

Chapter 18: Fourth Ledge — Sloth (Abbot of San Zeno) (Purgatory)

When Virgil had finished speaking, he looked at Dante to see if he wanted more information. Dante, although he wanted more information, wondered whether Virgil was tired of answering questions. Of course, Virgil could read his mind, and he encouraged him to ask questions.

Dante said, “The information you have given me is very good, but please explain love to me. It is, you say, the source of every virtue as well as of every vice.”

Virgil replied, “Listen carefully, and I will explain love. Not every love is good. The Epicureans believed that, but they were wrong. The Epicureans taught something false, and when they taught it, they were like blind people leading other blind people.

“People have desires, but not all desires are good. The Epicureans would say that anything that gives pleasure is good, but the Epicureans are wrong. As we have seen, it is important to love the right things. Loving the wrong things leads to pride, envy, and wrath. It is important to love to the right degree. People who are guilty of sloth love the right things, but not strongly enough. And when we climb to the final three terraces, you will see saved souls who loved the right things but too strongly.

“The soul senses something, whether material or nonmaterial, forms an image of it, and if the image seems desirable, the soul desires — or loves — the thing as naturally as a flame shoots upwards. If the thing is sufficiently desirable, the soul moves toward possessing it.”

Dante asked, “If all of this is completely natural, does it make sense for one to be praised or blamed for one’s choices, whether good or bad? It seems as if the soul must act as it does.”

Virgil replied, “I will explain to you what I can explain. Although the soul’s wanting a thing is completely natural,

as natural as a bee's making honey, people must use their reason to determine whether to pursue the thing or not. Some things we should pursue, and some things we ought not to pursue. Humankind has knowledge of right and wrong. Humankind has reason. Humankind has ethics. All of these things can help people to decide whether what the soul wants is good or bad. And Humankind has Free Will to make a decision and act on it. Whatever your heredity and environment are, reason can help you make the correct decision and Free Will can help you implement that correct decision.

“We human beings do have Free Will to choose, and what we choose is important.

“To summarize: What we choose is what we love. However, we have reason, and we can use our reason to understand the difference between good loves and bad loves. We also have Freedom of the Will, and we can use our Freedom of the Will to choose good loves.

“I have explained to you what I can explain. When you see Beatrice, she can give you more information. Beatrice, not I, understands faith.

“Intellect will not solve all of our problems or tell us everything that we ought to know. We have had an intellectual discussion of love, but you still need to have faith as well as intellect.

“I understand human reason, but Beatrice understands faith, and Beatrice will be able to take you further than I can.

“Again: Quite simply, intellect is not able to understand everything. Some things will remain a mystery and must be accepted on faith.

“I am aware of my limits, and I am aware that Beatrice will be able to answer some questions that I am unable to answer. I, of course, will soon turn you over to Beatrice. Beatrice will be your next major guide.”

The time was close to midnight. Dante was satisfied that Virgil had answered his question the best he was able to, but he realized that Beatrice could answer his question in more detail.

Dante's thoughts began to wander, but then he and Virgil heard people running toward them. The followers of Bacchus in Thebes were zealous in their worship of the god, and the saved souls running toward Dante and Virgil were also zealous.

Two souls were ahead of the others. One soul shouted, "Mary ran to the hills."

Dante thought, *After the Annunciation, in which an angel told Mary that she would bear Christ, Mary hurried to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary did not delay; she wished to hurry to share the good news with Elizabeth.*

The next soul shouted, "Caesar struck at Marseilles and then hurried to Spain to subjugate Ilerda."

Dante thought, *Julius Caesar warred against Pompey the Great. Eager to meet Pompey in battle, Caesar left some of his army to besiege Marseilles, and then he took as quickly as he could the rest of his soldiers to the showdown with the Spanish army of Pompey. Caesar won the Battle of Ilerda.*

Mary and Julius Caesar are examples of zeal and diligence that we ought to emulate.

Other souls running behind the two souls in front shouted, "Faster! Faster! Don't waste time! Purge the sin of sloth! Do good deeds to rid yourself of sloth and be blessed!"

Virgil said to the running souls, "Saved souls who are eager to make up for lost time — time lost due to the lukewarm love of doing the right thing and of doing good deeds — this man who is alive would like to climb higher when dawn arrives. Please show us the way up."

One of the saved souls shouted to him, “Follow in our tracks, and you will arrive at the way up the mountain.

“We cannot stop. We cannot lose time. We are keeping our eyes on the prize. We beg your pardon, but we must purge our sin of sloth.”

Dante thought, *These souls certainly are keeping their eyes on the prize. Elsewhere on the mountain, souls have been distracted from the prize when they have found out that I am still alive. These souls refuse to be distracted. Cato would be proud of them. Those who were slothful while they were alive are now purging their sin by staying busy day and night. The slothful purge their sin by running and running, both day and night.*

The saved soul continued, “I was the abbot of San Zeno in Verona when Barbarossa was Emperor. He destroyed Milan in 1162, even sowing salt into the ground so that nothing would grow in the fields. A person who has power over the monastery, but who will soon die, replaced the true pastor with a person who is an illegitimate bastard, unqualified mentally because of mental retardation, and unqualified physically because of physical handicaps. Thus, he is triply unqualified. Unless exceptional circumstances exist, a man with these qualities cannot become a priest. Such qualities can interfere with the duties of a priest. For example, a priest with severe physical handicaps may not be able to pour the liquid for the Mass. Living men abuse their power, and they make bad times worse by providing bad leaders.”

He raced on.

Virgil said to Dante, “Turn around. More souls are racing toward us as they work to purge the sin of sloth.”

Two souls at the end of the group of souls shouted, “Most followers of Moses never reached the Holy Land.”

Most of the followers of Moses never reached the Promised Land because they were slothful after God opened the Red Sea so that they could escape from Egypt.

As recorded in Numbers 14:22, God told Moses, “Because all those men who have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice, surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them who provoked me see it.” Among the older men, only Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, made it to the Holy Land.

And then the two souls at the end shouted, “Some followers of Aeneas never made it to Italy.”

Dante thought, *This is true. When Aeneas and his followers were on the island of Sicily, the women set fire to some ships because they were tired of wandering and wanted to stay on Sicily. Some of the ships burned, and Aeneas did not have enough ships to take all of the Trojan refugees to Italy. Therefore, he left nearly all of the women on Sicily (he did take to Italy at least one mother) and all the men who desired to stay there rather than going on to glory in Italy. Virgil tells this story in Book 5 of his Aeneid.*

These slothful followers of Moses and of Aeneas are not to be emulated.

When the souls had gone on, Dante’s thoughts wandered. He went to sleep, and he began to dream.