

SATAN TAKES A HAMMERING FROM SAINT BERNARD —OR— A PSYCHOLOGY OF SATAN

EVEN MORE than a shattering rebuke of the Evil One, this passage from Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 or 91–1153) lays bare the mental and spiritual machinations that proved to be Lucifer's undoing.

Saint Bernard's 'rebuke' is from his [*On t]he Steps of Humility [and Pride]* (*De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, written 1125 or 26), part 2 ('The Degrees of Pride'), chapter 10 ('Inquisitiveness, the First Degree of Pride'). *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, the first of Saint Bernard's published works, is a commentary on chapter 7 ('On Humility') of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

Saint Bernard, Cistercian Abbot of Clairvaux and Doctor of the Church, is called 'the last of the Fathers' of the Church for renewing and bringing to the fore in the twelfth century the important theology of the Fathers. Source: <https://vatican.va/> via <https://tinyurl.com/mw7hwvfs> (Benedict XVI) and <https://tinyurl.com/zb48cnpc> (Pius XII).

The Steps of Humility, translated from the Latin by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, was first published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1957, and was republished by The Saint Austin Press, London, in 2001. In both of these editions, the extract runs over pages 56–62. The present editor has made *additions* in preference to *replacements* in the text, to assist the reader's comprehension while preserving Webb and Walker's translation intact.

From Saint Bernard's preface, page 16: 'The first degree of pride is inquisitiveness, a state in which sight and all the other senses wander off in pursuit of things that are of no concern for a man's salvation.'

INQUISITIVENESS, THE FIRST DEGREE OF PRIDE

NOW CONSIDER Satan, who was placed even higher than Eve—not merely in paradise, but in the very delights of paradise. What more could he ask? Full of beauty, full of wisdom, had he only refrained [cf. stopped himself] from prying into the powers of One higher than himself, he would never have had to contend [cf. grapple] with One mightier than himself. Had he only remained where God had put him, he would never have fallen. But Satan insisted that he must have a higher place, and so we see him subjecting mysteries higher than himself to his own critical study. There is one discordant [cf. clashing] voice among the hosts [cf. armies] of heaven, one who breaks through peace and harmony by his self-assertion, even threatening to disturb the bliss of the Trinity. Where can such presumption [cf. arrogance] lead, such insult and disturbance, such prying into the wisdom of an order [cf. a system] established by God? Thousands upon thousands are God's ministers [cf. servants], but only God sits enthroned in majesty. Yet Satan insists that he will have a throne.

Only you, Satan, with your irreverence, your curiosity, and your presumption [cf. arrogant demand] to be different from the rest—only you insist upon taking a seat in heaven, so as to be like the Most High God. But what is your purpose [cf. intention]? What gives you such confidence? Only measure your strength, you mad fool, think what you are about, see what you are doing! Can you presume [cf. dare] to act thus [cf. like this] with God's knowledge [cf. with God knowing about it], or do you suppose Him to be ignorant? Have you His permission, or do you ignore His will? Ask yourself how God, Whose knowledge is perfect, can possibly remain in ignorance of your evil design; how the One Whose will is perfect could approve your wish. Or is it rather that you know very well that God is aware, and that He disapproves of your plan, but yet you suppose that He cannot resist you? For truly, unless

you doubt that you are yourself one of His creatures, I cannot believe that you can doubt the omnipotence [cf. attribute of being all-powerful] and the infinite knowledge and goodness of the Creator. He decreed your existence and made you, such as you are, out of nothing. How do you suppose that God can consent to that which must not be, and which He can so easily bring to nought [cf. nothing]? What your followers do on earth, I see fully accomplished in you already. You begin their evil deeds for them, and they have only to follow your example and rely on your help. 'Is your eye evil because He is good?'⁸⁰ You have presumed monstrously on [cf. monstrously taken advantage of] God's goodness! In the face of His power you have become bold; confronted with His supreme knowledge you show yourself impudent [cf. shameless].

You have said to yourself, 'Is the Creator likely to destroy any one of His creatures?' This is the evil on which you have been meditating, this the thought that shows you up as a monster of impiety [cf. unholiness]. 'I know that none of my thoughts is hidden from God,' you argue, 'for He is God. Nor can this design of mine please Him, for He is good. Nor can I escape from His hand, even should He will to let me go unpunished, for He is almighty. Should I then not fear . . . ?' But you go on to convince yourself that there is no need to fear. 'Since God is so good,' you say, 'may He not be pleased even by the evil that I do, seeing that I am so much less a being than He? At least, I call it my evil act insofar as it goes against His will, but if He should think fit to avenge [cf. take vengeance for] it when He could so easily overlook it, why then the evil is His! But He would no more avenge a wrong than He would deprive any creature of [cf. prevent any creature from having] His goodness.'

You have taken yourself in, poor fool, but God is not deceived. Evil may deceive itself, but it cannot lie to God. The evil that you do is done in God's sight, and now, since you presume on [cf. take

advantage of] His great goodness to you to the extent of plotting wickedly against Him, it is only just [cf. right] that your iniquity [cf. wickedness] should make you an object of hatred. What greater evil can there be than to show contempt for our Creator precisely in regard to that which should make us love Him more? What evil more terrible could you conceive than to presume on such great kindness, trusting that God would not wish to avenge your action when it lay in His power to do so? You have no doubt about His power. You know that He can destroy you as easily as He made you, and yet 'you render Him evil for good, and hatred in return for His love.'⁸¹

Such wickedness as yours is worthy, not of a passing moment of anger, but of eternal hatred, since it was against His will that you desired and hoped to be God's equal. If He had tolerated your design, He would always have had you as a companion against His will, and this could only have given Him sorrow. You thought that He would prefer to choose sorrow for Himself rather than suffer [cf. allow] you to perish [cf. be destroyed], refraining to cast [cf. holding back from casting] you out when He could rid Himself of you so easily. You cannot see that His kindness does not make it impossible for Him to punish you. Yet, if you believe Him to be kind, your conduct is all the more hateful if you do not love Him. If God suffers [cf. tolerates] such an insult to be committed against Himself, rather than take action against you, think how great is your malice in not sparing Him this sorrow, when He spares not Himself so that He may spare you. But far be it from the divine perfection that God should be unjust, simply because He is merciful, as if it were impossible that God could be both just and merciful at once. Indeed, without justice there could be no real mercy in God, for mercy bestowed with justice is obviously a better thing than mercy given indiscriminately [cf. not given selectively]. Mercy would even cease to be a virtue, without justice to decide how it is to be bestowed.

But now, since you show yourself ungrateful towards the gratuitous [cf. voluntary, free] goodness of God Who made you, you have no fear of justice, although you cannot be unfamiliar with it. Therefore you boldly commit this crime, and make yourself a futile [cf. useless] promise that you will go unpunished. Now you will realize soon enough that He Whom you already know to be good, is also just, for you are about to fall into the very trap which you had devised for your Maker. You strive [cf. work] against God, and you suppose Him to be incapable of hindering [cf. obstructing] your design. No one but yourself could imagine that such goodness as His could prevent Him from punishing justly, and so the punishment that you had planned for God is meted out [cf. dealt out, distributed] to yourself. God cannot, nor should He, suffer with [cf. tolerate, bear] impunity [cf. freedom from punishment] that His goodness be subjected to such an outrage [cf. atrocity]. Forgiveness is not denied you in His sentence, but it is conditional on your own ability to realize your fault and ask His pardon. Yet the hardness of your impenitent [cf. unrepentant] heart makes confession on your part impossible, and so it is yourself, and not God, who is unable to avoid punishment.

God has said that 'His throne is heaven, and [that] the earth is His footstool.'⁸² He has not said that His throne occupies any one part of heaven, the east for instance, or the west—no, the whole of heaven He claims as His throne. Therefore it is not as if you could make any particular part of heaven into your own dwelling-place, since God has already chosen the whole heaven for His own. Neither can you take up your residence on the earth, for this is God's footstool. The earth is, moreover, that solid rock on which the church was built, so there can certainly be no room for you there. What then are you to do? Thrust down from heaven and forbidden to remain on earth, you must seek a place in the unsubstantial air, and fly hither and thither [cf. in various directions, in a disorganized way] for ever in the torment of your

own inconstancy [cf. unfaithfulness]. You strove [cf. tried] to seize upon [cf. snatch] some permanent eminence [cf. greatness] for yourself, and now instead you are doomed to wander for all eternity in the void between God's footstool and His lofty throne.

We read that the six-winged Seraphim who contemplate God as they fly from heaven to earth and back again to heaven, use two of their wings wherewith [cf. with which] to cover the head and feet of their Lord. And I think that, just as the Cherubim forbade [cf. refused to allow] the return of fallen man into paradise by holding out their flaming swords, so the Seraphim are there to forbid access to your inquisitive eyes, O Satan. Your manner of examining the hidden things of heaven and the mysteries of the church on earth, would be as impudent [cf. immodest] as it was searching. But now you may be well content with the fruits of your presumption, for you have won to yourself the hearts of all proud men—of all those, that is, who on earth disdain [cf. refuse] to be like other men, yet are unable to fly to heaven like the angels. And although the head of God is hidden from you in heaven as are His feet on earth, you are still allowed to look upon the space between, where you can see angels ascending and (if they are yours) descending. But what the angels hear in heaven, or what they tell us here on earth before returning thither [cf. to that place], all this is concealed from you.

O Lucifer, rising star of the morning! No . . . Lucifer we can no longer call you, since you bring us, not light, but darkness. You are the bearer of black night and death. Your course was mapped out for you in heaven from east to zenith [cf. high point], but you have chosen to make for the north. The higher you strive [cf. try] to be, the nearer your star is to its setting. I must confess that I cannot but be curious to find a motive for your destroying curiosity. You have determined to set your throne in the north,⁸³ you say, but by this 'north' we are surely not meant to understand a cardinal point [cf. north, south, east, or west; a geographical location], since you

are a spirit and your throne cannot be a material one. I rather think that the north signifies all those who are destined for damnation, and that by your throne we are meant to understand your power over them. Since you were so near God, you could see more clearly than the other spirits into His foreknowledge. You would have seen that the damned, being wholly unenlightened with wisdom, utterly untouched by the warmth of charity, were ideal material for your domination. You could fill their deserted and empty souls with the brightness of diabolical cunning, and set them on fire with the flames of your own malevolence [cf. ill will]. The Most High rules over His own with wisdom and goodness, and they obey Him. You are not without some resemblance to Him, ruling as you do; only your rule is achieved with malice and subtle [cf. cunning] fraud, and your subjects are all the sons of pride.

Yet how is it, I wonder, that when you saw your own evil kingship so clearly in the foreknowledge of God, you had no inkling [cf. slight knowledge] of your own fall from heaven? If you had foreseen this too, what madness could have instilled in you the desire to rule over others by inflicting misery on them? How could you prefer to dominate others in wretchedness, rather than subject yourself to God in all happiness? Were it not better for you to be a citizen of God's great and glorious heaven, rather than to be prince of darkness? It is a mystery, yet I think it is more likely that you can have had no foreknowledge of your fall and of its terrible consequences. Perhaps you were over-confident in the goodness of God and thus [cf. in this way] offended Him. Or perhaps, having once seen the possibility of being a king in your own right, the mote [cf. speck] of pride became such a beam in your eye that all else was blotted out.



NOTES

⁸⁰ Saint Matthew 20:15 (according to the Vulgate).

⁸¹ Psalm 109[108]:5.

⁸² Isaiah 66:1.

⁸³ Isaiah 14:13.



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