



## Twelve Gardens of Stewardship

### Garden of Decisions

#### St. Teresa of Avila

*Charming, funny and strong willed, St. Teresa spent her life making decisions to follow God's path even when these choices went against her own nature and caused a great deal of trouble in her personal life. Because St. Teresa based her decisions on prayer and faith, she was able to bring a movement of great spiritual reform throughout Spain and all of Europe.*

Less than twenty years before Teresa was born in 1515, Columbus opened up the Western Hemisphere to European colonization. Two years after she was born, Luther started the Protestant Reformation. Out of all of this change came Teresa pointing the way from outer turmoil to inner peace.

Teresa's father was rigidly honest and pious, but he may have carried his strictness to extremes. Teresa's mother loved romance novels but because her husband objected to these fanciful books, she hid the books from him. This put Teresa in the middle -- especially since she liked the romances too. Her father told her never to lie but her mother told her not to tell her father. Later she said she was always afraid that no matter what she did she was going to do everything wrong.

When she was five years old she convinced her older brother that they should, as she says in her Life, "go off to the land of the Moors and beg them, out of love of God, to cut off our heads there." They got as far as the road from the city before an uncle found them and brought them back. Some people have used this story as an early example of sanctity, but this author think it's better used as an early example of her ability to stir up trouble.

After this incident she led a fairly ordinary life, though she was convinced that she was a horrible sinner. As a teenager, she cared only about boys and clothes and flirting and rebelling -- like other teenagers throughout the ages. When she was 16, her father decided she was out of control and sent her to a convent. At first she hated it but eventually she began to enjoy it -- partly because of her growing love for God, and partly because the convent was a lot less strict than her father.

Still, when the time came for her to choose between marriage and religious life, she had a tough time making the decision. She'd watched a difficult marriage ruin her mother. On the other hand being a nun

didn't seem like much fun. When she finally chose religious life, she did so because she thought that it was the only safe place for someone as prone to sin as she was.

Once installed at the Carmelite convent permanently, she started to learn and practice mental prayer, in which she "tried as hard as I could to keep Jesus Christ present within me....My imagination is so dull that I had no talent for imagining or coming up with great theological thoughts." Teresa prayed this way off and on for eighteen years without feeling that she was getting results. Part of the reason for her trouble was that the convent was not the safe place she assumed it would be.

Many women who had no place else to go wound up at the convent, whether they had vocations or not. They were encouraged to stay away from the convents for long periods of time to cut down on expenses. Nuns would arrange their veils attractively and wear jewelry. Prestige depended not on piety but on money. There was a steady stream of visitors in the parlor and parties that included young men. What spiritual life there was involved hysteria, weeping, exaggerated penance, nosebleeds, and self-induced visions.

Teresa suffered the same problem that Francis of Assisi did -- she was too charming. Everyone liked her and she liked to be liked. She found it too easy to slip into a worldly life and ignore God. The convent encouraged her to have visitors to whom she would teach mental prayer because their gifts helped the community economy. But Teresa got more involved in flattery, vanity and gossip than spiritual guidance. These weren't great sins perhaps but they kept her from God.

Then Teresa fell ill with malaria. When she had a seizure, people were so sure she was dead that after she woke up four days later she learned they had dug a grave for her. Afterwards she was paralyzed for three years and was never completely well. Yet instead of helping her spiritually, her sickness became an excuse to stop her prayer completely: she couldn't be alone enough, she wasn't healthy enough, and so forth. Later she would say, "Prayer is an act of love, words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love."

For years she hardly prayed at all "under the guise of humility." She thought as a wicked sinner she didn't deserve to get favors from God. But turning away from prayer was like "a baby turning from its mother's breasts, what can be expected but death?"

When she was 41, a priest convinced her to go back to her prayer, but she still found it difficult. "I was more anxious for the hour of prayer to be over than I was to remain there. I don't know what heavy penance I would not have gladly undertaken rather than practice prayer." She was distracted often: "This intellect is so wild that it doesn't seem to be anything else than a frantic madman no one can tie down."

Teresa sympathizes with those who have a difficult time in prayer: "All the trials we endure cannot be compared to these interior battles."

Yet her experience gives us wonderful descriptions of mental prayer: "For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us. The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love. Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything."

As she started to pray again, God gave her spiritual delights: the prayer of quiet where God's presence overwhelmed her senses, raptures where God overcame her with glorious foolishness, prayer of union where she felt the sun of God melt her soul away. Sometimes her whole body was raised from the ground. If she felt God was going to levitate her body, she stretched out on the floor and called the nuns to sit on her and hold her down. Far from being excited about these events, she "begged God very much not to give me any more favors in public."

In her books, she analyzed and dissects mystical experiences the way a scientist would. She never saw these gifts as rewards from God but the way he "chastised" her. The more love she felt the harder it was to offend God. She says, "The memory of the favor God has granted does more to bring such a person back to God than all the infernal punishments imaginable."

Her biggest fault was her friendships. Though she wasn't sinning, she was very attached to her friends until God told her "No longer do I want you to converse with human beings but with angels." In an instant he gave her the freedom that she had been unable to achieve through years of effort. After that God always came first in her life.

Some friends, however, did not like what was happening to her and got together to discuss some "remedy" for her. Concluding that she had been deluded by the devil, they sent a Jesuit to analyze her. The Jesuit reassured her that her experiences were from God but soon everyone knew about her and was making fun of her.

One confessor was so sure that the visions were from the devil that he told her to make an obscene gesture called the fig every time she had a vision of Jesus. She cringed but did as she was ordered, all the time apologizing to Jesus. Fortunately, Jesus didn't seem upset but told her that she was right to obey her confessor. In her autobiography she would say, "I am more afraid of those who are terrified of the devil than I am of the devil himself." The devil was not to be feared but fought by talking more about God.

Teresa felt that the best evidence that her delights came from God was that the experiences gave her peace, inspiration, and encouragement. "If these effects are not present I would greatly doubt that the raptures come from God; on the contrary I would fear lest they be caused by rabies."

Sometimes, however, she couldn't avoid complaining to her closest Friend about the hostility and gossip that surrounded her. When Jesus told her, "Teresa, that's how I treat my friends" Teresa responded, "No wonder you have so few friends." But since Christ has so few friends, she felt they should be good ones. And that's why she decided to reform her Carmelite order.

At the age of 43, she became determined to found a new convent that went back to the basics of a contemplative order: a simple life of poverty devoted to prayer. This doesn't sound like a big deal, right? Wrong.

When plans leaked out about her first convent, St. Joseph's, she was denounced from the pulpit, told by her sisters she should raise money for the convent she was already in, and threatened with the Inquisition. The town started legal proceedings against her. All because she wanted to try a simple life of prayer. In the face of this open war, she went ahead calmly, as if nothing was wrong, trusting in God.

"May God protect me from gloomy saints," Teresa said, and that's how she ran her convent. To her, spiritual life was an attitude of love, not a rule. Although she proclaimed poverty, she believed in work, not in begging. She believed in obedience to God more than penance. If you do something wrong, don't punish yourself -- change. When someone felt depressed, her advice was that she go some place where she could see the sky and take a walk. When someone was shocked that she was going to eat well, she answered, "There's a time for partridge and a time for penance." To her brother's wish to meditate on hell, she answered, "Don't."

Once she had her own convent, she could lead a life of peace, right? Wrong again. Teresa believed that the most powerful and acceptable prayer was that prayer that leads to action. Good effects were better than pious sensations that only make the person praying feel good.

At St. Joseph's, she spent much of her time writing her Life. She wrote this book not for fun but because she was ordered to. Many people questioned her experiences and this book would clear her or condemn her. Because of this, she used a lot of camouflage in the book, following a profound thought with the statement, "But what do I know. I'm just a wretched woman." The Inquisition liked what they read and cleared her.

At 51, she felt it was time to spread her reform movement. She braved burning sun, ice and snow, thieves, and rat-infested inns to found more convents. But those obstacles were easy compared to what

she faced from her brothers and sisters in religious life. She was called "a restless disobedient gadabout who has gone about teaching as though she were a professor" by the papal nuncio. When her former convent voted her in as prioress, the leader of the Carmelite order excommunicated the nuns. A vicar general stationed an officer of the law outside the door to keep her out. The other religious orders opposed her wherever she went. She often had to enter a town secretly in the middle of the night to avoid causing a riot.

And the help they received was sometimes worse than the hostility. A princess ordered Teresa to found a convent and then showed up at the door with luggage and maids. When Teresa refused to order her nuns to wait on the princess on their knees, the princess denounced Teresa to the Inquisition.

In another town, they arrived at their new house in the middle of the night, only to wake up the next morning to find that one wall of the building was missing.

Why was everyone so upset? Teresa said, "Truly it seems that now there are no more of those considered mad for being true lovers of Christ." No one in religious orders or in the world wanted Teresa reminding them of the way God said they should live.

Teresa looked on these difficulties as good publicity. Soon she had postulants clamoring to get into her reform convents. Many people thought about what she said and wanted to learn about prayer from her. Soon her ideas about prayer swept not only through Spain but all of Europe.

In 1582, she was invited to found a convent by an Archbishop but when she arrived in the middle of the pouring rain, he ordered her to leave. "And the weather so delightful too" was Teresa's comment. Though very ill, she was commanded to attend a noblewoman giving birth. By the time they got there, the baby had already arrived so, as Teresa said, "The saint won't be needed after all." Too ill to leave, she died on October 4 at the age of 67.

She is the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. In 1970 she was declared a Doctor of the Church for her writing and teaching on prayer, one of two women to be honored in this way.

St. Teresa is the patron saint of Headache sufferers. Her symbol is a heart, an arrow, and a book. She was canonized in 1622.

Source: Catholic.org