

TRADITION & TRADITIONS



THE LADDER FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN

~ Guigo II ~

Translated by Jeremy Holmes¹

Brother Guigo to his beloved brother Gervase: rejoice in the Lord. I am bound by debt to love you, brother, because you first began to love me; and I am compelled to write back to you, because you first invited me to write by your letter. So I decided to send you some things I had thought out concerning the spiritual exercise of cloistered monks, so that you, who have learned such things better by experiencing them than I have by discoursing learnedly about them, may be the judge and corrector of my thoughts. And it is right that I should offer you first of all these beginnings of our labor, that you may gather the first-fruits of the new plant²—which you stole by a laudable theft from servitude under Pharaoh³ and pampered solitude, and called into the well-ordered rows of a military camp,⁴ skillfully cutting off the wild-olive branch, you prudently grafted it onto a cultivated olive tree.⁵

1 *Translator's Note:* Guigo II (d. 1188) was the ninth prior of the Carthusian motherhouse, the Grande Chartreuse, in the second half of the twelfth century. Neither he nor his order were much concerned to leave a record about his life, and in the history of the order he is largely overshadowed by his predecessor, Guigo I. As a result, the work here translated, his *Scala Claustralium* ("The Ladder of Monks"), has been attributed to various authors over time, including St. Augustine and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Its popularity has endured, however, and today it is seen as a classic work in *lectio divina*, or the technique of reading sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer. My translation is based on the critical edition of Guigo's work, Guigo II, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative (l'échelle des moines)*, *Douze méditations*, Sources Chrétiennes 163, eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970). After the translation was complete, I compared it with the translation given by Colledge and Walsh in Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, Cistercian Studies Series 148 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981). Where appropriate, I have added further biblical references to the footnotes or omitted references that seem unlikely, and have supplied occasional interpretive comments. The better to serve academic study, this translation leans more towards a word-equivalence approach than Colledge and Walsh. I also attempt to bring out more clearly how the biblical allusions have impacted Guigo's choice of words.

2 Ps. 143:12.

3 Exod. 13:14.

4 Song of Sol. 6:3, 9; Num. 2.

5 Rom. 11:17, 24.

One day, while I was busy with the bodily labor of the hands, I began to think about man's spiritual exercise, and four spiritual steps suddenly presented themselves to my pondering soul: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. This is the ladder of cloistered monks⁶ whereby they are lifted up from earth into heaven; although it is divided into only a few steps, its length is nonetheless immense and incredible. Its lower part rests on the earth, but its upper part penetrates the clouds and probes the secrets of heaven.⁷

As these steps differ in name and number, so also are they distinguished by order and value. If anyone diligently considers their properties and functions, the various effects they have on us, and how one differs from and is better than another, he will consider any labor and study spent on them as short and easy in comparison to their tremendous usefulness and sweetness.⁸

Now *reading* is the diligent examination of Scripture with attentiveness of soul. *Meditation* is the studious action of the mind as it searches out the knowledge of hidden truth under the guidance of its own reasoning power. *Prayer* is the heart's devout reaching out to God for the removal of evils or the acquisition of goods. *Contemplation* is a certain elevation above itself of the mind suspended in God, as it tastes the joys of eternal sweetness.

Now that we have described the four steps, we must go on to look at their functions with respect to us.

The Four Steps

Reading seeks the sweetness of the blessed life, meditation finds it, prayer asks for it, and contemplation tastes it.⁹ Reading places solid food in the mouth;¹⁰ meditation chews and breaks it; prayer extracts the flavor; contemplation is the very sweetness that gives joy and refreshes. [The function of] reading is in the bark, meditation in the pith,¹¹ prayer in the request for what is desired, and contemplation in the enjoyment of the sweetness obtained. That one may grasp this more clearly, I will give one of many possible examples.

In reading I hear: *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.*¹² Behold, this saying, brief but packed full with a sweet and multiple meaning for the soul

6 Guigo's letter is often named from this phrase, "the ladder of monks," or in Latin: *scala claustralium*.

7 Gen. 28:12; Sir. 35:21.

8 Gen. 29:20.

9 A 15th-century manuscript found at the abbey of Melk contains the following wonderful insertion: "Hence the Lord himself said: Seek, and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you (Matt. 7:7). Seek by reading, and you shall find by meditating; knock by praying, and it shall be opened to you by contemplation."

10 1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12.

11 Compare the use of the word *adipe* ("pith" or "fat") in Pss. 80:17; 147:14.

12 Matt. 5:8.

to graze upon, provides, as it were, a cluster of grapes, and when the soul has diligently examined it she says to herself: "There could be something good here. I will withdraw into my heart and see whether perhaps I can find and understand this purity. For [most] precious and desirable is that thing whose possessors are called blessed, to which the vision of God—which is eternal life—is promised, which is highly praised by so many passages in sacred Scripture." Desiring, therefore, to elaborate this more clearly for herself, she begins to chew and break this cluster of grapes, and places it, so to speak, in a wine press by arousing the power of reason to search out what this very precious purity is, and how it can be possessed.

As diligent meditation goes to work, it does not remain outside, does not linger on the surface, but climbs higher, penetrates the interior [truths], and probes each one. Paying close attention, it considers that he did not say, *Blessed are the pure of body*, but *the pure of heart*; for to have hands innocent of evil deeds is not enough unless we be cleansed in mind from wicked thoughts. It confirms this by the authority of the prophet, when he says, *Who shall ascend the mountain of God, or who shall stand in his holy place? He who is innocent in hands and pure of heart.*¹³ It also considers how much that same prophet longs for this purity of heart, praying, *A pure heart create in me, O God,*¹⁴ and again, *If I have contemplated iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.*¹⁵ It thinks how anxious blessed Job was to guard [this purity] when he said, *I made a covenant with my eyes that I would not so much as think about a virgin.*¹⁶ See how much the holy man restrained himself: he shut his eyes lest he should see vanity,¹⁷ lest he should carelessly gaze upon what he would then unwillingly desire.

After [meditation] has studied these and similar [truths] regarding purity of heart, it begins to think about the reward, how glorious and delightful it would be to see the longed-for face of the Lord, beautiful above the sons of men,¹⁸ no longer downcast and despicable, no longer clothed in the appearance¹⁹ given him by his mother, but wearing the robe of immortality²⁰ and crowned with the diadem given him by his Father on the day of resurrection and glory,²¹ the day which the Lord

13 Ps. 23:3–4.

14 Ps. 50:12.

15 Ps. 65:18.

16 Job 31:1.

17 Ps. 118:37.

18 Ps. 44:3.

19 Colledge and Walsh render *species* as "earthly beauty," thus taking the rhetorical contrast here as between earthly and heavenly beauty. I have chosen the more basic lexical meaning of *species*, namely "appearance," because I understand the contrast as between unglorified and glorified appearance.

20 Sir. 6:32.

21 Song of Sol. 3:11.

has made.²² It ponders that this vision will offer that satisfaction of which the prophet says, *I will be satisfied when your glory appears*.²³

Do you see how much juice has come from the smallest grape, how much fire has arisen from a spark, how much this small mass, *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God*, has been stretched out on the anvil of meditation? But how much further it could still be stretched if someone experienced approached it! I perceive that the well is deep,²⁴ but I am still a clumsy beginner and have scarcely found a small amount to draw from it. Inflamed by these fires, incited by these desires, the alabaster broken,²⁵ the soul begins to have a presentiment of the ointment's sweetness—not by the sense of taste as yet, but as it were by the sense of smell.

Thence she infers how sweet it would be to experience this purity, if simply meditating upon it is so delightful. But what shall she do? The desire to have it consumes her, but she does not find within herself the means of having it; and the more she seeks, the more she thirsts. When she takes up meditation, she takes up sorrow,²⁶ because she does not experience the sweetness that meditation shows to be in purity of heart without itself providing it. For to experience this sweetness belongs neither to the one who reads nor to the one who meditates unless it be given from above.²⁷

For to read and to meditate is common to the good and to the wicked. Even the Gentile philosophers discovered what the main part²⁸ of the true good consisted in, guided by the power of reason; but since when they had known God, they did not glorify him as God,²⁹ and placing confidence in their own powers, they said, *We will make our tongue great, our lips are from ourselves*,³⁰ they did not deserve to obtain what they were able to see. They became vain in their thoughts, and their wisdom was swallowed up³¹—the wisdom that the pursuit of human learning gained for them, not the Spirit of wisdom, who alone gives true wisdom—that is, savory knowledge,³² which delights and refreshes the soul that possesses it with an invaluable flavor.

22 Ps. 117:24.

23 Ps. 16:15.

24 John 4:11.

25 Mark 14:3; John 12:3.

26 Eccles. 1:18.

27 John 19:11.

28 "Main part": *summa* could also mean "height," but I have rendered it in such a way as to credit the Gentile philosophers with only a partial insight.

29 Rom. 1:21.

30 Ps. 11:5.

31 Rom. 1:21.

32 Guigo alludes here to a popular etymology according to which the word *sapientia* ("wisdom") is formed from the combination of *sapidus* ("savory" or "sweet") and *scientia* ("knowledge").

Of this [wisdom] it is said, *Wisdom will not enter a wicked soul*.³³ It comes only from God. And as the Lord has bestowed the faculty of baptizing on many, but has reserved the power and authority to remit sins in baptism for himself alone—hence John said, speaking antonomastically³⁴ and by way of distinction, *This is he who baptizes*³⁵—so also can we say of him, “This is he who gives the flavor of wisdom, and makes knowledge savory to the soul.” Words are given to all, but wisdom of soul only to a few; the Lord dispenses it to whom he wills, and when he wills.³⁶

The Heart Burning with Love

Seeing that she cannot obtain the desired sweetness of knowledge and experience on her own, and [that] the more she approaches a lowly heart,³⁷ the more God is exalted,³⁸ the soul humbles herself, and has recourse to prayer, saying, “O Lord, seen only by the pure of heart, I search by reading, meditating on what true purity of heart is and how it may be had, that by purity of heart I may know you at least to some small extent. I was searching for your face, O Lord, your face, O Lord, did I seek;³⁹ for a long time I have meditated in my heart,⁴⁰ and in my meditation the fire and the desire of knowing you more has blazed up.⁴¹ When you break for me the bread of sacred Scripture,⁴² you are known to me in the breaking of the bread;⁴³ and the more I know you, the more I desire to know you, no longer in the bark of the letter but in the knowledge⁴⁴ of experience. Nor do I ask this on the basis of my own merits, O Lord, but in virtue of your mercy. For I confess that I am an unworthy sinner; but even the little dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their

33 Wisd. of Sol. 1:4.

34 Antonomasia is a figure of speech whereby a title or epithet is substituted for a proper name; in this case “he who baptizes” replaces “Jesus.”

35 John 1:33.

36 1 Cor. 12:11.

37 Ps. 63:7.

38 Ps. 63:8.

39 Ps. 26:8.

40 Ps. 76:7.

41 Ps. 38:4; Luke 24:32.

42 Luke 24:30–31.

43 Luke 24:35.

44 “Knowledge”: Guigo may be playing here on the double signification of *sensus*, which could be rendered either “meaning” (as opposed to the “letter”) or “knowledge” (aligned in connotation with “experience”).

masters' table.⁴⁵ Give me therefore, O Lord, a pledge of the future inheritance,⁴⁶ at least a drop of the heavenly rain to cool my thirst⁴⁷—for I burn with love."⁴⁸

By these and similar blazing words, [the soul] inflames her desire; thus she demonstrates her fervor, and, by these incantations, summons her spouse. But the Lord, whose eyes are upon the just, whose ears are directed not only toward their prayers⁴⁹ but into the prayers themselves,⁵⁰ does not wait until she has finished speaking, but interrupting in the middle of the prayer he thrusts himself in and rushes to the desiring soul, soaked in the dew of heavenly sweetness,⁵¹ steeped in the best of ointments;⁵² he revives the weary soul, refreshes her that was hungry, fattens her that was withered, causes her to forget earthly things, marvelously vivifies the self-forgetful soul by slaying her and sobers by inebriating her.

And, as in certain bodily functions the soul is so overcome by carnal desire that she loses all use of reason, and a man becomes, as it were, entirely carnal, so conversely, the motions arising from the urges of the flesh are so overcome and swallowed up by the soul in this exalted contemplation that the body in no way opposes the spirit, and man becomes, as it were, entirely spiritual.

But, O Lord, how shall we discover when you do this, and what will be the sign of your coming?⁵³ Are sighs and tears the messenger and witnesses of this consolation and joy? If so, this is a novel antiphrasis,⁵⁴ and unusual signification. For what agreement is there between consolation and sighs, between joy and tears?—if indeed these should be called tears and not rather the overflowing abundance of interior dew infused from above as a proof of interior cleansing and a purification of the exterior man; so that as in the baptism of infants an exterior washing signifies and represents the washing of the interior man, so here, conversely, an interior washing gives rise to an exterior cleansing.

O happy tears, that purify interior stains and extinguish the flames of sins! Blessed are you who so weep, for you shall laugh.⁵⁵ Recognize in these tears, O

45 Matt. 15:27.

46 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:14.

47 Luke 16:24.

48 Song of Sol. 2:5.

49 Ps. 87:3, *ad preces* ("toward their prayers").

50 Ps. 33:16; 1 Pet. 3:12, *in preces* ("into the prayers").

51 Song of Sol. 5:2; Gen. 27:28.

52 Song of Sol. 4:14; Amos 6:6.

53 Matt. 24:3. It is worth noting here that the tradition distinguishes three "comings" of Christ: the first coming is the Incarnation, the last is the coming in glory at the end of time (the original context of Guigo's Matthean allusion), and in between these is his invisible coming in grace to the individual believer.

54 Antiphrasis is the use of an expression where its exact opposite would be appropriate, usually intended to produce an ironic or humorous effect.

55 Matt. 5:5.

soul, your spouse, and embrace the one whom you desired, inebriate yourself now with a torrent of pleasure,⁵⁶ suck the honey and milk⁵⁷ of consolation from the breast.⁵⁸ These are the marvelous little gifts and comforts that your spouse brings and bestows upon you, namely groans and tears. He brings you for your drink tears in measure.⁵⁹ Let these tears be for you bread day and night,⁶⁰ bread that strengthens a man's heart,⁶¹ and sweeter than honey and honeycomb.⁶²

O Lord Jesus, if these tears provoked by remembering and desiring you are so sweet, how sweet shall the joy be that comes from open vision of you! If it is so sweet to weep for you, how sweet shall it be to rejoice over you! But why do we divulge such secret conversations to the public? Why do we try to express indescribable affections in common words? The inexperienced will not understand such things, for they would read them more clearly in the book of experience, where the unction itself teaches them.⁶³ For otherwise exterior letters will not profit the reader at all: reading exterior letters has little flavor unless the tongue takes an interior gloss⁶⁴ from the heart.

The Hidden Grace

O my soul, we have prolonged this discourse a long while. For it would have been good for us to be here and to contemplate the glory of the spouse with Peter and with John⁶⁵ and to remain with him a long time, if he wished to have built here not two, not three tents,⁶⁶ but one, in which we would be together, and together would delight. But now, the spouse says, "Release me, for now the dawn is rising;⁶⁷ now you have received the light of grace and the visitation you desired."

Having given the blessing, wounded the sinew of the thigh, and changed the

56 Ps. 35:8.

57 Song of Sol. 4:11. Note that the word order is "honey and milk" rather than the common biblical phrase "milk and honey."

58 Isa. 66:11.

59 Ps. 79:6.

60 Ps. 41:4.

61 Ps. 103:15.

62 Ps. 18:11.

63 1 John 2:27.

64 A reader of Scripture in the 12th-century might have consulted a gloss, a brief line-by-line commentary. Guigo's point is that even a commentary will not help unless the reader already has an "interior gloss" in his heart in the form of spiritual and experiential understanding.

65 The mention of Peter and John at the transfiguration sets the reader up to expect the name "James," which in Latin is *Jacobus*; Guigo takes advantage of this to transition into a mystical comment on the story of the patriarch Jacob. He repeats this pattern the next time he mentions the scene of the transfiguration.

66 Matt. 17:4.

67 Gen. 32:26.

name from Jacob to Israel,⁶⁸ the long-desired spouse withdraws for a little while, having suddenly escaped. He withdraws himself as regards the aforementioned vision, as regards the sweetness of contemplation, but remains present as regards governance [of the soul], as regards grace, as regards union.

But do not fear, O bride, do not despair, do not suppose that you are despised because [your] spouse has withdrawn his face from you for a little while. All things work together for your good,⁶⁹ and you profit both by his coming and by his departure. He comes to you, and he withdraws from you. He comes for consolation, and withdraws as a precaution, lest the greatness of the consolation should puff you up;⁷⁰ lest, having the spouse with you all the time, you should begin to despise your companions, and attribute this consolation no longer to grace, but to nature. The spouse dispenses this grace when he wills and to whom he wills; it is not possessed as though by right of inheritance.

There is a common saying that too much familiarity breeds contempt. He withdraws, therefore, lest he be despised while too constantly present, that when absent he may be all the more desired, that being desired he may be more eagerly sought, that being sought for a long time he may be found at last with more gratitude. Furthermore, if this consolation were never lacking, which in comparison with the future glory to be revealed in us⁷¹ is enigmatic and partial,⁷² we might think that we have here an abiding city and would think about the future [city] less.⁷³

Therefore, lest we should confuse exile with the homeland, a pledge with the chief part of the reward, the spouse comes and withdraws successively; one moment he brings consolation, another moment he turns all our bed in sickness.⁷⁴ For a little while he permits us to taste how sweet he is,⁷⁵ and before we fully experience him, he withdraws himself; and thus hovering over us with outstretched wings, so to speak, he encourages us to fly,⁷⁶ as though he were to say, "Behold,

68 Gen. 32:25–32.

69 Rom. 8:28.

70 2 Cor. 12:7.

71 Rom. 8:18.

72 1 Cor. 13:12.

73 Heb. 13:14.

74 This cryptic phrase is an allusion to Ps. 40:4. As Augustine interprets it, the image is of a feverish man who tosses and turns on his bed unable to find a comfortable position. The meaning is that we try to find our rest in earthly things, but God sometimes deprives us of comfort so that our restlessness will lead us to seek the things of heaven. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* ["On the Psalms"], in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J.P. Migne, 1844–1864), 36:457–8.

75 Ps. 33:9.

76 Deut. 32:11.

you have barely tasted how pleasant and sweet I am,⁷⁷ but if you wish to be wholly satisfied with this sweetness, run after me in the aroma of my ointments,⁷⁸ lift up your hearts to where I am at the right hand of God the Father.⁷⁹ There you will see me,⁸⁰ not through a mirror in an enigma, but face to face:⁸¹ your heart will rejoice fully, and no one will take your joy away.”⁸²

But take care, O bride: when the spouse withdraws himself, he does not go far. And though you do not see him, nonetheless he sees you at all times. He is full of eyes before and behind,⁸³ you cannot hide from him anywhere; he also keeps his spirit messengers around you at all times, like the most perceptive informants,⁸⁴ that they may see how you conduct yourself when the spouse is absent and accuse you before him if they detect in you any sign of wantonness and buffoonery.

He is a jealous spouse:⁸⁵ if by any chance you take on another lover, if you are more eager to please another, immediately he will leave you, and cleave to other young maidens. This spouse is fastidious, he is noble, he is rich, beautiful above the sons of men,⁸⁶ and so none but the beautiful is worthy to be his bride. If he sees any stain in you, any wrinkle,⁸⁷ he immediately averts his eyes.⁸⁸ He cannot abide any uncleanness. Therefore be chaste, be modest and humble, that you may deserve to be visited frequently by the spouse.

I fear that this discourse may have detained you too long, but a subject matter as fertile as it is sweet compelled me; I did not prolong it of my own accord, but its sweetness drew me unwillingly.

Climbing Step by Step

Let us summarize what has been said, that what was said in a scattered way may be better understood when brought together. As was pointed out in the foregoing examples, you can see how these steps are joined together, and how one comes before another not only in time, but in causation.

For reading comes first, being as it were the foundation, and once it has given

77 1 Pet. 2:3.

78 Song of Sol. 1:3.

79 Acts 7:55; Eph. 1:20.

80 John 16:19.

81 1 Cor. 13:12.

82 John 16:22.

83 Ezek. 1:18; Rev. 4:8; 5:6.

84 The critical text edited by Colledge and Walsh has *perlatores*, which would mean agents who bear messages or bring word of something, but many manuscripts have *exploratores*, “spies.”

85 Exod. 34:14.

86 Ps. 44:3.

87 Eph. 5:27.

88 Isa. 1:15; Ps. 118:37.

us the subject matter it sends us on to meditation. Meditation then inquires more diligently about what should be desired, and like a man digging in the ground⁸⁹ it finds a treasure and displays it;⁹⁰ but when it cannot obtain [the treasure] on its own, it sends us on to prayer. Raising itself to God with all its powers, prayer begs for the desirable treasure, the sweetness of contemplation. When this comes, it rewards the labors of the three previous [steps], as it inebriates the thirsty soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness.

Reading has to do with exterior exercise; meditation has to do with interior understanding; prayer has to do with desire; contemplation is beyond all comprehension. The first step pertains to beginners, the second to the proficient, the third to the devout, and the fourth to the blessed.

Furthermore, these steps are interconnected and mutually supportive in such a way that the preceding steps benefit one little or not at all without the subsequent steps, while the subsequent steps can never or rarely be reached without the preceding ones. For what good does it do to spend all our time in continual reading, running through the lives and writings of the saints, if we do not draw out the sap by chewing and re-chewing, and transfer it into the deepest recesses of our heart by swallowing it down, that by means of them we may consider our own condition and strive to imitate the works of those whose deeds we desire to read so often?

But how shall we think about these things, or how shall we be on our guard lest by meditating on false or useless things we overstep the boundaries laid down by the holy fathers⁹¹ unless we have previously been instructed about these things either by what we read or what we hear? For hearing pertains in a certain way to reading. Hence we often say that we have read not only the books that we read to ourselves or to others but also those we hear read by a teacher.

Similarly, what good does it do a man to see by meditation what he should do if he does not gain strength to do it by the help of prayer and the grace of God? For indeed, every best and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights;⁹² without him we can do nothing, but he himself works in us,⁹³ although not altogether without us. *For we are co-workers with God,*⁹⁴ as the apostle says. For God desires that we should pray to him; he desires that when grace comes and knocks at the door⁹⁵ we should open the inner recess of our will and consent to it.

He demanded this consent of the Samaritan woman, when he said, *Call your*

89 Prov. 2:4.

90 Matt. 13:44.

91 Prov. 22:28.

92 James 1:17.

93 Phil. 2:13.

94 1 Cor. 3:9.

95 Rev. 3:20.

husband,⁹⁶ as though to say, "I desire to pour out grace upon you; make use of your free will." He demanded prayer of her: *If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him for living water.*⁹⁷ When she heard this read to her by the Lord, so to speak, the woman thus instructed meditated in her heart that to have this water would be good for her, and useful. Inflamed, therefore, by the desire to have it, she betook herself to prayer, saying, *Lord, give me this water that I may not thirst anymore.*⁹⁸

You can see that hearing the Lord's word and then meditating upon it aroused her to prayer. For how could she be eager about her request if meditation had not first inflamed her, or what good would the preceding meditation have done her if the prayer that followed had not obtained what was shown to be desirable? So for meditation to be fruitful, it must be followed by the devotion of prayer, whose effect, so to speak, is the sweetness of contemplation.

From all this we can gather that reading without meditation is arid, meditation without reading is prone to error, prayer without meditation is tepid, meditation without prayer is unfruitful; prayer with devotion obtains contemplation, while to obtain contemplation without prayer is rare or miraculous.

For God, whose power has no end and whose mercy is over all his works, sometimes raises up children to Abraham from the rocks,⁹⁹ when he forces those who were hard and did not want to consent to want it, and so like an extravagant man, he takes the bull by the horn, as the saying goes, when he thrusts himself in uninvited, when he pours himself out unsought. Even though we read that this has happened to some [people], as [it did] to Paul¹⁰⁰ and some others, still we should not take such [graces] for granted by tempting God, as it were; rather we should do what pertains to us, namely read and meditate on God's law, pray to him that he may strengthen our weakness¹⁰¹ and look [kindly] upon our imperfect [efforts], as he himself teaches us to do when he says, *Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.*¹⁰² For now *the kingdom of God suffers violence, and violent men take it away by force.*¹⁰³

The Perfection of the Blessed Life

By means of the distinctions made here one can perceive the properties of the aforementioned steps, how they are interrelated, and what each of them does in

96 John 4:16.

97 John 4:10.

98 John 4:15.

99 Matt. 3:9.

100 Acts 9, 22, 26, and Gal. 1.

101 Rom. 8:26.

102 Matt. 7:7.

103 Matt. 11:12.

us. Blessed the man whose soul is free from other affairs, who desires always to go over and over these four steps, who sells all that he has and buys the field wherein is hidden the desirable treasure,¹⁰⁴ namely to be free and to see how sweet is the Lord.¹⁰⁵

The one who has labored on the first step, has pondered on the second, has been devoted on the third, and has been lifted above himself on the fourth—by these ascents which he has arranged in his heart he ascends from strength to strength until he sees the God of gods in Zion.¹⁰⁶ Blessed the one to whom it is granted to remain on this highest step even for a little while, who can truly say: “Behold, I experience the grace of God; behold, with Peter and John¹⁰⁷ I contemplate his glory on the mount; behold, with Jacob I delight in the embraces of beautiful Rachel.”

But let this man take heed after this contemplation, which has raised him up even to heaven, lest he fall by disorderly conduct¹⁰⁸ even to the abyss; lest, after so great a visitation, he turn back to the wanton actions of the world and the allurements of the flesh. But since the weak gaze of the human mind cannot endure the brilliance of the true light for very long, let him descend in a gentle and orderly fashion to one of the three steps by which he ascended. Let him linger alternately, now on one and now on another, as he freely chooses in light of the time and place—since, as it seems to me, he is closer to God the further he is from the first step. But alas! How fragile and pitiable the human condition!

Thus we see clearly by the guidance of reason and the witness of the Scriptures that the perfection of the blessed life is contained in these four steps, and that man’s spiritual exercise should revolve around them. But who is there who perseveres in this way of life? “Who is he, and we shall praise him.”¹⁰⁹ Many find it within themselves to will, but few to accomplish.¹¹⁰ Would that we were among those few!

Now there are four reasons that commonly draw us back from these steps, namely *inevitable necessity, useful and upright activities, human weakness, and worldly frivolity*. The first is excusable, the second tolerable, the third pitiable, and the fourth blameworthy. And blameworthy indeed: if a man draws back from his

104 Matt. 13:44.

105 Pss. 33:9; 45:11.

106 Ps. 83:6–8.

107 As before, Guigo names Peter and John at the scene of the transfiguration, and then uses the name of James (*Jacobus*) to transition into a mystical comment on the story of the patriarch Jacob.

108 “Disorderly conduct”: *inordinato casu* would most literally mean “by a disordered fall.” Coledge and Walsh render it as “violently.”

109 Sir. 31:9.

110 Rom. 7:18.

intended course of action for such reasons, it would have been better never to have known the grace of God than to draw back after he knew it.

For what excuse will he have for his sin?¹¹¹ Can the Lord not justly say to him: "What more should I have done for you that I did not do?"¹¹² You were not, and I created you; you sinned and made yourself the devil's servant and I redeemed you; you ran about in the world with wicked men¹¹³ and I chose you;¹¹⁴ I had given you favor in my sight and had desired to make my dwelling with you,¹¹⁵ and you indeed have despised me, and you have cast behind you not only my words but me,¹¹⁶ and have gone after your desires."¹¹⁷

But O my God, good, pleasant and meek, sweet friend, wise counselor, strong helper, how unfeeling, how rash is the one who casts you out, who drives so humble and meek a guest from his heart! O how unhappy and ruinous an exchange, to cast out his creator and receive instead perverse and harmful thoughts, so suddenly to hand over the hidden chamber of the Holy Spirit, the heart's hidden [place], to be trampled by unclean thoughts and swine—[this heart] which just a little before was contemplating heavenly joys!¹¹⁸ The spouse's footprints are still warm in the heart, and already adulterous desires are admitted. It is unfitting and indecent that the ears that just now heard the words which man is not permitted to speak¹¹⁹ should so quickly bend to hear fables and slander,¹²⁰ that the eyes that just now were baptized with sacred tears should suddenly turn to gaze on vanities, that the tongue that just now sang the sweet nuptial song, that reconciled the bride with [her] spouse by its fiery and persuasive words and brought her into the wine cellar,¹²¹ should turn again to immodest speech, to buffoonery, to devising treacheries, to slander. Far be it from us, Lord! But if we do fall back into such things out of human weakness, let us not despair because of it but let us run back again to the merciful doctor who raises the needy from the earth and lifts the poor out of the

111 John 15:22.

112 Isa. 5:4.

113 Ps. 11:9.

114 Isa. 43:7–11.

115 John 14:23.

116 Ps. 49:17.

117 Sir. 18:30.

118 Matt. 7:6.

119 2 Cor. 12:4.

120 2 Tim. 4:4.

121 Song of Sol. 2:4.

dunghill,¹²² and he who does not desire the death of the sinner¹²³ will again cure and heal us.¹²⁴

Now it is time for me to end this letter. Let us all pray to God that he may mitigate for the present the impediments that draw us back from contemplating him, and do away with them entirely in the future, leading us on by these steps from strength to strength until we see the God of gods in Zion,¹²⁵ where the elect will not perceive the sweetness of divine contemplation drop by drop and intermittently, but, in a torrent of pleasure, will unceasingly have that joy which no one will take away,¹²⁶ and unchangeable peace, peace in the selfsame.¹²⁷

You therefore, my brother Gervase, if ever it is given you from above to ascend to the uppermost level of these steps, remember me and pray for me when things are going well for you. Thus curtain draws curtain,¹²⁸ and he who hears let him say: Come.¹²⁹

122 Ps. 112:7.

123 Ezek. 33:11.

124 Hos. 6:2.

125 Ps. 83:8.

126 John 16:22.

127 Ps. 4:9.

128 Exod. 26.

129 Rev. 22:17. Guigo is cryptic in this last sentence because he is abbreviating a standard set of allusions. A traditional mystical interpretation understood the curtains of the Temple as representing a holy person, and just as one curtain draws another curtain after it, so one holy person can draw another after him by his good example or prayers. This allusion is often paired with the reference to Revelation, which is interpreted to mean that the one who has heard the divine invitation to the heavenly banquet should then extend that invitation to others. Guigo's readers are familiar enough with these traditions that he feels no need to spell them out.