



The Only Aim in Life is Death:
*What Dante's Divine Comedy teaches us about the
meaning of self-denial and the purpose of suffering*

Michael Skinner
www.gratiareflections.com
May 2022

A recent article from the publishers of *Entrepreneur Magazine* describes the difference between the words “motivation” and “inspiration” as such: “Motivation is a push factor. It’s an outside force that is compelling you to take action, even if you don’t necessarily want to. Inspiration, on the other hand, is more of a pull or driving force. It’s something that comes from within that gets us to proactively give our best effort.”¹ And it appears there is no shortage of demand for these “forces” - both outside and from within - to stir the hearts and minds of the “citizens of the earthly city”, we who “prefer our own gods”.² To wit, a simple Google search on the terms “motivational quotes” and “inspirational quotes” yields billions of results.

Calls-to-action from our heroes, luminaries, and legends - those beloved paragons of earthly achievement - are omnipresent. America, for example, has been referred to as a *shining city upon a hill*, famously by two of her most popular presidents, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan.³ Both Kennedy and Reagan borrowed this imagery from John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon titled *A Model of Christian Charity* and each incorporated these suggestive words into memorable (if not motivational) speeches delivered during their presidencies. However, while Winthrop’s treatise emphasized the primacy of God’s grace and the teaching of Jesus Christ as the bedrock for a new nation - “He is our life and our prosperity”⁴ - America’s secular culture has progressively eroded its spiritual foundation, choosing instead to fix itself upon material ideals of wealth and power - *Prosperity is our life and our God* - now seemingly the nation’s preferred mantra.⁵ In the earthly city, overcoming worldly adversity and realizing material

¹ Tom Popomaronis, “The Difference Between Inspiration and Motivation”, www.entrepreneur.com, Entrepreneur Media, Inc., December 13, 2019. [URL](#)

² Augustine, and Marcus Dods. *The city of God*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1913), Book Eleventh. Page 437

³ David Frum, “Is America Still the ‘Shining City on a Hill?’”, www.theatlantic.com, Atlantic Media, Inc. January 1, 2021. [URL](#)

⁴ Governor John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”, 1630. (Boston: Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society 1838), 3rd Series 7:31-48

⁵ Michael Skinner. “Capitalism of the Heart”. *Catholic Studies* 751, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Fall 2021.

success is, it seems, our national pastime; according to the edicts of proper western society, life's unmistakable calling as measured by wealth, power, honor, and pleasure⁶ can be captured in a single word: *more*.

Rise up. Overcome. Achieve. These are the popular exhortations of our modern culture. But is the pursuit of material gain the only objective worthy of expert, third-party wisdom? In fact, the struggle to avoid loss and prevent suffering provokes equal - if not more - demand for earthly motivation. For example, after becoming prime minister in 1940, with all of Europe facing fascist aggression, Winston Churchill - through his words and wartime speeches - motivated England and the world to rise up, confront, and "never surrender"⁷ to the existential Nazi threats of tyranny and evil. Consider this motivational quote famously attributed to Churchill, and now depicted (in true, capitalist, commercial fashion) on everything from coffee mugs to tee-shirts: "If you're going through Hell, keep going."⁸ Although Churchill, like Dante the Pilgrim 640 years prior,⁹ would agree that the price of victory upon "the hilltop shawled in morning rays of light"¹⁰ can only be paid "on that deep and rugged road"¹¹ through Hell, he [Churchill] is not the originator of this quote. The true source, as it turns out, has far more in common with the timeless theology of Dante than with the wartime urgings of the "British Bulldog".¹²

⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1911-1925). Prima Secundæ Partis, Question 2

⁷ Winston Churchill. 1874-1965. "Speech by the Prime Minister delivered in the House of Commons, June 4, 1940". Transcript by The International Churchill Society. www.winstonchurchill.org. URL

⁸ Geoff Loftus, "If You're Going Through Hell, Keep Going - Winston Churchill", www.forbes.com, Forbes Media, LLC. May 9, 2021. URL

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*. 1314. Edited by Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books 1995)

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I 16-17

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, II 142

¹² Winston Churchill. 1874-1965. "Bulldog Churchill: The Evolution of a Famous Image". The International Churchill Society. URL

An editorial written by John Randall Dunn, “Binding the Power of Pain”, appeared in the October 30, 1943 issue of the *Christian Science Sentinel*.¹³ In this article, Dunn supplies the authentic “going through Hell” quotation, but more interestingly he also offers spiritual direction congruent with that of *The Divine Comedy*;¹⁴ namely, that the cost of sin is suffering and death; that mankind’s pursuit of material success to achieve “real and lasting happiness” is forever futile; and “whenever and wherever the light of Truth shines forth, darkness is dissipated.” While Churchill’s “keep going” plea is intended to arouse the patriotism of a nation Hell-bent on vanquishing the Nazi war machine, Dunn’s use of the same imagery evokes a much different - a divine, poetic, even *Dantesque* - sentiment: “Keep on going - keep on clinging to Truth...What shall we say of the mighty conquest over all sin? A louder song, sweeter than has ever before reached high heaven, now rises clearer and nearer to the great heart of Christ; for the accuser is not there, and Love sends forth her primal and everlasting strain.”¹⁵

The popular/secular fixation on overcoming worldly adversity - on ascending shining hills - is misguided; rather, it is the far more consequential (and difficult) work of self-reflection, self-denial, and redemptive suffering through the light and truth of Christ that is life’s true vocation. That is, we must first descend before we can ascend, we must go down before we can go up. In the words of the poet Virgil to Dante the Pilgrim: “You must journey down another road if ever you hope to leave this wilderness.”¹⁶ Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is an indispensable guide for how

¹³ John Randall Dunn. “Binding the Power of Pain”. *The Christian Science Sentinel*. October 30, 1943. (Boston: The Christian Science Publishing Society 2022)

¹⁴ Authors note: The long-held Christian Science teaching on physical (i.e. medical) healing through prayer alone is the primary focus of this article. These philosophies have been much-debated over the years, and I do not wish to re-litigate them here. Rather, I am simply highlighting the origin of the “going through Hell” quotation, and the areas of this particular article possessing common ground with Catholic teaching and in harmony with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

¹⁵ Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist. *The Christian Science Sentinel*. October 30, 1943. (Boston: The Christian Science Publishing Society 2022)

¹⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I 91, 93

to get to Heaven; namely, through an active embrace of the cross and an inspired effort to acknowledge our sinfulness and receive the only remedy for it: the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus Christ through His Church and her sacraments. For when we are made to suffer, it is for our consolation and our salvation.¹⁷

The metaphorical association with the Resurrection - with suffering and salvation - is unmistakable in the *Inferno*, with Dante the Pilgrim beginning his downward journey on the evening of Maundy Thursday¹⁸ and ascending from Hell on Easter morning “to see once more the stars.”¹⁹ Furthermore, when Dante first “raises his head” to gaze upon that hilltop bathed in sunlight, having acknowledged only moments before his deviation from the “straight path”,²⁰ we are reminded of another pilgrim lost in the wilderness; the Prodigal (Lost) Son, who having “squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation”, determines to return home.²¹ The difference, of course, between the lost son and Dante, is that the son has already begun his ascent, having been stripped bare of his earthly possessions of money, food, and health. In “dire need”²² - that is, after hitting rock bottom and finally “coming to his senses”²³ - the son “got up and went back to his father”.²⁴ Dante the Pilgrim, by contrast, is only at the beginning of his “long road” into the abyss.²⁵

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 1:6 NAB

¹⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I 1

¹⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XXXIV 139

²⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I 3

²¹ Luke 15:11-30 NAB

²² Luke 15:14 NAB

²³ Luke 15:17 NAB

²⁴ Luke 15:20 NAB

²⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, IV 22, 24

Luke's "squandered inheritance"²⁶ analogy - the wayward son's loss of all worldly comforts, his material bankruptcy - is no doubt intended to demonstrate that the loving, merciful embrace of our Heavenly Father²⁷ is always available to his children regardless of the suffering we inflict upon ourselves, and others. "*The Father makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.*"²⁸ A more important, but perhaps less obvious message is that we are meant to measure our inheritance not by the accumulation of worldly amenities, but rather by our detachment from them. In the most famous motivational speech ever delivered - The Sermon on the Mount - Christ "declares war against the world"²⁹ and provides clear directions to achieve earthly peace and happiness. The very *first* of the Beatitudes (and remember, "there are no simple coincidences in the designs of divine Providence"³⁰) is the command to be "poor in spirit".³¹ We are called to be detached from material possessions, to instead "seek the Lord",³² to build treasure in Heaven - not as Christ's confiscatory judgement on the world, but rather as the antidote to earthly fear and anxiety, and the pathway to peace, simplicity, and ultimately - love. "*For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*"³³ As Saint Paul instructs, "Indeed, religion with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it".³⁴ But it is this warning from Christ that

²⁶ Luke 15:13 NAB

²⁷ Luke 15:20 NAB

²⁸ Matt. 5:45 NAB

²⁹ Brother Andre Marie. "The Sermon on the Mount". www.catholicism.org, November 27, 2012. (Richmond, New Hampshire: Saint Benedict Center 2022) [URL](#)

³⁰ Pope John Paul II. "Address of the Holy Father: Meeting with Monsignor Alberto Cosme Do Amaral, Bishop of Leiria." Apostolic Pilgrimage to Portugal. Chapel of the Apparitions in Fatima. May 12, 1982.

³¹ Matt. 5:3 NAB

³² Zep. 2:3 NAB

³³ Matt. 6:21 NAB

³⁴ 1 Tim. 6:6-7 NAB

provides the most essential wisdom regarding material indulgence: “For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul?”³⁵

Denying oneself, embracing our daily crosses, saving our lives by first losing them³⁶ - which is to say, journeying down another road³⁷ - these are the steps that mark the pathway to Heaven. As Dante the Pilgrim quickly learns, the pits of Hell are filled with souls damned by their selfish, earthly pursuits; Dante the Poet “wanted to...show examples of human beings incurring damnation through the way they lived and the choices they made - ways and choices that were evil, wrong, sinful.”³⁸ In a particularly memorable exchange, Dante upbraids Pope Nicholas III: “So stay stuck there, for you are rightly punished...your avarice brings grief upon the world, crushing the good, exalting the depraved.”³⁹ The eternal punishment for the damned popes? To be forced head-first, upside down, “squeezed tightly into the fissures of the rock.”⁴⁰

The consequence of our sinfulness, Dante reminds us, is not merely isolated, self-inflicted pain; indeed our words and actions also cause grief upon others. And once we commit sin, once we fracture our relationship with God, we have no earthly ability to repair the damage that we’ve caused to ourselves and the world.

As (A) Beatrice explains to Dante (B) the incarnation of Christ is (C) living (and dying) proof of God’s justice and mercy:

(A) *Sin is the only power that takes away
man’s freedom and his likeness to True Good,
and makes him shine less brightly in Its light;*

³⁵ Matt. 16:26 NAB

³⁶ Luke 9:23-24 NAB

³⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, I 91

³⁸ Kenelm, Foster, O.P. “The Canto of the Damned Popes: Inferno XIX.” *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*. No. 87. (The Johns Hopkins University Press 2021) Pages 47-68

³⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XIX 104-105

⁴⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* XIX 75

*nor can he win back his lost dignity
unless the void left by that sin be filled
by just amends paid for illicit joy.*

*Your nature, when it sinned once and for all
in its first root, was exiled from these honors,
as it was dispossessed of Paradise;⁴¹*

(B) *Given his limits, man could never make
amends: never in humility
could man, obedient too late, descend*

*as far as once, in disobedience,
he tried to climb, and this is why mankind
alone could not make his amends to God.⁴²*

(C) *for God, Who gave Himself, gave even more
so that mankind might raise itself again,
than if He simply had annulled the debt;*

*and any other means would have been less
than Justice, if God's only Son had not
humbled Himself to take on mortal flesh.⁴³*

As Mark Musa makes clear, “There were two ways in which God could accomplish man’s redemption - by means of His Mercy or by means of His Justice. God decided to employ both means, showing His Mercy by taking on the flesh and His Justice by His suffering and death on the Cross.”⁴⁴ And upon the circuitous timeline of our earthly journey, situated between our temporal restlessness and the promise of eternal peace is the very instant we recognize our complete and utter helplessness, acknowledge our sinfulness, and (with the help of his grace pulling us from within) turn back to God to freely embrace his mercy. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise VII*, 79-87

⁴² Dante Alighieri, *Paradise VII*, 97-102

⁴³ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise VII*, 115-120

⁴⁴ Dante Alighieri, and Mark Musa. 2003. *The portable Dante*. (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books.) Pages 427-428

⁴⁵ Eph. 2:8 NAB

It is precisely here, *in the turning back*, where we find hope. “Hope denotes a movement or a stretching forth of the appetite towards an arduous good; In so far as we hope for anything as being possible to us by means of the Divine assistance, our hope attains God Himself, on Whose help it leans.”⁴⁶ Hell, therefore, reflects our willing forfeiture of the love, grace, and mercy of God,⁴⁷ and the unforced surrender of our souls to the evil one. Alas, all who enter Hell have made the earthly choice to abandon the hope of Christ.⁴⁸

The Lost Son found hope and turned home - beginning his ascension toward his father - after first acknowledging his sins;⁴⁹ likewise, Dante the pilgrim finds hope, having emerged from Hell “through a small round opening...to see once more the stars.”⁵⁰ Dante’s use of diminutive imagery (the small opening here and the cramped fissures from the Canto of the Damned Popes) to define Hell is likewise no simple coincidence. Sin - and by extension, Hell - is miniscule, tiny, constraining, collapsed in on itself, frozen (like Lucifer)⁵¹ in the icy-ness of the wayward *ego*. In the words of C.S. Lewis, the realm of Hell is smaller than one atom of Heaven, and a damned soul, crammed with “all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies...is shrunk, shut up in itself...fists clenched, teeth clenched, eyes fast shut. Only the Greatest of all can make himself small enough to enter Hell. For the higher a thing is, the lower it can descend.”⁵²

So, why did God not choose another way for our redemption?⁵³ Because Christ had to go all the way down, he had to descend all the way to the furthest, lowest outlying point; to completely

⁴⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Secunda Secundae Partis, Question 17

⁴⁷ Catholic Church. “Hell,” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012. 1033-1037.

⁴⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, III, 9 (The inscription above the gates of Hell reads: ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER.

⁴⁹ Luke 15:18 NAB

⁵⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XXXIV 137, 139

⁵¹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, XXXIV 52

⁵² C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1946), Chapter 13. Pages 138-139

⁵³ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, VII 56-57

swallow up sin he had to go after every single lost soul.⁵⁴ In the end, he had to *become sin itself*.⁵⁵ Darkness cannot overcome the light of Christ,⁵⁶ nor can sin overcome his grace.⁵⁷ The mercy of God - and the suffering of Christ - do not merely go hand-in-hand. Rather, they became one upon the cross.

Communion is derived from the Latin word meaning “common.” At the Last Supper—the very first Mass of his Church—Jesus gathered with his disciples around a table, broke bread, and said “This is my body, which will be given for you.”⁵⁸ Within 24 hours, Jesus would be scourged, crowned with thorns, and nailed through his hands and feet to a cross. Christ and the cross became one; our communion with Christ, therefore, requires communion with the cross. As members of the body of Christ we are called to receive the grace of Jesus by embracing our earthly suffering as he did—with thanksgiving, faith, humility, and love; to “Be satisfied with *quia unexplained*”.⁵⁹

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”⁶⁰ In our suffering, Jesus Christ eternally satiates our hunger and forever quenches our thirst. Saint Paul proclaims, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church.”⁶¹ ⁶²

On April 30, 2000, Saint Pope John Paul II designated the second Sunday of Easter as the Sunday of Divine Mercy in obedience with Christ’s command to Saint Maria Faustina

⁵⁴ Luke 15:4

⁵⁵ 2 Cor. 5:21 NAB

⁵⁶ John 1:5 NAB

⁵⁷ Rom. 5:20 NAB

⁵⁸ Luke 22:19 NAB

⁵⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatory*, III 37. The remainder of this tercet provides further insight: “O human race! If you knew everything, no need for Mary to have borne a son.”

⁶⁰ Matt. 16:24 NAB

⁶¹ Col. 1:24 NAB

⁶² Michael Skinner, *Peaceful Heart Rosary*, www.gratiareflections.com (GratiaReflections 2020) [URL](#)

Kowalska.⁶³ In his homily on the one year anniversary of her canonization - Divine Mercy Sunday, 2001 - Saint Pope John Paul II said this:

“Let us thank the Lord for his love, which is stronger than death and sin. It is revealed and put into practice as mercy in our daily lives and prompts every person in turn to have "mercy" towards the Crucified One. Is not loving God and loving one's neighbor and even one's "enemies", after Jesus' example, the program of life of every baptized person and of the whole Church?... Mary, Mother of Mercy, help us always to have this trust in your Son, our Redeemer. Help us too, Saint Faustina, whom we remember today with special affection. Fixing our weak gaze on the divine Savior's face, we would like to repeat with you: "Jesus, I trust in you". Now and forever. Amen.”⁶⁴

Christ inspired Saint Faustina to “tell the whole world of My great mercy.”⁶⁵ Fittingly, much of Faustina’s diary focuses on the grace of suffering, particularly the relationship between suffering and communion with Christ:

Suffering is a great grace; through suffering the soul becomes like the Savior; in suffering love becomes crystallized; the greater the suffering, the purer the love.⁶⁶

I am glad I can suffer for You, however little. When I feel that the suffering is more than I can bear, I take refuge in the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and I speak to Him with profound silence.⁶⁷

From the moment I came to love suffering, it ceased to be a suffering for me. Suffering is the daily food of my soul.⁶⁸

I will comfort the most sweet Eucharistic Heart continuously and will play harmonious melodies on the strings of my heart. Suffering is the most harmonious melody of all.⁶⁹

If the angels were capable of envy, they would envy us for two things: one is the receiving of Holy Communion, and the other is suffering.⁷⁰

⁶³ Faustina. 2014. *Divine Mercy in My Soul. The Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska.* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press) Paragraph 299

⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II. “Homily of John Paul II”. Divine Mercy Sunday. April 22, 2001

⁶⁵ Faustina. 300

⁶⁶ Faustina. 57

⁶⁷ Faustina. 73

⁶⁸ Faustina. 276

⁶⁹ Faustina. 385

⁷⁰ Faustina. 1804

*Oh if only the suffering soul knew how it is loved by God, it would die of joy and excess of happiness! Someday, we will know the value of suffering, but then we will no longer be able to suffer. The present moment is ours.*⁷¹

My daughter, suffering will be a sign to you that I am with you.⁷²

C.S. Lewis writes that if we aim at Heaven, we'll get earth 'thrown in', but he cautions: "aim at earth, and you will get neither."⁷³ *The Divine Comedy* teaches that our aim, our soul's line of sight must be first trained downward. To descend is to ascend. To suffer is to be redeemed. On this, our paltry globe, to become truly wise is to hold our world for least, to turn our thoughts to other things.⁷⁴ Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an indispensable guide for how to get to Heaven; namely, through an active embrace of the cross and an inspired effort to acknowledge our sinfulness and receive the only remedy for it: the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus Christ through His Church and her sacraments.

The only aim in life is death. The only peace in life is through Christ, who by his cross and resurrection has overcome the world.⁷⁵ Saint Augustine's famous confession⁷⁶ is echoed by Dante in the final lines of *The Divine Comedy*:

*At this point power failed high fantasy
but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning,
I felt my will and my desire impelled*

*by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.*⁷⁷

⁷¹ Faustina. 963

⁷² Faustina. 669

⁷³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), Book 3. Chapter 10. Page 134.

⁷⁴ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, XXII 134-138

⁷⁵ John 16:33 NAB

⁷⁶ Augustine, of Hippo, Saint, 354-430. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by E.B. Pusey 1947. 1.1
"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee"

⁷⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, XXXIII 142-145