



## DAY 13: Meditation

### HELL

Today we continue the theme of the first week, which concerns the reality of sin, with a meditation on Hell.

#### **TODAY'S MEDITATION- ON HELL**

This meditation comes from #65 of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

#### **1. Act of the Presence of God**

#### **2. Preparatory Prayer, as in #46**

*Lord, I ask that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of Your Divine Majesty. Amen.*

#### **3. Prelude 1: Composition of Place**

The first Prelude is the composition, which is to see in imagination the length, breadth and depth of Hell. As Ignatius often does, he's having us first see a panorama of our subject from a distance, we're taking the whole of it in in one shot.

#### **4. Prelude 2: Petition**

"I should ask for what I desire. Here it will be to beg for a deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer, that if because of my faults I forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of the punishments will keep me from falling into sin."

#### **5. Main Points for Meditation - From the Exercises**

**First Point:** "This will be to see in imagination the vast fires, and the souls enclosed, as it were, in bodies of fire.

**Second Point:** "To hear the wailing, the howling, cries, and blasphemies against Christ our Lord and against His saints.

**Third point:** "With the sense of smell to perceive the smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and corruption."

**Fourth point:** "To taste the bitterness of tears, sadness, and remorse of conscience."

**And Fifth point:** "With the sense of touch to feel the flames which envelop and burn souls."

#### **6. CLARIFICATIONS ON THIS MEDITATION**



Saint Jerome recounts that it was a vision of his judgment, where Christ showed him he loved rhetoric more than God and deserved hell, that led him to leave his comfortable life in Rome to take up a life of fasting and study of Scripture in a cave. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, though a deeply holy man throughout his life, sometimes trembled at the thought of Hell. He who forgets Hell falls; he who considers it avoids its snares. We contemplate the pain of the damned, fixed in eternal hatred and obstinacy, **to grasp the gravity of sin.**

But before we continue to the meditation proper, we should unpack Ignatius's purpose with this petition. Notice the reason that he gives: so that if, because of our sins, we are carried further away from love of God, we will at least have a sort of fail-safe: a memory of pain which will convince us that risking our soul by sinning mortally is not worth it. This is a kind of servile fear that says "I'm tempted, but the consequences are too awful, so I won't do it."

But let's be very clear: That's not the only reason we do this meditation, and **this kind of fear should not be the basis for our relationship with God.** A lot of servile fear is not a good thing. Servile fear is not the same as the gift of the Holy Spirit that we call "the fear of the Lord." Fear of the Lord grows as charity grows in our soul- the more we love God, the more we fear damaging our relationship with Him. This is a sort of reverent awe that treasures God so much that it is afraid of losing Him. And so, in itself, fear of the Lord is good. But servile fear, in itself, is not good. It is neutral- even a bit mercenary. It simply wants to avoid suffering. Servile fear will motivate us to not sin in order to avoid Hell.

So **Ignatius does not want servile fear to become the foundation of our relationship with God.** Rather, he's aware that in most people, there is a mixture of charity and self-love. There's an ongoing struggle. So: if, God forbid, the struggle starts to go badly, and we are slipping, and our love for God isn't enough to keep us from sinning mortally, **then perhaps the combination of our weak love plus SOME DEGREE of servile fear of Hell** will keep us from falling off the cliff.

It could happen that we misunderstand, and think "Ok, I need to feel as much distance from God here as I can, so I can feel like I'm in Hell and be afraid of that, and that's the fruit of this meditation." That's actually not the goal. Each moment of this meditation should be done with recollection of the presence of Jesus.

As with the other exercises where we consider our own sins and the history of sin in the human race, this meditation is ultimately trying to draw us to humility, and thus, a greater reliance on God. So the goal is to be mortified in a way that draws us to Christ, not terrified in a way that makes us despair.

One final note about using imagination and the senses: our culture saturates us with disturbing images that cater to curiosity and a fallen attraction to ugliness. Many people have developed this disordered taste. So if your imagined scenes stir fascination rather than sorrow and horror, shift your focus. Perhaps you'll need to lean away from the images and more towards the sounds, the sensations of touch, the bitterness of tears. Use prudence here.

## **7. Development of the Points for Meditation**



Consider the twofold suffering of Hell. First, the pain of sense: the very creatures the sinner clung to instead of God now punish him. The senses lose their capacity for delight; because all created goodness reflects God, even light, sound, and beauty become occasions of torment. What once pleased—like the glow of fire—will no longer console.

Sister Lucia described this pain in her memoirs, saying: “Plunged in this fire, we saw the demons and the souls [of the damned]... They were floating about in that conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames which issued from within themselves, together with great clouds of smoke. Now they fell back on every side like sparks in huge fires, without weight or equilibrium, amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fright... That vision only lasted for a moment, thanks to our good Heavenly Mother, Who at the first apparition had promised to take us to Heaven. Without that, I think that we would have died of terror and fear.”

But all these pains of sense will seem small in comparison with the second type of suffering: what we call the pain of loss. This is the experience of rejection by God — “Depart from me, you cursed.” The soul will know itself to be infinitely rejected by God forever, and because the very center of our heart- our minds and wills, are made to know and love God, the sinner in Hell will experience the most intense sorrow and horror because they will never, ever see God.

Then there’s the aspect of free choice to be enslaved to evil. Perhaps one of the most disturbing things about souls in hell is that they chose to be there, and they will never change their mind. C.S. Lewis once said “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful. [They are] rebels to the end; the doors of hell are locked on the inside. I do not mean that [they] may not wish to come out of hell, in the vague fashion wherein an envious man “wishes” to be happy: but they certainly do not will even the first preliminary stages of that self abandonment through which alone the soul can reach any good. They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.”

C.S. Lewis’s thoughts on the freedom of souls in hell can lead us to reflect on how sin is complete a reversal of the principle and foundation- to sin is to praise, love, and serve ourselves, and by this means to secure our own glory- which fails. It ends in having nothing, yet remaining and clinging to that nothingness forever, choosing that nothingness in spite of its horror.

There’s another piece of writing that illustrates this- in the middle of the last century, a letter circulated in France with the approval of the bishops there, and this letter is said to have come from the journal of a nun. The nun wrote that before entering the convent, she had a friend who died in a car crash, and whose soul she prayed for. That same night, the soul of her friend visited her and told her not to pray, because she was already in Hell. She then said she had been ordered by God to give some details about her life and death.



She said “Even now [God] is merciful towards us, for He does not oblige us to draw near to Him. He allows us to remain in this distant place of Hell, thus diminishing our torment. Every step closer to God would torment me more than every step you might take toward a fire.”

She goes on to say “All those who burn in Hell either did not pray, or did not pray enough. Prayer is the first step toward God. It is always decisive, especially prayer to her who is the Mother of God, whose name we are not permitted to say. Devotion to her draws innumerable souls away from the devil, souls whose sins would otherwise have cast them into his hands.”

### **Colloquy**

Ignatius gives this colloquy: “Enter into conversation with Christ our Lord. Recall to memory that of those who are in hell, some came there because they did not believe in the coming of Christ; others, though they believed, because they did not keep the Commandments. Divide them all into three classes:

1. Those who were lost before the coming of Christ;
2. Those who were lost during His lifetime;
3. Those who were lost after His life here on earth.

Thereupon, I will give thanks to God our Lord that He has not put an end to my life and permitted me to fall into any of these three classes.

I shall also thank Him for this, that up to this very moment He has shown Himself so loving and merciful to me.”

In this colloquy, especially as you thank Jesus for his mercy, and that you have been given more time in this life- time to make these exercises, time to deepen in your life of prayer, time to grow in charity, remember the purpose of this first week: repentance and amendment. To change, to leave nothing undone.

Ignatius finishes by having us close our colloquy with an **Our Father**.