

Chapter 15: Third Ledge — Anger (Purgatory)

The time was 3 p.m. — the Sun is never still just as a child running and playing is never still — when Dante saw a light that was brighter than any that he had previously seen. His mind was stunned, and his head was forced down, and he put his hands above his head in an unsuccessful attempt to shield himself from the light.

Dante asked Virgil, “What light is this? I can’t shield myself from it! Isn’t it moving toward us?”

Virgil replied, “Don’t be surprised that the brightness of angels can still blind you. We are being invited to climb to the next ledge of the mountain. Soon, you will be able to look at angels and see them without being blinded. The more that you are without sin, the more that you will be able to see.”

Dante and Virgil stood before the angel, who said, “Climb higher now. These stairs are less steep than the stairs you have climbed before. The more that you are without sin, the easier it will be for you to climb.”

Dante and Virgil walked past the angel and started climbing, and they heard the angel sing, “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” They also heard “Conquer and rejoice.” Having conquered another sin, they rejoiced.

Dante wished to learn from Virgil as they climbed, so he asked, “What did Guido del Luca mean when he said, ‘Now I wonder why Humankind wants those things that either cannot be shared or are lesser when they are shared instead of wanting those things that are greater when they are shared?’”

Virgil replied, “He wishes you to avoid his sin: envy. He wishes you not to strive for material things but instead to strive for things that are nonmaterial.”

Dante asked, “Can you explain in more detail, and give some examples?”

Virgil said, “Those things that are lesser when they are shared are material things. If you have \$100 and you pay someone \$50 to perform a task for you, you have only \$50 left. What was once \$100 is now \$50. That can lead you to become envious of someone who has \$100.

“Here is another example: Suppose you have a rare book that is worth \$1,000. If you own it by yourself, you have the equivalent of \$1,000. But if you are an equal co-owner of it with someone else, then you have the equivalent of \$500. Material possessions, when shared, become lesser. Often, of course, material possessions are not shared. When it comes to material possessions, if one person owns something, then other people do not own it.”

Dante asked, “How can something that is shared by many souls make each of those souls wealthier?”

Virgil replied, “Nonmaterial, and especially spiritual, things, when shared, become greater. For example: Instead of owning a valuable and rare edition of a good book, suppose you and a friend both read an inexpensive edition of that good book. What you would share would be an appreciation and knowledge of the book. This is something that can be shared by all the people who read that book. When that is shared, it becomes greater, not lesser.

“The more someone loves God, the more they are able to know that God loves him or her. Beatrice told me that in Paradise everybody shares his or her spiritual gifts, and everybody gains because of the sharing.

“Love is shared and grows greater in Paradise, and Paradise is what you should strive for.

“If my words are hard to understand, soon you will see Beatrice, and she can help you to truly understand.

“For right now, work to rid yourself of the five P’s that remain on your forehead. Two have entirely vanished. The angel brushed your forehead with his wings and erased a second P.”

Dante was going to say, "I understand," but he was distracted because he and Virgil had reached the next ledge.

Here Dante fell into a trance, and he saw visions. These were visions of Meekness and Patience, the virtues opposed to the sin of Wrath.

The first vision was of Mary asking her young son, Jesus, "Why have you treated us in this way? Your father and I, frightened and crying, have searched throughout Jerusalem to find you." Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for Passover. When Joseph and Mary left Jerusalem, they assumed that Jesus was in the group of people, including kinsmen and friends, with whom they were traveling. They traveled an entire day and discovered that Jesus was not in their group of people. They returned to Jerusalem and spent three days searching for him before finding him teaching in a temple. All parents would be relieved to find their lost child, and most parents would then be understandably angry at the child for causing them to worry that the child had died or been injured or been kidnapped. But Mary did not get angry at Jesus. She simply asked, "Why have you treated us in this way?"

The second vision was of a kind ruler of Athens, Pisistratus, who was known for his ability to deal with angry people. His wife, crying, was upset because a young man had publicly hugged their daughter, and so she wanted him killed. She said to her husband the King, "Since you are the ruler of Athens, take vengeance on this man who hugged our daughter." In reply, Pisistratus asked her, "What shall we do to those who want to harm us, if we condemn those who love us?" Pisistratus felt compassion for, not anger toward, the young man.

The third vision was of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who died while praying for the forgiveness of his killers. The attackers were throwing stones at him and crying, "Kill him! Kill him!" But Stephen cried, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Even as he

died, Stephen forgave his enemies and wished that God would show them mercy.

Dante recognized that these were visions and were not actually happening in front of him, but he recognized the truth that resided in the visions.

Virgil saw that Dante had finished experiencing the visions, and he asked Dante, “What is wrong with you? You have been walking unsteadily, as if you are half-asleep.”

Dante replied, “I will tell you the visions I have seen.”

Virgil replied, “I know every thought you had. I know the visions you have seen. They were given to you so that you may learn from them and may learn to avoid the sin of anger and instead enjoy the peace that comes from Paradise.

“When I asked, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ after the visions had ceased, I simply wanted to encourage you to move faster. Those who climb the mountain must not be lazy. Here vigor is needed.”

Dante and Virgil walked together, and a cloud of black smoke rose and moved toward them. It enveloped them and they were not able to see. The smoke also made the air noxious.