Paradiso

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DANTE ALIGHIERI

Little is known of Dante's youth, except that he was born into a family that supported Florence's Guelph political faction. According to autobiographical writings, Dante met a girl named Beatrice Portinari when he was still a child, and he loved her long before he was settled into an arranged marriage with a woman named Gemma Donati, with whom he had several children. As a young man, Dante fought for the Guelphs at the battle of Campaldino in 1289. After the Guelph victory, Dante seems to have taken at least a modest role in Florentine politics. In 1302, as a member of the offshoot known as the White Guelphs, Dante was exiled from Florence, after which he wandered Europe and Italy for a number of years. His interest in poetry and philosophy appears to have deepened as he stepped away from political life, although the exile was always painful for him. It's unknown where Dante was educated, but his writings reveal that he was familiar with the Tuscan and Provençal poetry traditions as well as classical writings. Dante's lifelong love for Beatrice from afar (she died in 1290) also reflects the medieval poetic theme of courtly love, which Dante incorporated into his own literary style (which he called the *dolce stil novo*, or "sweet new style"). Dante died in Ravenna not long after finishing *Paradiso*, the last volume of *The Divine Comedy*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During Dante's lifetime, Italy wasn't a unified nation as it's known today. It was divided into feuding cities and factions—among these were the Guelphs and Ghibellines, whose rivalry features indirectly throughout *The Divine Comedy*. The conflict between these two factions was a contest between the power of the Roman Catholic papacy and the Holy Roman Empire, respectively. Dante's family was affiliated with the Guelphs. After the defeat of the Ghibellines, the Guelphs further divided into two factions called the White Guelphs and Black Guelphs. This division mainly centered on the role of the papacy in Florence, with the Black Guelphs more supportive of the Pope (Boniface VIII, at the time) and the White Guelphs desiring greater political freedom from the papacy. After serving as a White Guelph delegate during Pope Boniface VIII's occupation of Florence, Dante was fined and exiled by the invading Black Guelphs, under threat of execution if he stayed. (Dante has his ancestor, Cacciaguida, prophesy his exile in Canto 17.) He never returned to his home city.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The entire *Divine Comedy* is filled with direct references and allusions to the Bible. The theology of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, which was completed just before Dante's lifetime and remains a fundamental Roman Catholic theological text to the present day, pervades *The Divine Comedy*. In fact, *The Divine Comedy* has been called "the Summa in verse." Dante also wrote *La Vita Nuova* ("The New Life"), a collection of sonnets, songs, and prose commentary, which also contains the story of his love for the real-life Beatrice. His other works include a work of political philosophy titled *De Monarchia*, and an essay titled *De vulgari eloquentia*, in which he argues that literature written in the vernacular (the language spoken by common people) is just as noble as literature written in Latin (the language used by scholars and the clergy). Like *The Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem depicting events in Heaven and Hell, albeit from a late English Renaissance and Protestant theological perspective.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Paradiso
- **When Written:** Entire *Divine Comedy* written c. 1308–1320; *Paradiso* likely written between 1318 and summer of 1321
- **Where Written:** Ravenna, Italy
- **Literary Period:** Medieval
- **Genre:** Narrative Epic Poem; Christian Allegorical Fiction
- **Setting:** The heavenly spheres (envisioned as the solar system and the stars beyond), Wednesday following Easter, 1300
- **Climax:** Dante beholds God in the tenth heaven.
- **Antagonist:** Dante's doubts and deficient knowledge
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Paradise Lost? Shortly before Dante's death, he had to make an emergency diplomatic journey, and he left a portion of his *Paradiso* manuscript—containing the last 13 cantos—at his friend Giardino's house. In the aftermath of his sudden death, Dante's sons, Jacopo and Pietro, were alarmed to discover that *Paradiso* appeared to stop at Canto 20. Thankfully, with the help of Giardino, the missing cantos were eventually found and copied.

Layered Meanings. Dante intended for the *Divine Comedy* to be read both literally and allegorically—literally as an engaging adventure story (Dante's ascent through the Heavens) and allegorically as a series of images depicting spiritual realities

(the story of every soul's journey toward God). In his use of these twofold literary senses, Dante drew on patterns of biblical interpretation which were popular in medieval Catholic scholarship and preaching.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dante has journeyed through Heaven, the realm of God's **light**, a place impossible for a mortal to fully remember, much less describe. Nevertheless, he calls upon God for help in writing as much as he can.

Dante and his beloved, Beatrice, begin their journey a few days after Easter Sunday. From the Earthly Paradise at Purgatory's summit, the two are lifted skyward by a kind of heavenly gravity. Dante finds that he can withstand brief glances at the blazing sun (the lights of Heaven representing God), but usually he must resort to gazing at the eyes of Beatrice (who represents indirect revelation of God). However, even that is sometimes too much for his vision to handle.

Beatrice and Dante first visit the heavenly sphere of the Moon, the first of nine spheres. Observing the varied markings on the Moon's surface, Dante and Beatrice discuss God's providence—the way his will is expressed in widely varying ways throughout creation. Dante also speaks with souls residing in the Moon's sphere, including Piccarda, who dwells in this cloudy, variable sphere because of the inconstancy of her will during life. However, Piccarda is perfectly happy with her destiny because her will is completely in harmony with God's, and she cannot desire anything besides what God gives.

After this encounter, Beatrice resolves one of Dante's philosophical doubts. She explains that all souls in Heaven actually dwell within the Empyrean (the highest sphere of Heaven where God, angels, and saints reside). In other words, all souls in Heaven are enthroned in God's presence. But right now, the souls are appearing in lower spheres of Heaven in order to accommodate Dante's limited understanding.

Next, Dante and Beatrice ascend to the sphere of Mars. Dante meets the soul of the Emperor Justinian, who recounts the Roman Empire's just and powerful history—a legacy that none of today's rulers can aspire to match. For Dante, this conversation with Justinian brings to mind a burning question about God's justice. Dante wonders how it was just for Christ's Crucifixion to be avenged by the destruction of Jerusalem. Beatrice explains that Christ's Crucifixion satisfied justice in two respects: earthly (meaning it upheld justice in the eyes of Christ's persecutors) and heavenly (meaning it upheld justice in God's eyes). Thus, Christ's earthly persecutors could be justly avenged for tormenting him, even if the Crucifixion itself was a just act undertaken for humanity's redemption. Beatrice goes on to explain that God chose the atonement as the means for humanity's redemption in order to display his generous character.

Beatrice and Dante reach the sphere of Venus next. Here Dante is reunited with the soul of his old friend Charles Martel. Together, they discuss the mystery of God's providence, which works through indirect means—such as angelic powers, the stars, and the movements of the individual soul—in order to direct people in various ways. Dante also chats with two cheerful souls, Cunizza and Folco, who both succumbed too much to romantic passion in life, yet whose natural inclinations are transformed to holiness by God in Heaven.

The sphere of the Sun is Dante's and Beatrice's next stop. There, they meet the soul of the great theologian Thomas Aquinas, who introduces Dante to the souls of some of the Church's finest intellects. Aquinas was a member of the Dominican order, but he praises Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscans, for his adherence to a life of poverty. Afterward, the soul of St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan, praises Dominic, founder of the Dominicans. Both these "princes" of the Church labored to withdraw the Church from errors (attachment to wealth and toleration of heresy), yet their successors fall short of their examples.

As Dante and Beatrice emerge within the sphere of Mars, Dante sees a gleaming cross forming across the sky; a brief, indescribable vision of Christ flashes forth from it. Then an individual soul introduces himself as Cacciaguida, Dante's great-great-grandfather. Cacciaguida compares the decadence of present-day Florence unfavorably with the modesty, simplicity, and happiness of Florence two centuries earlier. He also predicts Dante's coming exile for speaking out, through his writings, about Florentine corruption.

When Dante and Beatrice ascend to the sphere of Jupiter, they witness the souls of the forming a giant, glittering Eagle in the sky, which speaks to Dante regarding justice. The Eagle especially considers the matter of non-Christian souls who are condemned to Hell, pointing out that hypocritical Christians suffer a worse fate, and that ultimately, God's justice remains inscrutable to humans. The eagle harshly condemns the pestilence of injustice among European Christian rulers.

Next is the sphere of Saturn. Here, Beatrice and Dante meet the souls of contemplatives, who ascend and descend a ladder of light. One of these souls, Peter Damian, discourages Dante from inquiring into the profound mystery of predestination. Instead, he and his fellow souls, including St. Benedict, loudly lament the opulence and corruption of monks today. Their vehemence startles Dante.

Ascend to the sphere of the fixed stars, Dante finds he is now able to endure Beatrice's radiance for a longer stretch of time than before. Beatrice tells St. Peter to examine Dante in his faith, hope, and love. St. Peter asks Dante questions about his belief in God and its basis in the Bible. St. James then asks Dante about the substance and ground of his hope, which

Dante identifies as the hope of Heaven and friendship with God, likewise taught throughout the Scriptures. Finally, St. John quizzes Dante about love. Dante names Christ as the summation of love, toward which Scripture, philosophy, and God's goodness inexorably draw him. Dante then has the chance to meet and question the soul of Adam, the first human being created by God.

After Dante's successful completion of his examination in faith, hope, and love, all of Heaven sings joyously. Then, St. Peter, glowing fiery red with indignation, condemns the corruption of the papacy and emboldens Dante to write against the evils of his day.

Dante and Beatrice now ascend to the ninth sphere, called the Primum Mobile. This sphere directs the movements of the other spheres in space and time. Beatrice explains the physics of the spheres and the nine hierarchies of angelic powers, each corresponding to one of the heavenly spheres. Beatrice also discourses on the nature of creation and the fall of humanity and denounces useless theological speculation.

Leaving the material spheres behind, Beatrice and Dante enter the Empyrean, where God, the angels, and the saints reside beyond space and time. Beatrice instructs Dante to drink from a river of light so that his intellect will be able to grasp what he sees here. Once he does so, he's able to see the glorified saints enthroned on many tiers, which form a white rose.

After Dante contemplates the white rose for a while, he turns toward Beatrice and is surprised to discover that she has returned to her throne in the Empyrean, suggesting that he no longer needs her guidance. In her place is St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a contemplative, who points out the Virgin Mary's surpassing radiance in the distance, as well as the enthroned souls of many biblical and historical figures.

St. Bernard prays to the Virgin Mary to aid Dante and then encourages Dante to look into the light of God. The experience exceeds Dante's ability to describe it with language or even to really remember it. But he nonetheless attempts to recount it for the reader and describes the vision in two parts. First, he sees creation contained within God, with all of creation's diversity bound together in God's unified plan. Second, he gets a fleeting yet soul-satisfying glimpse of the Holy Trinity, including the unity of Christ's human and divine natures. After this vision, Dante's will moves in harmony with God's, and his journey is finally complete.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dante Alighieri – Dante Alighieri was a citizen, minor politician, and poet of 13th- and 14th-century Florence, Italy. He is the author of *The Divine Comedy* and the protagonist of *Paradiso*. In this last segment of his three-part journey through the afterlife, Dante is guided through the heavenly spheres by his beloved Beatrice, whom he loved during her brief life. It was Beatrice's loving intercession spared Dante from Hell when he fell into a sinful lifestyle, hence why he is on this journey. After successfully traveling through Hell and ascending Mount Purgatory, Dante's ascends through the heavenly spheres and displays an insatiable curiosity. Dante's exploration of Heaven is marked by questions about divine and earthly justice and grief over the degradation of his beloved Florence. Dante is reluctant to attack Florentine corruption through his writing, knowing this will likely result in his exile. The soul of his ancestor, Cacciaguida, nevertheless encourages him fulfill this duty. Dante's knowledge of God is initially mediated through Beatrice, but the more Dante seeks God, the more his vision and knowledge is strengthened until he can gaze into the divine **light** directly. After this, Dante's desire for knowledge is satisfied, and his will harmonizes fully with God's.

Beatrice – The soul of Beatrice, Dante's earthly beloved, escorts him through Paradise. Beatrice symbolizes indirect knowledge of God, or revelation. Throughout the ascent through the heavenly spheres, Dante often looks to Beatrice, therefore, for understanding of God, as well as reassurance, until his vision is sufficiently strengthened to gaze on the divine directly. Even so, her beauty is so radiant—her eyes and smile often characterized by **light** and laughter—that sometimes Dante can't stare at her for very long. As she guides him through the spheres, Beatrice instructs Dante in theological and philosophical matters when doubts and questions surface in the latter's mind. When they reach the Empyrean, Beatrice occupies her usual throne, since Dante no longer requires her mediation between himself and direct knowledge of God.

Piccarda dei Donati – Dante meets Piccarda in the sphere of the Moon. She is a sweet-tempered former nun who died not long after her brother forced her into a politically advantageous marriage. Because of her failure to stick to her vows, Piccarda is now assigned to the sphere of Heaven that's associated with inconstancy. However, she is not unhappy about this; she explains to Dante that her happiness consists in the adherence of her will to God's and her acceptance of whatever God grants her, a significant step in Dante's understanding of the doctrine of providence.

Empress Constance – Constance was a 12-century Sicilian queen, wife of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. Like her fellow nun Piccarda dei Donati, Constance left the religious life she preferred on the urging of family members and married; as a result, she spends eternity in the heavenly sphere of the Moon, which is associated with inconstancy. Nevertheless, like Piccarda, she is radiantly happy there.

Justinian – Dante encounters the soul of the emperor Justinian in the heavenly sphere of Mercury. Justinian was the emperor of the Roman Empire, based at Constantinople, in the sixth century C.E. Though he had military triumphs under his

general, Belisarius, Justinian is best known for undertaking a comprehensive codification of Roman law, which was subsequently received as the basis for law in Europe. Because Justinian successfully held together the fragmenting Empire in his own day, Dante sees him as a symbol of hope for the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire in his day. For Dante, the justice practiced in the Roman Empire is an earthly counterpart to divine justice.

Charles Martel – Dante meets Charles Martel while visiting the heavenly sphere of Venus. The historical Charles Martel was roughly Dante's contemporary, a 13th-century member of the Angevin dynasty. As a young prince, Martel visited Florence, supported the interests of the Guelph faction, and apparently befriended Dante. In *Paradiso*, Martel explains the doctrine of God's providence.

Cunizza da Romano – Dante meets Cunizza in the heavenly sphere of Venus. Cunizza lived in the 13th century, was married four times, and was the mistress of the poet Sordello, who appears in *Purgatorio*. Cunizza is portrayed as an erotically passionate yet warm-hearted figure, in contrast to her cruel despot of a brother, Ezzelino, who shows up in *Inferno*.

Folco of Marseilles – Folco talks with Dante in the heavenly sphere of Venus. Folco was a 12th-century poet who later became a bishop; he was said to have been an amorous figure when young. Folco explains to Dante that souls in Heaven do not brood over their earthly sins, instead praising God's providential re-ordering and transformation of those characteristics that occasioned sin on earth.

Thomas Aquinas – Aquinas was a 12h-century Roman Catholic theologian whose *Summa Theologiae* became the basis for Catholic theology thereafter. In *Paradiso*, he appears in the sphere of the Sun along with other Christian intellects. After introducing the other souls in this sphere, Aquinas discusses providence with Dante and eulogizes Francis of Assisi.

Eagle – In Cantos 18–20, in the heavenly sphere of Jupiter, the souls of the just come together to form a great, glittering eagle across the sky. The eagle's voice speaks as the collective voice of all the just, defending God's just character and addressing Dante's questions about the nature of justice, like the condemnation of unbelievers in Hell. The eagle scathingly condemns the injustice of Christian rulers across Europe.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux – Bernard of Clairvaux was a 12th-century Benedictine monk and contemplative theologian. In the Empyrean, where he is depicted as a kindly, fatherly soul, he takes Beatrice's place as Dante's guide. He is especially devoted to the Virgin Mary, to whom he prays on Dante's behalf before Dante's vision of God.

Adam – Adam was the first human being God created. Although Adam's sin resulted in humanity's fall into corruption and death; however, he is now among the redeemed souls in Paradise. After his examination by the apostles in faith, hope, and love, Dante is rewarded with the chance to question Adam about his life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Francis of Assisi – In the 1300s, St. Francis renounced his riches and founded a monastic order, the Franciscans, devoted to poverty and humility. Francis does not speak directly but is praised by Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican (member of a rival monastic order).

Dominic – In the 1300s, St. Dominic founded the Dominican monastic order. He was known for his great learning and zealous opposition to heresy. Dominic does not speak directly but is praised by Bonaventure, a Franciscan (member of a rival monastic order).

Bonaventure – In the sphere of the sun, Bonaventure, a 13th-century leader of the Franciscan order and theologian, speaks in praise of Dominic, founder of a rival monastic order.

King Solomon – Solomon, an Old Testament king of renowned wisdom, appears in the heavenly sphere of the Sun. He explains to Dante the nature of the future resurrection of the body.

Cacciaguida – Cacciaguida is Dante's great-great-grandfather, who speaks to him in the heavenly sphere of Mars. He died a martyr's death while fighting in the Second Crusade. Cacciaguida prophesies Dante's exile but exhorts Dante not to back off from writing honestly about Florence's moral decline.

Peter Damian – Peter Damian was an austere 11th-century monk, abbot, bishop, and monastic reformer. In the heavenly sphere of Saturn, Dante asks him a question about predestination, which Damian rebuffs as presumptuous for any human being to ask. He also castigates the corruption of the Church in Dante's day.

St. Benedict – Benedict was the 6th-century founder of Monte Cassino, the first monastery in the Western Church, and author of its monastic *Rule*. Dante meets Benedict in the heavenly sphere of Saturn and, like Peter Damian, Benedict laments the decline in monastic discipline since his own day.

St. Peter – St. Peter was one of Christ's apostles and is the founder of the Catholic Church. In *Paradiso*, he examines Dante in the articles of his faith in the sphere of the fixed stars. St. Peter also furiously denounces the corruption of the papacy.

St. James – St. James, one of Christ's 12 apostles, examines Dante in the virtue of hope in the sphere of the fixed stars.

St. John – St. John, one of the 12 apostles, was especially loved by Christ. Because of this closeness, John's **brightness** temporarily blinds Dante in the sphere of the fixed stars. He asks Dante questions about love.

The Virgin Mary – The Virgin Mary, the mother of God (Christ), **shines** brightest in the sphere of the Empyrean. Though she does not speak in the poem, Mary's intercession enables Dante

to have a direct vision of God.

TERMS

Providence – God's providence is understood in *Paradiso* as God's purpose and will working in various ways throughout his diverse creation, always with the ultimate goal of drawing his creatures back into union with himself. The sheer variety and differentiation of natural creation is evidence of God's providence. One example within humanity is the differing personalities and talents of **St. Francis** and **St. Dominic**—God sanctioned both men to correct and lead the Church through perilous times using their own unique abilities.

Primum Mobile – The Primum Mobile is the ninth of the heavenly spheres through which **Dante** and **Beatrice** journey. Unlike the lower eight spheres, it contains no stars. In fact, in exists completely within the mind of God, outside of space and time, while directing the movements of the other spheres by means of God's love.

Empyrean – The Empyrean is the highest sphere of Heaven, in which God, the angels, and the saints dwell. The Empyrean is the summit of **Dante**'s journey through the afterlife, and it's in this light-filled space that he experiences a firsthand vision of God.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY JUSTICE

In *Paradiso*, the third and final cantica of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante is primarily concerned with justice. Many of the figures he meets during his tour of Heaven are concerned about injustices that prevail on Earth, especially corrupt rulers whose actions harm everyday people. Since he's still living, Dante wonders about his role in addressing these earthly injustices—in fact, other characters urge him to write in order to speak out against the injustices he perceives in his contemporary Florence and within the Catholic Church more broadly. Dante wonders, too, about God's justice in allowing injustices to stand. Although Dante's questions are never fully answered, he recognizes that the bigger picture of God's justice is both more particular and more sweeping than he can comprehend. God's justice is *particular* because he cares about individual people and ensuring justice is done for them. But God's justice also goes far beyond the level of the individual, as he's also concerned with bringing about justice on a *cosmic* scale, righting the wrong of humankind's falling into sin. In both cases, it's difficult for humans to grasp how God's divine justice is playing out. Dante ultimately suggests that God cares about the injustices that humans suffer on earth, and that he is in fact bringing about justice—on both an individual and cosmic scale—through those who obey him, even if the end result is a mystery for now.

Dante's hometown of Florence is riddled with injustice. In the heaven of Mars (one of the spheres of Heaven that Dante visits), Dante's ancestor, Cacciaguida, laments Florence's moral downfall. Cacciaguida first gives an idealized picture of how Florentine commoners lived in his own 12th century: "Florence [...] lived on in modesty, chasteness and peace [...] content to wear the plainest skin and hide, / their women occupied with loom and flax. / How fortunate these were[!]" To Cacciaguida, medieval Florence exemplified justice in the sense that it provided a peaceful, stable environment in which families could thrive, and people, providing for themselves, didn't take more than they need. In Dante's view, this is a happy life, and God cares about ordinary people's ability to thrive in this way. Sadly, within a few generations, corruption, greed, and feuding have brought formerly happy families to disgrace. Cacciaguida catalogues Florentine families who have fallen into moral decline: "all I shall tell of noble Florentines, / whose fame lies hidden now in passing time. / I saw the [...] Ormanni, Greci e Alberichi, / already in decline, illustrious men." By populating his verses with specific names that would have been recognizable in his day, Dante reinforces his argument that Florence is overrun with injustice, but he also begins to flesh out the idea that God pays attention to the specific people and events of earthly life and cares about them.

Dante suggests that, because God cares about particular people, he uses them as instruments to bring about justice in the world. But while people may be God's agents in administering justice, the outcome is ultimately in God's hands, not people's. For example, Dante himself has a direct role in addressing the injustices that have become systemic in Florence. After encouraging Dante to write about injustices, Cacciaguida plainly prophesies Dante's impending exile: "You'll leave behind you all you hold most dear. / And this will be the grievous arrow barb / that exile, first of all, will shoot your way." This passage, which foretells Dante's political exile from Florence by an opposing faction, sets up the idea that Dante will be on the receiving end of injustice very soon and thus must do everything in his power to address injustice himself. When Dante shrinks from this fate, wondering if he really dares write the truth about what he's learned about Florence, his ancestor assures him that he has a vital role to play, which will be vindicated in the end: "All murky consciences, / who feel their own or any other's shame / are bound to baulk at your abrasive words. / [...] make plain what in your vision you have seen, / and let them scratch wherever they may itch." It's

Dante's job, in other words, to strive for justice as it lies within his reach (for him, this means by writing truthfully and unapologetically about the corruption he sees in Florence), and let matters play out as they must. Only God can oversee the outcome.

As he journeys through Heaven, Dante learns that God is not only addressing injustices on earth; he is also bringing about justice on a cosmic scale. God's dealing with injustice is especially evident in his actions to address human sin. Instead of the perfect obedience God intended, Adam and Eve disobeyed, plunging all of humanity into sin. But in order to bring about justice for humanity's sin and restore humanity to holiness, God planned the atonement: humanity "was made one [...] with Him, by action solely of eternal love [...] The sentence, therefore, that the Cross imposed [...] was just and true." In other words, God punished humanity representatively when Christ (having both human and divine natures) was crucified on the Cross.

When Beatrice explains this act of justice to Dante, she adds that God's reason for choosing this specific means of redemption—the Crucifixion—"lies entombed, unseen" by anyone except for God. Humanity can't see or fully understand the ultimate outcome of earthly justice, and God's plan to enact cosmic justice is also an inscrutable mystery. Beatrice suggests that people, even as they strive to obey God and to act as agents of earthly justice where possible, must also have faith in heavenly justice. In the end, heavenly justice will address all the harms caused by earthly injustices, too.

CREATION AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

As Dante journeys through Heaven, he questions Beatrice and other souls about God's creation (the earth, humanity, and everything that exists), as well as creation's diversity, its flaws, and its ultimate fate. Dante is troubled by the mysteries he perceives in creation—for instance, why do imperfections exist in nature if God is perfect? These concerns prompt Dante to question how and why God works as he does. What Dante learns is that God diffuses his power within and throughout created things—acts of God's "providence." Although the idea of providence doesn't neatly answer all of Dante's questions, it does reveal to him that creation is part of an orderly, divinely ordained trajectory toward perfection, when all of creation will enjoy God's direct presence and praise him for eternity. Throughout *Paradiso*, Dante examines both direct and indirect creation—things God created firsthand, and things his creation generated through God's power—to show how creation comes in many forms but is nonetheless imbued with God's power. And even though creation can be imperfect, God is ultimately working to bring all creation to a state of eternal perfection.

God directs all of creation by his providence, but his direction most often occurs through indirect means (secondary causes). For Dante, nature expresses the goodness, beauty, and power of the God who created it, and angelic beings are the means by which God directs and sustains the natural world. Beatrice explains this to Dante early in their journey through the heavens: "And as your soul within the dust you are / diffuses and resolves through different limbs [...] so too angelic intellect unfolds / (while turning still round its own unity) / its goodness multiplied through all the stars." Just as the soul powers different parts of the body in order to direct the whole person, so too do the various angelic beings (envisioned as stars) direct the various activities of the world. God's direction flows through these beings and, from there, through the various functions of the natural world.

The soul of Dante's old friend Charles Martel explains to him the doctrine of God's providence, which accounts for the diversity of the world: "The Good, which turns the whole domain you climb / and brings it joy, forms from its providence / the power that works in all these cosmic limbs. [...] Were this not so, the spheres you journey through / would bring all their effects about in ways / that count as chaos, not as skill or art." In other words, God works through secondary causes in nature ("cosmic limbs") in order to keep creation going, but these powers ultimately derive from God. If that weren't the case, creation would dissolve into chaos.

Though God's providence is always working, even in those things that come about through indirect creation (like human beings), imperfections still occur in the world—especially when people resist God's providence. Charles Martel further suggests that, though providence applies to the diversity of character and ability found among human beings, people run into problems when they resist the workings of providence: "And if the earthly world would set its mind / to fundamentals set by Nature's hand, / pursuing these, you'd make a happy end. / But you will twist to some religious role / a man who's born to buckle on the sword / and make a king of someone who should preach." Martel suggests that people can wrongfully resist the way God's providence works through nature, and that this accounts for much of the chaos in the world—like when people are forced into roles that don't come naturally to them (e.g., a warrior being forced into the priesthood, or a would-be preacher being crowned as king).

Later, in the sphere of the Sun, Dante questions theologian St. Thomas Aquinas about this directly—if created things are the result of God's perfect idea, how can they be imperfect? Aquinas replies: "Yet Nature, as created, falls far short. / It operates as any craftsman will / who knows his trade and yet has trembling hands." Here, Aquinas elaborates on the doctrine of indirect creation. It's part of a discussion in which he explains why King Solomon, for example, was imperfect, unlike Adam (prior to disobeying God and bringing sin into the world) and Christ. Basically, when things are created at a greater remove from God (instead of directly, like God himself creating Adam in

the Garden of Eden or orchestrating Mary's immaculate conception of Christ), nature's "trembling hands" can produce imperfections.

Dante learns that God will someday bring all creation to a state of perfection. In other words, God's providence is not a one-time infusion of his power throughout creation, but an ongoing process that's leading to ever greater perfections. This becomes clearer in Dante's discussion of *re*-creation. When souls are someday reunited with their bodies at the final judgment, "when the glorious and sacred flesh / is clothing us once more, our person then / will be – complete and whole […] For then whatever has been granted us, / by utmost good, of free and gracious **light** […] will increase." In this mysterious future, creation will finally embody its full potential and will be even more glorious than it was originally, its flaws overcome. Though Dante isn't granted the ability to know *how* this will happen, it's clear that it's something intimately connected to God's creative power. The natural world won't be obliterated but will become more filled with God's light and therefore more fully itself.

At the end of *Paradiso*, Dante sees a vision of the complexity of all creation somehow contained within the simplicity of God's pure light: "Within in its depths, this light, I saw, contained, / bound up and gathered in a single book, / the leaves that scatter through the universe." This brings Dante's understanding of providence within creation full circle, as he sees that all of creation is held together by God as part of a unified whole.

GOD'S CHARACTER AND WILL

Throughout *Paradiso*, theology is always personal. Dante often wants to know, for instance, why a certain person, or group of people, has been given a particular fate. As Dante's understanding develops, he comes to believe that such circumstances reflect God's will, and in turn, God's will must be expressive of God's character. In other words, although events on earth and in Heaven are often difficult for humans to grasp, these events are ultimately reflective of God's will, and so people must consequently trust that such events are reflective of God's goodness. In the poem, Dante considers events that are confusing or inscrutable for humans but nevertheless convey God's good character (the key example being the atoning death of Christ). Through these examples, Dante suggests that people must first understand God's deep love for humanity in order to then discern and accept his will.

Through conversations with souls, Dante learns that peace consists of accepting God's loving will, even when a person's fate might look less than ideal from a limited earthly standpoint. A soul named Piccarda, who is assigned to one of the lower heavenly spheres, explains to Dante that she and her fellow souls "in will are brought to rest / by power of [love] that makes us will / no more than what we have, nor thirst for more. / Were our desire to be more highly placed, / all our desires would then be out of tune / with His." Now that they're in Heaven, the souls are in harmony with God's will and can desire nothing other than what God gives them. It would make no sense for a soul like Piccarda to desire a higher spot in Heaven, because that would go against God's will for her.

Later, Dante meets a soul named Folco, a poet who dwells in the sphere of Venus because in life he displayed excessive romantic ardor that dulled his love for God. Folco explains to Dante how God's will comes to transform even this sinful tendency: "Yet here we don't repent such things. […] / In wonder, we here prize the art to which / His power brings beauty, and discern the good / through which the world above turns all below." Folco means that blessed souls don't waste time regretting the sins that affected their heavenly placement. Rather, they focus on how God transformed their earthly sins in such a way that they now enjoy heavenly bliss in ways that individually suit and elevate their particular human natures.

Aspects of God's will—especially regarding damnation—remain hidden to human understanding but must be considered against the backdrop of God's fundamental justice, which is an aspect of his goodness. In Heaven, the souls of the just rulers form the sign of a huge eagle in the sky, which addresses Dante with a single voice. Dante struggles to understand how a soul in some distant region of the Earth, who has no opportunity to learn of Christianity, can rightfully be consigned to Hell for this lack. The voice of the just does not directly answer Dante's question about those who die unbaptized or unconverted. It *does*, however, explain how there are some Christians who will not be admitted to Heaven because of their hypocrisy: "many cry out: 'Christ!' […] / Yet many will, come Judgement, be to Him / less [near] than are those who don't know Christ. […] What will the [non-Christians] say about your kings" when they hear of their wickedness? God is the source and measure of all justice, which humans can't fully penetrate with their limited understanding. In addition, the idea of the virtuous unbeliever is not more pressing than the problem of the professed Christian who doesn't live according to their faith. Indeed, Dante suggests that the latter faces a harsher fate in Hell than mere unbelievers do. These questions must be subordinated, therefore, to trust in God's just character.

The mystery of the atonement (Jesus sacrificing himself to make up for humankind's sins) provides the greatest demonstration of God's goodness, and how it's essential for a person to understand God's goodness to then interpret his will: "until it pleased [God's Word] to descend / to where our nature, long abandoning / its maker, was made one, as person, with Him, / by action solely of eternal love." In other words, the divine Word (Christ) united himself, out of love, to human nature, even though humanity had willfully rejected God's love.

When Dante asks Beatrice *why* God chose this means of redemption, she replies that this truth is mysterious, but what *is* clear is that "The generosity of God which scorns / all spite and meanness burns within itself, / yet, flaring out, unfolds eternal beauties." In other words, the answer, though inscrutable, lies in the overflowing generosity and beauty of God's own nature. Human beings can only discover the meaning of God's will by increasingly coming to acknowledge and worship his goodness, beauty, and love.

At the very end of *Paradiso*, Dante's vision is complete when his will is united to God's: "All powers of high imagining here failed. / But now my will and my desire were turned, / […] by love that moves the sun and other stars." In this way, Dante comes full circle to share Piccarda's attitude as expressed early in the poem. His powers as poet fall silent before the immense mystery of God, and yet his will's union with God's, propelled by God's love, satisfies his desires. He may not understand the mystery fully, yet he cannot will anything other than what God wills—trusting that it will ultimately be good.

VISION, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE PURSUIT OF GOD

As he journeys through Heaven, Dante frequently gazes at his beloved Beatrice, who throughout *The Divine Comedy* has symbolized divine revelation. Sometimes, just looking at the beautiful Beatrice overpowers and temporarily blinds Dante. His overwhelm and loss of sight in the face of her beauty—symbolically, the beauty of divine revelation, or indirect knowledge of God—suggests that his own knowledge of God is weak and easily overwhelmed. But that Dante continually gazes at his beloved Beatrice anyway shows that love keeps him pressing forward. Significantly, as he journeys through Heaven, Dante's desire to look at Beatrice gradually lessens as his strength to endure her beauty strengthens. By the end of the cantica, Dante is strong enough to look briefly upon the beauty of God himself, no longer needing to look instead at Beatrice. By showing Dante's lessening need to look to Beatrice and his growing ability to endure the sight of God directly, Dante suggests that the more determinedly a person seeks God, the more a person will be able to see and understand God, though never exhaustively.

At first, Dante cannot look directly toward the heavens for long, though he wants to; instead, he redirects his gaze to Beatrice's lesser yet still dazzling beauty. This shows how Dante isn't yet ready for direct knowledge of God, though Dante still tenaciously seeks God through indirect knowledge. At the beginning of Dante and Beatrice's journey through Paradise, Dante looks fleetingly at the heavens, then back at Beatrice. "I could not bear it long" to look directly toward the sun, Dante relates; "And my bright glance, / turned back from that above, I fixed on" Beatrice instead. Notably, Dante is able to bear the sight of the sun for a brief moment, and his glance is "bright," suggesting that even at this early stage of his journey, he has *some* capacity to understand God. Yet, for now, he is mainly dependent on indirect knowledge, mediated through Beatrice.

In fact, Dante is often dazzled by Beatrice herself, and he sometimes has to be reminded to pay attention to his heavenly surroundings instead. In the heaven of Mars, for example, Dante becomes so entranced by Beatrice's eyes that he disregards his surroundings: "my heart, in awe now looking back at her, / was free of all desires, save that alone […] A smile – its **light** defeating me – she now addressed me: 'Turn around. […] Heaven is found not only in my eyes.'" In this case, Dante contents himself with indirect knowledge of God and is even "defeated" by the intensity of this mediated light. Beatrice's words remind him that he must not be satisfied with gazing at her, but that he is supposed to be strengthening his vision for yet greater sights—that is, direct knowledge of God.

As Dante learns more about God throughout his journey, he becomes able to look directly at God, first fleetingly through Christ, then more searchingly into the divine light itself. Again, the more Dante seeks God, the more he is enabled to seek God—a quest that never ends. When Dante and Beatrice reach the sphere of the fixed stars, Dante is able to look at Christ himself, albeit fleetingly. Dante finds that, after glimpsing in Christ "the being that creates that glow, too bright […] to tolerate," redirecting his gaze to Beatrice's blazing smile is actually a relief: "Open your eyes and look at what I am!" Beatrice comforts Dante. "You have seen things by which you're made so strong, / you can, now, bear to look upon my smile." Beatrice means that, now that Dante's vision has been strengthened to endure a brief look at God in Christ, Beatrice's smile (symbolizing indirect knowledge of God) no longer has the power to dazzle Dante so completely. He can fall back on her gaze (which has grown brighter and more intense the higher they've traveled) for respite. This further suggests that, the more passionately a person seeks God, the more they will be enabled to see him.

By the time Dante reaches the Empyrean, the heavenly sphere where God himself dwells, Dante outgrows his need for Beatrice's mediating light altogether. Beatrice is replaced as guide by Bernard of Clairvaux who, unlike Beatrice, doesn't *mediate* knowledge of God, but rather exhorts Dante to look directly at the light of God—something Dante is now ready for. "My sight," Dante exults upon looking into the divine light, "becoming pure and wholly free, / entered still more, then more, along the ray / of that one light which, of itself, is true." Dante's long ascent through the heavenly spheres has gradually purified and freed his vision to gaze directly into God's light—an inexhaustible sight, as he searches "still more, then more."

In God's presence, Dante reflects that "The beauty I saw, transcending every kind, / is far beyond us here […] / Its maker, I

think, alone could know its joy." From struggling to endure Beatrice's radiance (God's mediated light), Dante is gradually strengthened in his capacity for God's light to the point that it can shine on him directly. Importantly, though, even this light contains unfathomable depths that only God himself can know. In Heaven, souls' happiness consists in the reality that, as God's depths are gazed upon, deeper love is continually drawn out of souls, spurring an ever-expanding, endlessly delightful and satisfying quest.

LANGUAGE AND THE INEFFABLE

A curious aspect of *Paradiso* is that Dante often uses his poetic skill not to describe the sights and sounds of Heaven in detail but to indicate his inability to fully capture an experience in words. In fact, Dante opens the cantica with this very warning: in Paradise, "our intellect so sinks into the deep [of God] / no memory can follow it that far. / As much, though, truly of that holy realm / as I could keep as treasure in my mind / will now become the substance of my song." In other words, human capacities cannot hold the overwhelming memories of Heaven, much less do justice to them in words. This is even true for Dante, despite the fact that he's blessed with both a masterful grasp on language as a poet and the rare favor of visiting Paradise. However, Dante deploys his poetic ability in another way—by gesturing to the ineffable (inexpressible), he encourages his audience to seek the divine for themselves. By repeatedly emphasizing that Heaven cannot be contained within language or even memory, and by seeking to enchant rather than solely inform his audience, Dante argues that God and Heaven must be sought through firsthand experience instead of through secondhand accounts.

Language cannot capture the beauties of Heaven; however, it can persuade Dane's audience to seek the ineffable for themselves. In the sphere of Mars, Dante briefly sees a vision of Christ in the sky: "And here remembering surpasses skill: / that cross, in sudden flaring, blazed out Christ / so I can find no fit comparison. / But those who take their cross and follow Christ / will let me off where, wearily, I fail, / seeing in that white dawn, as lightning, Christ." In this case, Dante can remember the blazing vision of Christ, but when he tries to describe his memory, language eludes him. He asks his fellow Christians to forgive him for this failure, suggesting that those who are following Christ, like him, will someday be able to experience this sight firsthand. His language cannot capture the experience, but it can urge Christians to pursue the same experience for themselves.

Again, when Dante witnesses the sheer joy of souls in the sphere of the fixed stars, he refrains from describing the sight in detail: "Three times [a soul] circled Beatrice round, / the song it sang too deeply divinized / for my imagination to recount. / And so my pen will leap, and I'll not write. / Such pictures as we form – and words, of course – / are far too garish for those subtle pleats." The sights and sounds of Heaven are so divine that the limited human mind cannot convey them through either pictures or words. Instead of using his poetic ability to try to describe them, Dante instead uses it to describe the ineffability of what he experiences, intending by this means to enchant his audience and draw them toward the divine for themselves.

Not only does the experience of Paradise defy language; it's so overpowering that it even eludes Dante's capacity to remember it. When the beauty of Heaven is reflected in Beatrice's eyes, he finds himself unable to describe the sight or even to remember it fully; he can only relate the effect that this beauty had on him: "I turned towards that sound so full of love / [...] but saw, within / those holy eyes, a love I leave unsaid, / unsure not only of my powers of speech, / but Memory, as well – [...] This much of that one point I can repeat: / my heart, in awe now looking back at her, / was free of all desires, save that alone." In other words, Dante can only remember and speak of the desire to keep gazing into Beatrice's eyes, savoring the love and beauty he saw reflected there. In doing so, he entices his audiences not with specific images (which will inevitably fall short), but with the desire to experience the same love and beauty for themselves and to keep pursuing it, rather than being satisfied with Dante's account.

Even though manmade language falls short of describing the glory of God and Heaven, Dante suggests that language is nevertheless an important aspect of a person's pursuit of God. When Dante joins the saints in the sphere of the fixed stars, St. Peter quizzes him about Christianity, requiring Dante not to shun language but to "arm [himself] / with every argument." So although the divine is too glorious, powerful, and beautiful to be adequately summed up in language, it seems that there's still value in *trying* to speak about God—even if just to express the idea that God's goodness transcends words.

When Dante finally does experience God directly at the end of *Paradiso*, he is once again at a loss for words: "How short mere speaking falls, how faint against my own idea," he exclaims when he glimpses the Trinity firsthand; "alone, you [God] know yourself." To experience God, then, Dante's audience must not rely on his secondhand account, which will forever fall short; instead, they should pursue God, who transcends all language and knowing, for themselves.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LIGHT

Throughout *Paradiso*, light symbolizes the presence

or knowledge of God. On the surface, light's simplicity suggests God's purity and perfect self-sufficiency. But light also suggests God's constant generosity, as God's love and grace naturally shine forth to illuminate his creation.

Throughout most of his journey through the heavens, Dante is unable to look directly at God's light—at the beginning, even a brief glance toward the sun stuns him. This inability to look directly at light suggests that Dante isn't ready or able to fully see and know God yet. Instead, he sees God's light reflected in the eyes of his beloved, Beatrice, who guides him through Heaven. Beatrice's gaze symbolizes indirect revelation of God, as opposed to direct sight: "This light in me proceeds / from perfect sight," she explains when Dante finds he cannot steadily endure even this much light. But as Dante learns more about the nature of God and Heaven over the course of his journey, his sight acclimates until he can enjoy more of Beatrice's gaze and, eventually, can graduate from indirect revelation of God to direct sight of God's light. At the end of *Paradiso*, Dante is able to look directly at the light of God ("pure light of intellect, all love") and sees that the entire universe, in all its diversity, is contained and bound together within this single light.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Divine Comedy* published in 2013.

Canto 1 Quotes

Glory, from Him who moves all things that are,
penetrates the universe and then shines back,
reflected more in one part, less elsewhere.

High in that sphere which takes from Him most light
I was – I was! – and saw things there that no one
who descends knows how or ever can repeat.

For, drawing near to what it most desires,
our intellect so sinks into the deep
no memory can follow it that far.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

The opening stanzas of *Paradiso* (the last cantica of *The Divine Comedy*) look back on Dante's journey through Heaven. This quote highlights God's providence, which is one of *Paradiso*'s key themes. This passage speaks to the idea that God's glory pervades and shines through everything in the universe, though not equally in every place. As Dante journeys through Heaven, he will see that God's glory shines more clearly and radiantly in some spheres and in their inhabitants than it does in others. According to Dante's theology of providence, God chooses to display his glory differently in different creatures, but no matter the brightness or the details of each specific display, that glory always reflects God's unvarying perfection.

In *Paradiso*, Dante's growing knowledge of God is pictured as an ascent through the Heavens, and as he ascends, his intellect is transformed more and more. When he reaches the highest sphere, he sees things that cannot be conveyed through language or even fully remembered with his finite human capacities. The entirety of *Paradiso* will reflect Dante's struggle to convey, through metaphors like light and ascent, ideas too big for the human mind to comprehend, yet all of them reflections of divine love.

Canto 3 Quotes

'Dear brother, we in will are brought to rest
by power of *caritas* that makes us will
no more than what we have, nor thirst for more.

Were our desire to be more highly placed,
all our desires would then be out of tune
with His, who knows and wills where we should be. […]

In formal terms, our being in beatitude
entails in-holding to the will of God,
our own wills thus made one with the divine.'

Related Characters: Piccarda dei Donati (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

Piccarda dei Donati was a Florentine nun whom Dante was acquainted with in real life. While Piccarda was still a young woman, her brother persuaded her to leave the convent and agree to a marriage that would be politically advantageous for *him*. Dante is troubled by Piccarda's fate, sensing that there is something unjust about it—she probably had little choice in complying with the marriage, and yet she's in the lowest sphere of Heaven. In response, Piccarda emphasizes that equality doesn't work the same way in Heaven as it does on Earth. In Heaven, God's love transforms a person's

will so that his or her will is completely in harmony with God's. Thus, when Dante asks if Piccarda wouldn't prefer to be more highly placed in Heaven, Piccarda says no and explains that this wouldn't make sense to her—her desire is no more nor less than what God wills for her. The slightly complicated last stanza could be summed up this way: a soul's blessedness consists in a person's will adhering totally to God's.

Canto 4 Quotes

I see full well that human intellect
can never be content unless that truth
beyond which no truth soars shines down on it.

[...] Born of that will, there rise up, like fresh shoots,
pure doubts. These flourish at the foot of truth.
From height to height, they drive us to the peak.

This beckons me.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker), Beatrice

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of *Paradiso*, Dante has just been questioning Beatrice about the fate of souls in Heaven and the nature of God's justice. After Beatrice satisfies Dante's curiosity (for now), he thanks her with these words. His words sum up *Paradiso*'s approach to the intellect's role in a person's pursuit of God. The first stanza could be summed up by saying that no one's intellect can be satisfied until God has revealed himself to it. Put another way, God is the intellect's ultimate prize, the goal of the mind's striving. Dante also describes how this striving takes place—surprisingly, it's propelled not just by desire, but also by doubts. Doubts spring up incessantly from the desire to know, giving rise to questions that lead a person higher in the quest for God. Thus questions and doubts don't distract from the intellect's quest; they are one of its primary motivating factors.

Canto 7 Quotes

Between the last great night and first of days
there's never been nor shall be, either way,
a process soaring, so magnificent.

For God, in giving of Himself to make
humanity sufficient to restore itself,
gave more than, granting pardon, He'd have done.

All other means, in justice, would have come
far short, had not the very Son of God
bowed humbly down to take on human flesh.

Related Characters: Beatrice (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 352

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Beatrice essentially gives Dante a theology lesson. Dante has been trying to understand the justice behind the Crucifixion, specifically wondering why God choose this particular means to save humanity from their sin. Beatrice teaches Dante to look at the Crucifixion as a display of God's generosity. To do this, human nature was joined to divine nature in the person of Jesus Christ (both God and man), who died on the cross. Thus, human nature—which had been guilty of rebellion against God—suffered the consequences for sin on the cross but, because it was joined to divine nature, was ultimately able to triumph through Christ's Crucifixion.

Beatrice emphasizes that the humility and graciousness God showed in doing this are even greater—and even more just—than if God had simply chosen to overlook humanity's sin rather than punishing it. God's generous character therefore enables him to display both justice and love. Put another way, both of these characteristics are joined within God's character. In Dante's theology, understanding God's will cannot be separated from understanding his character, and he also highlights how God's justice also dwarfs the human capacity to understand it.

Canto 9 Quotes

Yet here we don't repent such things. We smile,
not, though, at sin – we don't think back to that –
but at that Might that governs and provides.

In wonder, we here prize the art to which
His power brings beauty, and discern the good
through which the world above turns all below.

Related Characters: Folco of Marseilles (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 362

Explanation and Analysis

In the heavenly sphere of Venus, Dante meets souls whose earthly passions obscured their love for God during their lifetimes. Therefore, in Heaven, these souls are presented to Dante as inhabiting a lower sphere than might have been the case otherwise. However, one soul, a poet named Folco, explains to Dante that this isn't a cause for grief. Souls in Heaven do not lament their earthly sins or even focus on them at all. Rather, their minds are focused entirely on God's providence. In their case, God's power has created beauty out of past waywardness—in other words, the same inclination that led them into sin on earth (love) now leads them to praise God in Heaven. God's providence is constantly at work both in Heaven and in the world below, and it's only from a heavenly perspective that God's goodness can be fully discerned. Dante's encounters with different souls in Heaven deepen his awareness of God's working throughout creation—always with the goal of drawing souls closer to himself in love.

Canto 10 Quotes

Call as I might on training, art or wit,
no words of mine could make the image seen.
Belief, though, may conceive it, eyes still long.

In us, imagination is too mean
for such great heights. And that's no miracle.
For no eye ever went beyond the sun.

So shining there was that fourth family
that's always fed by one exalted Sire
with sight of what He breathes, what Son He has.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 365

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, describing the surpassing brightness of the souls whom Dante encounters in the sphere of the sun, is an example of the limitations of language in *Paradiso*. Dante is so overwhelmed by this sphere's beauty that neither his training nor his native talent suffice to help him describe what he witnesses. He basically appeals to his audience's faith in what he tells them, since only sight fully satisfy them. Yet he further explains that heavenly visions even surpass human imagination, because nobody (with the exception of Dante himself) has ever gone past the sun and thus have no concept of its beauty. The sun's light often symbolizes the light of God himself in the *Divine Comedy*, which suggests that only those in Heaven (and not a mere visitor like Dante) can truly see and contemplate God. In this passage, Dante refers to the "fourth family" (the inhabitants of this fourth heavenly sphere) who are directly nourished by the presence of God the Trinity.

In this passage and throughout *Paradiso* more broadly, Dante pointedly refrains from attempting to describe some of the things he sees in Heaven, especially those closest to God. By doing so, he reinforces his argument about the mind's ascent to God (a kind of seeing to which the intellect must be gradually acclimated) and the impossibility of adequately conveying this ascent in words.

Canto 11 Quotes

The providence that rules the universe,
in counsels so profound that all created
countenance will yield before it finds its depth [...]

ordained two princes that, on either side,
should walk along with [the Church] and be her guide.

The one was seraph-like in burning love,
the other in intelligence a splendour
on the earth that shone like Heaven's cherubim.

[...] Their different actions served a single plan.

Related Characters: Thomas Aquinas (speaker), Dante Alighieri, Dominic, Francis of Assisi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 370

Explanation and Analysis

In the heavenly sphere of the sun, Dante sees the souls of two major medieval figures. The "seraph-like" figure is Francis of Assisi, and the figure with shining intelligence is Dominic. Historically, the monastic orders founded by these two "princes" of the Church—the Franciscan and the

Dominican—were great rivals. Dante has Franciscans and Dominicans praise one another's virtues in Heaven, showing that both orders ultimately sought the same goal, and that the Church needed both those who emphasized love (Francis) and intellect (Dominic).

This quote is also an example of Dante's emphasis on God's providence throughout *Paradiso*. God's "single plan" equipped the Church with different, but complementary and equally necessary, figures to guide believers through their earthly pilgrimage. This is one specific example of God's larger providential guidance of the world, building a variety of gifts into creation so that humanity would have plenty of evidence of God's care and plenty of help on the way to Heaven.

Canto 14 Quotes

So too, like constellations in the depths
of Mars, these rays composed the honoured sign [...]

And here remembering surpasses skill:
that cross, in sudden flaring, blazed out Christ
so I can find no fit comparison.

But those who take their cross and follow Christ
will let me off where, wearily, I fail,
seeing in that white dawn, as lightning, Christ.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 387

Explanation and Analysis

In the heavenly sphere of Mars, Dante sees a dazzling vision of souls gathered in the shape of a cross, and for a brief moment, Christ himself shines forth from the cross like white lightning. Dante attempts no more detailed description. This is an example of Dante's reticence in the face of mystical experiences, something that recurs frequently in *Paradiso*, especially as Dante travels higher towards God's presence. Even a fleeting sight of Christ defeats Dante's powers of language, suggesting that even for a poet like Dante, the highest heavenly realities transcend ordinary human capacities. Such knowledge cannot be conveyed through an intermediary like Dante, he hints; it can only be experienced firsthand. This is why Dante trusts fellow Christians ("those who take their cross and follow") to forgive his silence, intending that his reticence will spur his audience onward in their own pursuit of Christ, kindling their desire to one day experience such vision for themselves.

Canto 15 Quotes

Florence, within the ancient ring, from which
she takes the bell-sound still of terce and nones,
lived on in modesty, chasteness and peace. [...]

I saw the Nerli and del Vecchio
content to wear the plainest skin and hide,
their women occupied with loom and flax.

How fortunate these were, each being sure
of where her grave would be!

Related Characters: Cacciaguida (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 392

Explanation and Analysis

When Dante visits the heavenly sphere of Mars, he meets his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida. The conversation between Cacciaguida and Dante is a significant moment in the plot because Cacciaguida serves as a connection between earth and Heaven, and he also encourages Dante in his role as a writer. Cacciaguida's reminiscences about his own 12th-century Florence contrast with the moral decay of Dante's Florence. Cacciaguida recalls a society in which people lived within their means, didn't fight with their neighbors, and even prayed the monastic hours ("terce" and "nones" were two of the seven daily prayer services that monks observed). In other words, in Cacciaguida's day, Florentines were content with their simple, predictable lives. In contrast, Dante's present-day Florence is torn apart by greed, rivalry, envy, violence, and even corruption within the Church. In contrast to the simple wife who knew "where her grave would be," Dante doesn't know where he might die in exile. By portraying his ancestor's virtuous Florence in this way, Dante builds a justification for his own vocation as a writer denouncing the moral failings of his own time, calling his audience back to simpler virtues as he does so.

Canto 17 Quotes

[Y]ou'll leave Florence, too.

[…] You'll leave behind you all you hold most dear.
And this will be the grievous arrow barb
that exile, first of all, will shoot your way.

And you will taste the saltiness of bread
when offered by another's hand – as, too,
how hard it is to climb a stranger's stair.

Related Characters: Cacciaguida (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 400

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Dante's journey, he has received occasional hints regarding his future exile, but when the hints came from Virgil in earlier parts of the work, they were always veiled. Now, in the clarity of Heaven, Dante's ancestor, Cacciaguida, speaks plainly at last. Cacciaguida has just given a moving, positive picture of what Florence was like in his day, followed by a denunciation of Florence's slide into decadence and violence. Now, Cacciaguida tells him, it will be Dante's mission to warn Florence about its sin—and the broader world, too. This will cause Dante to be exiled from the city that he loves so much—and relegate him to an uncomfortable life among strangers.

Of course, when Dante wrote these words, he was already living in exile in Ravenna, never having returned to his beloved hometown of Florence. He therefore uses Cacciaguida's warning as a way of highlighting his present plight and putting it into a larger context—he portrays his writing, especially the denunciations of Florentine decadence sprinkled throughout, as the reason for his sufferings. This also reinforces the centrality of justice in *Paradiso*, and subtly suggests that heavenly justice is on Dante's side, too, even though exile might make it appear otherwise.

For if at first your voice tastes odious,
still it will offer, as digestion works,
life-giving nutriment to those who eat.

The words you shout will be like blasts of wind
that strike the very summit of the trees.
And this will bring no small degree of fame.

For you've been shown in all these circling wheels –
around the mountain, in the sorrowing vale –
only those souls whose fame is widely known,
since those who hear you speak will never pause

or give belief to any instances
whose family roots are hidden or unknown,
nor demonstrations that remain obscure.

Related Characters: Cacciaguida (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 402

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Dante continues his conversation with the soul of Cacciaguida, his ancestor. Cacciaguida has just given a nostalgic picture of what life was like in Florence two centuries ago and then contrasted that image with a scathing denunciation of Florence's corruption and decadence in Dante's present day. Now he encourages Dante not to shrink from publishing that denunciation to the world, even if it personally costs him to do so (e.g., even if he will be exiled for it). This "food" will no doubt be unsavory to those who receive it, but that doesn't mean it won't be good for them—by which Dante means that such rebuke might save their souls.

Cacciaguida also gives a reason for the frequent appearance of famous Italians throughout the whole *Divine Comedy*. His justification (and the author Dante's, by extension) is that, if only obscure people were denounced, then nobody would take Dante's criticisms seriously. But when famous personalities are placed in Hell and Purgatory and given voice through Dante's poem, those still living might actually listen to their warnings and react accordingly. Finally, in the midst of his charge to Dante, Cacciaguida tucks an additional inducement—that Dante will gain fame through what he writes (exile, of course, being the flipside of fame).

Canto 19 Quotes

But see this: many cry out: "Christ! Christ! Christ!"
Yet many will, come Judgement, be to Him
less [close] than are those who don't know Christ.

And Christians such as these the Ethiopian
will damn when souls divide between two schools,
some to eternal riches, some to dearth.

What will the Persians say about your kings,
when once they see that ledger opened up
in which is written all their praiseless doings.

Related Characters: Eagle (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 411

Explanation and Analysis

In the heavenly sphere of Jupiter, just souls combine into the shape of an Eagle, which then speaks to Dante about justice. The Eagle perceives a nagging question that Dante has carried with him through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise: how is it just for souls to be damned if they've never had the opportunity to learn of Christ (e.g., someone who lives in a remote area where Christianity hasn't yet spread)?

The Eagle doesn't actually answer Dante's question directly. Instead, it points out that, while the unbaptized cannot enter Heaven, neither can those Christians—especially Christian rulers—who have hypocritically failed to live up to their faith by oppressing others instead. As a result, some of these supposed Christians will spend eternity farther away from Christ than those virtuous souls who never became Christians (the latter likely consigned to Limbo, the less punitive realm within Hell where Virgil and other pagan scholars reside). The Eagle refers to non-Christians with the terms "the Ethiopians" and "the Persians," meant to suggest far-off realms where Christianity has not yet been preached (though there *is* actually an ancient history of Christianity in both lands). The Eagle's argument doesn't neatly resolve Dante's question, but it does suggest that God's justice is both more inscrutable and more trustworthy than Dante's limited mind can grasp.

Canto 20 Quotes

'And so you mortals, in your judgements show
restraint. For even we who look on God
do not yet know who all the chosen are.

Yet this deficiency for us is sweet.
For in this good our own good finds its goal,
that what God wills we likewise seek in will.'

So from that sacred sign was given me,
to bring to my short sight new clarity,
a gentle draught of soothing medicine.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri, Eagle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 416

Explanation and Analysis

In the sphere of Jupiter, where the figure of an Eagle discourses to Dante on the subject of God's justice, the subject of predestination comes up—or, God's predetermined will for individuals' souls. This is because Dante is surprised at the presence of two particular souls, those of Trajan and Rhipeus, among the most just rulers celebrated in this sphere. Neither of these men was a Christian upon his death, which leads to Dante's confusion—he'd thought that if a soul didn't affirm the Christian faith in their lifetime, then they couldn't enter Heaven.

According to the Eagle, Trajan (a compassionate Roman emperor in the 100s C.E.) was, due to the fervent prayers of St. Gregory, temporarily restored to life so that he had a chance to be baptized; Rhipeus, described in Virgil's Aeneid, was a Trojan of exemplary righteousness. God granted both men salvation and entrance to Heaven. The Eagle implies that Trajan and Rhipeus are not the only souls of their kind; he warns Dante that mortals must be careful in their judgments about the fate of human souls, because it's something that's not within their power to know. Yet they should take comfort in God's character, since his will is good and the source of all human happiness. Dante describes the Eagle's words as "soothing medicine"—not a clear-cut answer to his questions about justice, but a reminder that, though God's will is often inscrutable to human eyes, it is still trustworthy.

Canto 23 Quotes

As bolts of fire, unlocked from thunder clouds,
expand beyond containment in those bounds,
then fall to ground [...]

so, too, surrounded by this solemn feast,
my own mind, grown the greater now, went forth
and can't remember what it then became.

'Open your eyes and look at what I am!
You have seen things by which you're made so strong,
you can, now, bear to look upon my smile.'

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri, Beatrice (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 429

Explanation and Analysis

During his ascent through the heavens, Dante's knowledge of God has gradually grown stronger. This is symbolized by Dante's capacity to look toward the heavens or, more often, to gaze at Beatrice's radiant beauty (since Beatrice stands for indirect revelation of God). A breakthrough in Dante's capacity occurs when he and Beatrice reach the level of the fixed stars, which is the last of the material spheres (the remaining ones existing beyond space and time).

When Dante gazes into the stars here, he experiences a fleeting glimpse of Christ, which he describes as resembling a lightning strike in its dazzling impact. The effect is so overpowering that Dante's mind, "grown the greater," can't hold onto the memory of something so far past ordinary human experience. Afterward, Beatrice encourages Dante to look upon her smile, which she'd concealed from him in the previous sphere because it would have been too much for him to absorb. Now, Dante's capacity to turn towards the light—metaphorically, his ability to understand truths about God—is much stronger; having glimpsed Christ, he can freely gaze on the indirect revelation that Beatrice represents. He will soon be able to look upon God without any intermediary, though that experience, too, will defy language and memory.

Canto 26 Quotes

My being, and the being of the world,
the death that He sustained so I might live,
the hope that all, with me, confess in faith,

the living knowledge I have spoken of –
all drew me from the waves of wrongful love
and set me on the shores of righteousness.

And every leaf, en-leafing all the grove
of our eternal orchardist,
I love as far as love is borne to them from Him.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker), St. John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 444

Explanation and Analysis

Upon his arrival in the heavenly sphere of the fixed stars, Dante undergoes an examination in the main Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. This is a fitting capstone to Dante's ascent and precursor to actually seeing God firsthand, because it allows Dante to explain the motivation for his entire journey through the afterlife and the means by which he did it. In this quote, the apostle John specifically quizzes Dante about the virtue of love, or charity. Dante explains to John that although he came to know God's love through the Bible, that's not the only source. Dante's own existence, the evidence of Christ's death on his behalf, and the faith he and his fellow Christians share in common—in short, his lifelong Christian pilgrimage—are all things that have taught him about God's love. This "living knowledge" has pulled Dante away from sin ("wrongful love") and led him to righteousness, suggesting that, as Beatrice had prayed, Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven has deepened the virtue of love within him, sparing him from damnation. In fact, "every leaf" that's given life by God is a testimony of God's goodness and instills deeper love in Dante. Dante's examination in love fittingly concludes his arguments about God's providence within creation and the goodness of God's character, as well as showing the link between love and the intellect.

Canto 27 Quotes

❝ We did not mean that some of Christ's own race
should sit in favour on our heirs' right hand,
and others, to the left, incur disgrace;

nor that the keys entrusted to my hands
should serve as battle emblem on the flag
that fought against those marked by baptism;

nor that, myself, I should become the stamp
that seals the sale of untrue privilege.
I flare and redden often at this thought.

Down there, in every pasture, ravening wolves
are seen dressed up as shepherds and as priests.
God our defence, why are you still unmoved?

Related Characters: St. Peter (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 449

Explanation and Analysis

When Dante concludes his examination in faith, hope, and love, the celebration in the heavens is short-lived, as St. Peter (one of Jesus's apostles) turns to angry denunciation of the papacy's corruption on earth. St. Peter was the first pope and, in Catholicism, is considered the founder of the Church. Given this, it's fitting that St. Peter is so furious about the way the office of the papacy has been misused; here he outlines several key ways that's happening, including undue favoritism, the papacy's intervention in warfare, and the sale of Church offices. All these things signal that the papacy has become entangled in earthly politics and privileges. Dante as a historical figure was known for his criticisms of papal politics, and at the time he wrote *Paradiso*, the church was reeling from the so-called Babylonian Captivity, when a succession of popes, beginning with Clement V, lived in Avignon, France, instead of Rome—another sign of the church's unholy entanglement with the earthly world. Although the transition to Peter's denunciation is stark, it also serves to reinforce Dante's duty after his journey through Heaven. Peter's words suggest that God—and Dante's audience—will be "moved" after Dante writes about the corruption of the papacy, which lends a further sense of legitimacy to Dante's writing (particularly his recurrent emphasis on injustices).

❝ The order in the natural spheres that stills
the central point and moves, round that, all else,
here sets its confine and begins its rule.

This primal sphere has no "where" other than
the mind of God. The love that makes it turn
is kindled there, so, too, the powers it rains.

Brightness and love contain it in one ring,
as this, in turn, contains the spheres below.
And only He who binds it knows the bond.

Related Characters: Beatrice (speaker), Dante Alighieri

Related Themes:

Page Number: 451

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the Primum Mobile, the penultimate sphere Dante visits. The Primum Mobile was a concept derived from Ptolemy's ancient cosmology which remained popular in medieval conceptions of the universe. Beatrice describes the Primum Mobile (or "first mover") as the sphere that contains all the other spheres, and it is the swiftest in its motion. Only the presence of God himself (or the Empyrean, which Dante will visit shortly) contains the Primum Mobile.

Unlike the other spheres Dante's visited, it does not contain any stars. However, it determines the rest of the universe's movements within time and space—the revolutions of the other spheres. These motions are generated by God's love, and God's creative power flows from here to the rest of creation. The Primum Mobile is therefore evidence of God's providence as Dante understands the concept—God's purposes working among creation in indirect, though meticulously ordered, ways. While here, Dante doesn't meet additional souls or have further visions of God; instead, the location gives Beatrice an opportunity to give Dante his final lessons in the sciences of heaven, as she discourses on creation and the hierarchy of angels.

Canto 33 Quotes

Grace, in all plenitude, you dared me set
my seeing eyes on that eternal light
so that all seeing there achieved its end.

Within in its depths, this light, I saw, contained,
bound up and gathered in a single book,
the leaves that scatter through the universe –

beings and accidents and modes of life,
as though blown all together in a way
that what I say is just a simple light.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 480

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Dante's glimpse of the light of God himself—the goal of his entire journey throughout the *Divine Comedy*. Dante has finally reached the moment in his ascent when he is free to gaze directly on God, instead of learning about him indirectly through others. The sight is too much for Dante to remember or to describe completely, but one of the images he retains is that of a book with various leaves (or pages) bound together in it. These "leaves" stand for a great variety of things and events that are scattered across the universe—in other words, the dazzling variety of creation itself. Within God, however, all these diverse and seemingly contradictory things are gathered together in an orderly way. This image suggests that, in his workings within creation (his "providence"), God is always working toward a specific goal. Even if that goal isn't obvious to human beings, it ultimately involves union with God. Dante sees this complicated idea conveyed through "just a simple light," suggesting that in his eyes, God's immensity is matched only by his utter simplicity.

But mine were wings that could not rise to that,
save that, with this, my mind, was stricken through
by sudden lightning bringing what it wished.

All powers of high imagining here failed.
But now my will and my desire were turned,
as wheels that move in equilibrium,
by love that moves the sun and other stars.

Related Characters: Dante Alighieri (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 482

Explanation and Analysis

This quote further describes Dante's vision of God in the heavenly Empyrean (the highest sphere in Heaven, where God, the angels, and the saints dwell). The first part of his vision involved a glimpse of the diversity and unity of creation as contained within God. In this second part, he gets a fleeting glimpse of God himself as the Holy Trinity—three equal and perfectly interrelated persons, seen as differently colored circles. The last thing he recalls seeing is some semblance of a human figure within the second of the three circles—suggesting the human nature united to the divine in Christ. But this mystery eludes Dante's ability to express, as his mind seems to be struck by lightning at the sight. Instead of being discouraged by the limits of his seeing and his language, however, Dante is completely satisfied by what he has seen. Moreover, his will now moves in perfect harmony with God's will—moved by the same love that sustains the motion of the stars. Each of *The Divine Comedy*'s three canticas end with the word "stars," suggesting that this union of wills has been the goal of Dante's journey ever since he began his arduous climb through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CANTO 1

Dante has traveled to the realm that's most filled with God's **light**—that is, Heaven. While there, he saw things that he wouldn't know how to explain, even if he could. But as much as he can remember and express will become the subject of this poem. He calls upon Apollo for help in his task.

At the end of Dante's Purgatorio, the Divine Comedy*'s second cantica, Dante had just left the Earthly Paradise, where he was purified from his sins. Now, he's ascending into the heavens, symbolizing human progress toward God. Setting out on this journey, he calls upon God—by means of an allusion to the Greek sun god, Apollo, the chief of the Muses. As in the previous canticas, Dante will draw freely upon his classical literary heritage in order to give his narrative depth and richness.*

When Dante and Beatrice begin their journey through Heaven, it is a few days after Easter Sunday. Beatrice gazes into the noonday sun, and Dante copies her, able to stare into the sun for a short time. After that, he redirects his gaze to Beatrice instead. When Dante hears heavenly music and sees blazing **lights** filling the sky, Beatrice says that they have risen beyond the Earthly Paradise toward the heavens. She explains how this rising is made possible: essentially, all created things have a natural tendency to fulfill the purpose of their existence by seeking God, like a form of heavenly gravity.

In Purgatory, Beatrice became Dante's guide through the afterlife, taking over from Virgil, who guided Dante through Hell and most of Purgatory. She now resumes this role in Paradise. And as she did in Purgatory, Beatrice represents divine revelation. God's love and truth are reflected through her in a way that Dante can perceive more easily than he could perceive them from God directly. After being purified in Purgatory, Dante exists in the same state of innocence that Adam was in before sinning. This means that Dante's faculties, untainted by sin, are stronger than they'd be on Earth—hence being able to look into the sun, though only for a short time, at this point. Allegorically, Dante's ability to look directly into heavenly light represents his deepening capacity for knowledge of God.

CANTO 2

Dante warns less spiritually prepared readers not to embark on this heavenward journey. Only those who have been accustomed to feeding on "angel-bread" can safely follow him there.

Dante suggests that those who are not accustomed to studying theology (feeding on "angel-bread") may find his poem's "waters" too deep for them to navigate safely. Yet this rhetorical gesture isn't meant to be taken too seriously; Dante intended that the beauty of his language would draw ordinary readers, not just highly educated ones. He simply signals that his poem will deal with lofty subjects that aren't meant solely for entertainment, but for his audience's spiritual betterment as well.

Beatrice tells Dante that God has led them to the "first star," the moon. A dense, shining cloud envelops them. Dante asks Beatrice about the dark markings visible on the moon's surface—on Earth, people refer to these as the marks of Cain. Dante suggests that perhaps the markings are due to variations in density on the moon's surface.

Beatrice's and Dante's journey will take them through nine spheres of heaven. They'll encounter different types of souls in each sphere, as well as different types of angels and virtues. Dante's question is an example of his insatiable appetite for knowledge, which is portrayed throughout Paradiso *as a noble, God-given human characteristic. Dante's reference to Cain is to a piece of folklore which held that Cain, the world's first murderer as portrayed in the Book of Genesis, was banished to the moon.*

Beatrice explains the scientific reason for the varied coloration on the moon's surface—basically, that each of the heavenly spheres reflects the **light** of the sun in a different way, and that different parts of the moon reflect that light differently, too. Similarly, the human soul diffuses its energies in various ways, as needed, throughout the human body.

Beatrice's explanation is'nt accurate in terms of the modern scientific understanding of the moon's surface. But her scientific discourse nevertheless serves an important function in the story—it anticipates the poem's emphasis on God's providence, or God's purpose and will working itself out in diverse ways throughout creation. In other words, like the heavens and the human body, creation as a whole is made up of varying expressions of God's unified purpose.

CANTO 3

Before Dante can reply to Beatrice's scientific explanation, a sight distracts him. He sees indistinct reflections of faces and turns around, thinking people must be standing behind him. Beatrice teases him, calling him a "baby" in his pursuit of truth. She explains that the beings he sees are real souls, not reflections. The reason that they're in this sphere—and why they appear so cloudy—is because of their inconstancy during life. Beatrice encourages Dante to speak to them.

Just as there are different levels in the heavenly spheres, so there is a hierarchy of blessedness in Heaven. An inverted version of this appears in Dante's Inferno*—as Dante travels deeper and deeper into the layers of Hell, the souls he meets are increasingly sinful. The souls in this heavenly sphere reflect their cloudy, variable environment because they behaved inconstantly in life—their wills changing like the changeable moon.*

Dante asks the nearest spirit to reveal her name and destiny. Smiling, she identifies herself as Piccarda, a former nun who'd been pulled from the cloister and made to marry. She explains that she and her fellow souls are assigned to this slower-moving sphere of Heaven because they neglected their vows in life. Noticing how happy she appears, Dante wonders if she'd prefer to be in a higher sphere, where she'd be closer to God. Still radiant, Piccarda replies that God's love causes her to want nothing other than what she has been given. If she wished to be placed higher, then her will would be "out of tune" with God's—but, in Heaven, that simply cannot be. In God's will, in other words, she finds her peace.

Piccarda dei Donati was a woman whom Dante knew in real life. As she alludes to here, she was persuaded to leave a Florentine convent in order to marry for her brother's political advantage. Piccarda's story is an example of God's providence, meaning how God's grace is distributed in various ways. Every soul's destiny is a gift of God's grace, but grace is not granted in the same way or to the same degree everywhere. Yet souls do not suffer any sense of deficiency or injustice because of this. That's because, in Heaven, their wills are completely aligned with God's will and find their peace and happiness only there.

Piccarda points out the soul of another former nun, Empress Constance. Constance was also pulled from the cloister, but "she never let the veil fall from her heart." Piccarda then fades from Dante's sight, singing *Ave Maria*. Dante turns to look at Beatrice again, and his eyes are overwhelmed by her radiant **light**.

Empress Constance died in 1198, daughter of the King of Naples and Sicily and wife of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. Like Piccarda, Constance, is portrayed as a religiously devout figure who nevertheless yielded to the pressure to serve the political world. Dante's ability to withstand Beatrice's radiance will grow as the story goes on, symbolizing his maturing in the knowledge of God.

CANTO 4

Beatrice perceives that Dante feels torn between two questions, so she seeks to resolve his doubts. Dante's first question, she says, is how a person's merit can justly be reduced, if that person was violently forced to do something against their will. Secondly, Dante is surprised that human souls appear to return to their allotted stars, a fact that seems to vindicate Plato rather than Christianity.

In this canto, Beatrice embodies the quest for truth, illuminating Dante's doubts because of her greater insight (which she possesses because she's already in union with God). Dante first questions God's justice, which is a matter of God's character. He's also troubled by the apparent harmony between what he sees in Heaven and the teaching of pre-Christian Greek philosopher Plato.

Beatrice addresses the second question first, because it's the question that's more likely to lead Dante astray from his faith. She explains that no soul resides anywhere besides the Empyrean (the highest sphere, where God himself dwells). However, these two souls have *appeared* in a lower sphere in order to signify their relative level of blessedness, thereby adapting to Dante's limited understanding. For all souls, regardless of where they dwell, "life is sweet […] in differing ways."

Here, Beatrice distinguishes between Platonic teaching and Christian teaching. Basically, all souls live in Heaven's highest sphere, but Piccarda and Constance have appeared to Dante in a lower sphere in order to illustrate the teaching on God's variously expressed providence. This is key to understanding Dante's work in general—he does not intend for his account to be taken over-literally (he doesn't intend his levels of Heaven to be understood as absolute truths), but to accommodate theological ideas to the limitations of space and time.

Beatrice goes on to explain that Plato's *Timaeus* argues something different. Plato taught that souls literally return at death to the stars from which they were formed. Though this is wrong, his teaching may have had truthful implications—namely, that souls are influenced by the stars' power, for good or ill. However, people took this truth too far and ultimately turned the stars into gods (like Jove, Mars, and Mercury).

Platonic philosophy had a strong influence on the development of Christian theology, and Dante was familiar with Plato's account of the creation of the world in the dialogue Timaeus. *However, Dante models thoughtful critique of classical models by showing where, in his opinion, Plato's teaching is reconcilable with Christian ideas (like limited belief in the stars' influence), and where it is incompatible (such as belief in other deities).*

Beatrice turns to Dante's first and less dangerous question—the seeming injustice of souls' placement in Heaven. She explains that even under force, a will is still held responsible for yielding, however slightly, to the pressure exerted upon it. Piccarda and Constance, after all, could have chosen to flee when pressed. They could have been as steadfast as Saint Lawrence, who chose to be burned to death rather than betray his faith. But such strength of will is rare.

Beatrice identifies Dante's question about Plato as more dangerous because it's more threatening to core Christian teachings, such as God's creation of each human soul. The question about justice is easier, in her view—it is possible for the human will to remain resolute under the severest pressure, as did the third-century martyr Lawrence.

Dante is satisfied with Beatrice's explanations and voices his gratitude. He also observes that intellect can't be content until the greatest Truth **shines** on it. Doubts surface which drive the intellect in its pursuit of truth until it reaches God.

Dante's response to Beatrice further emphasizes his belief in the intellect as something that spurs an individual in his or her pursuit of God. In this sense, doubts are not an obstacle, because questions prompt a soul to seek God all the more eagerly—an attitude Dante will model throughout.

CANTO 5

Beatrice tells Dante it's no surprise that he is often overwhelmed by the **light** of her gaze. The light "proceeds from perfect sight." Already, Beatrice can see that light becoming mirrored in Dante's own mind. She also perceives Dante's next question: if someone fails to fulfill a vow, can something else be offered in place of the vow?

Beatrice already enjoys the "perfect sight" of a soul who is able to gaze upon God in Heaven. Dante's soul doesn't yet enjoy this state, so he only sees God's light reflected through Beatrice; still, that light is beginning to be reflected in him as he progresses through the heavens.

Beatrice explains that God's greatest gift is freedom of the will, which is granted to all rational creatures. The significance of vows comes from this freedom—a vow, after all (especially a monastic vow), is a sacrifice of one's own will to God. Nothing can be substituted for a monastic vow. Under some circumstances, though, the Church can release people from certain vows. How, then, are these things not contradictory?

Free will is a gift from God to rational creatures (humans and angels). When a person makes a vow to God, such as a monastic vow, they are essentially returning the gift of the will to God. In such a case, the human and divine wills are in agreement, forming a covenant, or contract.

Beatrice explains that there are two elements of a vow: the intention to do something, and the agreement with God to follow through. It's the latter that cannot be nullified, though the *particulars* of the vow can be modified—but this modification can only be approved by the Church. In such a case, the thing substituted for the original vow must exceed the original's worth—something that was not possible with the souls Dante has just met. No matter what, vows are no light matter, so people should be careful when they take oaths. Beatrice concludes her explanation and gazes again toward the sun. She and Dante continue their ascent.

Once a person enters into an agreement with God, the agreement itself cannot be nullified. This shows how weighty a matter it is when the human and divine wills come into agreement. However, the precise terms *of the agreement can be altered, if the Church permits this. When a person made a monastic vow, they vowed to practice poverty, chastity, and obedience, and Beatrice explains that there is nothing more valuable that can substitute for these.*

Dante and Beatrice arrive in the second heavenly sphere, that of Mercury. Mercury is nearest the sun, so it is often not visible from Earth. Ambitious souls dwell here, especially those who were deficient in the virtue of justice. A thousand shining souls eagerly approach Dante. On Beatrice's encouragement, Dante speaks to the first soul that approaches him, wanting to know who these souls are and why they dwell here.

There is an allegorical connection between Mercury's position (its light obscured by the sun) and the condition of the souls who dwell here: because these souls sought their own glory on Earth, their glory is now obscured by God's. As before, Dante is eager to learn more about what he sees.

CANTO 6

The soul Dante meets in the sphere of Mercury introduces himself as the emperor Justinian. Justinian describes his earthly work of reforming the law code of the Roman Empire. He also explains that, before he undertook that task, he held heretical beliefs about Christ, until the bishop Agapetus corrected his mistaken views. After that, Justinian committed his military efforts to his general, Belisarius.

The Roman emperor Justinian reigned during the 6th century C.E. For Dante, he is an idealized figure, symbolizing a just and powerful Roman Empire—the kind of figure who Dante wishes would set affairs right in the Italy of his own day. Justinian handles the law justly, is successful militarily, and practices orthodox Christianity—all aspects of an ideal ruler in Dante's eyes.

Justinian surveys the history of Rome from ancient times through the time of Christ and, a few centuries later, Constantine's conversion. Today, he says, many people try to lay claim to Rome's mantle, including the Guelphs and Ghibellines, but Justinian finds fault with both factions. He names Romèo of Provence as an upstanding figure who fell into undeserved disgrace. Throughout Justinian's speech, the symbol of an eagle stands for Roman power.

Dante sees the Roman Empire, and by extension the Holy Roman Empire of his day, as being part of a unified historical stream, from ancient times through Constantine's efforts to make the empire Christian and up to the present (late medieval) day. However, battling factions in Dante's day, like the Guelphs and Ghibellines with whom he was familiar in Florence, do not measure up to Roman standards of just and mighty rule. Romèo, a 12th- and 13th-century count of Provence, stands as an example of a faithful figure who later fell into disgrace. Though he was an obscure individual, his story is something Dante himself could identify with.

CANTO 7

Justinian and other souls whirl out of sight, singing. Dante has a question for Beatrice, but, embarrassed by her **radiant** smile, he stays silent. But Beatrice perceives and speaks his question: how is it just, Dante wonders, for vengeance to befall *just* vengeance? Beatrice explains that the first human being, Adam, sinned and condemned subsequent generations to sin—humanity having abandoned its creator, God. Then, centuries later, God chose to become incarnate as a human being, out of love—thereby uniting fallen human nature with himself.

Dante's discussion of earthly justice with Justinian prompts questions about divine justice. His somewhat obscure question requires some unpacking. "Just vengeance" refers to the Crucifixion, which atoned for humanity's sins. Traditionally, Christians claimed that the Crucifixion was avenged by God through the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 C.E. Dante wonders how the just punishment of humanity could justly be avenged by God. In response, Beatrice first explains that, to bring about humanity's atonement, God chose to become man—human and divine natures being united in the person of Jesus Christ.

Beatrice continues her explanation. At the Cross, when Christ was crucified, human nature (as united to Christ) underwent the just penalty for its sin. From an earthly perspective, therefore, Christ's death pleased his persecutors; from a heavenly perspective, Christ's death satisfied God's justice, too. The "vengeance" wrought for this event—the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.—can thus, in Beatrice's view, be understood as just vengeance.

When Christ died, multiple things were happening at once. Christ was being unjustly killed by his tormentors; but, at the same time, humanity (human nature being united to divine nature in Christ) was undergoing just punishment for sin. Therefore, from an earthly perspective, the destruction of Jerusalem could be viewed as a just response to those who, not having God's purposes in view, condemned Christ to death.

Dante wants to know why God chose this means of redemption and not some other. Beatrice explains that nobody whose mind is immature can understand it fully. However, God's chosen means of redemption springs from his generosity of character, which constantly "unfolds eternal beauties." Anything that's directly created by God, in fact, perfectly reflects God's goodness. However, human beings, because of their sinful nature, have forfeited this perfect dignity and must make amends for sin. God could have made this possible either by simply pardoning humanity outright, or by allowing for humanity to offer satisfaction.

Ultimately, human beings cannot fully understand God's justice. However, the Crucifixion does clearly reveal God's character—specifically, his generosity. God didn't have *to provide this specific means of redemption; he could simply have disregarded human sin, for example. But God's enabling humanity, through Christ, to participate in their own redemption is a greater display of God's generous character.*

Left to themselves, Beatrice goes on, human beings could not give satisfaction for their sin. That's why God provided the means, in himself, by which humans could make satisfaction. Because of God's innate generosity, it pleased God most to provide the means that best displayed his generosity. His humble action on humanity's behalf is therefore even more generous than free pardon would have been.

Human beings are not capable in themselves of making restitution for their sins to God—the debt is too great. In Beatrice's view, God's generosity in humbly becoming a human being in order to atone for human sin is the clearest revelation of God's character.

As a final point, Beatrice discusses secondary causes. Elements like fire, air, earth, and water eventually fail and decay. Beatrice explains that *all* created things have this characteristic. The human soul is a key exception, because God himself directly breathes a soul into people. This explains why human beings will eventually be resurrected.

Beatrice's final point touches on human beings' ultimate destiny. Basically, things directly created by God do not suffer decay. This includes the soul, which explains why human souls are ultimately immortal. This implies, too, that somehow human bodies—Adam's having been created directly by God in the beginning—will, in conjunction with souls, enjoy immortality, too.

CANTO 8

Dante and Beatrice now ascend to Venus, which has long been associated with love. Swiftly moving souls approach Dante, delighted to hear what he has to say. One of these souls reveals himself to be Charles Martel, who had once been Dante's close friend. When Martel talks about the decline of character in his family line, Dante is prompted to wonder why people's attributes vary so widely.

Venus, the third heavenly sphere, has traditionally been associated with love's irresistible influence. Dante expands on this imagery; for him Venus is associated with all *natural inclinations, which human beings are free to use or resist as they will. Just as Justinian's talk of justice prompted theological questions, Charles Martel's discussion of various human attributes prompts Dante to consider God's providence.*

Charles Martel replies, explaining that God's providence works through creation in various ways. If this were not true, then the cosmos would be chaotic. He notes that the stars are moved by angelic powers. Similarly, people on earth, directed by their souls (which, in turn, are moved by the stars), are designed to fulfill different roles and duties. If human beings adhered more closely to nature's imprint, they would be better off. However, people tend to force themselves into roles to which they're unsuited—like "[making] a king of someone who should preach"—and this leads to much needless upheaval.

The opening lines of Paradiso, *as well as Beatrice's discussion of the moon in Canto 2, have hinted at the doctrine of providence. Martel expands on it here. Basically, God provides for humanity by working through a variety of indirect means. This results in, among other things, wide differentiation among humanity (though, coming from God, these indirect powers are all meant to direct people back toward union with God). For ideal harmony within oneself and society, people should cooperate with God's providential working.*

CANTO 9

Still in Venus, Dante is approached by another happy soul, Cunizza. She explains that, during life, she was overcome by the effects of Venus, but she doesn't brood on this in Heaven. A soul named Folco tells Dante that he burned with passion when he was young. In Heaven, though, souls no longer lament over their past sins but instead rejoice in God's governing providence, which beautifully transforms their earthly inclinations. He then points out the soul of Rahab, who shines especially brightly in this sphere. Finally, Folco laments the greed of the present-day Church and predicts that it will someday be purified.

Dante's encounter with Cunizza illustrates God's providence as it was explained in the previous canto. Fully understanding this passage requires some additional context from Dante's Inferno, in which Cunizza's brother, Ezzelino, suffered in Hell for his cruelty as a ruler. By contrast, Cunizza is tender-hearted—showing how the results of indirect creation can be vastly different. Both Cunizza and Folco, who erred in their love during life, marvel at the perfection of God's perfectly ordered love in Heaven. Rahab was an Old Testament prostitute who became an ancestor of Christ and whose sinful ardor is likewise made beautiful in Heaven.

CANTO 10

Dante and Beatrice next ascend to the sphere of the sun, which completely surpasses Dante's capacity to describe. Flares of **light** circle around the two of them, as if in a dance. Stopping, one of these lights introduces himself to Dante as Thomas Aquinas. He identifies the soul next to him as his former teacher, Albert the Great.

As light has symbolized divine illumination throughout Paradiso, *the sun here symbolizes the wisdom of God himself, and its sphere is accordingly inhabited by some of the Church's brightest intellectuals. Although the figures in this sphere are known for having written and taught on theological subjects, in Heaven their beauty is beyond the power of words to describe—suggesting that earthly language can only gesture in a limited way toward God. Aquinas, one of the most significant theologians in the Catholic Church and one whose theology permeates Dante's thought, orients Dante to his surroundings.*

Thomas Aquinas introduces another 10 souls to Dante. They include Gratian, Peter Lombard, Boethius, the Venerable Bede, and Richard of St. Victor. One soul, Siger, is a philosopher with whom Aquinas disputed on Earth. The souls sing an ineffably beautiful song together.

Each of these figures was in some way significant for the Church's intellectual heritage. Gratian was a codifier of the Church's law; Peter Lombard an important medieval theologian; Boethius was a sixth-century philosopher executed by a pagan king; Bede an English historian; and Richard was a writer on the mystical life. Despite their differences in character, emphasis, and even specific ideas, all these figures are able to sing harmoniously in Heaven, suggesting that the intellect finds its fulfillment only in Heaven, and that differently inclined intellects are all reaching toward the same eternal truths.

CANTO 11

Dante reflects on the foolish efforts of the human mind, which runs pointlessly after such things as law, medicine, politics, trickery, and leisure. He, on the other hand, has been freed from all such things, following Beatrice to Heaven instead. Still in the sphere of the sun, the dancing souls gather in a circle, looking like a candle chandelier. Thomas Aquinas senses that Dante has questions—Dante wants to better understand some of the things that Aquinas said earlier about his fellow souls.

Dante is not literally denouncing the importance of the mind; he is simply comparing the emptiness of earthly pursuits and indulgences compared to what should be humanity's greatest delight—the pursuit of God in Heaven. This contempt for earthly things will characterize Aquinas's speech in this canto.

Aquinas explains that God, in his providence, provided two "princes" who would help guide the Bride of Christ (the Church) to her Beloved (Christ). One of these men was characterized by "burning love," while the other had shining intelligence. Though different, both of these men are equally deserving of praise, because "their different actions [served] a single plan."

Thomas Aquinas himself was a member of the Dominican order; he will spend most of this canto praising St. Francis (who had "burning love"), head of the rival Franciscan order, instead of Dominic, the head of Aquinas's own Dominican order. This demonstrates the loving fellowship enjoyed in Heaven. The differences between the two men also highlight God's providence, which always works toward a unified plan.


Aquinas begins by describing Francis of Assisi and his lifelong love affair with a girl called Poverty. Poverty was a scorned, abandoned widow when Francis united himself to her, but Francis soon gathered a like-minded band around the two of them. Saint Dominic worthily followed in Francis's footsteps when it came to poverty, but later generations of his flock have wandered astray after riches.

Here Aquinas praises Francis's abandonment of earthly riches in pursuit of poverty, which he personifies as a desirable lady, albeit a widow (the Church of the day having lost sight of her virtues). Francis exemplifies Dante's attitude at the beginning of the canto, scorning the things of the world because they pale in comparison to the beauties of Heaven. Aquinas, again, is himself a Dominican, and he doesn't hesitate to condemn the Dominicans' failure to match the Franciscans' detachment from riches.

CANTO 12

The circling **lights** are soon surrounded by a second circle of lights, which moves and sings in harmony with the first. After the two circles of lights rest from their joyous song, one light emerges from the rest and speaks to Dante. He explains that God draws him to praise Dominic—since, after all, Francis and Dominic "soldiered to a single end."

Just as Aquinas, a Dominican, praised St. Francis, now a Franciscan (St. Bonaventure, as he soon reveals himself) will praise the founder of the Dominican order. Once again, this shows the harmony that prevails in Heaven, even among earthly rivals.

The soul describes Dominic's birth in Spain, and how the young boy prompted prophecies of future renown. As Dominic grew, his only desire was truth, and he became a celebrated scholar and resister of heresy. Despite Dominic's great service to the Church, however, his successors no longer follow his example. The soul now identifies himself as Bonaventure. He introduces some of the other souls who have joined them, including the Old Testament prophet Nathan, John Chrysostom, St. Anselm, and Joachim of Fiore.

Bonaventure's eulogy of Dominic parallels Aquinas's eulogy of Francis, including youthful promise and distinguished service to the Church by leading it back from error. In Francis's case, he summoned the Church back from worldly indulgence, while Dominic attempted to save it from false theological teaching. Unfortunately, both men's successors failed to uphold their founders' example. The other souls in Bonaventure's circle include prophets (the biblical Nathan and the medieval Joachim), renowned preachers (the ancient Chrysostom), and theologians (Anselm). All the figures in the sphere of the Sun pursued both love and learning in their lifetimes, showing that love and intellect were closely connected for Dante.

CANTO 13

The two circles of **lights** resume their revolutions around Beatrice and Dante, singing praises to the Trinity and especially to Christ. Aquinas then addresses another one of Dante's misgivings. As God's love descends from God's eternally united self, it results in differentiation. It works through the "moving spheres"—that is, through nature—to produce different kinds of people, who are all variously gifted. Nature, in turn, acts like a craftsman with unsteady hands.

In this canto, Aquinas elaborates on the doctrine of God's providence. He begins by explaining how the universe is structured. In his view, everything descends from God's original act of creation. Importantly, not everything is created directly from God's hand—many things are indirectly generated through nature (for instance, the art that an artist creates). The further away one gets from direct creation, the more created things are subject to change, decay, and defect—hence the craftsman with shaky hands, whose creations definitely reflect God's original pattern, yet depart from it through various imperfections.

God's direct power was at work in creating the earth, creating the first man (Adam), and causing Jesus to be conceived in Mary's womb. Aquinas says that this explains the difference between King Solomon, on one hand, and Adam and Christ, on the other. Aquinas closes with a warning against excessively hasty judgments in which one's emotions throw their intellect off balance.

The crux of Aquinas's argument about divine providence is a distinction between the Old Testament's King Solomon and Adam and Christ. The latter two figures are unique because they were created directly by God (in the Garden of Eden and in Mary's womb, respectively), so they perfectly reflect God's intention. King Solomon was not directly generated by God in the same way and is therefore characterized by various imperfections, though still made in the image of God.

CANTO 14

After Thomas Aquinas falls silent, Beatrice asks for a resolution to Dante's perplexity: will heavenly souls always remain in such an illuminated state? If so, then how will they be able to bear one another's radiance once their bodies are resurrected? At this, the souls rejoice even more. In a modest voice, King Solomon speaks up. He explains that, in their current state in Paradise, the souls will always be this bright. However, after the resurrection, souls' brightness and their capacity for vision will both increase.

Beatrice's question touches on the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. In Dante's day, Christians didn't believe that souls would remain eternally disembodied in Heaven, but that, at the Last Judgment, souls would be reunited with their bodies forever. King Solomon was traditionally regarded as the author of the Old Testament's Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), whose erotic language was allegorically interpreted to refer to the soul's ecstasy. This might be why Solomon volunteers his wisdom regarding the eventual union of body and soul.

Not long after this, as he and Beatrice rise to the heavenly sphere of Mars, Dante perceives a ring of **light** forming outside the other two. His eyes soon become unable to bear the light. He looks instead at the laughing Beatrice, whose own beauty is beyond remembrance. His eyes growing stronger, Dante looks again at the ruby-studded light, which now appears in the shape of a cross, with individual sparkles gleaming forth from it. Suddenly, Christ himself blazes forth from the cross like white lightning, and Dante cannot describe him. He also cannot describe the hymn he hears, but it conveys the sense of rising and conquering.

In the heavenly sphere of Mars, Dante will encounter the souls of warriors and martyrs for the Christian faith. These shine forth as individual sparkles in Christ's cross of light. In this sphere, everything Dante experiences—Beatrice's radiance, the vision of the cross and Christ himself, and the hymn— is more beautiful than Dante has seen before, and accordingly more difficult to convey in language, or even to hold in memory. Yet his vision is becoming stronger, more able to bear such brightness and beauty, the more his intellect gains in strength and the closer he gets to God.

CANTO 15

In the heavenly sphere of Mars, the singing falls silent, and a **light**, resembling a shooting star, flashes across the sky to the foot of the cross-shaped collection of lights. The light-figure warmly greets Dante and explains why his happiness surpasses that of the other souls—he is Dante's great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida.

Dante's reunion with his ancestor is one of the most emotional moments in the Divine Comedy. *It links Dante not only with his own forefather, but also with the tangible history of his beloved Florence. Cacciaguida will guide Dante in a discussion of divine and earthly justice, one of* Paradiso*'s key themes.*

Cacciaguida speaks nostalgically of the Florence of his own day. It was, he says, a place of "modesty, chasteness and peace." It wasn't a particularly magnificent city—people lived in unassuming houses, and they were content with ordinary occupations, inconspicuous clothing, and warm-hearted family life. Cacciaguida himself left Florence, he explains, to go on crusade, where he was killed and detached forever from earthly vanities.

Cacciaguida idealizes 12th-century Florence as a happy place because of its simplicity, moderation, and absence of wickedness. In these ways it's meant to contrast sharply with the decadent Florence of Dante's era. Cacciaguida is known to have served as a knight in the Second Crusade, dying about the middle of the 12th century. Though he values the simple joys of earthly life, they pale next to the heavenly glories to which his martyr's death granted him entrance.

CANTO 16

Dante, overwhelmed by the honor of this moment, refers to his ancestor as "Thou," prompting a smile from Beatrice. Dante requests to hear more about Cacciaguida's life. Cacciaguida describes the smaller, purer Florence of his own day, back when families didn't resort to deadly rivalries.

In a humorous moment, Dante somewhat pompously resorts to archaic language to greet his ancestor, which even Beatrice finds amusing. The point of Dante's reaction is that, throughout the Divine Comedy, *Dante places great stock on the importance of his Italian heritage, particularly as it traces back to Rome—for him the symbol of justice. Thus the decline of Florence, which Cacciaguida will soon describe, is a source of pain for him, and its divisions—nonexistent in his ancestor's day—are a deeply personal matter.*

Cacciaguida catalogues well-known Florentine families whose fortunes were already in decline in his day. Yet, on the whole, 12th-century Florence was at peace. It wasn't torn apart by rival factions, envy, greed, and bloodshed.

The idealized Florence Cacciaguida describes is meant to show just how severe the moral decline has been in Dante's own Florence. The discussion, linked to specific families whose names would have been recognizable to Dante's audience, heightens the sense of urgency for Dante's speaking out against injustice and corruption, as Cacciaguida will urge him to do in the next canto. It also shows that earthly injustices are relevant in Heaven and, in Dante's eyes, demand God's justice.

CANTO 17

Dante longs to ask Cacciaguida a question, and Beatrice urges him to speak freely. Dante explains that, during his journey through Hell and Purgatory, Virgil often spoke obscurely of Dante's troubled future. Therefore Dante begs Cacciaguida to speak plainly to him of what will happen.

The Divine Comedy *is set during the week of Easter, 1300, but the work was actually written more than a decade later. Dante will use his characters to "prophesy" his future, thereby allowing him to provide a self-defense for the events surrounding his political exile. It's fitting that his own ancestor will speak to him of his earthly fate.*

Cacciaguida explains that, in Heaven, souls are able to glimpse possible futures, though this does not mean that the things seen will infallibly happen. Nevertheless, Cacciaguida warns that Dante will be forced to leave Florence and go into exile. The worst of exile will be that Dante will be forced to keep unsavory company. Eventually, though, this party's wickedness will turn back on them. In the meantime, Dante should seek refuge with a certain Lombard of good character.

Dante was exiled from Florence in 1302 because of his affiliation with a sub-faction called the White Guelphs after Pope Boniface VIII occupied the city; the White Guelphs tended to be less favorable to papal interference in politics (a position that's readily detected throughout Dante's work). Cacciaguida further predicts that the White Guelphs will bring about their own ruin (thus justifying Dante's failure to rejoin them) and that Dante will find refuge in the court of the Della Scala family in Verona.

Hearing this, Dante worries that, if he writes about what he's learned of Florence's evils during his journey through the afterlife, he will find himself in greater disfavor—yet he doesn't want to "prove a timid friend to truth." Cacciaguida encourages Dante to write boldly of what he knows and leave the rest to individuals' consciences. Ultimately, he's doing their souls good, and in the end, Dante himself will gain fame from what he writes.

Cacciaguida's encouragement to Dante to write serves as justification for Dante's many scathing criticisms of Florentines and other Italians in his day. Dante portrays himself as shrinking from this responsibility at first, while Cacciaguida suggests that Dante will actually be doing his targets a spiritual favor by writing The Divine Comedy.

CANTO 18

When Dante broods over his future, Beatrice encourages him to take heart. When he looks at her, Dante is overwhelmed by the look of love in Beatrice's eyes; it escapes his powers of both speech and memory. (Now, as he's writing, all Dante remembers is that his heart was momentarily freed of desire for anything but Beatrice.) But Beatrice she urges him to turn around and continue listening to Cacciaguida; Heaven isn't *just* within her eyes, she says.

Dante can now endure looking in Beatrice's eyes for an extended period instead of being dazzled by them; in fact, she now has to remind him to pay attention to his surroundings, not just her. This suggests that Dante's ability to gaze on the truths of God has become much stronger since he began his journey, though those truths still overpower speech, and he still can't look at them directly.


Cacciaguida points out to Dante the various warriors making up the fiery cross. These include Joshua, Maccabeus, Roland, Charlemagne, and other, more recent warriors and crusaders. Then, Cacciaguida rejoins his fellows within the cross, singing.

The figures within the cross represent what Dante sees as holy warfare, with many of the figures having died in battle against those who were seen as resisting the biblical God. In the Bible, the Israelite warrior Joshua led his people into the Promised Land; Judas Maccabeus was a Jewish freedom fighter in the second century B.C.E.; Charlemagne was crowned as the first Holy Roman Emperor in 800; and Roland was one of Charlemagne's heroic warriors, celebrated in the epic poem Song of Roland.

Dante soon realizes that he and Beatrice have been abruptly moved to the sixth heaven, the sphere of Jupiter, where the souls of the just reside. Dante watches in wonder as the bright, singing stars of this sphere form themselves into letters and then words. Gradually, the words spell out the Latin phrase *DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM*. Souls congregate on top of the final M, and as these lights rise, Dante sees an eagle's head taking shape. Moved as he witnesses this, Dante prays that those who corrupt the Church on earth will be brought to justice.

The Latin phrase in this passage is translated "Love justice, you rulers of the earth." It's the opening verse from the Book of Wisdom, *written in the first century B.C.E. and included within the Catholic biblical canon. The eagle emerging from the letter "M" will be an emblem and spokesman for justice in this sphere. The Latin phrase emphasizes the connection between earthly and heavenly justice; in other words, as Dante instinctively recognizes with his prayer, God is concerned about injustice on earth.*

CANTO 19

Dante admires the **gleaming** eagle, in which individual souls shine forth like rubies. The eagle's beak opens, and it begins to speak, affirming that even those who behave unjustly on earth retain the memory of heavenly justice. This emboldens Dante to ask a question that's been bothering him for a long time. Already perceiving Dante's question before he asks it, the eagle answers that human nature cannot even perceive the profound depths of God's justice.

The eagle speaks as the collective voice of just figures across history. The eagle's utterances express much of Dante's argument about the awareness of earthly injustice in Heaven and heavenly justice on earth. Heavenly justice is so powerful that even unjust rulers cannot claim to be totally ignorant of it; yet it's also so inscrutable that no human being should claim to be able to understand it perfectly.

The eagle gets to the heart of Dante's concern—what about the souls of people born in faraway lands, who never have the opportunity to learn of Christ? How can such a soul be held responsible for unbelief and condemned to Hell, despite having lived a faultless life? The eagle retorts that human beings are foolish to presume to judge such things with their limited understanding. After taking flight with a brief song that Dante cannot understand, the eagle continues, saying that there is no one in Heaven who does not believe in Christ. Yet there are plenty in Hell who will *claim* to have known Christ, yet will be judged to have been further away from Christ than those who never heard of him.

One of Dante's recurring questions throughout The Divine Comedy *is the fate of souls, like his earlier mentor Virgil, who were assigned to hell on the basis of not being Christian, despite having led just lives. The eagle describes God's justice as being embedded in human nature (hence outcry over injustice) even though it surpasses human ability to understand. Accordingly, the eagle does not specifically answer Dante's question. Yet it also condemns the hypocrisy of many Christian rulers, who will suffer a harsher fate in Hell than many non-Christians.*

The eagle goes on to condemn the deeds of supposedly Christian kings across Europe. As he lists the corrupt kings of various lands, his words form an acrostic poem spelling out "POX."

As the eagle catalogues the corrupt rulers of various countries, the first letters of each stanza spell out the Italian word for "pestilence" or "pox." This suggests that injustice and corruption spread across the whole world like a plague; it's native to humanity and impossible to escape in this world, even within Christian realms.

CANTO 20

The eagle's voice falls silent; yet, gradually, the individual souls within the eagle break into sweet song, like the murmur of a river. As the song rises up the eagle's neck and out its beak, Dante listens. The eagle instructs Dante to examine its eye, where the greatest representatives of justice reside. In its pupil resides King David, "singer of the Holy Ghost." Along the eagle's brow are five other figures: Trajan, Hezekiah, Constantine, William of Sicily, and Rhipeus.

Some of the just figures in the eagle's eye are relatively simple to explain. David, the king of Israel and author of the biblical Book of Psalms, represents the combination of just spiritual and temporal rule to Dante; he established Jerusalem as a place of God's worship. Hezekiah was a king of Judah whose service to his people was graciously permitted to extend when Hezekiah on his deathbed. Constantine was the Roman Emperor whose legal recognition of Christianity transformed the Empire and the future of all Christendom. William was a 12th-century king of Naples and Sicily who was known for his compassion. Yet the remaining two figures, Trajan and Rhipeus, present a challenge to Dante, which the eagle is about to address.

Sensing Dante's bewilderment over what he's seeing, the eagle speaks again, explaining that the kingdom of Heaven "will submit to force / assailed by warmth of love." The eagle knows that Dante is especially confused about why Trajan and Rhipeus are in Heaven. He explains that, because of others' fervent prayers, God granted Trajan the ability to believe in him and come back to life for long enough to be baptized. And Rhipeus was so righteous in his lifetime that God opened his eyes to belief. The eagle exhorts Dante and all mortals to show restraint in their judgments—nobody can presume to peer into the mysteries of predestination. Dante is comforted by this answer, realizing that God's will is always good and ultimately triumphs.

Trajan was a Roman emperor from 98–117 C.E. In legend, Trajan was known for exemplary compassion during life, and it was said that when St. Gregory prayed for the dead Trajan, Trajan's soul was temporarily restored so that he could believe in Christ and be baptized, thereby gaining entrance to Heaven. Rhipeus was described in Virgil's Aeneid *as being the most just of the Trojans. The salvation of both of these non-Christian souls shows Dante that God's grace operates in ways he cannot understand. It's also another example of God's inscrutable justice at work.*

CANTO 21

As Dante and Beatrice ascend to the seventh sphere, that of Saturn, Beatrice explains that she's not smiling because, at this level of Heaven, her beauty would have the effect of a **lightning** strike and could perhaps destroy Dante. When Dante turns his attentions to his surroundings, he sees a ladder stretching higher than his eyes can reach. Brilliant lights are descending the ladder.

Saturn is the sphere allotted to those who pursued a contemplative and ascetic life on Earth—meaning that they refrained from worldly things in order to focus on the spiritual. The golden ladder was a common medieval symbol of such a life—a means for souls to ascend to Heaven and also to descend, in order to minister compassionately to people below.

Dante speaks to a soul that has stopped near him and asks why there's no music in this sphere. The soul explains that Dante's mortal hearing couldn't bear their song's beauty, so they refrain from singing. When Dante asks the soul a question about predestination, the soul explains that this matter is so deeply hidden within the divine will that no creature can see it. When souls on earth speculate on this topic, they "give off mere smoke."

The restraint of Beatrice's normally radiant smile, and the souls' restraint from singing, is connected to this sphere's contemplative character. Dante, however, is not yet prepared for such pure, direct contemplation of God. Fittingly, the subject of predestination—which is so deeply hidden within God that even angels don't inquire into it—is addressed in this sphere. Since not even a contemplative is fit to explore it, it's no wonder that people on earth can only "give off mere smoke" when they talk about it.

Dante gives up his question about predestination and asks the soul to identify himself. He explains that he is Peter Damian, who once enjoyed a contemplative life as a monk, fasting and dressing simply. His successors today, however, are well-fed and opulent. At this, circling souls give a piercing cry of lament that Dante cannot understand.

Peter Damian was a humble 11th-century Benedictine monk who eventually became his monastery's abbot. He was an avid reformer of monastic life, which explains his and his fellow contemplative souls' grief over the extravagance and corruption of the Church today.

CANTO 22

Shocked by the overwhelming cry of lament, Dante turns to Beatrice for comfort, like a little boy turning to his mother. Beatrice reassures him, reminding him of Heaven's all-pervading holiness and zeal. If he's so shaken by this cry, she asks, how would Dante have been undone by Beatrice's smile or by the song of the sphere, if the souls hadn't remained silent? She encourages Dante to turn and look at Saturn's souls once more. When he does, a particularly **brilliant** soul approaches, introducing himself as St. Benedict.

Dante's alarm at the contemplative souls' fierce lament suggests that he misunderstood the aim of the contemplative life. In life, these souls didn't withdraw entirely from the world's concerns; they were (and still are) deeply distressed by earthly injustices. St. Benedict was the sixth-century founder of Monte Cassino, the first monastery in the Western Church.

Benedict, like Peter Damian, laments the decline of monasticism, especially his own Benedictine order. Nowadays, his *Rule* is neglected, alms make brutish men rich, and monks grow fat. Good beginnings, in other words, don't guarantee holiness in the end. Benedict withdraws to the ladder, and Beatrice gestures that Dante, too, should ascend. He finds he can climb swiftly.

Benedict authored a famous Rule, *which commended a life of poverty and humility—things Benedict sees being grossly neglected in Dante's present day. A good foundation is not sufficient to ensure continued flourishing—continual effort is needed in order to realize spiritual aims. This is a truth that Benedict sees in his own monastic order and that Dante sees playing out in the corrupt Church at large.*

Dante realizes he is in the region of the fixed stars, particularly under the sign of Gemini, his own. He expresses thanks for the talents he's derived from having been born under this star and asks for strength to continue his journey. Beatrice then exhorts Dante to keep the **light** within his eye clear, being so close to his goal. Instead of getting too caught up within himself, he should look down at the Earth, now visible beneath them. When he does, Dante is awed by its smallness, and by the vastness of the seven spheres through which he's now progressed. Then he turns his eyes back to Beatrice.

Dante and Beatrice now enter the heavenly sphere of the fixed stars, the eighth and last of the starry spheres through which they'll pass. They enter the part of the sphere which contains the astronomical sign under which Dante was born. Now that Dante has passed through the level assigned to contemplatives, Dante's own vision is transformed so that he can see the world in its proper (small) proportion next to the heavens.

CANTO 23

As Beatrice gazes toward the stars, Dante gazes at her bright face and happy eyes. Then Dante looks into the stars, too, and sees one overpoweringly **bright glow**, which Beatrice says is Christ himself. Because Dante has been strengthened by all he's seen thus far, Beatrice urges Dante to now look upon her smile. Dante describes Beatrice's smile as a "Paradise" unto itself, which defies description.

The stars Dante looks at in this passage are the fixed stars, or the firmament—the highest region of the starry spheres. They're home to all the Church Triumphant, or all souls in Heaven. Dante also gets a glimpse of Christ for the second time. This time, he glimpses Christ as the head of his Church. Dante's strengthened vision, even able to endure Beatrice's smile, indicates that Dante's knowledge of God has increased; he can take in much greater understanding of indirect revelation now, and soon will be able to gaze on God directly.

Beatrice urges Dante to look around to see the other beauties this sphere offers—the Virgin Mary is here, for one. As Dante gazes on this fiery star, another **light** streaks through the sky and circles her, singing. The light identifies himself as the Angel Gabriel, come to lead Mary in procession back to the highest sphere, where Christ is. The rest of the stars sing Mary's name in praise.

Though Dante is much strengthened in his ability to look directly at Beatrice, she warns him not to neglect the higher beauties of Heaven—the reason that he's here. Mary is the figure through whom Christ became the human means of redemption, so she receives honor second only to her Son in Heaven.

CANTO 24

Beatrice addresses her fellow souls in Heaven, asking them to allow Dante to taste a morsel of their joy. One soul **flames** forth joyously and circles Beatrice, singing an impossibly beautiful song. This soul—St. Peter—says that Beatrice has prayed long and ardently for this very moment. Beatrice tells St. Peter to quiz Dante in any aspect of faith, hope, and love—starting with faith, since it's by means of faith that this realm is attained. Dante gathers his thoughts for the coming test.

According to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (which Dante faithfully follows throughout the Divine Comedy*), a soul needs to possess faith, hope, and love before it can attain Heaven. These three things were known to medieval Catholic theology as the "theological virtues," which were only made possible through the grace of God's revelation. It's fitting that Beatrice, the sign of revelation, invites St. Peter—himself the head of the Church—to quiz Dante in these matters.*

St. Peter asks Dante, "What is this faith?" Beatrice gives Dante an encouraging look, and Dante duly quotes St. Paul, saying that faith is "substantial to the things we hope, / the evidence of things we do not see." Peter asks Dante to distinguish between "substance" and "evidence," and Dante does so, drawing a distinction between mystery and argument. Peter further asks Dante where he gets this faith from, and Dante says he gets it from the Holy Spirit via the Scriptures.

Beatrice's strengthening presence symbolizes the revelation of the Bible, which Dante quotes as the basis for his understanding of faith, starting with the Book of Hebrews. Dante further distinguishes between the substance that supernatural faith is grounded on and the theological argument that articulates this faith. This is a complex argument that shows Dante the author's background in medieval theology.

St. Peter approves all that Dante has said thus far, but asks him, finally, to say what he believes and to explain who first gave him this faith. Dante states his belief in "one true God" whose love "moves all the spheres," as well as in the Holy Trinity—these beliefs being the basis for his faith as a whole, and all of them deriving from the authors of the Scriptures. (He also notes that belief in the true God has an additional basis in metaphysics.) St. Peter's **light**, singing, circles Dante three times in joyous approval.

Here, Dante articulates the chief articles of his faith. Although Dante has encountered things in Heaven that transcend language, he maintains that his beliefs are firm and can be expressed and even proven on the basis of the Scriptures and the natural world. (Aristotle, whom Aquinas drew from, believed that metaphysical proofs for God as the "unmoved Mover" were possible.)

CANTO 25

Still in the sphere of the fixed stars, Dante contemplates the dim possibility that he might someday see Florence again. The soul of St. James, approaches, wishing to examine Dante in the virtue of hope. Beatrice speaks up on his behalf, affirming that there's no Christian on earth more filled with hope than Dante. Dante replies that hope is the firm expectation of coming glory, and that it's been instilled in him by the Psalms and by James's own epistle. At James's prompting, Dante further explains that he hopes for what Scripture promises—friendship with God. Soon after, another **gleaming** soul approaches, which Beatrice identifies as that of the apostle John. St. John's brightness temporarily blinds Dante.

Dante's fading hope of seeing Florence again contrasts with the far greater hope of going to Heaven—even his beloved hometown pales in significance. The apostle James questions Dante about hope, another of the three main Christian virtues. James's letter in the New Testament doesn't focus exclusively on hope, but Dante seems to interpret this virtue in terms of perseverance through suffering for the sake of God's reward—a hallmark of his journey throughout the Divine Comedy*—which the epistle's opening touches on.*

CANTO 26

St. John reassures Dante that his sight will be restored. Meanwhile, he questions Dante regarding his soul's goal, and Dante replies that it's Christ, the beginning and end of love. John further questions Dante as to how he aims at this goal. Dante replies that, besides Scripture and philosophy, God's goodness itself "sets love on fire," drawing him towards it.

In medieval biblical interpretation and iconography, John was associated with direct vision of God—itself understood to be the highest experience of love. That's why John is a fitting examiner for Dante's test on love. Dante's understanding of love also connects with his emphasis on the function of the intellect throughout—that the more one seeks God, the greater one's desire for God.

St. John asks what else draws Dante in his pursuit of God, and Dante elaborates that his own being, the world's being, Christ's death, and the common faith of his fellow Christians "all drew me from [...] wrongful love." In fact, "every leaf [...] of our eternal orchardist" draws him closer.

Essentially, everything in the world—every instance of God's providence—ultimately serves to draw a person closer to the original source of goodness (God), as long as a person is seeking him.

After Dante gives his answer, the souls break out in a hymn. At this, Dante is abruptly healed of his blindness by Beatrice's **shining** gaze. Now Dante can see better than ever before. He sees that a fourth soul has joined him, Beatrice, and St. John, and when Beatrice explains that it is the soul of Adam, Dante is full of questions.

The significance of Dante's temporary blindness at this stage is confusing; it might be that Dante's understanding of love needed to be further purified before he could be prepared to see yet more clearly, which his examination by John achieves. Adam represents not just the first human being, but the first to be redeemed from his sin—so, for Dante, Adam is an "everyman" figure who stands for every soul that pursues God.

Adam perceives Dante's questions—how long he lived in the Garden of Eden, why God was so angry with him, and what language he spoke. Adam explains that he lived in Eden for only six hours, lived on earth for more than 900 years, and spent more than 4,000 years in Hell before Christ freed him to go to Heaven. He also explains that his and Eve's expulsion from the Garden was due to disobedience, not to simply tasting the forbidden fruit. Finally, the language he spoke in the Garden has long since become extinct.

Since Adam was the first human being, his experiences wholly unique and also establishing conditions for the rest of humanity, Dante's insatiable curiosity is understandable (and humorously characteristic of Dante). Adam explains that when he and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, it wasn't because their appetite was sinful in itself, but because they transgressed God's boundaries. Adam also gestures to the idea that language evolves over time. This point was of special interest to Dante the scholar, who wrote about the importance of vernacular speech (local native languages) in his De vulgari eloquentia.

CANTO 27

Following the conclusion of Dante's examination, all of Heaven erupts in a sweet song, and Dante reels at what sounds like "the laughter […] of the universe." Then, Dante watches as St. Peter begins to glow brilliantly red, and Heaven falls silent. Peter fiercely condemns the one who has robbed him of his place and ravaged Rome. Dante sees the rest of Heaven's inhabitants flush red with anger, too.

The sweetness and delight of the heavenly hymn contrasts pointedly with Peter's anger. Peter's diatribe against the current occupant of the papal throne (Boniface VIII) is Paradiso*'s peak example of Heaven's concern for earthly justice. Peter's biggest critique is that the Church has gotten increasingly mixed up in (and tainted by) secular politics—a continual concern for Dante, too.*

St. Peter continues in his denunciation, saying that the Church wasn't built on his own blood in order to be used in the pursuit of wealth, favoritism, warfare, and sale of ecclesiastical privileges. Now, on earth, wolves invade Christ's flock. Peter laments that the Church's faithful beginning has deteriorated in this way. But he has hope that, in God's providence, a rescuer, whom he likens to Scipio, will soon emerge. Peter urges Dante not to conceal anything of what he's heard when he returns to earthly life.

According to Roman Catholic teaching, St. Peter was the apostle on whom the Church was founded, as well as one of its earliest martyrs. For Peter, the corruption of the present-day Church—which Dante describes in terms of the Pope's favoring of the Guelphs and his readiness to support Italy in war against other European countries—is a personal affront, besides harming ordinary Christians. Peter also cites Scipio, who defended ancient Rome against Hannibal's forces. In this way, Dante has Peter emphasize Rome's centrality in God's providential plan throughout history. Dante also has Peter echo Cacciaguida's command that Dante write boldly about Italian corruption.

Beatrice then encourages Dante to admire the sight of the earth beneath them once more. After that, Dante is drawn by Beatrice's increasingly **radiant** smile into the next sphere of Heaven, the Primum Mobile. This sphere, the ninth, contains no stars and isn't visible; in fact, in only exists within God's mind; yet it directs the movements of the other spheres by means of love. Beatrice indignantly observes that greedy, self-serving humanity doesn't deserve to dwell in such a perfectly ordered universe.

The Primum Mobile invisibly directs the movements of the other spheres and orders time. All space and time, in other words, is contained within it and determined by it. In this way, the sphere of the Primum Mobile is a primary example of God's providential ordering of the whole universe—guiding everything that occurs in creation, by means of God's power operating within and throughout creation. All of this occurs by way of God's love. The sublimity and perfection of the Primum Mobile contrasts starkly with the degeneracy of humanity, hence Beatrice's outburst.

CANTO 28

After drawing strength from Beatrice's lovely gaze, Dante sees reflected in her eyes a small, single point of **light** with fire whirling around it. Dante counts a total of nine rings circling around the single point, each turning more slowly than the one before it. Dante is confused by this sight—to his senses, it seems that the Primum Mobile moves slowest, the outermost spheres the fastest—so Beatrice enlightens him. She explains that the size of each sphere corresponds to the diffusion of God's power within it. So although the Primum Mobile *looks* like a small, slow circle from this perspective, it is actually the sphere which "most loves and knows" and speeds accordingly.

The small point of light represents God, the rest of his creation moving around him. The number nine was sacred to Dante, with its evocation of the Trinity (three substances interlinked in one perfect harmony). The nine spheres, and the nine hierarchies of angels corresponding to them, communicate God's power throughout the rest of creation. Dante comes to understand that, somehow, the seemingly smallest and simplest point in Heaven is actually the most expansive of the heavenly spheres that he can perceive.

Beatrice then identifies the various angelic powers that inhabit the spheres, beginning with the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones. Each of these powers, she explains, has different levels of knowledge of God (depth of sight). The next triad includes powers known as Dominations, Virtues, and Powers, and the final triad contains Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. All these powers are constantly drawn up to God, drawing all of creation up with them.

In Dante's time, the various angelic powers were associated in Christian tradition with the functioning of the heavenly spheres—one type of angelic power corresponding to each sphere. The specifics of these powers are less important than what they represent more broadly for Dante: God's providence. The angelic powers are agents of God's power throughout creation. Their variety and different levels of knowledge and power represent God's power working in diverse ways throughout creation. All the angelic beings are powered by God's love for the sole purpose of drawing the entirety of creation back to himself.

CANTO 29

Beatrice can tell that Dante still has many questions about what she's been telling him. She explains more about the nature of creation—that God didn't create in order to add anything to himself (for he lacks nothing), but instead so that his own **light** would shine back to him. The angels were his first creation, simultaneously with the heavens and primordial matter. All this happened within eternity, before time itself came to be. Beatrice also distinguishes between the creation of "act" (which corresponds to matter) and "potency" (angels) and the combination of these two things (the heavens).

Beatrice once again assumes the task of being Dante's theology teacher, here delving into complex matters of Aristotle's philosophy and Aquinas's theology. Again, it's less critical to understand these abstract ideas than to notice the central point about God's providence. which animates creation: creation everywhere displays God's goodness and is therefore an expression of God's generosity.

Beatrice goes on to describe the nature of humanity's fall, which was the result of Satan's arrogance. The rest of the angels, however, continued to acknowledge God's goodness and so remain in Heaven, their understanding raised to comprehend God and their wills fully fixed on him. On earth, some theology teachers speculate that angels possess memory as well as understanding and will, but Beatrice dismisses this idea, explaining that because angels' sight never wavers from God, they have no need for memory.

Satan's rebellion against God resulted in his fall (he was created along with the rest of the angels) and ultimately that of humanity. The rest of the angels continued to contemplate God uninterruptedly. Beatrice argues that angels' capacities differ from those of human beings because the nature of their existence and contemplation of God is likewise different.

Beatrice says that speculation is blameworthy because it's usually due to "love of showy thoughts," yet even speculation isn't as bad as those who willfully twist the meaning of Scripture and preach foolishness to the people, who don't know any better. In closing, Beatrice invites Dante once more to reflect on the diversity of the angels, as they all differently reflect God's single, eternal **light**.

Beatrice lays heaviest blame on theological scholars and preachers who advance trendy ideas instead of feeding the people with the basic truths of Scripture. She distinguishes between speculation that inflates a preacher's pride and knowledge that spurs people toward God. Beatrice circles back to where she began, with an emphasis on God's love variously expressed throughout his creation.

CANTO 30

The spheres Dante has been studying fade from his sight, and when he turns to look at Beatrice, he is overwhelmed anew by her beauty. (In fact, her smile's sweetness is now impossible for Dante to remember as he writes.) Beatrice explains that they have left the "material spheres" behind and risen to "pure **light** of intellect, all love." They are entering the Empyrean. Here Dante will see all the angels and saints.

Dante and Beatrice enter the Empyrean, which is where God, the saints, and the angels reside; it is above the nine heavenly spheres, but beyond both space and time. Dante's inability to remember Beatrice's beauty suggests that, in the Empyrean, a soul's beauty is derived directly from God ("pure light") and is therefore impossible for a mortal, like Dante, to fully absorb, much less retain in memory.

Dante finds himself enveloped in brilliant **light**, lifting him above his natural capacities. He now possesses strength to look at any light. He looks and sees a dazzling river of light flowing amidst springlike colors. Sparks of colors swirl, coming to rest on flowers beside the river. Beatrice encourages Dante to drink from the river in order to have his thirst for knowledge further satisfied.

Dante is about to see God directly—what's known as the Beatific Vision. Because he is still a mortal soul, his vision must be transformed in order to make this seeing possible. In the Earthly Paradise in Purgatory, Dante had to drink from the river Lethe in order to cleanse his memories of the past. In parallel, he now drinks from a heavenly river in order to be able to understand what he is seeing now. His approach to the vision of God is gradual, requiring multiple transformations of his senses and intellect.

Dante drinks eagerly, and when he looks up again, the flowers and sparks of **light** have been transformed—he now sees the saints and angels before him. The river of light now takes the form of a great sphere. This light, he comes to understand, is reflected by the Primum Mobile and from there to angels, throughout the heavenly spheres, and thence to all creation. Above the sphere, Dante sees thousands of tiers of saints, forming the shape of a white rose. Beatrice shows Dante that certain long-expected souls are still to come—including that of Henry VII. Pope Clement V, meanwhile, will soon be in Hell.

At first, Dante could only see the Empyrean symbolically. Now that he's drunk from the river of light, he sees flowers as saints and the sparks of light as ministering angels. He also sees firsthand how the light of God is distributed, by God's providence, throughout the universe. In other words, Dante is now seeing reality as it truly is. Souls are seated on thrones arranged in the shape of a vast rose—the rose being a medieval symbol of love. Dante had great hopes that the pious Emperor Henry VII would liberate Florence and Italy from the chaos of misrule. It was under Pope Clement V that the papal see was relocated from Rome to Avignon, France, the much-lamented "Babylonian Captivity."

CANTO 31

Dante contemplates the white rose filled with the souls of saints. Angels constantly descend upon these souls, ministering peace and love. After gazing long and joyfully at his surroundings, Dante turns to ask Beatrice a question and discovers that she is not there. Instead, he sees a robed, gentle, fatherly saint standing in her place. To Dante's query, the soul points out that Beatrice has reoccupied her usual throne in the Empyrean. Gazing on her, Dante prays a prayer of thanksgiving for Beatrice's gracious guidance.

When he approached the summit of Mount Purgatory in Purgatorio, *Dante suddenly turned to see that his faithful guide, Virgil, was no longer at his side. Now, in the Empyrean, something similar happens, as Beatrice returns to her rightful place in order to resume her praise of God. Now that he has attained the ability to contemplate God firsthand, Dante no longer needs Beatrice (who has symbolized indirect revelation of God).*

The soul at Dante's side introduces himself as Bernard of Clairvaux, a famous monk and theologian. He encourages Dante to look toward the circle of the rose that's furthest off; there, he will behold the Virgin Mary. When he does, Dante sees a **flaming brightness** that outshines everything else, angels dancing and celebrating in her smiling presence.

Bernard of Clairvaux was a Benedictine abbot of the 12th century who was renowned as a contemplative (thought to have experienced visions of God during his earthly life) and devoted to the Virgin Mary. As one who experienced such contemplation during life, he'll now lead Dante toward the same experience.

CANTO 32

St. Bernard gives Dante a guided tour of the thrones of the Empyrean, pointing out Eve, Beatrice, and several women from the Bible. The structure of the rose is divided between those who died while looking forward to Christ's coming and those who died, having believed in him, after he had come. Bernard further points out John the Baptist, St. Francis, St. Benedict, Augustine, and others.

Dante's contemplation of the glorified souls of saints (God's light pervading them) helps prepare him to look upon God himself. All of these souls, too—whether they lived before Christ or after him—had a part to play in the unfolding of God's plan for human redemption (for example, Eve's sin ultimately bringing about Christ's life and death for humanity), illustrating God's perfectly ordained providence.

Then, Bernard shows Dante the souls of children who died before they were old enough to exercise their wills. Bernard can tell that Dante is puzzled by the presence of these children's souls and their varying degrees of grace. He recalls the biblical story of Jacob and Esau as an example of the inscrutable nature of God's will. Then Bernard points out those souls enthroned nearest the Virgin Mary, including Adam, St. Peter, St. John, Moses, and Anna (Mary's mother). He also points out Lucia (the saint who first warned Beatrice of Dante's sinfulness). Finally, before Dante turns to look toward God himself, Bernard prays for him.

The souls of children display various degrees of the light of God's grace. Dante can't understand why, if these children all attained Heaven simply by God's grace and not by their own merit (because they couldn't be held responsible for the actions of their immature wills), they don't all possess equal distributions of grace. The answer lies, once again, within the deep mysteries of God's inscrutable providence—much like the story of Jacob and Esau in the biblical Book of Genesis, where God chose one of the twins in the womb and passed over the other, before either child could have done anything good or bad. In these matters, Bernard suggests that God's working defies human grasping, and one must trust in God's gracious character.

CANTO 33

St. Bernard beseeches the Virgin Mary to grant Dante grace to be able to behold God directly, strengthening his sight for this and purifying his heart for the life he will lead thereafter. At Bernard's beckoning, Dante looks, his sight "becoming pure and wholly free," into the **light**. His seeing outstrips his ability to see or even to remember what he sees.

With Mary's intercession, the story is brought full circle—it was because of Mary's pity that Beatrice initially summoned Virgil to lead Dante through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Mary's intercession allows Dante, at last, to look upon the light of God directly—an experience that transcends intellect, language, and memory.

As he writes about this experience, Dante prays for grace to convey some "spark" of what he saw. When he gazed into the eternal **light**, Dante felt that he saw, contained within the light, all the pages of a single book, scattered throughout the universe, yet now bound together. When that light strikes a soul, that soul cannot choose to look elsewhere—for the light gathers up all goodness.

Dante's vision of God has two parts. In this first part, Dante sees all of diverse creation gathered up and bound together within God. In this way, Dante sees how God's providence holds creation together with the ultimate purpose of uniting all things in himself. This also means that all goodness—the ultimate desire of the will—is contained within God, and when a soul fixes its gaze on that goodness, it can't desire anything else.

The longer Dante gazes, he begins to perceive, deeper within the **light**, three mutually encircling spheres of the same size and different colors—one mirrored by the second (appearing like twin rainbows), and the third appearing as fire, flaming out from the other two. Deep inside this "inter-circulation," in the second sphere that reflects the first, Dante thinks he perceives the human form. Dante finds that although his mind reaches its limits, his desire is satisfied. His will and desire now move in harmony with the "love that moves the sun and other stars."

In this second part of Dante's vision of God, he gets a fleeting glimpse of God himself. He sees three interconnected circles—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the Trinity). In the second circle, he briefly perceives Christ's human nature united to his divine nature—but at this point, the light of God overwhelms him, and he can neither see nor desire to see anything more. Though Dante's ability to fully convey such a transcendent vision must fail, he has achieved the goal of such vision—perfect harmony with God. Paradiso, *like* Inferno *and* Purgatorio, *ends with the word "stars," with Dante now having attained the heavenly goal he sought all along.*

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