



William of St. Thierry
on
Contemplating
GOD
+

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ON CONTEMPLATING GOD

De contemplando Deo

A Soliloquy of William of Saint-Thierry

Translated by

GEOFFREY WEBB AND ADRIAN WALKER

A first English translation of a twelfth-century MS. by a Benedictine contemplative distinguished by the beauty and intellectual power of his thought, who exercised a great formative influence on Saint Bernard.

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ON CONTEMPLATING GOD

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On Contemplating God

DE CONTEMPLANDO DEO

BY
WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY

Translated from the Latin by
GEOFFREY WEBB AND ADRIAN WALKER

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'Nihil obstat: CAROLUS DAVIS, S.T.L.
'Imprimatur: E. MORROGH BERNARD, *Vicarius Generalis*
'Westmonasterii, die 8a Decembris, 1954'

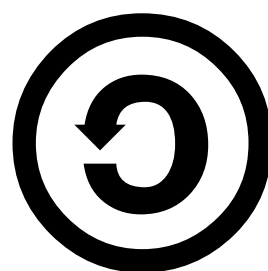
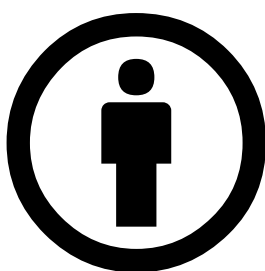
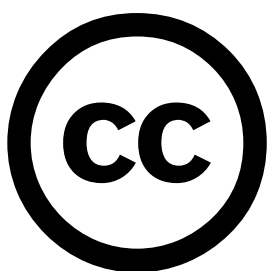
First published by
A. R. Mowbray & Co., London,
and Morehouse-Gorham Co., New York,
in 1955.

Republished in a facsimile of the Mowbray edition by
The Saint Austin Press, London,
in 2001.

Edited, re-typeset and published in a new edition by
Stephen Plustwik, Heidelberg VIC,
in 2026.

This edition's annotations, layout,
typography and recast front cover
© 2026 Stephen Plustwik.

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ISBN 978-0-9945179-4-4 PDF

ISBN 978-0-9945179-5-1 Spiral bound

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM of Saint-Thierry was born towards 1085. It is highly probable that he was a student at Laon under Master Anselm. It was sometime about the end of the first decade of the twelfth century that he took the habit of a Benedictine monk in the abbey of Saint Nicasius in Rheims. In 1118 he had his first meeting with the Cistercian Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux.

Although William of Saint-Thierry considered himself as Saint Bernard's disciple, it is important to remember M. Gilson's observation that 'William is not to be regarded as a young man coming to Saint Bernard as to a master who is to teach him everything, and receiving a doctrinal synthesis already complete.'¹ The two monks were exactly contemporary, William being the elder by five years. Their first meeting was at Bernard's hermitage in the Val d'Absinthe in 1118, but long before then William's doctrine was as complete as Bernard's—perhaps more so.

One wonders how significant it is that neither of them seems to have written seriously before the date of their first meeting. Their literary careers cover the same thirty years. The influence of one on the other is impossible to judge, but William's life of Bernard, and what little remains of their correspondence with each other, is sufficient witness to the depth of their friendship. One recalls those words in the *Symposium*: 'The true order of being led by another to the things of love, is to use the beauties of earth as steps, along which we move upwards for the sake of that other beauty, the divine beauty, pure, clear and unalloyed. And holding converse with the true beauty, divine and simple, bringing

into being true creations of virtue ... In that communion only is it possible to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities.' Such was their friendship. It is not extravagant to think of Bernard's work *On the steps of humility [and pride]* and of William's *On contemplating God*, as part of the first fruits of their mutual affection.

About the time of this first meeting with Bernard, William was elected abbot of Saint-Thierry or Theoderic, near Rheims, and it was in 1130 that, joined in love to the abbot of Clairvaux, tired of the abbatial burden, and filled with admiration for Cistercian observance, he asked his friend's advice, for he wanted to join the white monks. Bernard replied without hesitation that he should stay where he was, as that was what God wanted of him. But five years later, William's longing forced him to make up his own mind, and he entered the monastery of Signy. Here he lived out his life, devoting his time to writing, because his health would not allow him to take part in the manual labour of the community. On the birthday of the Blessed Virgin in the year 1148, after a last sickness, his spirit 'returned to God Who gave it,' 'to the source and beginning to which we must all return.'

The image of God is the central concept of all monastic spirituality, it could be said, for the spiritual life is a perpetual development of self-knowledge. The seventh chapter of Saint Benedict's Rule, and the Delphic 'know thyself,' are things on which a strikingly large number of the contemporaries of Bernard and William wrote. Many a tractate on self-knowledge is to be found; sometimes they were called tractates on the soul, or meditations on our human condition. The actual nature of the image of God in man, is, however, one of the more interesting points of difference between Bernard

and William. For Bernard the 'Godlikeness' of man is his free will. For William it is the ability to love.

Love, according to William, begins as a mere capacity for loving; this capacity, the will, being deformed by sin, must be reformed. The process of reformation starts with the recollection of God's presence in the soul. And this presence is recollected by means of the memory, which reminds William that God is only to be found 'in love, for that is where He lives.' Thus the image of God in the soul begins to emerge. In William's vocabulary of 'form' alone, we can discover the whole of the process of our return to God. In the preface to his soliloquy *On contemplating God*, he complains that God is punishing him for taking lightly that form in which he was made. Elsewhere he will claim that 'when the substance of the inner man has been softened up by the long practice of penance,' it is 'impressed and informed anew.' The passage from 2 Corinthians 3, 'Beholding the glory of the Lord with face uncovered, we are transformed into the same image,' is the *Leitmotiv* of William's development of the process: the term he has in mind, and the transformation itself.

The reformer of the image is the Holy Spirit, and the birth of love is visualized as a sort of marriage of the Spirit, with our human will. The will is informed by the Spirit and is gradually transformed hereby into its original beauty—*formositas*. To be indwelt and transformed by the Holy Spirit, is to live in the central point of the Trinity, for the Holy Spirit is the common will of Father and Son; He is their mutual cohesion and circumincession. Therefore to love in the Holy Spirit, is to love God in God, and to love all men in God. Or as William will often say, it is God loving Himself in Himself. In chapter seven we read that the Holy Spirit brings God close to us, joining us in the love of God because 'He is the unity of the Father and the Son.' The soul is united to God in virtue of

the same principle by which the three Persons of the Trinity are one.

Love is the social activity *par excellence*, implying *ipso facto* plurality of persons in human society, just as it does in the Trinity. This is where the monastery plays its part in the development of love. Charity is envisaged less as an infused virtue and more as the result of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. William holds fast to the doctrine which the Lombard held and of which Saint Thomas Aquinas disapproved,² namely that charity in the soul is the Holy Spirit himself. It is a gift from God, true, but it is the giver himself under the form of gift. The common life of the monks in their monastery allows for the expansion of all those human loves which belong by right to human nature as created by God. Our fellow man is as much God's image as we [are] ourselves. This implies that we can and must love and worship God in each other, as we love and worship Him dwelling in ourselves.

For a better understanding of the process of reformation, one must consider William's use of the concept of desire. This is, after all, the whole climate of the spiritual life between the soul's initial conversion and the final fruition of God in heaven. For William, our life is an interim; for the soul who desires God, life can only be a matter of waiting for the shadows to pass away. Love in this life, therefore, must be so coloured with desire as to require almost another name—for Rolle it was *lovelonging*; for William, *desiderium*. He asks, for instance, 'how can one love that which one cannot see?' He longs to touch and hold the Lord of Whose presence he is conscious, but he cannot even begin to enjoy it in its fulness. The most one can hope for in this life is that God will implant in us the desire for loving and desiring Him.

We would like to add finally, that many of the passages in this work are mosaics of quotations from Scripture, and it

has been hard to piece them together in translation so that they retain the beautiful rhythm and unity of the Latin. Therefore translations have been taken from several different versions, so that the one which would fit into the context most satisfactorily has been used. References are to the Vulgate. For leave to quote from Mgr. Knox's translation of the Bible, we have to thank the publishers, Messrs. Burns, Oates & Washbourne. The text used for the translation was Migne P.L. Vol. 184.

G.W.
A.W.

Epiphany, 1955

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
❖ COLOPHON	4
❖ TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION	5
❖ CONTENTS	11
❖ AUTHOR'S PREFACE	13
1. THE SOUL WHICH LOVES GOD ASKS TO BE PURGED OF ITS VICES AND OF ALL ATTACHMENT TO WORLDLY THINGS. IT BEGS TO BE RAISED UP TO HEAVEN	15
2. THE SOUL WHICH DESIRES GOD COMPLAINS OF HOW IT IS BURDENED BY THE BODY	19
3. ON WHETHER THE SAINTS RECEIVE LOVE IN AN UNEQUAL MEASURE, AND ON HOW THIS COMES ABOUT	21
4. THAT GOD IS TO BE LOVED FOR HIMSELF ALONE AND THAT ALL OTHER THINGS ARE TO BE LOVED ON ACCOUNT OF HIM	25
5. THAT THERE IS NOTHING TO BE LOVED ABOVE GOD, AND NOTHING TO BE DESIRED BEYOND HIM	27
6. THAT GOD HAS FIRST LOVED US. THROUGH HIS SON, HE INCITES US TO RETURN HIS LOVE	28
7. WITH WHAT LOVE GOD LOVES US	30
8. THAT BY MEANS OF LOVE WE ARE MADE ONE WITH GOD	33
9. THAT LOVE CONSISTS IN KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS	36
10. THE SOUL DECLARES THAT IT LOVES AND ADORES GOD	38
❖ NOTES	40

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ON CONTEMPLATING GOD

PREFACE

I HAVE almost rotted away in this cheerless pit where the mire has settled deep. I am sunk in a deep morass with no ground under my feet. And out of the depths of my sad plight I cry to Thee, Lord. O Lord, hear my cry. Thou madest me like Thyself by creating me to Thine own image and likeness. And now Thou seemest to be punishing me for taking lightly that form in which Thou madest me, because Thou hast taken it away from me altogether, making me wretched and miserable. Evil presses me down, plunging me deeper into the bog of sin. The hand of Thy just and secret judgments presses me down so that I cannot rise. Nowhere in the pit is there any foothold for me to stand on so as to struggle out; there is nothing to seize hold of by which to pull myself out. The pit of hell is as deep as despair. The mire of this bog, which is the corruption of nature, always has something wherewith to suck me down, but it has nothing to help me struggle out. It holds me down and binds me low. The deep morass holds me in its grip by Thy condemnation: it is the love of the flesh which always seeks the worst in the depths which it never tires of fathoming.

But, Lord, deep calls unto deep. My deepest wretchedness calls to the unfathomable depth of Thy mercy. I search for some firm ground on which to stand, I look for something to catch hold of, and I find only Thee. Thou art the

really firm foothold, for Thou dost subsist in Thyself, and everything in turn has its being from Thee. But why do I say 'I find'? If I *had* found Thee I would indeed stand on firm ground. I am looking for the place where I may find the one my soul loves, and in my search I go round the whole of the great city of this life, 'where the hardness of men's hearts breeds in them an ignorance which estranges them from the divine life,' as the Apostle puts it.³ I search every alleyway and street of this life, but my whole body and soul call after me with the loud cries of sure proof, and they call me back to the things of the Spirit. It is on Thine authority that they tell me that the kingdom of God is within me. And so I look for Thee in my heart, because I can find Thee nowhere else. Now within myself, I can ask my innermost powers if they have seen the one I love. The memory replies 'He dwells with me.' 'But whereabouts in you?' I ask, 'because you are like a vast ocean stretching wide on every hand and peopled with living things past number, great creatures and small.'⁴ 'You must not seek Him,' replies the memory, 'where those creatures dwell, nor even among men.' 'Where then?' 'In love, for that is where He lives. Now the disposition to love is natural to you, and the one you seek is within you if He is in your love. If He is not there, He is not within you at all. But you could not look for Him if you did not love, and so it follows that you have Him and that He dwells with you. But you cannot delight in Him unless I am with you.'

'And so you must not give me over to other things which do not matter, and waste me on them. Keep me completely for Him. In this way,' concludes the memory, 'your delight will be perfect, and you will proclaim His great goodness and praise His righteousness.' Yes, my memory and all my powers, let us go and enjoy the supreme goodness and all His

perfections with the aid of memory, understanding and vision. He is indeed within me, for I find Him in my love. I love Him and love Him, and my great longing is to love with a complete love. Oh, let us run to Him and clasp Him in an embrace. O Lord, Thou art both sweet and meek, lovable and mighty. Thou didst take a share in my humanity, so receive my embrace. Thou didst join Thy nature to mine; kiss me then with Thy charity. We embrace Thee while our actions and our desires still long to enjoy Thee. Our kiss is the offering of pure love from a pure mind. Thine embrace is Thy consolation, and gifts of grace are Thy kisses. May Thy consolation help me always. May Thy left hand pillow my head, as the bride sings in the Canticle, and let Thy right hand clasp me in the embrace⁵ of utter delight in Thee, for it soothes us and gives us a foretaste of the eternal joy which awaits the soul. In the peace which is found in the embrace of Thy charity, and in the kisses of Thy sweetness may my soul rest, for that is where Thou tellest me to repose in loving trust.⁶

1

THE SOUL WHICH LOVES GOD ASKS TO BE PURGED OF ITS VICES
AND OF ALL ATTACHMENT TO WORLDLY THINGS.
IT BEGS TO BE RAISED UP TO HEAVEN

‘COME let us climb up the Lord’s mountain peak, to the house where the God of Jacob dwells. He shall teach us the right way.’⁷ Yes, come with me, my thoughts, will and desires, let us go up to that mountain: that is where God looks down on us and where we gaze on God. Cares and troubles, you must stay down here with the ass which is my body, and wait until the boy and I—by which I mean reason and understanding which speed us on our way—come down again to you after

we have adored. For we certainly will have to return, and that, unfortunately, all too soon. That is because the truth of charity considers the brethren, and will not let us leave and disown you completely, although the charity of truth may draw us away from you awhile. But in spite of you, and although our natural needs hold us back, we will not give up that sweetness altogether. 'Lord God of hosts, restore us to our own; smile upon us and we shall find deliverance.'⁸ O God, my Lord, how forward it is for an unclean heart to wish to have sight of Thee! It is certainly not consonant with the rule of Thy truth and wisdom. But yet, in Thy goodness have mercy on me and be kind to me, light of my soul's sight, light of my heart! For when I contemplate Thy goodness I am cleansed of my sins and filled with hope and trust, and I taste of Thy justness towards me. Thou alone, Lord God, knowest how to say to my soul 'I am thy salvation.'⁹ Thou art the only master Who can teach the things I long to know. So please say to this blind beggar, 'What wouldst thou have me do for thee?'¹⁰ And because Thou hast already granted the request, Thou knowest what my heart will say to Thee. It will throw aside like rubbish all the wonders, the beauty and the pleasure of this world. It will turn its back on all the things that stir up lust and ambition, and will cry out: 'I have eyes only for Thee. I long for Thy presence, Lord. Do not hide Thy face. Do not turn away from Thy servant in anger.'¹¹

I am quite shameless when I make these excessive requests, and yet in spite of that Thou dost remain my helper and unwearying protector. But it is only out of love for Thy love that I do these things. By Thy grace I am not for ever lusting after the delights of the flesh, and Thou hast put the world out of temptation's way for me. I search for Thee with all my heart. When I see Thy face I am overjoyed. Then,

suddenly, Thou art gone, and once more I am alone. But how is this? Why dost Thou hide Thy face? Dost Thou take me for an enemy? Or art Thou just taxing me with the sins of my youth? Is it because the whole bent of my heart is not turned towards Thee? Or because Thou hast turned away from me? If it is my fault, bring me back to Thee. If it is Thou Who hast turned from me, look kindly on me again. For Thou didst say: 'Draw near to Me and I will draw thee to Myself. Come back to Me and I will come back to thy side.'¹² Thou knowest perfectly well what gifts of grace Thou hast poured into my poor heart, and now my heart is ready to serve Thee. Command whatever Thou wilt, and give me to understand Thine order. Thou hast given me the will to do Thy bidding, so give me now the ability to carry it out. Let Thy will be done by me, and in me. 'O God of hosts, draw us to Thyself. Show us Thy face and we shall find salvation.'¹³

And then I hear Thy voice in my soul. Thine answer makes my mind stagger and my powers reel. The brightness and glory of Thy truth blind me. It is true that a man cannot see Thee and live. But what am I to do? for I am so completely taken up with sin that I cannot die to myself, let alone live for Thee. Then Thou biddest me stand securely on the rock of my faith, and this, by Thy grace, I do. Here I find that I am really close to Thee, and I kiss the hand which guides me hither, and shields me with its power. Now I can catch a glimpse of Thee by thinking over the economy of our salvation in Jesus Christ, Thy Son. I go up to our Lord, like the woman with the issue of blood, so that I may steal health for my sick soul by touching even the hem of His garment. Like Thomas, my one desire is to see Him as He really is, and to touch Him. I long to draw near to the wound in His side, which is the very gate of heaven itself, so that the whole of me, not just a finger or a

hand, may enter right into the heart of Jesus. But when I try to approach Him, I am heartbroken to hear 'Do not touch Me!'¹⁴ or those words of the Apocalypse, 'There is no room here for dogs.'¹⁵ To be driven off like this is a punishment I deserve, and it forces me to pay the penalty for being so presumptuous. So I start all over again and go back to my rock, like the hedgehog creeping back to its hiding place—except that I am covered not with prickles but with the stains of sin. Once again I kiss Thy hand which guides me and protects me with its power. The slight glimpse I caught of Thee, and the feelings I had at the time make my desire still more strong. And I am impatient while I wait for Thee to take away Thine overshadowing hand and pour out that grace of Thine which will enlighten me and give me full sight of Thee. I long to die to myself so as to live completely in Thee, because then Thou wilt answer my prayer as Thou didst promise to do, and I shall begin to see Thee face to face. I long for that vision because by it I will be drawn to cleave to Thee so as never to leave Thee again.

How happy is the soul that has been joined inseparably to Thee by that vision! 'True to my heart's promise' it sings, 'I have eyes only for Thee. It is Thy face, O Lord, that I seek.'¹⁶ The law given on the mountain has modelled the soul into a true dwelling place for God. When I look deep into my soul I know that for me, too, there is only one desire, and that is to see Thee. I long that there may be no corner of the little world which is myself, that has not seen God and known His power to save. And I desire this so that I may love Him when I see Him, for to love Him is truly to live. As I long and desire, I often ask myself how it is possible to love something one cannot see. But he who yearns for Thee has no doubt that Thou canst be loved. I can see in everything—in heaven, on

earth, in all Thy creatures—that Thou canst be loved without being seen, because everything speaks to me of Thy love, O God. The more I see this, the more I long for Thee. But these creatures that provide my surety, cannot themselves bring me to that complete and perfect happiness which I will find in the neverending enjoyment of Thy Presence. They can only make me feel the pain which comes from a great desire, together with the absence of the thing desired (although this pain is not lacking in a certain sweetness). My prayers and sacrifices cannot be perfectly pleasing in Thy sight unless I offer myself with them. And it is just like that when we contemplate Thy goodness and find refreshment and sweetness in doing so: these are not fully satisfying unless Thou givest us Thyself as well.

2

THE SOUL WHICH DESIRES GOD COMPLAINS OF HOW IT IS BURDENED BY THE BODY

It is for this vision and complete enjoyment of Thee that my soul strives without resting and without sparing any effort; and in this striving it is purified all the while. The things which speak of Thy goodness and love give me so much help that it is as if they were my hands and feet, and even my very strength. With their help and through them I journey to Thee Who art All-Love and All-Good. The trouble is that the more I strive after Thee and the more I long for Thee, I seem to be pushed even harder back to earth, back into myself so that once again I am completely subject to my whims and fancies. Looking at myself, I see that I am just a riddle, a sort of contradiction in terms. But Lord, my one comfort is this: Thy

grace makes me sure that I really do desire to desire Thee. It makes me certain that I really do love to love Thee with all my heart and soul. Thy help has brought me to the point where I do both these things. But although I do love to love Thee, I am not at all clear about what I love. What do we mean when we talk about loving love and desiring desire? We say that it is *through* love that we love when we love something, and that we desire *with* desire when we desire something. Perhaps when I love love, I do not love the love which is the means of loving that which I wish to love, or already love—but rather do I love myself as loving. When my soul rejoices in the Lord, and when I love my soul in Him, then it is true to say that I love myself, for if I were to find my soul elsewhere [than] in the Lord I would only loathe and detest it. Then there is the question of desire. If I say that I desire to desire I am obviously desiring already. Do I desire to desire Thee then, as if I did not already desire, or do I long for a desire much stronger than any I have yet experienced?

So I beg Thee to open the eyes of my soul quickly, when they fail and begin to go blind. But do not open them as Thou didst open Adam's eyes, with the result that he saw his own nakedness. Instead let me see Thy glory, Lord, and then I shall be able to forget all about my own smallness and uselessness. Then I shall rush into Thy embrace. I shall see Thee Whom I have loved, and love Thee when I have seen Thee fully. I beg again that I may die to myself so that I may begin to live in Thee, for when I live in Thee all is well, but when I live only in myself all is lost. Come quickly Lord, and do not delay. There is no reason for Thee to be slow in coming, because the wisdom of Thy grace and the grace of Thy wisdom can take short cuts. We do not come upon that joy which is to be found in Thy love, as we come to the conclusion of a proof—that is

by definite steps and stages. No, the man who seeks and knocks at the door without giving up easily, is often granted this special grace and brought quite suddenly to the joy of Thy love. Whenever this happens to me, albeit rarely, I cannot help crying out 'Lord, it is well that we should be here; if it pleases Thee, let us make three arbours in this place'¹⁷—one for faith, one for hope, and one for love. Do I really know what I am saying when I cry 'it is well that we should be here'? for a little later I look up and see nothing. I am like one stricken down, sad at heart and troubled in my soul. How long will this go on, Lord? How long will I have to endure cares and worries, and sorrow by day and night? For how long will God's Spirit be absent from man, who is but mortal clay? The Spirit comes and goes as It will. But when It does come and stay with us we will be as glad and as comforted as the children of Zion when the Lord brought them back from captivity.¹⁸ When they came back, there was laughter in every mouth, joy on every tongue. And it will be like that for us, too, when God's Spirit returns to us. Meanwhile I am still unhappy because [I am] still doomed to exile. In the tents of Kedar my heart is sick for home.¹⁹ And while I am sorrowful and brood over my plight, I hear within my heart the comforting of Thy truth, and the truth which is found in Thy consolation.

3

ON WHETHER THE SAINTS RECEIVE LOVE IN AN UNEQUAL MEASURE, AND ON HOW THIS COMES ABOUT

As I see it, there is one kind of love which is the result of desiring something, and there is another kind which comes

from enjoying a thing and delighting in it. The first kind, which is the result of desire, does sometimes deserve to see its object. And the vision of the object of desire, in its turn, is given the favour of enjoying and delighting in the thing, while the delight brings in its wake the fullness of love. And now I thank Thee deeply, Lord, that Thou hast given me that great grace which I received when Thou didst speak to my heart and didst make some sort of reply to my questions. I clasp to my heart this grace which is a token of Thy Spirit's promise to bring me to the unending vision of Thee, and, having His pledge, I can wait happily for the promise to be fulfilled. And so I long to love Thee completely, and I love to yearn for Thee in this way. I run to Thee to clasp Thee in the same way that Thou gatherest me to Thyself, to love Thee perfectly at long last because Thou, Lord, hast first loved us. But can such perfect love of God be found anywhere, at any time? Dost Thou ever bestow on the soul which thirsts after Thee, living water that Thou art, such consummation of blessedness in Thy love, that it may be filled, sated to the point of saying, 'This is enough'? I cannot believe that anyone could have such an experience without fainting away. I cannot believe that such a one would be able to say, 'It is enough.' But how can we claim that love is perfect unless the soul is able to say that? Obviously we never can, and we must conclude that love in this life can never be perfect. But does this mean that the imperfect lovers, the unjust and the ungodly, will possess Thy kingdom? Will that be possible? For an unjust or ungodly man is one who does not feel in the least bound, who does not even realize that he is bound, to love Thee alone as much as a rational creature can love Thee. As for those in heaven, we know that the Seraphim, which means in Hebrew 'fiery spirits' (for they burn through being so near to Thee and Thy

brightness), love Thee more than does a soul who is less in importance than they. But even so, the one who is lowest of all in heaven, longs to love Thee as much as possible, and as much as Thou shouldst be loved. Perhaps that is what is meant by the words, 'on Him the angels long to gaze.'²⁰ And so those who are lower among the saints yearn to love Thee as much as those by whom they are surpassed in love. This yearning does not spring from any sort of rivalry, but from a desire to imitate and to be like those who are more holy. And if a soul which is lower among the saints does come to love Thee more deeply and completely, he will understand that Thou canst be loved yet more; that Thou canst never be loved enough, in fact. He will realize that he is bound to love Thee yet more, and that he should love Thee every bit as much as do the Cherubim and Seraphim. But one who desires something unattainable is unhappy and unsatisfied, and in the kingdom where there is complete happiness in the vision of Thee, with the fulfilment of all desire, unhappiness has no place.

What is Thy answer to that? I can suggest no answer, so I beg Thee, Lord, to speak because Thy servant is waiting to hear what Thou hast to say. Does everyone in heaven, great and small, love and long to love according to a sort of fixed degree which goes by rank? Does the fact that they all have Thee as the object of their love allow this to happen? Does the soul which loves less deeply see without envy that other souls receive the gift of a greater love? If he desires that gift, then he loves it. He loves it and even possesses it in those who have it in greater measure than himself. It is love that pours the same grace, though in unequal measure, into all who love the same object—namely Love—and who are happy together, rejoicing in the same Love.

The deeper love sinks into the senses, the more capacity they acquire for receiving it. They are filled, but without satiety. Love fills them, but does not lessen their desire. Instead it increases it; and yet there is none of that intensity and worry which we often feel while waiting for our desires to be fulfilled. Yes, it is love that is loved, and it is wonderful how love's delights drive from the lover any sort of nausea which could come of being filled, or any trace of that tension which goes with awaiting fulfilment, or any suspicion of envy in regard to those who have received the gift of a more complete love. Love enlightens its lovers, and 'borrows glory from the Lord's glory'²¹ as Saint Paul puts it. And in this light of love they see the Light which enlightens all men, while love brings forth in their souls a still deeper love. Love is the spring which is always flowing, without overflowing or drying up. These are the riches that are given to the man who loves and desires Thee. He always has at hand, always possesses, what he desires and loves. And so we can say that one who desires always loves to do so, and one who loves always desires to love. And Thou dost bless the man who desires and loves Thee, Lord, so that he is rich in what he loves and desires; but Thou dost this in such a wonderful way that he is never anxious and worried in his desire. Surely this is the eternal life of which the psalmist sings 'See if my heart is set on any false path, and show me the everlasting way.'²² Here we have the aim of our striving set before us, and here, too, we have the attaining of our end described. To go along this everlasting way is to come to complete love in the vision of God. Of this the apostle speaks, when he says, 'not that I have already won the prize, already reached fulfilment. I only press on in hope of winning the mastery, as Christ Jesus has won the mastery over me ... I press on with the goal in view,

eager for the prize, God's heavenly summons in Christ Jesus.'²³ And then he finishes with this very important sentence—'Meanwhile let us be all of the same mind, all follow the same rule, according to the progress we have made.'²⁴

4

THAT GOD IS TO BE LOVED FOR HIMSELF ALONE AND
THAT ALL OTHER THINGS ARE TO BE
LOVED ON ACCOUNT OF HIM

THY way of showing the love Thou hast for those who love Thee, Lord, is to implant in them the desire to love Thee and the desire for loving and desiring Thee. This great gift Thou givest to man out of Thy loving goodness. It makes no difference to Thee, it does not affect Thee in the least when Thou lovest us, for Thou art eternally changeless. Thy very being is the same as Thy goodness, and Thou canst not be without being good. In Thee is all goodness, both to Thyself and to Thy creatures. But for us it is quite different. When we love Thee, Thou drawest us to Thyself and into Thyself. But we can exist without loving Thee, and this is an evil existence indeed, because it is living outside Thee. Since Thou art completely changeless it does not affect Thee in the least if we draw near to Thee by love. Thou art in no way the loser when we withdraw from Thy love. Now it is only on account of Thyself that Thou lovest us, while we in turn are bound by divine justice to love nothing outside Thee. And by the help of grace a man can love God in such a way that he loves Thee, and himself on account of Thee alone, and for no other reason than Thyself. In this way he begins to image God clearly again and he is restored to the likeness in which Thou didst create

him. Like Thyself, he can love only on account of Thee. Thou, by the truth and fairness in Thy nature, and because Thou art by nature substantial Truth, canst love Thyself only on account of Thyself, and men and angels only for the same reason.

The soul which God has taken for His own is truly happy. Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, Who is God's Unity and Love, it loves only God. It no longer cares about itself or its own interests. Indeed it still loves itself, but in God and only in Him. God looks on such a soul and loves it. He sees that there is within it that which He cannot look upon without joy and approval—namely Himself. In the soul, God alone is to be loved, both by God Who made it and all other things, and by man who is God's handiwork. For there is no one but Thee, Lord, who deserves to be called love, and there is none who deserves to be loved but Thee. And moreover, Thy Son had a special wish for us. He prayed to God His Father that 'as Thou and I are one, so they too may be one in Us.'²⁵ When we are one with God in this way, we have reached our goal. The very reason for our creation was this completion of our nature in being joined inseparably to God. That is where we shall find real peace and the joy which the Lord promised to His faithful servants. There we will be filled with bliss by the Holy Spirit in the silence of heaven. But meanwhile, as long as we are alive, the heart can enjoy only very occasionally that peace and bliss in heaven. I mean that this blessing comes quite rarely to the godly man's soul, which is Wisdom's dwelling place. And when it does come, it lasts for only about half an hour. But the joy remains even when the blessing is no longer felt, for the soul still remembers it as it strives for Thee with renewed love and desire. And until we come to life without end in the vision of Thee; until we hear Thee say,

‘Come and share the joy of your Lord,’²⁶ it will always be the same—we can never have complete and endless delight in Thee until then. And when a man seems to have been kept away from that delight for a great length of time, he will be even more happy when he does come to the neverending eternity of God’s love. For that is what he has been striving after, and when he has it, his happiness in the sight of God cannot be marred.

5

THAT THERE IS NOTHING TO BE LOVED ABOVE GOD,
AND NOTHING TO BE DESIRED BEYOND HIM

O LOVE, come into us and take complete possession of us. Let Thy presence in our souls kill every germ of sensuality and the filth of sin which has been conceived and born of fleshly lust and the pride of life. That sentiment which goes by the name of love among us, is infected and corrupted by the diseases of that very soul which Thou didst create in us for Thyself. Love was also intended for Thee alone, but now its nature fights contrary to that law, and very often refuses to follow it. Then it is no longer called love, but gluttony, sensuality, covetousness, and so on, depending on its object. But when it is not allowed to suffer corruption its whole tendency is towards Thee. To Thee alone, Lord, love is due. Rational love in the soul, it has been said, can be described as a movement, or as a state of rest, or even as the attainment of an end. But no matter how we may describe it, in every case the will desires nothing more; it finds nothing further to desire at all. If a man tries to go beyond Thee to look for something better than Thyself he is wasting his time because

there is nothing to look for. The reason for that is that there is nothing better or sweeter than Thee. In fact, if a man ignores Thee, the only true object of love, and goes off to lust after other things, he himself becomes—nothing. That is because love is for Thee alone, and for nothing else, and because everything has its being in Thee. Since man is bound by his very *raison d'être* to fear God with a fear inspired only by love, and to keep His commandments, we can only find peace and satisfaction and happiness, Lord, in Thee.

6

THAT GOD HAS FIRST LOVED US. THROUGH HIS SON,
HE INCITES US TO RETURN HIS LOVE

AND therefore, Lord, I pray that my soul may leave behind all sin and former ungodliness, so that I shall be able to love Thee with all my heart and soul and strength. Let me be quite free from jealousy and double dealing, so that while I love Thee, Lord, I may not love anything for any reason but that of my love for Thee. When I love a thing because of Thee, it is not the thing which I love, but Thyself, because Thou art the reason why I love it. How can I help loving Thee Who art the one great Lord, and King of kings? Thy ruling over us is the same as Thy saving us; when we serve Thee, Thou bringest us to salvation. And how dost Thou bless and save Thy creatures? Thou givest them gifts which make them love Thee, and Thou dost shower on them that most perfect blessing of being loved by Thee. It is for this reason that Thou didst call Thy Son Jesus, which means Saviour—'for He shall save His people from their sins,' as the angel promised Joseph.²⁷ As the psalmist says, Jesus is the man of Thy right

hand, the son of man whom Thou didst strengthen for Thyself.²⁸ No one else can give us salvation, just as no one else can teach us to love Him, for His great lesson in love was to love us first, even to the point of dying on the cross for us. He washed us in His blood, in His love. And then when He rose from the dead He raised us up from the depths of sin so that we might love Him Who first loved us, and loved us until the end. Men would say it was a fair bargain if Thou hadst asked us to love Thee because Thou lovest us. But Thou dost look at it quite differently, Lord, and there are few others who can say, as Thou didst, 'I love thee so that thou mayest love Me.' But that is in fact what Thou hast done. For, as Thy beloved disciple says, Thou hast given us Thy love first,²⁹ and this Thou hast done so that we might give Thee our love in return. This is not because Thou needest to be loved by us at all, but simply because loving Thee is the only way for us to be what Thou didst intend us to be. 'In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last in these times He has spoken to us, with a Son to speak for Him.'³⁰ And this Son was the Word of God that made the heavens; the breath of His lips that peoples them.³¹ And when Thou didst speak through Thy Son it was only to show that all men could come to Thee and have Thee quite easily, just as if Thy Son had built Thee a dwelling place here as an abiding witness of Thy love; just as the sun in the sky is there to witness to Thy presence in heaven.

How deeply Thou didst love us! And how completely! Thou didst not even spare Thine own Son, but gave Him up for us all. And He loved us too, and gave Himself up quite willingly for us. Yes, this is the Son Who speaks to us now, Thy Word omnipotent. There is a hush of silence all around,³² there is a deep gloom of sin and error, and suddenly He leaps

down from His heavenly throne. He comes as a mighty warrior against sin and error, but He comes, too, to preach and teach love, with sweetness and kindness. Whatever Thy Son said or did on earth—even the disgrace and torture which were meted out to Him at the end—these were Thy words to us, spoken through Him, to draw us into the embrace of Thy love, and to incite us to give Thee all our love. Thou seekest to draw us to Thee because Thou knowest that love cannot be forced into men's souls; Thou knowest that it must be kindled from within. If there is force involved, there is no place for liberty, and if liberty is absent, so also is righteousness. Thou didst wish to save us, Lord, yet, since Thou art wholly just, Thou canst only save or damn a man according to his deserts, and not as Thou wouldst like to do. Thou givest us redress and maintainest our cause; Thou art there on Thy throne, seeing justice done, the justice which is of [Thy] making. It is determined that no one shall have anything to say for himself, that the whole world shall own itself liable to God's judgments. Thou showest favour and pardon where Thou wilt.³³ It is Thy wish that we should love, because we can only be saved if we do love. Yet we could not love Thee at all if even that were not another of Thy marvellous gifts. And so that we might be saved by loving Thee, Lord, Thou gavest us Thy love first, without which no one can begin to love Thee in return.

7

WITH WHAT LOVE GOD LOVES US

WE for our part, Lord, love Thee through a power and disposition to love which Thou hast bestowed on us. For

Thou dost create all such good powers and affections, as well as the souls which come under their sway. Is it possible for Thee to love those Thou lovest, with only a passing infatuation? Canst Thou, the Maker of all men and all things, be affected by anything, in any way? To think so would be absurd, and it would be against faith, for the Creator of all is free from any sort of defect. How then dost Thou love us if not with love? But Thy goodness and Thy love are the same thing, O God. They are the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son. From the very beginning He brooded over the waters,³⁴ over the minds of men as they tossed this way and that. And from the first moment of time, He has offered Himself as a gift and blessing to all, while He draws all things to Himself and brings God close to us, joining us in love to God. He does this by pouring His grace into us, filling us with a heartfelt desire, warding off evil and temptation—in fact, He provides everything useful, everything needful. In this way Thy Holy Spirit produces the charity of God in us. Through that charity He can make Himself one with us, for He is the love and unity and will of the Father and Son. He lives in us by grace and unites us to God by the goodwill which He inspires in us. The strength of this goodwill is called love in us; by it, we love what we are bound to love—God—for love is nothing but an ardent and well-disposed will. And so Thou dost love Thyself in Thyself, Lord, when from the Father and Son proceeds the Holy Spirit, Who is the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father. This love is so intense that it is unity, and so complete is the unity that it is consubstantiality. And Thou lovest Thyself in us when Thou sendest the Spirit of Thy Son into our hearts. In the sweetness of love, and in the ardent goodwill which [Thou inspirest] in us, He cries: Abba, Father. In this way Thou makest us love

Thee, or rather, in this way Thou lovest Thyself in us. Before, we could only live in hope, and we could only do that because we knew Thy name, and because as true lovers of Thy name we boasted of Thee. But now, because Thy grace has been poured into us, and because we have received the spirit of adoption, we know that whatever the Father has is ours. And now, too, because the Spirit we have received is the Spirit of adoption, we can call on Thee by the same name as Thine only Son by nature uses.

All these blessings are from Thee. They are gifts of Thy love, because to love and to give us blessings are the same thing for Thee. Whatever gifts are worth having, whatever endowments are perfect of their kind, these come to us from Thee, the Father of all that gives light. And because they are from Thee, Thou lovest Thyself in us just as Thou lovest us in Thyself, when we love Thee by means of this great gift of Thine, and when our love joins us to Thee. And as has been said, we are made sharers in that prayer of Christ, Thy Son: 'I wish that as I and Thou are one, so may they also be one in Us.'³⁵ For we are Thy offspring, O Lord; we are the offspring of God, as the Apostle says,³⁶ keeping the pagan poet's words, but changing their meaning. We are gods and we are all sons of the Most High. We claim this intimate affinity with Thee in virtue of Thy spiritual parenthood, since Thy Son did not disdain to take the same name as we ourselves, by the spirit of adoption. Directed by saving precepts and schooled in divine teaching, we make bold to say with Him and through Him, 'Our Father, Who art in heaven.' And so Thou lovest us to the degree in which Thou makest us love Thee. We love Thee to the degree in which we receive Thy Spirit. He is Thy Love, and He occupies and possesses every corner of our affections. He transforms us into the purity of Thy truth, and

the truth of Thy purity, in perfect conformity with Thy love. This produces so strong a cleaving and so much enjoyment of Thy sweetness, that Thy Son called it unity, praying 'that they may be one in Us.' He added, moreover, 'as I and Thou are one,' signifying the joy, the glory, the riches and the pride we experience in our union with Him. For even wisdom has a special kind of pride when it says, 'Mine are riches, glory, glorious riches and justice.'³⁷

8

THAT BY MEANS OF LOVE WE ARE MADE ONE WITH GOD

IT would be impossible to be united to God in love without also being united with Him in happiness, for they alone are really and truly happy who are utterly in love. The world calls anyone happy who has prosperity and well-being, but this is not true, because he alone is happy 'whose God is the Lord.'³⁸ What is happiness unless it be the state of desiring nothing but good, and having all that one has wished for? To want Thee, and to want Thee very much—that is to love Thee, and to love Thee intensely. Thou dost refuse to be loved with anything else, carnal or spiritual, on earth or in heaven, which is not loved for Thy sake. And that certainly is to desire nothing but good, and to have all that is wished for. For a man has Thee inasmuch as he loves Thee. United to God by love and happiness, we understand that 'to the Lord belongs salvation' and that His blessing is on His people.³⁹ And so, unremittingly we offer Thee, our Father, prayer and devotion and sacrifice through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son. We realize now that all our being and every good is bestowed on

us through His mediation, coming from God and designed to return to God.

We realize as well as we are able that all these things are gifts of Thy Holy Spirit Who lives in us. He is the Spirit Who strengthens and unites our souls to Himself, breathing in us as He wills. We are His workmanship, created to do good. He is our Holiness, our Justification and our Love. Through His mediation we reach out to Thee, and by Him we embrace Thee, for it is not given to us to contact Thee directly. The soul has no power wherewith to comprehend Thee—only love can grasp Thee completely, despite Thy greatness. One cannot speak of extension where there are no parts, nor of quality where there is no size. We cannot understand when familiar concepts are of no avail. But when we love Thee, our souls are touched by the Holy Spirit and drawn into Him. Through Him, as He lives in us, we have the Charity of God poured out in our hearts. This is none other than the mutual Love of the Father and the Son, dwelling in our souls. And as It turns back to God, even as It must, It turns the soul to God and makes it free and holy. Then it is equally true to say that we love God, and that God is loving Himself in us. His love for us has the effect of uniting us to Himself. The Father and the Son have mutual knowledge of each other, and this knowledge is nothing other than their identity of being. Likewise the Holy Spirit knows both Father and Son, and His being is identical with Theirs. For us, the image in which we were created, once disfigured by Adam, is daily renewed by Christ. This means that our loving and fearing God, our keeping of His commandments, is nothing other than our being one with God in unity of spirit. 'To fear God and to keep His commandments is the whole meaning of man.'⁴⁰ O lovable, terrible and most blessed God, give us this Spirit!

‘Send forth thy Spirit and they shall be created, and thou shalt renew the face of the earth.’⁴¹ For not in the flood of many waters (that is, in the disturbance and disorder caused by many different loves) do men draw close to God. Long enough, O Lord, has this deluge lasted, long enough the punishment of Adam’s sons. Bring forth Thy Spirit upon the earth. Let the sea turn back; let the salt waters of our condemnation subside, and let the dry land appear, as it thirsts for the fountain of life. Let the Dove, Thy Holy Spirit, come, and let the carrion bird be banished. Let the Dove bring tidings of peace with the olive branch signifying strength and enlightenment. May Thy holiness and hallowing sanctify us. May the unity of the Trinity make us one with Thee.

It remains to speak somewhat of our manner of loving [Thee]. As Saint Augustine says in his *Confessions*,⁴² many love truth when it enlightens them, but hate it when it accuses them. Many desire and approve of righteousness, but do not do it. Do such people really love Thee, O God of Justice? In times past the philosophers of this world honoured righteousness both by loving and practising it, so much so that it was said of them: ‘For love of virtue, the good hate to sin.’⁴³ But it is evident that no one can love Thee if he does not love righteousness. For Thou art love’s source and origin; to Thee all true righteousness returns and in Thee it finds its goal. Without Thee all the righteousness of man is like filthy rags. However good a man’s deeds may appear to be, if he does not love Thee he has no real faith for love to put into effect. If his works do not originate in the source of all righteousness, he cannot achieve the aim of true righteousness, which is Thyself. There is only one way to the Father, and that is the Son, Who said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’⁴⁴

9

THAT LOVE CONSISTS IN KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS

‘As the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love, as I also have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.’⁴⁵ Thus does Thy Truth, Who is also the Life towards which we journey, and the Way by which we travel, set out Thy divine philosophy in simple outline. Behold the beloved Son of the well-loved Father and see how the Father loves His Son, and how the Son remains in His Father’s love, keeping His commandments faithfully. Consider also the beloved ones of God’s loved Son, and among them that beloved disciple who loved His Master so much that he kept all His commandments lovingly even until death. Enlightened by truth and love, he knew how to choose good and refuse evil, and how to use the indifferent for a good end—these being the hallmarks of Christian virtue. For virtue, as has been said before, is the good use of free will. Virtue’s work is the use of those things for a good purpose, which could be used for an evil end. And so, lest our charity be imperfect, we are taught to love our neighbour in accordance with the perfect law of charity. Just as God only loves Himself in us, and we say that we only love God, so too let us begin to love our neighbour as ourselves. In him, just as in ourselves, we will love God alone.

But why so many words, Lord? My wretched soul is naked, cold and shivering. It longs to be warmed by the fire of Thy love. Since I have no clothes, I have gathered together a few rags here and there and sewn them together to cover my nakedness. I am not like the wise woman of Zarephath

who collected two faggots;⁴⁶ for I gather only little twigs from the great desert of my heart's vanity. I go into my house to prepare a meal from a handful of flour and a measure of oil before I die. Or rather, O Lord, I will not die—instead I will live and tell of Thy works. Like a wild ass in the desert, and with my dwelling in the land of bitterness, I draw in the breath of my love, O Lord; I open my mouth and receive Thy Spirit.⁴⁷ Sometimes, Lord, I open my mouth and close my eyes and Thou dost send into my heart something ... what it is I cannot tell, but its taste is so delightful and gives me such strength, that if it would but remain I could desire nothing else. Yet Thou dost not let me know what it is by means of sight or feeling or understanding. I savour it, ponder over it and long to keep it, but it passes away almost at once. I swallow it, whatever it may be, in the hope of having eternal life thereby. I long for it to pour itself into my innermost soul so that I may lose the taste for every other affection. But it passes away all too quickly.

And when I try to remember more clearly some bare details of how one searches for it and receives, and of the experience of it, or when I try to prolong the passing remembrance of it by writing about it, I am made to learn by experience what Thou sayest of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel—'And thou dost not know where it comes from or where it goes to.'⁴⁸ Sometimes I want to recall these bare details I have tried to remember; sometimes I want these thoughts to return whenever I like. Then I hear the Lord saying, 'The wind blows where it will.'⁴⁹ And I know then that it blows when He wishes, and not when I want. All seems dead and tasteless. I know that my eyes must gaze on Thee alone, O fountain of life, so that in Thee only I may see the light. My eyes are turned to Thee now, O Lord, and may they

never cease to gaze on Thee. By Thy power, under Thy protection, my soul strives towards Thee. My strength is nothing, so when it fails, may all my weakness cry out for Thy mercy. In the meanwhile, how long wilt thou put me off? How long wilt Thou make my unhappy soul wait, yearning for Thee? 'Hide me, I beseech Thee, in the hiding place of Thy presence, from the disturbance of men. Protect me in Thy tabernacle from the strife of tongues.'⁵⁰ But now the ass which is my body, calls me down from the mountain, the place whence God looks down and where we look upon God. The servants waiting below grow impatient.

10

THE SOUL DECLARES THAT IT LOVES AND ADORES GOD

Now, therefore, I worship Thee, O my God, with deepest faith. Thou art the source of all things, the Wisdom which makes every wise soul wise, the Goodness which gives joy to all happy souls. I adore Thee, bless Thee, and worship Thee, the one true God. I love Thee, and I long to love Thee with all my heart, all my mind, and all my strength. The angels and spirits who love Thee, love me too. And I love them in Thee. I know that the soul which remains in Thee and is capable of feeling human needs and longings, listens to me in Thee; and I rejoice in that soul's glory. He who has Thee as his reward, helps me in Thee; he cannot envy me my share in Thee. Only the fallen Lucifer finds joy in our unhappiness. For him alone, our gain is a loss. He has fallen from true happiness and from the reward of all. No wonder then that he does not submit to the power of truth, that he rejoices in his own selfish interests and hates the commonweal. Therefore we adore Thee, God

the Father, Who created us and gave us life. We worship Thee, Wisdom of the Father, Who renewed His likeness in us, and from Whom we have the grace to live wisely. We bless Thee, Holy Spirit, Whom we love, and in Whom we love. By Thy blessing we live in utmost happiness. We praise Thee, Holy Trinity, Three Persons in one God. By Thee we live; through Thee, and in Thee, we have our being. When we depart from Thee by sinning, and lose our likeness to Thee, yet dost Thou not allow us to perish. Thou art the Source and the Beginning to which we must return. To Thy likeness we are made, and by Thy grace we are reshapen to that image. We adore and bless Thee. To Thee be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

- ¹ Étienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940), 5.
- ² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2.2.23.2.
- ³ Ephesians 4:18.
- ⁴ Psalm 103:25.
- ⁵ Canticle of Canticles 2:6.
- ⁶ Psalm 4:9–10.
- ⁷ Isaias 2:3.
- ⁸ Psalm 79:20.
- ⁹ Psalm 34:3.
- ¹⁰ Saint Luke 18:41; Saint Mark 10:51.
- ¹¹ Psalm 26:8–9.
- ¹² Jeremias 4:1; Zacharias 1:3.
- ¹³ Psalm 79:8.
- ¹⁴ Saint John 20:17.
- ¹⁵ Apocalypse 22:15.
- ¹⁶ Psalm 26:8.
- ¹⁷ Saint Matthew 17:4; Saint Mark 9:4; Saint Luke 9:33.
- ¹⁸ Psalm 125:1–2.
- ¹⁹ Psalm 119:5–6.
- ²⁰ 1 Saint Peter 1:12.
- ²¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18.
- ²² Psalm 138:24.
- ²³ Philippians 3:12–15.
- ²⁴ Philippians 3:16.
- ²⁵ Saint John 17:11.
- ²⁶ Saint Matthew 25:21,23.
- ²⁷ Saint Matthew 1:21.
- ²⁸ Psalm 79:18.
- ²⁹ 1 Saint John 4:19.
- ³⁰ Hebrews 1:1–2.
- ³¹ Psalm 32:6.
- ³² Wisdom 18:14–15.
- ³³ Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15.
- ³⁴ Genesis 1:2.
- ³⁵ Saint John 17:11,21.
- ³⁶ Acts 17:28. Verse quoted from ‘Phenomena’ of Aratus <https://tinyurl.com/2tn9xjvv> (Wikipedia), a poet of Tarsus, Paul’s own city. There is a similar passage in the hymn of Cleanthes the Stoic <https://tinyurl.com/5n6cuwvu> (ibidem).
- ³⁷ Proverbs 8:18.
- ³⁸ Psalm 143:15.
- ³⁹ Psalm 3:9.
- ⁴⁰ Ecclesiastes 12:13.
- ⁴¹ Psalm 103:30.
- ⁴² Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 10.23.34.

NOTES

⁴³ Horace, *Epistle* 1.16.52.

⁴⁴ Saint John 14:6.

⁴⁵ Saint John 15:9–10.

⁴⁶ 3 Kings 17:10–16.

⁴⁷ Jeremias 2:24.

⁴⁸ Saint John 3:8.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Psalm 30:21.

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