one day is ended another does not come at once, but first there comes the night and separates the days; sometimes it is long and sometimes short, and then there comes another day. The prophet was referring not only to this sort of night, but to a spiritual night. You must know that there are two days or two periods of light; the first is a false light, the second a true one. The false light is the love of this world that a man has because of the corruption of his human nature; the true light is the perfect love of Jesus felt in the soul through grace. The love of the world is a false light, for it passes away and does not last, and so it does not perform what it promised. The devil promised this light when he persuaded Adam to sin and said: *Aperientur oculi vestri; et eritis sicut dii* (Gen. iii. 5). Your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as gods. And he spoke the truth, for when Adam had sinned his inward eye was closed and spiritual light withdrawn, and his outward eyes were opened, and he felt and saw a new light of bodily pleasure and love of the world that he did not see before. And so he saw a new day, but it was an evil day. It was the day that Job cursed when he said: *Pereat dies in qua natus sum* (Job iii. 3). May the day perish in which I was born. It was not the day in the course of the year created by God that he cursed, but the day made by man, that is the concupiscence and love of the world into which he was born without knowing it. It was of this day that he asked of God that it should perish and no longer endure.

But the everlasting love of Jesus is a true day and a blessed light. For God is both love and light and He is everlasting, and therefore he who loves Him is in everlasting light, as St John says: *Qui diligit Deum manet in lumine* (1 John ii. 10).

He who loves God dwells in light. The man who perceives that the love of this world is false and does not last, and for this reason wishes to forsake it and seek the love of God, cannot immediately experience His love, but must stay for a time in the night. For he cannot come suddenly from one light to the other, that is from the love of the world to the perfect love of God. This night consists in nothing else than a withdrawal of the soul from the things of earth by a great desire and longing to love and see and experience Jesus and spiritual things. This is the night; for just as the night is dark and material objects are hidden in it and exterior occupations cannot be carried on, so a man who determines to fix his mind on Jesus and to desire only his love, must give neither his thoughts nor his love to bodily creatures. In this way his thoughts will be made free and his affections will not be entangled in anything beneath him. If he can do this, he is in the night, for he is in darkness.

But this night is good and the darkness luminous, for it keeps out the false love of the world and brings nearer the true day. And indeed the darker the night, the nearer is the true day of the love of Jesus. The more the soul is withdrawn from the tumult of the desires of the flesh and impure thoughts through its longing for God, the nearer it is to experiencing the light of His love; and it is in fact very near. It seems that this was what the prophet meant when he said: *Cum in tenebris sedero, Dominus lux mea est* (Mic. vii. 8). When I sit in darkness our Lord is my light. That is, when my soul is free from all movements of sin, as though it were asleep, then our Lord is my light, for then by His grace He draws near to show me His light. But this night is sometimes distressing, and sometimes easy and comforting. It is distressing at first, when a man is much stained by sin, for grace has not accustomed him to the darkness, and yet he wishes to be in it, and he directs his thoughts and his will to God as far as

he is able, and endeavours not to feel or think of anything but Him. And because He cannot easily achieve this, he is distressed. Habits of sin, his previous familiarity with it and with the desires of the flesh and the things of earth, his external activities, all press upon him with powerful influence and draw down his soul to them, so that he cannot escape from them as quickly as he would like. And so this darkness is distressing to him, and especially when the effects of grace are slight. Nevertheless, if you find it so, do not be too depressed, and do not struggle too much, as though you would put these things out of your mind by force, for you cannot do that. Wait till grace comes, be patient and do not let your efforts be too violent; if you can, quietly turn your will and your thought to Jesus as though you attached no importance to these feelings.

For be sure of this; when you would desire and think of nothing but Jesus and find this impossible, because worldly thoughts press in on you, you have already got out of the false day and are entering into the darkness. But this darkness is not peaceful, because you are not accustomed to it, and because of the lack of understanding and the impurity in you. And so give yourself to it often, and it will by custom and by the grace of God become easier and more peaceful. That is, your soul by grace will become so unimpeded and strong, and so recollected, that it will find no attraction in earthly thoughts, and no material thing will prevent it from thinking of nothing.¹ Then it is in a fruitful darkness.

¹ "Lust not to think on right nought." A double negative which I take to have merely an intensifying effect, as often in Middle English. It does not care to think of anything [worldly]. This interpretation is borne out by the Latin translation, *quod non delectatur de aliquo cogitare*. In the next phrase Hilton uses the expression "to think of right nought" in a curious technical sense reminiscent of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (e.g. chap. 3) but different, I believe, to its sense (see Bk. I, chap. 52, n.). Hilton goes on to explain what he means by it in the next paragraph.

When I say that the soul thinks of nothing, I mean that by grace it is recollected, free and self-sufficient, and not driven against its will to think of, or feel an attachment for, any sin or anything of the earth. When this is so the soul thinks of nothing, for it does not think with attachment of any earthly thing. This is a fruitful nothing, and this nothing and this night are a great comfort to the soul that desires the love of Jesus. It is no longer troubled by the thought of earthly things, but all its thought is for Jesus. Though it is not distracted by earthly thoughts, it is fully occupied with thinking of Him.

What does this darkness consist of then? Truly nothing else than a desire through grace to have the love of Jesus.² For its desire and its longing for the love of God, for the vision and the possession of Him, drives out of the heart all worldly interests and all desires of the flesh, and makes the soul recollected and occupied only with how it may come to His love, and so it brings it into this fruitful nothing. And all is not darkness and nothingness when it is so occupied. For though it is darkness in relation to the false light, it is not all darkness in relation to the true light. For Jesus, who is both love and light, is in this darkness, whether it is distressing or peaceful. He is in the soul making it labour with desire, and

² It should be noted that here as in Book I (chaps. 46-54) the basis of all the soul's activity is simply what he calls the desire for Jesus (cf. also Book II, chap. 21, n. 1, and this same chapter, p. 205). To desire Jesus means of course necessarily to turn the mind and the will to Him, it is essentially prayer, and the process he is describing here is essentially that which he described in chaps. 46 and 47 of Book I. He went on there to point out (especially chap. 48) that the first result of this desire for God was to bring a man to a realization of his own sins, and the whole of the second part of the Book (from chap. 55) was devoted to a consideration of the sins so revealed. Here the sins and the difficulties are not ignored (e.g. chaps. 22, 23, and 25) but the emphasis is on the positive attainment of contemplation that is going to ensue from this seeking Jesus.

long for the light, but He is not yet in it making it rest in love, and He does not yet show His light.³ And therefore it is called night and darkness, in as much as the soul is hidden from the false light of the world and does not yet fully experience the true light, but it is waiting for that blessed love of God which it desires.

If, then, you want to find out when you are in this safe darkness and when not, you may test yourself in this way, and do not try to do so in any other way. When you feel that your will is fully concentrated on seeking God and thinking only of Him, ask yourself whether you desire to have anything on earth for its own sake, or whether you wish the satisfaction of your bodily senses through any creature. And if your eye answers that it wishes to see nothing, and your ear that it would hear nothing, your mouth that it wishes to taste nothing, and not to speak of earthly matters; your nose that it would smell nothing, and your body that it would feel nothing; if your heart says that it does not wish to think about creatures or to love them, but only to be occupied with the thought and love of God, and if all your faculties answer thus, as they easily may under the effect of grace, then you have entered into this darkness. For though you

³ This sentence usefully summarizes the state of the contemplative soul. We may note three things about this state: (1) It is essentially supernatural, the outcome of divine action and in some way of divine indwelling (cf. Book II, chap. 34, n. 2); (2) Jesus may be in the soul making it labour with desire; or (3) He may be in it making it rest in love, and illuminating it.

(2) I take to be the time of justification and (3) that of exaltation of which he speaks in chap. 28. As pointed out in n. 4 to that chapter these states are not rigidly divided one from another but alternate, (2) predominating at first and later (3). So in this chapter he says the night is sometimes distressing and sometimes easy and comforting, and later on, "give yourself to it often, and it will by custom and the grace of God become easier and more peaceful" (p. 206). Cf. also chap. 25, p. 210.

may perceive gleams and suggestions of idle thoughts and carnal desires pressing in on you, nevertheless you are in this fruitful darkness as long as your mind is not fixed on them. Idle imaginings that crop up unexpectedly trouble this darkness and distress the soul, because it would be quit of them and cannot be so, but they do not take away the value of the darkness, for through it the soul will come to peace. And the darkness is peaceful, when for the time being the soul is free from all these idle thoughts and rests peacefully in the desire and longing it has for the spiritual vision of Jesus, as will be said later. That does not last long, but though it is only for a short time it is a most valuable experience.

THE TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER

How the desire of Jesus felt in this luminous darkness destroys all movements of sin, and enables the soul to perceive the spiritual light of the heavenly Jerusalem, that is of Jesus

THEN, since this darkness, or night, which is nothing else than the desire of Jesus accompanied by a blind movement of the intellect towards Him, is so fruitful and brings so much peace, even though it does not last long, how much better it must be to experience His love and to be illumined by His holy, invisible light to see the truth. This is the light that a soul receives when the night passes and the day comes, and it was to this night, I think, that the prophet referred when he said: *Anima mea desideravit te in nocte* (Isa. xxvi. 9). My soul desired Thee in the night. It is much better to be cut off from the view of the world in this dark night, however painful this may be, than to dwell outside occupied with the world's false pleasures, though these appear so attractive and agreeable to those whose eyes are closed to the light of

the spirit. For when you are in this darkness you are much nearer to Jerusalem than when you are in the false light.

Open your heart then to the movement of grace and accustom yourself to dwell in this darkness, strive to become familiar with it, and you will quickly find peace, and the true light of spiritual understanding will flood your soul—not all at once, but gradually. As the prophet says: *Habitantibus in regione umbrae mortis, lux orta est eis* (Isa. ix. 2). To those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death light has sprung up. That is, the light of grace has arisen, and it will shine on those who can dwell in the shadow of death, that is in the darkness which is like death. For as death slays a living body and all its sense perception, so the desire to love Jesus which is felt in this darkness slays all sins, all the desires of the flesh, and all impure thoughts, and when this occurs, you have

come very near to Jerusalem. You have not yet reached it, but by the gleams of light that escape from it you will be able to see it in the distance before you come to it. For be certain of this, that though your soul is in this peaceful darkness and untroubled by the vain joys of the world, it has not yet reached its goal, it is not yet clothed in light or transformed into the fire of love. It is aware of something above it that it does not know and does not yet possess, but which it wants and yearns after eagerly. And what it longs for is nothing but the sight of Jerusalem, which is like the city that the prophet Ezechiel saw in his vision (Ezech. xl).

He says that he saw a city standing on a hill which sloped to the south, and when it was measured before his eyes it was no more in length and breadth than a rod, that is six cubits and a palm. But when he was brought into it, it seemed strangely large; he saw many halls and rooms, both public and private, he saw gates and portals outside and in, and many other buildings many hundred cubits in length and breadth. And he was amazed that this city was so large in-

side, that appeared so small when he was outside it. This city signifies the perfect love of God, and it is set on the hill of contemplation. To the soul that has had no experience of it but that strives for it with desire it seems only small, six cubits and a palm in length. The six cubits represent the perfection of human effort, the palm a little touch of contemplation.¹ He sees that there is something which surpasses the attainment of all human effort, as the palm goes beyond the six cubits, but he does not see what this is. But if he is able to get inside the city of contemplation, he sees much more than he saw at first.

THE TWENTY-SIXTH CHAPTER

How a man may distinguish the false light, which is an illusion of the devil, from the true light which comes from Jesus

YOU should beware the noon-day devil who makes light to appear as though it came from Jerusalem when in truth it does not do so. For the devil perceives that our Lord Jesus shows the light of truth to those who love Him, and so to deceive the foolish he shows a false light under colour of a true one. I will explain how the light of truth coming from God may be distinguished from the feigned representation of the devil by an example taken from the sky.

Sometimes one sees in the sky a shaft of sunlight which one takes to be the sun, but in reality it is not so, and sometimes the sun truly appears. The two appearances may be distinguished in this way. The false sun only appears between two black rain clouds. The sun is behind them, and a shaft of light shines out between the clouds that looks as though it

¹ This interpretation is to be found in St Gregory (*Hom. in Ezech.*, Bk. II, hom. v, n. 1, P.L., LXXVI, col. 984-5).

were the sun. But the true sun appears when the sky is clear, or at least when there are not many black clouds. Applying this to our subject. Some men appear to forsake the love of the world and to wish to come to the love of God and to the light of His knowledge, but they are not willing to pass through the darkness that I have been speaking about. They will not learn to know themselves truly and humbly—what they previously were, and what they still are through sin, nor how they are nothing in their own nature in comparison with God. They will not trouble to enter into themselves, leaving aside all exterior things; they will not put down all evil movements of pride, envy, anger, and other sins that arise in their hearts, by cultivating a constant desire of Jesus in prayer and meditation, in silence and tears, and in other corporal and spiritual exercises, as holy and devout men have done before them. As soon as they have forsaken the world exteriorly, or very soon after, they think that they have achieved holiness and the spiritual understanding of the Gospels and Holy Scripture. And especially if they are able to keep the Commandments of God literally and refrain from bodily sins, they think that they love God perfectly. And so they want immediately to preach and instruct all other men, as if they had received the gift of understanding and perfect charity through a special gift of the Holy Ghost. And they are all the more incited to this, because they are sometimes conscious of great lights suddenly given to them without much effort on their part, and they have an ardent love, it seems, urging them to preach truth and righteousness to their fellow-men. They take this as a grace from God which is given to them in preference to others. But if they will consider carefully, they will see that the intellectual light and the ardent love that they experience do not come from the true sun, that is our Lord Jesus, but from the devil, who produces a false light which looks like the sun. And