

# Paradise Canto 5

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## Canto V

### Argument

The question proposed in the last Canto is answered. Dante ascends with Beatrice to the planet Mercury, which is the second heaven; and here he finds a multitude of spirits, one of whom offers to satisfy him of anything he may desire to know from them.

"If beyond earthly wont,[1] the flame of love  
Illume me, so that I o'ercome thy power  
Of vision, marvel not: but learn the cause  
In that perfection of the sight, which, soon  
As apprehending, hasteneth on to reach  
The good it apprehends. I well discern,  
How in thine intellect already shines  
The light eternal, which to view alone  
Ne'er fails to kindle love; and if aught else  
Your love seduces, 'tis but that it shows  
Some ill - mark'd vestige of that primal beam.

[1: "If beyond earthly wont." Dante having been unable to sustain the splendor of Beatrice, as we have seen at the end of the last Canto, she tells him to attribute her increase of brightness to the place in which they were.]

"This wouldst thou know: if failure of the vow  
By other service may be so supplied,  
As from self - question to assure the soul."

Thus she her words, not heedless of my wish,  
Began; and thus, as one who breaks not off

Discourse, continued in her saintly strain.

"Supreme of gifts,[2] which God, creating, gave  
Of His free bounty, sign most evident  
Of goodness, and in His account most prized  
Was liberty of will; the boon, wherewith  
All intellectual creatures, and them sole,  
He hath endow'd. Hence now thou mayst infer  
Of what high worth the vow, which so is framed  
That when man offers, God well - pleased accepts:  
For in the compact between God and him,  
This treasure, such as I describe it to thee,  
He makes the victim; and of his own act.

What compensation therefore may he find?  
If that, whereof thou hast oblation made,  
By using well thou think'st to consecrate,  
Thou wouldst of theft do charitable deed.  
Thus I resolve thee of the greater point.

[2: "Supreme of gifts." So in the "De Monarchia," lib. i. pp. 107 and 108. "If then the judgment altogether move the appetite, and is in no wise prevented by it, it is free. But if the judgment be moved by the appetite in any way preventing it, it cannot be free: because it acts not of itself, but is led captive by another. And hence it is that brutes cannot have free judgment, because their judgments are always prevented by appetite. And hence it may also appear manifest that intellectual substances, whose wills are immutable, and likewise souls separated from the body, and departing from it well and holily, lose not the liberty of choice on account of the immutability of the will, but retain it most perfectly and powerfully. This being discerned, it is again plain that this liberty, or principle of all our liberty, is the greatest good conferred on human nature by God; because by this very thing we are here made happy, as men; by this we are elsewhere happy, as divine beings."]

"But forasmuch as holy Church, herein  
Dispensing, seems to contradict the truth  
I have discover'd to thee, yet behoves  
Thou rest a little longer at the board,  
Ere the crude aliment which thou hast ta'en,  
Digested fitly, to nutrition turn.  
Open thy mind to what I now unfold;  
And give it inward keeping. Knowledge comes  
Of learning well retain'd, unfruitful else.

"This sacrifice, in essence, of two things  
Consisteth: one is that, whereof 'tis made;  
The covenant, the other[3]. For the last,

[3: The one, the substance of the vow, as of a single life, or of keeping fast; the other, the compact.]

It ne'er is cancel'd, if not kept: and hence  
I spake, erewhile, so strictly of its force.  
For this it was enjoin'd the Israelites[4], [change  
Though leave were given them, as thou know'st, to  
The offering, still to offer. The other part,  
The matter and the substance of the vow,  
May well be such, as that, without offence,  
It may for other substance be exchanged.  
But, at his own discretion, none may shift  
The burden on his shoulders; unreleased  
By either key,[5] the yellow and the white.

Nor deem of any change, as less than vain,  
If the last bond[6] be not within the new  
Included, as the quatre in the six.  
No satisfaction therefore can be paid  
For what so precious in the balance weighs,  
That all in counterpoise must kick the beam.  
Take then no vow at random: ta'en, with faith  
Preserve it; yet not bent, as Jephthah once,  
Blindly to execute a rash resolve,  
Whom better it had suited to exclaim,  
'I have done ill,' than to redeem his pledge  
By doing worse: or, not unlike to him  
In folly, that great leader of the Greeks;  
Whence, on the altar, Iphigenia mourn'd  
Her virgin beauty, and hath since made mourn  
Both wise and simple, even all, who hear  
Of so fell sacrifice. Be ye more staid,  
O Christians! not, like feather, by each wind  
Removable; nor think to cleanse yourselves  
In every water. Either testament,  
The old and new, is yours: and for your guide,  
The shepherd of the Church. Let this suffice  
To save you. When by evil lust enticed,  
Remember ye be men, not senseless beasts;  
Nor let the Jew, who dwelleth in your streets,  
Hold you in mockery. Be not, as the lamb,  
That, fickle wanton, leaves its mother's milk,

[4: See Lev. c. xii. and xxvii.]

[5: Purgatory, Canto ix. 108.]

[6: If the thing substituted be not more precious than the thing released.]

To dally with itself in idle play."

Such were the words that Beatrice spake:  
These ended, to that region, where the world  
Is liveliest, full of fond desire she turn'd.

Though mainly prompt new question to propose,  
Her silence and changed look did keep me dumb.  
And as the arrow, ere the cord is still,  
Leapeth unto its mark; so on we sped  
Into the second realm. There I beheld  
The dame, so joyous, enter, that the orb  
Grew brighter at her smiles; and, if the star  
Were moved to gladness, what then was my cheer,  
Whom nature hath made apt for every change!

As in a quiet and clear lake the fish,  
If aught approach them from without, do draw  
Toward it, deeming it their food; so drew  
Full more than thousand splendours toward us;  
And in each one was heard: "Lo! one arrived  
To multiply our loves!" and as each came,  
The shadow, streaming forth effulgence new,  
Witness'd augmented joy. Here, Reader! think,  
If thou didst miss the sequel of my tale,  
To know the rest how sorely thou wouldst crave;  
And thou shalt see what vehement desire  
Possess'd me, soon as these had met my view,  
To know their state. "O born in happy hour!  
Thou, to whom grace vouchsafes, or e'er thy close  
Of fleshly warfare, to behold the thrones  
Of that eternal triumph; know, to us  
The light communicated, which through Heaven  
Expatiates without bound. Therefore, if aught  
Thou of our beams wouldst borrow for thine aid,  
Spare not; and, of our radiance, take thy fill."

Thus of those piteous spirits one bespake me;  
And Beatrice next: "Say on; and trust  
As unto gods." - "How in the light supreme  
Thou harbour'st, and from thence the virtue bring'st,  
That, sparkling in thine eyes, denotes thy joy,  
I mark; but, who thou art, am still to seek;  
Or wherefore, worthy spirit! for thy lot  
This sphere<sup>[7]</sup> assign'd, that oft from mortal ken  
Is veil'd by other's beams." I said; and turn'd  
Toward the lustre, that with greeting kind  
Erewhile had hail'd me. Forthwith, brighter far  
Than erst, it wax'd: and, as himself the sun  
Hides through excess of light, when his warm gaze<sup>[8]</sup>  
Hath on the mantle of thick vapours prey'd;  
Within its proper ray the saintly shape  
Was, through increase of gladness, thus conceal'd;  
And, shrouded so in splendour, answer'd me,  
E'en as the tenour of my song declares.

[7: "This sphere." The planet Mercury, which being nearest to the sun, is oftenest hidden by that luminary.]

[8: "When his warm gaze." When the sun has dried up the vapors that shaded his brightness.]