

# Paradise Canto 4

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## Canto IV

### Argument

While they still continue in the moon, Beatrice removes certain doubts which Dante had conceived respecting the place assigned to the blessed, and respecting the will absolute or conditional. He inquires whether it is possible to make satisfaction for a vow broken.

Between two kinds of food, both equally  
Remote and tempting, first a man might die  
Of hunger, ere he one could freely chuse.  
E'en so would stand a lamb between the maw  
Of two fierce wolves, in dread of both alike:  
E'en so between two deer a dog would stand.  
Wherefore, if I was silent, fault nor praise  
I to myself impute; by equal doubts  
Held in suspense; since of necessity  
It happen'd. Silent was I, yet desire  
Was painted in my looks; and thus I spake  
My wish more earnestly than language could.

As Daniel,[1] when the haughty king he freed  
From ire, that spurr'd him on to deeds unjust  
And violent; so did Beatrice then.

[1: "Daniel." See Dan. ii. Beatrice did for Dante what Daniel did for Nebuchadnezzar, when he freed the King from the uncertainty respecting his dream, which had enraged him against the Chaldeans. See Hell, Canto xiv.]

"Well I discern," she thus her words address'd,  
"How thou art drawn by each of these desires;[2]  
So that thy anxious thought is in itself  
Bound up and stifled, nor breathes freely forth.  
Thou arguest: if the good intent remain;  
What reason that another's violence

[2: His desire to have each of the doubts, which Beatrice mentions, resolved.]

Should stint the measure of my fair desert?

"Cause too thou find'st for doubt, in that it seems,  
That spirits to the stars, as Plato[3] deem'd,  
Return. These are the questions which thy will

Urge equally; and therefore I, the first,  
Of that[4] will treat which hath the more of gall.[5]  
Of Seraphim[6] he who is most enskied,  
Moses and Samuel, and either John  
Chuse which thou wilt, nor even Mary's self,  
Have not in any other Heaven their seats,  
Than have those spirits which so late thou saw'st;  
Nor more or fewer years exist; but all  
Make the first circle[7] beauteous, diversely  
Partaking of sweet life, as more or less  
Afflation of eternal bliss pervades them.  
Here were they shown thee, not that fate assigns  
This for their sphere, but for a sign to thee  
Of that celestial furthest from the height.  
Thus needs, that ye may apprehend, we speak:  
Since from things sensible alone ye learn  
That, which, digested rightly, after turns  
To intellectual. For no other cause  
The Scripture, condescending graciously  
To your perception, hands and feet to God  
Attributes, nor so means: and holy Church  
Doth represent with human countenance  
Gabriel, and Michael, and him who made  
Tobias whole. Unlike what here thou seest,  
The judgment of Timaeus, who affirms  
Each soul restored to its particular star;  
Believing it to have been taken thence,  
When nature gave it to inform her mold:  
Yet to appearance his intention is

[3: "Plato." Plato, *Timaeus*, v. ix. p. 326. "The Creator, when he had framed the universe, distributed to the stars an equal number of souls, appointing to each soul its several star."]

[4: "Of that." Plato's opinion.]

[5: Which is the more dangerous.]

[6: She first resolves his doubt whether souls do not return to their own stars, as he had read in the *Timaeus* of Plato. Angels, then, and beatified spirits, she declares, dwell all and eternally together, only partaking more or less of the divine glory, in the empyrean; although, in condescension to human understanding, they appear to have different spheres allotted to them.]

[7: "The first circle." The empyrean.]

Not what his words declare: and so to shun  
Derision, haply thus he hath disguised  
His true opinion. If his meaning be,  
That to the influencing of these orbs revert

The honour and the blame in human acts,  
Perchance he doth not wholly miss the truth.  
This principle, not understood aright,  
Erewhile perverted well - nigh all the world;  
So that it fell to fabled names of Jove,  
And Mercury, and Mars. That other doubt,  
Which moves thee, is less harmful; for it brings  
No peril of removing thee from me.  
"That, to the eye of man,[8] our justice seems  
Unjust, is argument for faith, and not  
For heretic declension. But, to the end  
This truth[9] may stand more clearly in your view,  
I will content thee even to thy wish.

[8: "That the ways of divine justice are often inscrutable to man,  
ought rather to be a motive to faith than an inducement to heresy."]

[9: "This truth." That it is no impeachment of God's justice, if  
merit be lessened through compulsion of others, without any failure of good  
intention on the part of the meritorious. After all, Beatrice ends by  
admitting that there was a defect in the will, which hindered Constance and  
the others from seizing the first opportunity of returning to the monastic  
life.]

"If violence be, when that which suffers, nought  
Consents to that which forceth, not for this  
These spirits stood exculpate. For the will,  
That wills not, still survives, unquench'd, and doth,  
As nature doth in fire, though violence  
Wrest it a thousand times; for, if it yield  
Or more or less, so far it follows force.  
And thus did these, when they had power to seek  
The hallow'd place again. In them, had will  
Been perfect, such as once upon the bars  
Held Laurence[10] firm, or wrought in Scaevola  
To his own hand remorseless; to the path,  
Whence they were drawn, their steps had hasten'd back,  
When liberty return'd: but in too few,  
Resolve, so stedfast, dwells. And by these words,  
If duly weigh'd, that argument is void,  
Which oft might have perplex'd thee still. But now

[10: Martyr of the third century.]

Another question thwarts thee, which, to solve,  
Might try thy patience without better aid.  
I have, no doubt, instill'd into thy mind,  
That blessed spirit may not lie; since near  
The source of primal truth it dwells for aye:

And thou mightst after of Piccarda learn  
That Constance held affection to the veil;  
So that she seems to contradict me here.  
Not seldom, brother, it hath chanced for men  
To do what they had gladly left undone;  
Yet, to shun peril, they have done amiss:  
E'en as Alcmaeon, at his father's[11] suit  
Slew his own mother;[12] so made pitiless,  
Not to lose pity. On this point bethink thee,  
That force and will are blended in such wise  
As not to make the offence excusable.  
Absolute will agrees not to the wrong;  
But inasmuch as there is fear of woe  
From non-compliance, it agrees. Of will[13]  
Thus absolute, Piccarda spake, and I  
Of the other; so that both have truly said."

[11: "His father's." Amphiaraus.]

[12: "His own mother." Eriphyle.]

[13: "Of will." What Piccarda asserts of Constance, that she retained her affection to the monastic life, is said absolutely and without relation to circumstances; and that, which I affirm, is spoken of the will conditionally and respectively: so that "both have truly said."]

Such was the flow of that pure rill, that well'd  
From forth the fountain of all truth; and such  
The rest, that to my wandering thoughts I found.

"O thou, of primal love the prime delight,  
Goddess!" I straight replied, "whose lively words  
Still shed new heat and vigour through my soul;  
Affection fails me to requite thy grace  
With equal sum of gratitude: be His  
To recompense, who sees and can reward thee.  
Well I discern, that by that Truth[14] alone  
Enlighten'd, beyond which no truth may roam,  
Our mind can satisfy her thirst to know:  
Therein she resteth, e'en as in his lair  
The wild beast, soon as she hath reach'd that bound.  
And she hath power to reach it; else desire

[14: The light of divine truth.]

Were given to no end. And thence doth doubt  
Spring, like a shoot, around the stock of truth;  
And it is nature which, from height to height,  
On to the summit prompts us. This invites,  
This doth assure me, Lady! reverently

To ask thee of another truth, that yet  
Is dark to me. I fain would know, if man  
By other works well done may so supply  
The failure of his vows, that in your scale  
They lack not weight." I spake; and on me straight  
Beatrice look'd, with eyes that shot forth sparks  
Of love celestial, in such copious stream,  
That, virtue sinking in me overpower'd,  
I turn'd; and downward bent, confused, my sight.

— Paradise Canto 4