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HOW EARTHLY THINGS CAN NEVER SATISFY

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, O. CIST (1090 – 1153)

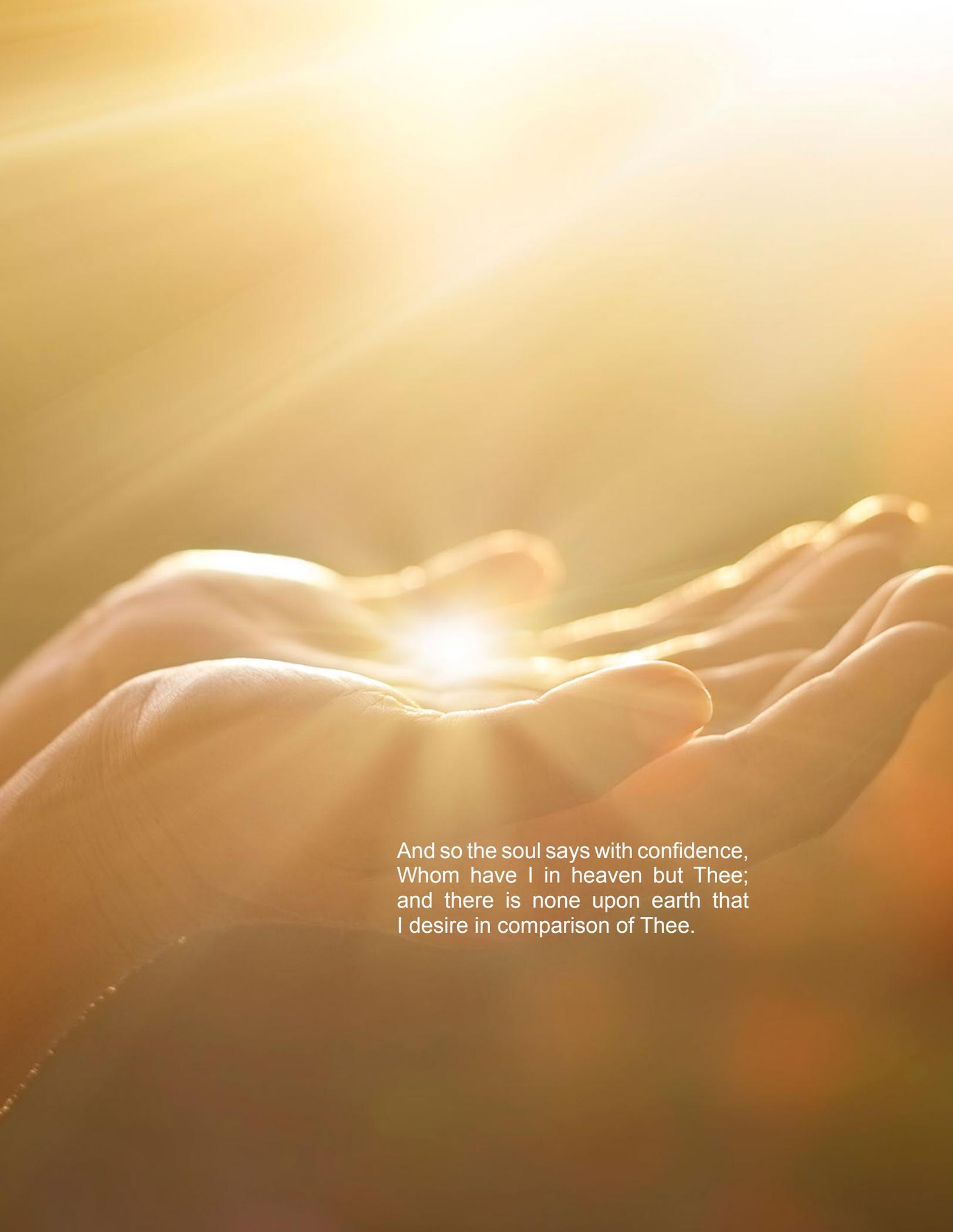
FRENCH ABBOT

Of love toward God not without reward: and how
the hunger of man's heart cannot be satisfied with
earthly things

Chapter VII of *On Loving God*



And now let us consider what profit we shall have from loving God. Even though our knowledge of this is imperfect, still that is better than to ignore it altogether. I have already said (when it was a question of wherefore and in what manner God should be loved) that there was a double reason constraining us: His right and our advantage. Having written as best I can, though unworthily, of God's right to be loved. I have still to treat of the recompense which that love brings. For although God would be loved without respect of reward, yet He wills not to leave love unrewarded. True charity cannot be left destitute, even though she is unselfish and seeketh not her own (I Cor. 13.5). Love is an affection of the soul, not a contract: it cannot rise from a mere agreement, nor is it so to be gained. It is spontaneous in its origin and impulse; and true love is its own satisfaction. It has its reward; but that reward is the object beloved. For whatever you seem to love, if it is on account of something else, what you do really love is that something else, not the apparent object of desire. St. Paul did not preach the Gospel that he might earn his bread; he ate that he might be strengthened for his ministry. What he loved was not bread, but the Gospel. True love does not demand a reward, but it deserves one. Surely no one offers to pay for love; yet some



And so the soul says with confidence,
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recompense is due to one who loves, and if his love endures he will doubtless receive it.

On a lower plane of action, it is the reluctant, not the eager, whom we urge by promises of reward. Who would think of paying a man to do what he was yearning to do already? For instance no one would hire a hungry man to eat, or a thirsty man to drink, or a mother to nurse her own child. Who would think of bribing a farmer to dress his own vineyard, or to dig about his orchard, or to rebuild his house? So, all the more, one who loves God truly asks no other recompense than God Himself; for if he should demand anything else it would be the prize that he loved and not God.

It is natural for a man to desire what he reckons better than that which he has already, and be satisfied with nothing which lacks that special quality which he misses. Thus, if it is for her beauty that he loves his wife, he will cast longing eyes after a fairer woman. If he is clad in a rich garment, he will covet a costlier one; and no matter how rich he may be he will envy a man richer than himself. Do we not see people every day, endowed with vast estates, who keep on joining field to field, dreaming of wider boundaries for their lands? Those who dwell in palaces are ever adding house to house, continually building up and tearing down, remodeling and changing. Men in high places are driven by insatiable ambition to clutch at still greater prizes. And nowhere is there any final satisfaction, because nothing there can be defined as absolutely the best or highest. But it is natural that nothing should content a man's desires but the very best, as he reckons it. Is it not, then, mad folly always to be craving for things which can never quiet our longings, much less satisfy them? No matter how many such things one has, he is always lusting after what he has not; never at peace, he sighs for new possessions. Discontented, he spends himself in fruitless toil, and finds only weariness in the evanescent and unreal pleasures of the world. In his greediness, he counts all that he has clutched as nothing in comparison with what is beyond his grasp, and loses all pleasure in his actual possessions



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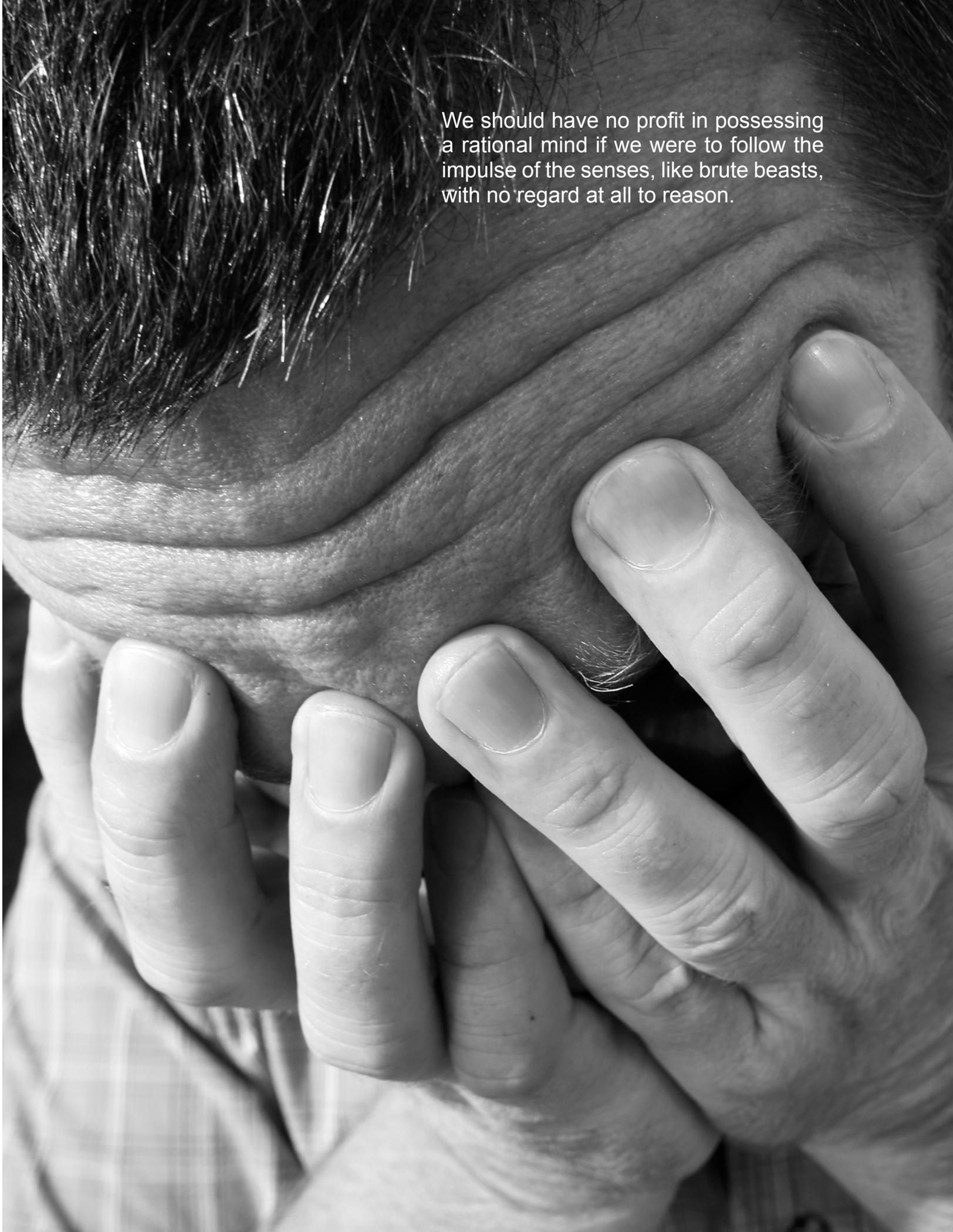
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by longing after what he has not, yet covets. No man can ever hope to own all things. Even the little one does possess is got only with toil and is held in fear; since each is certain to lose what he hath when God's day, appointed though unrevealed, shall come. But the perverted will struggles towards the ultimate good by devious ways, yearning after satisfaction, yet led astray by vanity and deceived by wickedness. Ah, if you wish to attain to the consummation of all desire, so that nothing unfulfilled will be left, why weary yourself with fruitless efforts, running hither and thither, only to die long before the goal is reached?

It is so that these impious ones wander in a circle, longing after something to gratify their yearnings, yet madly rejecting that which alone can bring them to their desired end, not by exhaustion but by attainment. They wear themselves out in vain travail, without reaching their blessed consummation, because they delight in creatures, not in the Creator. They want to traverse creation, trying all things one by one, rather than think of coming to Him who is Lord of all. And if their utmost longing were realized, so that they should have all the world for their own, yet without possessing Him who is the Author of all being, then the same law of their desires would make them contemn what they had and restlessly seek Him whom they still lacked, that is, God Himself. Rest is in Him alone. Man knows no peace in the world; but he has no disturbance when he is with God. And so the soul says with confidence, Whom have I in heaven but Thee; and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee. God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. It is good for me to hold me fast by God, to put my trust in the Lord God' (Ps. 73.25ff). Even by this way one would eventually come to God, if only he might have time to test all lesser goods in turn.

But life is too short, strength too feeble, and competitors too many, for that course to be practicable. One could never reach the end, though he were to weary himself with the long effort and fruitless



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toil of testing everything that might seem desirable. It would be far easier and better to make the assay in imagination rather than in experiment. For the mind is swifter in operation and keener in discrimination than the bodily senses, to this very purpose that it may go before the sensuous affections so that they may cleave to nothing which the mind has found worthless. And so it is written, Prove all things: hold fast that which is good' (I Thess. 5.21). Which is to say that right judgment should prepare the way for the heart. Otherwise we may not ascend into the hill of the Lord nor rise up in His holy place (Ps. 24.3). We should have no profit in possessing a rational mind if we were to follow the impulse of the senses, like brute beasts, with no regard at all to reason. Those whom reason does not guide in their course may indeed run, but not in the appointed race-track, neglecting the apostolic counsel, So run that ye may obtain'. For how could they obtain the prize who put that last of all in their endeavor and run round after everything else first?

But as for the righteous man, it is not so with him. He remembers the condemnation pronounced on the multitude who wander after vanity, who travel the broad way that leads to death (Matt. 7.13); and he chooses the King's highway, turning aside neither to the right hand nor to the left (Num. 20.17), even as the prophet saith, The way of the just is uprightness (Isa. 26.7). Warned by wholesome counsel he shuns the perilous road, and heeds the direction that shortens the search, forbidding covetousness and commanding that he sell all that he hath and give to the poor (Matt. 19.21). Blessed, truly, are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 5.3). They which run in a race, run all, but distinction is made among the racers. The Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: and the way of the ungodly shall perish' (Ps. 1.6). A small thing that the righteous hath is better than great riches of the ungodly' (Ps. 37.16). Even as the Preacher saith, and the fool discovereth, He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver'



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(Eccles. 5.10). But Christ saith, Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled' (Matt. 5.6). Righteousness is the natural and essential food of the soul, which can no more be satisfied by earthly treasures than the hunger of the body can be satisfied by air. If you should see a starving man standing with mouth open to the wind, inhaling draughts of air as if in hope of gratifying his hunger, you would think him lunatic. But it is no less foolish to imagine that the soul can be satisfied with worldly things which only inflate it without feeding it. What have spiritual gifts to do with carnal appetites, or carnal with spiritual? Praise the Lord, O my soul: who satisfieth thy mouth with good things (Ps. 103.1ff). He bestows bounty immeasurable; He provokes thee to good, He preserves thee in goodness; He prevents, He sustains, He fills thee. He moves thee to longing, and it is He for whom thou longest.

I have said already that the motive for loving God is God Himself. And I spoke truly, for He is as well the efficient cause as the final object of our love. He gives the occasion for love, He creates the affection, He brings the desire to good effect. He is such that love to Him is a natural due; and so hope in Him is natural, since our present love would be vain did we not hope to love Him perfectly some day. Our love is prepared and rewarded by His. He loves us first, out of His great tenderness; then we are bound to repay Him with love; and we are permitted to cherish exultant hopes in Him. He is rich unto all that call upon Him' (Rom. 10.12), yet He has no gift for them better than Himself. He gives Himself as prize and reward: He is the refreshment of holy soul, the ransom of those in captivity. The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him' (Lam. 3.25). What will He be then to those who gain His presence? But here is a paradox, that no one can seek the Lord who has not already found Him. It is Thy will, O God, to be found that Thou mayest be sought, to be sought that Thou mayest the more truly be found.





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But though Thou canst be sought and found, Thou canst not be forestalled. For if we say, Early shall my prayer come before Thee' (Ps. 88.13), yet doubtless all prayer would be lukewarm unless it was animated by Thine inspiration.

We have spoken of the consummation of love towards God: now to consider whence such love begins. ■

NOTES

Source: From Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1947), 1.2.3, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FP_Q2_A3.html.

Source: An Excerpt from the Christian Classic, *On Loving God*, by Bernard of Clairvaux Public Domain

https://www.ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god.txt



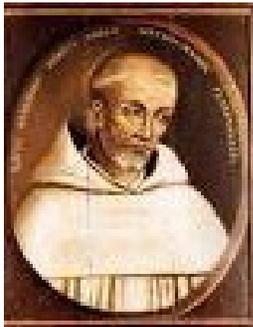
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PHILOSOPHER AND THEOLOGIAN



Bernard of Clairvaux, O. Cist (1090 – August 20, 1153) was a French abbot and the primary builder of the Cistercian order which sought to reform Benedictine monasticism. He was known as both a “honey-tongued doctor” for his writings on God’s love and at the same time was an adviser to popes. Over 800 years after his death, he is still quoted by Catholics and Protestants alike. During the Reformation, John Calvin considered

Bernard to be the chief witness to truth of the Scriptures between Gregory the Great and the 1500s.