

# Paradise Canto 32

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## Canto XXXII

### Argument

St. Bernard shows him, on their several thrones, the other blessed souls, of both the Old and New Testament; explains to him that their places are assigned them by grace, and not according to merit; and, lastly, tells him that if he would obtain power to descry what remained of the heavenly vision, he must unite with him in supplication to Mary.

Freely the sage, though wrapt in musings high,  
Assumed the teacher's part, and mild began:  
"The wound, that Mary closed, she[1] open'd first,  
Who sits so beautiful at Mary's feet.  
The third in order, underneath her, lo!  
Rachel with Beatrice: Sarah next;  
Judith; Rebecca; and the gleaner - maid,  
Meek ancestress[2] of him, who sang the songs  
Of sore repentance in his sorrowful mood.  
All, as I name them, down from leaf to leaf,  
Are, in gradation, throned on the rose.  
And from the seventh step, successively,  
Adown the breathing tresses of the flower,  
Still doth the file of Hebrew dames proceed.  
For these are a partition wall, whereby  
The sacred stairs are sever'd, as the faith  
In Christ divides them. On this part, where blooms  
Each leaf in full maturity, are set  
Such as in Christ, or e'er He came, believed.  
On the other, where an intersected space

[1: Eve.]

[2: Ruth, the ancestress of David.]

Yet shows the semicircle void, abide  
All they, who look'd to Christ already come  
And as our Lady on her glorious stool,  
And they who on their stools beneath her sit,  
This way distinction make; e'en so on his,  
The mighty Baptist that way marks the line  
(He who endured the desert, and the pains  
Of martyrdom, and, for two years,[3] of Hell,

Yet still continued holy), and beneath,  
Augustin;<sup>[4]</sup> Francis;<sup>[5]</sup> Benedict;<sup>[6]</sup> and the rest,  
Thus far from round to round. So Heaven's decree  
Forecasts, this garden equally to fill,  
With faith in either view, past or to come.  
Learn too, that downward from the step, which cleaves,  
Midway, the twain compartments, none there are  
Who place obtain for merit of their own,  
But have through others' merit been advanced,  
On set conditions; spirits all released,  
Ere for themselves they had the power to chuse.  
And, if thou mark and listen to them well,  
Their childish looks and voice declare as much.

[3: The time that elapsed between the death of the Baptist and his redemption by the death of Christ.]

[4: Bishop of Hippo, fourth century. See also Canto x. 117.]

[5: "Francis." See Canto xi.]

[6: "Benedict." See Canto xxii.]

"Here, silent as thou art, I know thy doubt;  
And gladly will I loose the knot, wherein  
Thy subtile thoughts have bound thee. From this realm  
Excluded, chance no entrance here may find;  
No more than hunger, thirst, or sorrow can.  
A law immutable hath stablish'd all;  
Nor is there aught thou seest, that doth not fit,  
Exactly, as the finger to the ring.  
It is not, therefore, without cause, that these  
O'erspeedy comers to immortal life,  
Are different in their shares of excellence.  
Our Sovran Lord, that settleth this estate  
In love and in delight so absolute,  
That wish can dare no further, every soul,  
Created in His joyous sight to dwell,  
With grace, at pleasure, variouslyeendows.

And for a proof the effect may well suffice.  
And 'tis moreover most expressly mark'd  
In holy Scripture, where the twins are said  
To have struggled in the womb. Therefore, as grace  
Inweaves the coronet, so every brow  
Weareth its proper hue of orient light.  
And merely in respect to his prime gift,  
Not in reward of meritorious deed,  
Hath each his several degree assign'd.  
In early times with their own innocence

More was not wanting than the parents' faith,  
To save them: those first ages past, behoved  
That circumcision in the males should imp  
The flight of innocent wings: but since the day  
Of grace hath come, without baptismal rites  
In Christ accomplish'd, innocence herself  
Must linger yet below. Now raise thy view  
Unto the visage most resembling Christ:  
For, in her splendour only, shalt thou win  
The power to look on Him." Forthwith I saw  
Such floods of gladness on her visage shower'd,  
From holy spirits, winging that profound;  
That, whatsoever I had yet beheld,  
Had not so much suspended me with wonder,  
Or shown me such similitude of God.  
And he, who had to her descended, once,  
On earth, now hail'd in Heaven; and on poised wing,  
"Ave, Maria, Gratia Plena," sang:  
To whose sweet anthem all the blissful court,  
From all parts answering, rang: that holier joy  
Brooded the deep serene. "Father revered!  
Who deign'st, for me, to quit the pleasant place  
Wherein thou sittest, by eternal lot;  
Say, who that Angel is, that with such glee  
Beholds our Queen, and so enamour'd glows  
Of her high beauty, that all fire he seems."

So I again resorted to the lore  
Of my wise teacher, he, whom Mary's charms  
Embellish'd, as the sun the morning star;  
Who thus in answer spake: "In him are summ'd,  
Whate'er of buxomness and free delight  
May be in spirit, or in Angel, met:  
And so beseems: for that he bare the palm  
Down unto Mary, when the Son of God  
Vouchsafed to clothe Him in terrestrial weeds.  
Now let thine eyes wait heedful on my words;  
And note thou of this just and pious realm  
The chiefest nobles. Those, highest in bliss,  
The twain, on each hand next our Empress throned,  
Are as it were two roots unto this rose:  
He to the left, the parent, whose rash taste  
Proves bitter to his seed; and, on the right,  
That ancient father of the holy Church,  
Into whose keeping Christ did give the keys  
Of this sweet flower; near whom behold the seer,[7]  
That, ere, he died, saw all the grievous times

Of the fair bride, who with the lance and nails  
Was won. And, near unto the other, rests  
The leader, under whom, on manna, fed  
The ungrateful nation, fickle and perverse.  
On the other part, facing to Peter, lo!  
Where Anna sits, so well content to look  
On her loved daughter, that with moveless eye  
She chants the loud hosanna: while, opposed  
To the first father of your mortal kind,  
Is Lucia,[8] at whose hest thy lady sped,  
When on the edge of ruin closed thine eye.

[7: St. John.]

[8: See Hell, Canto ii. 97, and Purgatory, Canto ix. 50.]

"But (for the vision hasteneth to an end)  
Here break we off, as the good workman doth,  
That shapes the clock according to the cloth;  
And to the Primal Love our ken shall rise;  
That thou mayst penetrate the brightness, far  
As sight can bear thee. Yet, alas! in sooth  
Beating thy pennons, thinking to advance,  
Thou backward fall'st. Grace then must first be gain'd;  
Her grace, whose might can help thee. Thou in prayer  
Seek her: and, with affection, whilst I sue,  
Attend, and yield me all thy heart." He said;  
And thus the saintly orison began.