
ST. BONAVENTURE

THE TREE OF LIFE

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Bonaventure, [*Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Ewert Cousins, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 119–122.

PROLOGUE

1. *With Christ I am nailed to the cross,*¹
from Galatians, chapter two.

Galatians 2 – ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law,* that I might live for God. **I have been crucified with Christ;**^o ²⁰yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given

^{*1} Gal. 2:19.

^{*} *Through the law I died to the law:* this is variously explained: the law revealed sin (Rom 7:7–9) and led to death and then to belief in Christ; or, the law itself brought the insight that law cannot justify (Gal 2:16; Ps 143:2); or, the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2) led to abandoning the Mosaic law; or, the law put Christ to death (cf. Gal 3:13) and so provided a way to our salvation, through baptism into Christ, through which we die (*crucified with Christ*; see Rom 6:6). Cf. also Gal 3:19–25 on the role of the law in reference to salvation.

^o 6:14; Rom 6:6, 8, 10; 7:6.

himself up for me.^{p 21} I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.^{q 1}

The true worshiper of God and disciple of Christ,
who desires² to conform perfectly
to the Savior of all men
crucified for him,³
should, above all, strive
with an earnest endeavor of soul⁴
to carry about continuously,
both in his soul and in his flesh,
the cross of Christ
until he can truly feel in himself
what the Apostle said above.⁵
Moreover, an affection and feeling of this kind⁶
is merited to be experienced in a vital way only by one
who, not unmindful of the Lord's passion nor ungrateful,

^p 1:4; Rom 8:10-11; Col 3:3-4.

^q 5:2.

¹ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ga 2:19-21.

² **“who desires”** - It is not about thinking about God, and of Christ in particular, but it is about what God and Jesus Christ cause a disciple to *desire*. This that Bonaventure seeks to do by this book, *The Tree of Life*, is to activate his readers' desires, affections, so his readers can “truly feel” in themselves the impact of God in their lives.

³ **“to conform perfectly ... crucified for him”** - Bonaventure will teach that any disciples must always begin his or her spiritual journey at/through the Cross of Christ. So “to conform perfectly” means here to conform to Christ on the Cross ... “until he can truly feel in himself”.

⁴ **“an earnest endeavor of soul”** - See below the note on the “three powers” of the soul. These “powers” is what “endeavor of soul” means.

⁵ **“The true worshiper of God and disciple of Christ”** - Always in Bonaventure's mind is the luminous example of St. Francis of Assisi, who is the most sufficient Example, and Jesus is the Exemplar.

⁶ **“an affection and feeling of this kind”** - Bonaventure shows discernment about the affections. He desires for his readers to receive affections “of this kind” with their crucified Lord. In other words, it is not about *any* affection that a disciple is able to stir up within himself or herself (this is where devotion can go way off the rails, becoming disordered *sentimentality*) when contemplating at the Cross. No, the affections that Bonaventure means are those given the soul to experience, such as “meriting to experience” the affections that Jesus Christ wants each of us to have.

contemplates⁷
the labor, suffering and love
of Jesus crucified,
with such vividness of memory, such sharpness of intellect
and such charity of will⁸
that he can truly say with the bride:
*A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me;
he will linger
between my breasts.*²

2. To enkindle in us this affection, to shape this understanding and to imprint this memory,⁹ I have endeavored to gather this bundle of myrrh from the forest of the holy Gospel, which treats at length the life, passion and glorification of Jesus Christ¹⁰. I have

⁷ “**contemplates**” – One can “endeavor” to *meditate* (holy thinking about holy things) by *lectio divina*, by prayerful and careful study of the Scriptures, by reading good Theology and Spirituality. But *contemplation* is something that we cannot endeavor, because contemplation is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Contemplation opens the realities themselves (not just ideas about reality) to become suddenly alive to a disciple, and the disciple to become fully present to those realities. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**contemplation**” – “Religious or spiritual meditation; (sometimes) *spec.* a meditative practice in which a person seeks to pass beyond intellectual reasoning or reflection to a direct experience of the divine or infinite.”

⁸ “**memory ... intellect ... will**” – These are the “three powers of soul”. Notice that Bonaventure desires for a disciple the activation of just one of the powers of soul, but all of the powers of soul – the fullest possible personal interaction with the mystery of Christ Crucified.

^{*2} Cant. 1:12.

⁹ “**to enkindle ... to shape ... imprint**” – Again, the powers of soul. But notice the order here. He starts with the kindling of the affections, which then need to be “shaped” or discerned through the use of one’s intellect, so that what a person has felt about Christ in some moment in his earthly life is discerningly understood, with the result that one has a genuine, trustworthy memory of Christ. It is through attention to our desires that we have access to the reality of *disordered affections* functioning within us. See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* [16] – “if by chance the exercitant feels an affection or inclination to something in a disordered way, it is profitable for that person to strive with all possible effort to come over to the opposite of that to which he or she is wrongly attached.”

¹⁰ “**the life, passion, and glorification**” – For perhaps a thousand years – the first thousand of Christianity – what occupied the Church’s attention was the Incarnation (“Why did God become human?!”) and later, the redemption as focused on the Holy Triduum: the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it was in the rising of the Mendicant Orders, and especially among the Franciscans that *the saving importance of the life* of Christ – the way He lived among us; what He did; what He said and to whom – was “discovered”. Notice how the Creeds “ignore” the saving importance of the life of Christ: “born of the Virgin Mary / suffered under Pontius Pilate / was crucified / died / and was buried.”

bound it together with a few ordered and parallel words to aid the memory.¹¹ I have used simple, familiar and unsophisticated terms to avoid idle curiosity,¹² to cultivate devotion¹³ and to foster the piety¹⁴ of faith. Since imagination aids understanding, I have arranged in the form of an imaginary tree the few items I have collected from among many and have ordered and disposed them in such a way that in the first or lower branches the Savior's origin and life are described; in the middle, his passion; and in the top, his glorification. In the first group of branches there are four stanzas placed opposite each other in alphabetical order.³ So also in the second and third group of branches. From each of these branches hangs a single fruit. So, there are, as it were, twelve branches bearing twelve fruits according to the mystery of the tree of life.⁴

¹¹ **“to aid the memory”** – Remember that books were precious and rare, except in the great monasteries or universities of Europe. And there existed no “school system” for young people in Europe to attend, so that they might learn how to read. The significance of memory for the “illiterate” was great indeed, and so a religious Teacher had to attentive to “aids” to memory in his teaching. *Britannica* – **“Printing Press**, machine by which text and images are transferred from movable type to paper or other media by means of ink. Movable type and paper were invented in China, and the oldest known extant book printed from movable type was created in Korea in the 14th century. Printing first became mechanized in Europe during the 15th century.”

¹² **“to avoid idle curiosity”** – This whole sentence is an excellent statement of Bonaventure's pedagogical approach. “Idle curiosity” is a misuse of the power of soul that is Understanding/Intellect. Young people need to be taught the proper use of their soul's powers. “Idle curiosity” is to ask about matters whose answers don't matter to the one asking – one asks questions because one can, not because they are the questions that one *must* ask, whose answers really matter to him or her.

¹³ **“devotion”** – As long as I can remember in my life “devotions” or “the devotional life” was for religious weirdos. Devotion was in a person (whom I was never attracted to trust) a kind of “over-ripe” affectivity in religious matters, about a person with a constellation of emotions that was quickly impatient with an intellectual challenge to the basis of these emotions. What true “devotion” happens in a religious context when a disciple's affections are aligned with a sufficient intellectual understanding of religious truth and both of these for the sake of “the praise, reverence, and service of God.” For St. Ignatius of Loyola “always growing in devotion” meant a greater and greater capacity to be able “to find God in all things” (i.e., not just in specifically religious or spiritual or ecclesial experiences).

¹⁴ **“piety”** – In the ancient Roman meaning “piety” meant duty (to the gods and in relation to the highest values of the Roman State). And in the famous “Gifts of the Holy Spirit” the “fear” of the Lord is expressed twice, such that some authors have changed the second “fear” into “piety.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“piety”** – “Reverence and obedience to God (or to the gods); devotion to religious duties and observances; godliness, devoutness.”

³ Bonaventure implies that the original manuscript contained a picture of a tree. On this was inscribed a poem, which is discussed in note 5, p. 121; cf. the Quaracchi critical edition, *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, VIII, xxxix.

⁴ This and the following passage are based on Apocalypse 22:1-2: *And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as a crystal, coming forth from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the city street,*

3. Picture in your mind¹⁵ a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels¹⁶ to water the garden of the entire Church.

Genesis 2 – ⁸ The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east,* and placed there the man whom he had formed.^e ⁹*Out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the

on both sides of the river, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit according to each month, and the leaves for the healing of nations. Cf. Esther 10:6; Gen. 2:9-10.

¹⁵ “**picture in your mind**” – As Matteo Ricci, SJ learned to build a “memory palace” through which he built his prodigious memory during his mission in China, so Bonaventure asks his readers to allow to appear in their imagination a Great Tree. And the ordered arrangement of branches, leaves, and fruits is to assist his readers to remember all that he is now to teach them.

¹⁶ **Genesis 2** - ¹⁰ A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches. [*New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 2:10.]

* *Eden, in the east*: the place names in vv. 8-14 are mostly derived from Mesopotamian geography (see note on vv. 10-14). Eden may be the name of a region in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), the term derived from the Sumerian word *eden*, “fertile plain.” A similar-sounding Hebrew word means “delight,” which may lie behind the Greek translation, “The Lord God planted a paradise [= pleasure park] in Eden.” **It should be noted, however, that the garden was not intended as a paradise for the human race, but as a pleasure park for God; the man tended it for God.** The story is not about “paradise lost.”

The garden in the precincts of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem seems to symbolize the garden of God (like gardens in other temples); it is apparently alluded to in Ps 1:3; 80:10; 92:14; Ez 47:7-12; Rev 22:1-2.

^e Is 51:3; Ez 31:9.

* **The second tree, the tree of life, is mentioned here and at the end of the story (3:22, 24). It is identified with Wisdom in Prv 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4, where the pursuit of wisdom gives back to human beings the life that is made inaccessible to them in Gn 3:24. In the new creation described in the Book of Revelation, the tree of life is once again made available to human beings (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19).** *Knowledge of good and evil*: the meaning is disputed. According to some, it signifies moral autonomy, control over morality (symbolized by “good and evil”), which would be inappropriate for mere human beings; the phrase would thus mean refusal to accept the human condition and finite freedom that God gives them. According to others, it is more broadly the knowledge of what is helpful and harmful to humankind, suggesting that the attainment of adult experience and responsibility inevitably means the loss of a life of simple subordination to God.

middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.^{f 10} A river rises in Eden* to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches.¹⁷

Revelation 22: ¹⁴ Blessed are they who wash their robes so as to have the right to the tree of life and enter the city* through its gates.^{h 15} Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the unchaste, the murderers, the idol-worshippers, and all who love and practice deceit.^{i 18}

Psalm 1 –

³ He is like a tree^c
planted near streams of water,
that yields its fruit in season;
Its leaves never wither;
whatever he does prospers. ¹⁹

^f Gn 3:22; Prv 3:18; Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14.

* *A river rises in Eden*: the stream of water mentioned in v. 6, **the source of all water upon earth, comes to the surface in the garden of God and from there flows out over the entire earth.** In comparable religious literature, the dwelling of god is the source of fertilizing waters. The four rivers represent universality, as in the phrase “the four quarters of the earth.” In Ez 47:1–12; Zec 14:8; Rev 22:1–2, the waters that irrigate the earth arise in the temple or city of God. The place names in vv. 11–14 are mainly from southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), where Mesopotamian literature placed the original garden of God. The Tigris and the Euphrates, the two great rivers in that part of the world, both emptied into the Persian Gulf. Gihon is the modest stream issuing from Jerusalem (2 Sm 5:8; 1 Kgs 1:9–10; 2 Chr 32:4) but is here regarded as one of the four great world rivers and linked to Mesopotamia, for Cush here seems to be the territory of the Kassites (a people of Mesopotamia) as in Gn 10:8. The word Pishon is otherwise unknown but is probably formed in imitation of Gihon. Havilah seems, according to Gn 10:7 and 1 Chr 1:9, to be in Cush in southern Mesopotamia though other locations have been suggested.

¹⁷ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 2:8–10.

* *The city*: heavenly Jerusalem; see note on Rev 21:2.

^h 7:14–15; 22:2.

ⁱ 21:8; Rom 1:29–32.

¹⁸ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Re 22:14–15.

^c Ps 52:10; 92:13–15; Jer 17:8.

¹⁹ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 1:3.

From the trunk of this tree, imagine that there are growing twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit. Imagine that the leaves are a most effective medicine to prevent and cure every kind of sickness, because the word of the cross *is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes* (Rom. 1:16). Let the flowers be beautiful with the radiance of every color and perfumed with the sweetness of every fragrance, awakening and attracting the anxious hearts of men of desire. Imagine that there are twelve fruits, *having every delight and the sweetness of every taste* (Wisd. 16:20). This fruit is offered to God's servants to be tasted so that when they eat it, they may always be satisfied, yet never grow weary of its taste.²⁰ This is the fruit that took its origin from the Virgin's womb and reached its savory maturity on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, that is, the love of Christ. In the garden of the heavenly paradise – God's table – this fruit is served to those who desire it.²¹ This is suggested by the first stanza, which says:

O cross, salvation-bearing tree,
Watered by a living fountain,
Your flower is spice-scented,
Your fruit an object of desire.⁵

²⁰ Recall the title of this book – *The Tree of Life*. Bonaventure is inviting his readers back into the Garden of God. **Genesis 2:** ⁸ The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, **with the tree of life in the middle of the garden** and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 2:8–9.] What is interesting is that Bonaventure does not choose “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” as his paradisaic image – the place where Adam and Eve suffered lethal damage. If Bonaventure had used that tree, then he could have explored human failings – the Tree of Death, if you will. He did not do so.

²¹ “**this fruit is served to those who desire it**” – Obviously this is Eucharistic imagery – the receiving of the body and blood of Christ from the altar. But what is interesting is that this Eucharistic imagery is being associated with the Tree of Life in paradise rather than with the Last Supper, on the night before He died.

⁵ This and the two stanzas below, in no. 6, are part of a longer poem which Bonaventure mentions in no. 2; cf. note 3, p. 120. This longer poem, which probably had fifteen stanzas, was changed and added to by later copyists. The editors of the critical edition print within the text only the three stanzas here but add a number of others in a supplement: cf. the critical edition, *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, VIII, 86–87.

From²² Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (published November 1984) –

In 1596 Matteo Ricci taught the Chinese how to build a memory palace. He told them that the size of the palace would depend on how much they wanted to remember: the most ambitious construction would consist of several hundred buildings of all shapes and sizes, “the more there are the better it will be,” said Ricci, though he added that one did not have to build on a grandiose scale right away. One could create modest palaces, or one could build less dramatic structures such as a temple compound, a cluster of government offices, a public hostel, or a merchant’s meeting lodge. If one wished to begin on a still smaller scale, then one could erect a simple reception hall, a pavilion, or a studio. And if one wanted an intimate space, one could use just the corner of a pavilion, or an altar in a temple, or even such a homely object as a wardrobe or a divan.

In summarizing this memory system, he explained that these palaces, pavilions, divans were mental structures to be kept in one’s head, not solid objects to be literally constructed out of “real” materials. Ricci suggested that there were three main options for such memory locations. First, they could be drawn from reality, that is, from buildings that one had been in or from objects that one had seen with one’s own eyes and recalled in one’s memory. Second, they could be totally fictive, products of the imagination conjured up in any shape or size. Or third, they could be half real and half fictive, as in the case of a building one knew well and through the back wall of which one broke an imaginary door as a shortcut to new spaces, or in the middle of which one created a mental staircase that would lead one up to higher floors that had not existed before.

The real purpose of all these mental constructs was to provide storage spaces for the myriad concepts that make up the sum of our human knowledge. To everything that we wish to remember, wrote Ricci, we should give an image; and to every one of these images, we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it by an act of memory. Since this entire memory system can work only if the images stay in the assigned positions and if we can instantly remember where we stored them, obviously it would seem easiest to rely on real locations which we know so well that we cannot ever forget them. But that would be a mistake, thought Ricci. For it is by expanding the number of locations and the corresponding number of images that can be stored in them that we increase and strengthen our memory. Therefore, the

²² This quotation taken from the Art of Memory website:
https://artofmemory.com/wiki/The_Memory_Palace_of_Matteo_Ricci/.

Chinese should struggle w/ the difficult task of creating fictive places, or mixing the fictive with the real, fixing them permanently in their minds by constant practice and review so that at last the fictive spaces become “as if real, and can never be erased.”

4. Although this fruit is one and undivided,²³ it nourishes devout souls with varied consolations in view of its varied states, excellence, powers and works. These can be reduced to twelve. This fruit of the tree of life, therefore, is pictured and is offered to our taste under twelve flavors on twelve branches.²⁴ On the first branch the soul devoted to Christ perceives the flavor of sweetness,²⁵ by recalling the distinguished origin and sweet birth of her Savior; on the second branch, the humble mode of life which he condescended to adopt; on the third, the loftiness of his perfect power; on the fourth, the plenitude of his most abundant piety; on the fifth, the confidence which he had in the trial of his passion; on the sixth, the patience which he exhibited in bearing great insults and injuries; on the seventh, the constancy which he maintained in the torture and suffering of his rough and bitter cross; on the eighth, the victory which he achieved in the conflict and passage of death; on the ninth, the novelty of his resurrection embellished with remarkable gifts; on the tenth, the sublimity of his ascension, pouring forth spiritual charisms; on the eleventh, the equity of the future judgment; on the twelfth, the eternity of the divine kingdom.

St. Augustine, *Confessions* – 5, 5. Who will grant me to find peace in you? Who will grant me this grace, that you would come into my heart and inebriate it, enabling me to forget the evils that beset me²¹ and embrace you, my only good? What are you to me? Have mercy on me, so that I may tell. What indeed am I to you, that you should command me to love you, and grow angry with me if I do not, and threaten

²³ **“this fruit one and undivided”** – That is, Jesus Christ whose consolations for the human race we will here contemplate through the “varied states, excellence, powers, and works” of the Christ.

²⁴ **“offered to our taste under twelve flavors”** – Bonaventure is referring to the value of “tasting” ideas not just thinking them. Constantly present in St. Ignatius of Loyola is his preference for *sentire-knowledge* (“felt or tasted or experiential” knowledge). For example, in *Spiritual Exercises* [2] – **“For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly.”**

²⁵ **“perceives the flavor of sweetness”** – I think what Bonaventure means is the experience a person is given, through grace, suddenly to *love* the things of God. It is not just any kind of knowledge of things, but the specific knowledge of Jesus through which one a startling world – “This is real; not just a nice story!”

²¹ See Jer 44:9.

me with enormous woes? Is not the failure to love you woe enough in itself? Alas for me! **Through your own merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, I am your salvation.**²² Say it so that I can hear it. **My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, I am your salvation. Let me run toward this voice and seize hold of you.** Do not hide your face from me:²³ let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.²⁴ ²⁶

5. I call these fruits because they delight with their rich sweetness and strengthen with their nourishment the soul who meditates on them and diligently considers each one, abhorring the example of unfaithful Adam who preferred *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Gen. 2:17) to the tree of life.²⁷ No one can avoid this error unless he prefers faith to reason, devotion to investigation, simplicity to curiosity and finally the sacred cross of Christ to all carnal feeling or wisdom of the flesh.²⁸ Through the cross the charity of the Holy Spirit is nourished in devout hearts and the sevenfold grace is poured forth, as is requested in the two first and last verses.

6. Let us, then, say with devotion and tears:

Feed us with these fruits,
Shed light upon our thoughts,
Lead us along straight paths,
Crush the attacks of the enemy.

²² Ps 34(35):3.

²³ See Dt 32:20.

²⁴ See Ex 33:23.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, [*The Confessions, Part I*](#), ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, vol. 1, Second Edition., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 41–42.

²⁷ “**preferred**” – It has never occurred to me before Bonaventure states it here that Adam and Eve preferred one Tree more than the other one. By speaking in this way, Bonaventure locates the presence of *disordered affections* operating from so early in the human story.

²⁸ “**unless he or she prefers**” – By speaking in terms of *preferences*, Bonaventure steers clear of anti-intellectualism. In other words, to “prefer” faith is not the rejection of reason but reason’s proper “ordering” in relation to revelation. But the main point about these “preferences” that Bonaventure lists has to do with *knowing* God and letting one’s life be changed by that relationship, not just *knowing about* God.

Fill us with your sacred light,
Breathe holy inspiration,
Be a peaceful way of life
For those who fear Christ. Amen.^{6 29}

^{*6} Cf. note 5, p. 121.

²⁹ Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Ewert Cousins, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 119–122.