

Chapter 17: Fourth Ledge — Sloth (Purgatory)

Imagine being caught in a mountain fog. Imagine trying to see through the fog with eyes that seem to be covered with membranes, partially blinding you. Imagine that the fog begins to dissipate, and finally you can see the Sun again.

That is how Dante felt as he saw the Sun again, just before the Sun set.

Following Virgil, Dante walked out of the cloud of thick smoke that blinded the wrathful. Similar to how he had experienced examples of meekness, now he experienced examples of wrath — in inner visions.

Where do such inner visions come from? Some people say from the stars; other people say from God. The people who say that the inner visions experienced on the Mountain of Purgatory come from God are correct.

First, Dante experienced an inner vision of Procne, a wrathful woman who was transformed into a bird in a myth told in Book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Procne was married to Tereus, a Thracian King, and she bore him a son named Itys. Tereus then raped Procne's sister, Philomela, and cut out her tongue so that she could not tell anyone what had happened. Philomela wove a tapestry. The tapestry contained pictures that told the story of the rape. When Procne saw the tapestry and realized that her husband had raped her sister, she was so angry that she killed her son, cooked him, and served him to her husband.

Procne experienced anger against family.

Second, Dante experienced an inner vision of the Persian Haman, a high official of the Persian King Ahasuerus, who is better known in modern times as Xerxes. He was famous in ancient Greek history as well as in Old Testament history. In ancient Greek history, his father, Darius, invaded the Greek mainland, but was defeated at Marathon. People got the name "marathon" for

our long-distance race because a runner carried the news of the Greek victory all the way to Athens, dying after he delivered the news. Xerxes also invaded the Greek mainland. He was delayed at Thermopylae, a pass in the mountains. During the Battle of Thermopylae, 300 Spartans, and 1000 other Greeks, led by King Leonidas of Sparta, held off the vastly numerically superior Persians for a few days, giving the Greeks time to gather their forces. The Spartans knew that they would die. King Leonidas told them that they would eat the morning meal in the Land of the Living, and they would eat the evening meal in the Land of the Dead. The Greeks defeated the Persians in such battles as the Battle of Salamis and the Battle of Plataea, thus preventing the Persians from subjugating Greece.

According to the Book of Esther in the Bible, Haman decided to have all the Jews killed because Mordecai, the cousin of Esther, would not bow down to him. Haman told Xerxes that some people in his kingdom did not obey his laws, and therefore those people ought to be killed. Xerxes agreed.

Esther asked that the Jews, herself included, fast for three days, and then she would see the King. (She was his Queen.) Xerxes was unable to sleep one night, and he ordered a book of chronicles to be read to him. The selection read told about the loyalty of Mordecai, who had prevented a plot to assassinate King Xerxes by two eunuchs.

Esther went to King Xerxes, her husband, and asked him not to kill all the Jews. He asked who was planning to kill all the Jews. Hearing from Esther that Haman was planning to kill all the Jews, Xerxes ordered that Haman be crucified. In fact, the crucifix that Haman had planned to use to crucify Mordecai was used to crucify Haman. Even as Haman died, he was still filled with anger against Mordecai.

Haman experienced anger against neighbor.

Third, Dante experienced an inner vision of Queen Amata, who committed suicide. Virgil's *Aeneid* tells her story. Amata, a Queen in Italy, wanted her daughter, Lavinia, to marry Turnus. However, following the end of the Trojan War, the Trojan Prince Aeneas came to Italy in order to fulfill his fate of becoming an important ancestor of the Roman people. Aeneas was fated to marry Lavinia, and together they would have children and their descendants would eventually become the Romans. Turnus wanted to marry Lavinia, and he fought a war against Aeneas and the Trojan warriors whom Aeneas had brought with him.

When Queen Amata heard a rumor — it turned out to be false — that Turnus had been killed in battle, she committed suicide rather than see Lavinia married to Aeneas. Lavinia mourned when she discovered that her mother was dead. Lavinia said, “Why, mother, did you allow your rage to take away your life? Now I must mourn you before I mourn another person who will soon die — Turnus!”

Queen Amata experienced anger against God — who wanted Aeneas to marry Lavinia and become an important ancestor of the Roman people.

A person who is asleep will wake up when light suddenly falls across his or her eyes. So Dante woke up when bright light flashed across his eyes.

Then Dante heard a voice that said, “This is the place where you can climb higher.”

Virgil explained, “This is an angel. Very helpful, he tells us what we need to know even before we ask. He follows the ethical rule ‘Treat others as you would like to be treated.’ Some people see a person who needs something, but they wait to be asked for help. Such people are half-guilty of not helping those who need help.

“Let us climb as high as we can while light still remains. Once the light is gone, we will not be permitted — or able — to climb higher.”

Dante and Virgil started climbing the stairs, and with his first step, Dante felt a wing pass over his forehead, and he heard the words “Blessed are the peacemakers, who feel no sinful wrath.”

The light faded, and Dante thought to himself, *Why is my strength fading?*

Dante and Virgil climbed the last of the stairs to the next ledge. Then they stopped, just like a ship has to stop once it runs aground.

Virgil thought, *The end of the day has arrived, and on the Mountain of Purgatory, no sinner can ascend at night.*

Dante listened, heard nothing, and then asked Virgil, “What sin is purged on this ledge? Although we cannot climb higher, we can talk to each other.”

Virgil replied, “The sinners here are purging the sin of sloth. They failed to pursue with zeal the things they should have pursued with zeal. The sinners were not necessarily lazy, except when it came to spiritual things. Some sinners here were very busy indeed, just not when it came to pursuing what they should have been pursuing. On this ledge, the sinners pursue with zeal and diligence the purgation of the sin of sloth.”

Virgil thought, *I am not a Christian, but I learned much during the Harrowing of Hell. I have also spent much time in the library in Limbo. Beatrice also told me much.*

Virgil continued, “Let me tell you some of what I know about the sins purged on the Mountain of Purgatory. You can benefit from that knowledge.

“All people have love. Love is of two kinds: natural love and rational love. These terms come from Aristotle.

“Natural love is simply a desire for something. Natural love does not involve the use of reason. Later, I will talk

about natural love. Right now, I will talk about rational love.

“Rational love involves choosing what we love. One way to look at it is rational love involves choosing what we pursue. We may choose wisely or foolishly. We may choose to pursue what we love with not enough force or with too much force or with just the right amount of force.

“Because we have Free Will, we can choose what we love, and we can choose with how much force we will pursue it. It is important to choose to love the right things and to pursue them with the right amount of force.

“What we choose is what we love. We can choose to love the right thing or the wrong thing.

“Rational love should stay fixed on the Eternal Good. However, we can choose to love the wrong thing, such as money, instead. Or we can choose to love something good but pursue it with either too much zeal or not enough zeal. Making the wrong choice or pursuing what you love with the wrong amount of force can put you in the Inferno or make you spend additional years in Purgatory, depending on whether or not you repent your sins before you die.

“The first three ledges of the Mountain of Purgatory purge the sins of pride, envy, and wrath. These are sins of loving the wrong thing.

“Sinners who were guilty of pride, envy, or wrath were guilty of loving the wrong things; they wished some kind of evil upon their neighbors.

“If a sinner was proud, the sinner placed the sinner at the center of the universe and therefore wished for the sinner’s neighbors to be beneath the sinner.

“If a sinner was envious, the sinner placed the sinner at the center of the universe and therefore did not want the sinner’s neighbors to have good fortune.

“If a sinner was angry, then the sinner placed the sinner at the center of the universe and therefore wished to do something like punch the sinner’s neighbors in the nose.

“We are now on the middle ledge, which purges the sin of sloth. The saved souls here loved the right thing, but they pursued it without sufficient zeal.

“We have three ledges above this ledge to climb. They are devoted to purging the sins that involve loving the right thing too much. I won’t tell you what they are. I prefer that you discover for yourself what they are.”

Virgil thought, *The ledges above punish the sins of avarice, gluttony, and lust.*

Rational love and staying fixed on the Eternal Good involve staying temperate, something that many unrepentant sinners in the Inferno and many repentant sinners on the Mountain of Purgatory did not do.

Sinners who were guilty of avarice, gluttony, or lust were guilty of loving the right things too much.

If a sinner was guilty of avarice, the sinner loved money or material things too much. The sinner either hoarded money or spent every penny the sinner could borrow in order to get more stuff. Nothing is wrong with money or material possessions provided they are used wisely, but a person can love either money or material possessions too much.

If a sinner was guilty of gluttony, then the sinner overate and over-drunk. Of course, food and drink are good things if they are used wisely, but the sinner loved food and drink too much.

If a sinner was guilty of lust, then the sinner loved sex too much. God invented sex, and when sex is indulged in wisely and ethically, it is one of the best things on Earth, but it is possible to love sex too much and to misuse sex.

Everyone loves, but it is necessary to love the right things and to love them with the right amount of zeal.