Course Reading


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1. The disobedience of the first man would have involved all mankind in the second, everlasting, death, had not God's grace rescued many.

I have already stated in the foregoing books⁴ that God chose to make a single individual the starting-point of all mankind, and that his purpose in this was that the human race should not merely be united in a society by natural likeness, but should also be bound together by a kind of tie of kinship to form a harmonious unity, linked together by the 'bond of peace'. And this race would not have been destined for death, in respect of its individual members, had not the two first human beings (of whom one was created from no one, and the other from him) incurred death as the reward of disobedience: and so heinous was their sin that man's nature suffered a change for the worse; and bondage to sin and inevitable death was the legacy handed on to their posterity.

Now the reign of death has held mankind in such utter subjection that they would all be driven headlong into that second death, which has no ending, as their well-deserved punishment, if some were not rescued from it by the undeserved grace of God. The result is that although there are many great peoples throughout the world, living under different customs in religion and morality and distinguished by a complex variety of languages, arms, and dress, it is still true that there have come into being only two main divisions, as we may call them, in human society: and we are justified in following the lead of our Scriptures⁵ and calling them two cities. There is, in fact, one city of men who choose to live by the standard of the flesh, another of those who choose to live by the standard of the spirit. The citizens of each of these desire their own kind of peace, and when they achieve their aim, that is the kind of peace in which they live.

11. The natural state of man, created good and spoilt by sin, can only be restored by its Creator.

Now God foreknew everything, and therefore could not have been unaware that man would sin. It follows that all our assertions about the Holy City must take into account God's foreknowledge and his providential design; we must not advance theories which could not have become matters of knowledge for us, because they had no place in God's plan. Man could not upset the divine purpose by his sin, in the sense of compelling God to alter his decision. For God in his foreknowledge anticipated both results: he knew beforehand how evil the man would become whom God himself had created good; he also knew what good, even so, he would bring out of man's evil.

It is true that God is said to alter his decisions; and so we are told in Scripture, by a metaphorical way of speaking, that God even 'repented'. But such assertions are made from the standpoint of human expectation, or the prospect suggested by the normal procedure of natural causation; they do not take into account the Almighty's foreknowledge of what he is going to do. Thus, as the Bible says, 'God made man upright,' and therefore possessed of a good will - for he would not have been upright, had he not possessed a good will. Good will then is the work of God, since man was created with it by God.

But the first evil act of will, since it preceded all evil deeds in man, was rather a falling away from the work of God to its own works, rather than any substantive act. And the consequent deeds were evil because they followed the will's own line, and not God's. And so the will itself was, as it were, the evil tree which bore evil fruit, in the shape of those evil deeds; or rather it was the man himself who was the tree, in so far as his will was evil. Moreover, though an evil will is not natural but unnatural because it is a defect, still it belongs to the nature of which it is a defect, for it cannot exist except in a nature. But it can only exist in a nature which God created out of nothing, not in that nature which the Creator begot out of himself, as he begot the Word through whom all things were made. For, although God fashioned man from the dust of the earth, the earth itself and all earthly matter are derived from nothing at all; and when man was made, God gave to his body a soul which was created out of nothing.

108. Gen. 6, 6; Exod. 32, 14; 1 Sam. 15, 11; 15, 35; 2 Sam. 24, 16.
110. cf. John 1, 3.
113. John 8, 36.
114. Bk. xi, 13; xii, 1.
slippery body, moving along in tortuous twists and turns. The rebel, in virtue of his angelic prestige and his superior nature subdued the serpent to his will in spiritual wickedness, and by misusing it as his instrument he had deceitful conversation with the woman—no doubt starting with the inferior of the human pair so as to arrive at the whole by stages, supposing that the man would not be so easily gullible, and could not be trapped by a false move on his own part, but only if he yielded to another’s mistake.

That is what happened to Aaron. He was not persuaded by argument to agree with the erring people to erect an idol; he yielded to constraint.118 And it is unbelievable that Solomon mistakenly supposed that he ought to serve idols; he was induced to such acts of sacrilege by feminine cajolery.119 It was the same with that first man and his wife. They were alone together, two human beings, a married pair; and we cannot believe that the man was led astray to transgress God’s law because he believed that the woman spoke the truth, but that he fell in with her suggestions because they were so closely bound in partnership. In fact, the Apostle was not off the mark when he said, ‘It was not Adam, but Eve, who was seduced,’117 for what he meant was that Eve accepted the serpent’s statement as the truth, while Adam refused to be separated from his only companion, even if it involved sharing her sin. That does not mean that he was less guilty, if he sinned knowingly and deliberately. Hence the Apostle does not say, ‘He did not sin,’ but, ‘He was not seduced.’ For he certainly refers to the man when he says, ‘It was through one man that sin came into the world,’118 and when he says more explicitly, a little later, ‘by reproducing the transgression of Adam’.119

The Apostle intended us to take ‘the seduced’ as meaning those who do not think that what they do is sin. But Adam knew; otherwise how would it be true that ‘Adam was not seduced’? However, he was unacquainted with the strictness of God, and he might have been mistaken in that he supposed it to be a pardonable offence he had committed. In consequence, while he was not seduced in the same sense as the woman, it remains true that he was mistaken about the kind of judgement that would be passed upon his allegation that ‘The woman you gave me as companion, she gave it to me, and I ate.’120

Need I say more? They were not both deceived by credulity; but both were taken captive by their sin and entangled in the snares of the Devil.

15. Exod. 32, 35.
16. 1 Kings 11, 4.
17. 1 Tim. 2, 14.
18. Rom. 5, 12.

121. Ecclus. 10, 13; cf. Bk XII, 6.
than in himself, he ought to have found his satisfaction. This desertion is voluntary, for if the will had remained unshaken in its love of the higher changeless Good, which shed on it light to see and kindled in it fire to love, it would not have been diverted from this love to follow its own pleasure; and the will would not have been so darkened and chilled in consequence as to let the woman believe that the serpent had spoken the truth and the man to put his wife's will above God's commandment, and to suppose that his was a venial transgression when he refused to desert his life's companion even though the refusal entailed companionship in sin.

Thus the evil act, the transgression of eating the forbidden fruit, was committed only when those who did it were already evil; that bad fruit could only have come from a bad tree. Further, the badness of the tree came about contrary to nature, because without a fault in the will, which is against nature, it certainly could not have happened. But only a nature created out of nothing could have been distorted by a fault. Consequently, although the will derives its existence, as a nature, from its creation by God, its falling away from its true being is due to its creation out of nothing.

Yet man did not fall away to the extent of losing all being; but when he had turned towards himself his being was less real than when he adhered to him who exists in a supreme degree. And so, to abandon God and to exist in oneself, that is to please oneself, is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come nearer to nothingness. That is why the proud are given another name in holy Scripture; they are called 'self-pleasers'. Now it is good to 'lift up your heart', and to exalt your thoughts, yet not in the self-worship of pride, but in the worship of God. This is a sign of obedience, and obedience can belong only to the humble.

Thus, in a surprising way, there is something in humility to exalt the mind, and something in exaltation to abase it. It certainly appears somewhat paradoxical that exaltation abases and humility exalts. But devout humility makes the mind subject to what is superior. Nothing is superior to God; and that is why humility exalts the mind by making it subject to God. Exaltation, in contrast, derives from a fault in character, and spurns subjection for that very reason. Hence it falls away from him who has no superior, and falls lower in consequence. Thus the scriptural saying is fulfilled, 'You have thrown them down when they were being lifted up.' It does not say,


'When they had been lifted up', that is, that they were first lifted up and then thrown down; they were thrown down in the very act of being exalted. The exaltation itself is in fact already an overthrow.

That is why humility is highly prized in the City of God and especially enjoined on the City of God during the time of its pilgrimage in this world; and it receives particular emphasis in the character of Christ, the king of that City. We are also taught by the sacred Scriptures that the fault of exaltation, the contrary of humility, exercises supreme dominion in Christ's adversary, the Devil. This is assuredly the great difference that sunders the two cities of which we are speaking: the one is a community of devout men, the other a company of the irreligious, and each has its own angels attached to it. In one city love of God has been given first place, in the other, love of self.

We can see then that the Devil would not have entrapped man by the obvious and open sin of doing what God had forbidden, had not man already started to please himself. That is why he was delighted also with the statement, 'You will be like gods.' In fact they would have been better able to be like gods if they had in obedience adhered to the supreme and real ground of their being, if they had not in pride made themselves their own ground. For created gods are gods not in their own true nature but by participation in the true God. By aiming at more, a man is diminished, when he elects to be self-sufficient and defects from the one who is really sufficient for him.

This then is the original evil: man regards himself as his own light, and turns away from that light which would make man himself a light if he would set his heart on it. This evil came first, in secret, and the result was the other evil, which was committed in the open. For what the Bible says is true: 'Before a fall the mind is exalted: before honour it is humbled.' The fall that happens in secret inevitably precedes the fall that occurs in broad daylight, though the former is not recognized as a fall. Does anyone think of exaltation as a fall, even though the falling away was already there, in the desertion of the Most High? On the other hand, no one could fail to see that there is a fall when there is an obvious and unmistakable transgression of a commandment.

This was the reason why God forbade an act which could not be defended, after it had been committed, by any fantasy of justification. And I venture to say that it is of service to the proud that they should fall into some open and obvious sin, which can make

them dissatisfied with themselves, after they have already fallen through self-complacency. Peter's dissatisfaction with himself, when he wept, was healthier than his complacency when he was over-confident. We find the same thought in a verse of a holy psalm: 'Fill their faces with shame, and they shall seek your name, Lord,' which means, 'They set their heart on themselves in seeking their own name; let them set their heart on you, by seeking yours.'

14. The pride of the transgressor was worse than the sin itself

Even worse, and more deserving of condemnation, is the pride shown in the search for an excuse, even when the sins are clear as daylight. This was shown in the first human beings, when the woman said, 'The serpent led me astray, and I ate'; and the man said, 'The woman whom you gave me as a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' There is not a whisper anywhere here of a plea for pardon, nor of any entreaty for healing. True, they did not deny their sin, as Cain did, and yet their pride seeks to pin the wrong act on another; the woman's pride blames the serpent, the man's pride blames the woman. But in the case of so obvious a transgression of the divine command, to talk like this is really to accuse rather than to excuse oneself. For the fact that the woman committed the offence on the serpent's suggestion, and the man because of the woman's offer, did not mean that it was not their own act — as if anything should have priority over God in a claim for credence or obedience.

15. The justice of the retribution

Man took no heed of the command of God who had created him, who had made him in his own image, who had set him above the other animals, who had established him in paradise, who had supplied him with abundance of all things for his well-being, who had not burdened him with a large number of oppressive and difficult rules, but had given him one very short and easy commandment to support him in healthy obedience. God's intention in this command was to impress upon this created being that he was the Lord; and that free service was in that creature's own interest. Therefore it was a just punishment that followed, and the condemnation was of such a kind that man who would have become spiritual even in his flesh, by observing the command, became carnal even in his mind; and he who in his pride had pleased himself was by God's justice handed over to himself. But the result of this was not that he was in every way under his own control, but that he was at odds with himself, and lived a life of harsh and pitiable slavery, instead of the freedom he so ardently desired, a slavery under him with whom he entered into agreement in his sinning. So he was dead in spirit, of his own will; but doomed, against his will, to die in body; forsaking eternal life, he was condemned also to eternal death, unless he should be set free by grace. Anyone who considers this sort of condemnation to be excessive or unjust certainly does not know how to measure the immensity of the wickedness in sinning when it was so immensely easy to avoid the sin.

Abraham's obedience is renowned in story as a great thing, and rightly so, because he was ordered to do an act of enormous difficulty, namely, to kill his own son. By the same token, the disobedience in paradise was all the greater inasmuch as the command was one of no difficulty at all. The obedience of the second man is the more worthy of renown in that 'he became obedient unto death.' By the same token, the disobedience of the first man was the more abominable in that he became disobedient unto death. For where the penalty set for disobedience is great, and it is an easy thing which has been ordered by the Creator, who can adequately describe the enormity of the evil in a refusal to obey in a matter so easy, when the command comes from so great a power, and the punishment that threatens is so grave?

In fact, to put it briefly, in the punishment of that sin the retribution for disobedience is simply disobedience itself. For man's wretchedness is nothing but his own disobedience to himself, so that because he would not do what he could, he now wills to do what he cannot. For in paradise, before his sin, man could not, it is true, do everything; but he could do whatever he wished, just because he did not want to do whatever he could not do. Now, however, as we observe in the offspring of the first man, and as the Bible witnesses, 'man has become like nothingness.' For who can list all the multitude of things that a man wishes to do and cannot, while he is disobedient to himself, that is, while his very mind and even his lower element, his flesh, do not submit to his will? Even against his will his mind is often troubled; and his flesh experiences pain, grows old, and dies, and endures all manner of suffering. We should not endure all this against
our volition if our natural being were in every way and in every part obedient to our will.

It may be objected that the flesh is in such a state that it cannot serve our will. But what difference does it make how this situation comes about? The important point is that through the justice of God, who is our Lord and master and whom we refused to serve as his subjects, our flesh, which had been subject to us, now gives us trouble through its non-compliance, whereas we by our defiance of God have only succeeded in becoming a nuisance to ourselves, and not to God. For he does not need our service as we need the service of our body, so that what we receive is punishment for ourselves, while what we have done is not punishment for him. Moreover, the so-called pains of the flesh are really pains of the soul, experienced in the flesh and from the flesh. The flesh can surely feel no desire or pain by itself, apart from the soul.

When the flesh is said to desire or to suffer pain, it is in fact the man himself who has this experience — as I have maintained — or else some part of the soul which is affected by the experience of the flesh, whether a harsh experience producing pain, or a gentle experience, producing pleasure. Bodily pain is really nothing but a distress of the soul arising from the body, and a kind of disagreement with what happens to the body, in the same way as mental pain, which is called grief, is a disagreement with what has happened to us against our will. And grief is usually preceded by apprehension, which is also something in the soul, not in the body. Whereas bodily pain is not preceded by anything that we may call bodily apprehension, felt in the physical organism before the pain. Pleasure, on the other hand, is preceded by a kind of craving which is felt in the body as its own desire — hunger, for instance, and thirst, and the feeling normally called lust, when it is concerned with the sexual organs, though lust is the general name for desire of every kind.

Even anger was defined in antiquity as being simply the lust for revenge, although very often a man is angry even with inanimate objects where the vengeance cannot be felt, and in a rage he smashes his stool when it writes badly, or he breaks his reed pen. But even this, irrational as it is, is a kind of lust for revenge and, in a strange way, a shadow, so to speak, of the notion of retribution, the principle that those who do evil should suffer evil. Thus we have the lust for vengeance, called anger; the lust for possession of money, called greed; the lust for victory at any price, called obstinacy; the lust for boasting,

called vanity. There are many different kinds of lust, and some of them even have their special titles, while others have not. For instance, one would have difficulty in giving a name to the lust for domination, though the evidence of civil wars shows how powerful is its influence on the minds of tyrants.

16. The evil of lust in the specifically sexual meaning

We see then that there are lusts for many things, and yet when lust is mentioned without the specification of its object the only thing that normally occurs to the mind is the lust that excites the indecent parts of the body. This lust assumes power not only over the whole body, and not only from the outside, but also internally; it disturbs the whole man, when the mental emotion combines and mingles with the physical craving, resulting in a pleasure surpassing all physical delights. So intense is the pleasure that when it reaches its climax there is an almost total extinction of mental alertness; the intellectual sentiments, as it were, are overwhelmed. Now surely any friend of wisdom and holy joys who lives a married life but knows, in the words of the Apostle’s warning, how to possess his bodily instrument in holiness and honour, not in the sickness of desire, like the Gentiles who have no knowledge of God — surely such a man would prefer if possible, to beget children without lust of this kind. For then the parts created for this task would be the servants of his mind, even in their function of procreation, just as the other members are its servants in the various tasks to which they are assigned. They would begin their activity at the bidding of the will, instead of being stirred up by the ferment of lust.

In fact, not even the lovers of this kind of pleasure are moved, either to conjugal intercourse or to the impure indulgences of vice, just when they have so willed. Sometimes the impulse is an unwanted intruder, sometimes it abandons the eager lover, and desire cools off in the body while it is at boiling heat in the mind. Thus strangely does lust refuse to be a servant not only to the will to beget but even to the lust for lascivious indulgence; and although on the whole it is totally opposed to the mind’s control, it is quite often divided against itself. It arouses the mind, but does not follow its own lead by arousing the body.
17. The nakedness of the first human beings, and the feeling
of shame after their sin

It is right, therefore, to be ashamed of this lust, and it is right that the
members which it moves or fails to move by its own right, so to speak,
and not in complete conformity to our decision, should be called pu-
denda ("parts of shame"), which they were not called before man's sin; for,
as Scripture tells us, 'they were naked, and yet they felt no em-
barrassment.' This was not because they had not noticed their
nakedness, but because nakedness was not yet disgraceful, because lust
did not yet arouse those members independently of their decision.
The flesh did not yet, in a fashion, give proof of man's disobedience by a
disobedience of its own.

It was not that the first human beings had been created blind, as is
commonly believed among the uneducated, since Adam saw the
animals to which he gave names, while of Eve we are told, 'The
woman saw that the tree was good for food, and was pleasant for the
eyes to look at.' It follows that their eyes were open, but not wide
enough open, that is to say, not attentive enough to recognize what a
blessing they were given in the garment of grace, inasmuch as their
members did not know how to rebel against their will. When this
grace was taken away, and in consequence their disobedience was
chastised by a corresponding punishment, there appeared in the move-
ments of their body a certain indecent novelty, which made nakedness
shameful. It made them self-conscious and embarrassed.

That is why Scripture says of them, after they had violated God's
command by an overt transgression, 'The eyes of both of them were
opened and they recognized that they were naked. And they sewed
together fig leaves and made aprons for themselves.' The eyes of
both', it says, 'were opened', not to enable them to see (they could see
already) but to enable them to distinguish the good which they had
lost and the evil into which they had fallen. Hence the tree itself,
which was to make this distinction for them if they laid hands on it to
eat the fruit in defiance of the prohibition, got its name from that
event, and was called 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. For
experience of the distresses of sickness reveals the joys of health in a
clearer light.

And so 'they recognized that they were naked' - stripped, that is, of
the grace that prevented their bodily nakedness from causing them
any embarrassment, as it did when the law of sin made war against
their mind. Thus they gained a knowledge where ignorance
would have been a greater bliss if they had trusted in God and obeyed
him and thus had refrained from an action which would force them to
learn by experience the harm that disloyalty and disobedience would
do. The consequence was that they were embarrassed by the insub-
ordination of their flesh, the punishment which was a kind of
evidence of their disobedience, and 'they sewed together fig leaves
and made aprons (campestria) for themselves.' (Campestria means 'loin-
cloths', and that is the word used in some translations. The Latin word
campestria is derived from the custom of the young men who covered
their pudenda when they stripped for exercise on the playing-field, the
campus. Hence those who are so girdled are called campestrati.)

Thus modesty, from a sense of shame, covered what was excited to
disobedience by lust, in defiance of a will which had been condemned
for the guilt of disobedience; and from then onwards the practice of
concealing the pudenda has become a deep-rooted habit in all peoples,
since they all derive from the same stock. Some barbarians even go so
far as to refrain from exposing those parts even in the baths, and they
keep their covering on when they wash. And in the darkened soli-
ditudes of India, those who practised philosophy in nakedness (and
are hence called 'gymnosophists') nevertheless have coverings on their
genitals, although they have none on the rest of the body.

18. The sense of shame in sexual intercourse

The sexual act itself, which is performed with such lust, seeks privacy.
This is true not only in respect of the various kinds of debauchery
for which secret hiding-places are needed to avoid the sentence of human
law courts, but also in the practice of fornication, which the earthly
city has made a legalized depravity. This practice is not punishable by
any law of that city, and yet this permitted lust, which carries no
penalty, shuns the public gaze. A natural sense of shame ensures that
even brotheis make provision for secrecy; and it was easier for immor-
ality to dispense with the fetters of prohibition than for shamelessness
to abolish the furtive dens of this degradation.

Fornication, in fact, is called a depravity even by those who are
deprieved themselves; and, fond as they are of it, they dare not display
it in public. But what of conjugal intercourse, whose purpose is, ac-
cording to the prescriptions of the marriage contract, the procreation
of children? It is lawful and respectable certainly; but does it not require a private room and the absence of witnesses? Does not the

right will, to pursue any course which made it necessary to hold them back with the guiding reins, so to speak, of reason.

The situation now is that these passions are set in motion in this fashion, and are brought under control by those who live disciplined, just, and devout lives, sometimes with comparative ease, sometimes with difficulty. But this control entails coercion and struggle, and the situation does not represent a state of health in accordance with nature, but an enfeebled condition arising from guilt. Again, we observe that modesty does not hide the acts of anger and of the other emotions in the same way as it conceals the acts of lust, which are performed by the sexual organs; but this is simply because in the effects of other emotions the members of the body are not set in motion by the feelings themselves but by the will, after it has decided to co-operate with them, for the will has sovereign power in the employment of those members. Anyone who utters a word in anger, anyone who goes so far as to strike another person, could not do so if his tongue or hand were not put in motion at the command, as one may say, of his will; and those members are set in motion by the same will even when there is no anger. But the genital organs have become as it were the private property of lust, which has brought them so completely under its sway that they have no power of movement if this passion fails, if it has not arisen spontaneously or in response to a stimulus. It is this that arouses shame; it is this that makes us shun the eyes of beholders in embarrassment. A man would be less put out by a crowd of spectators watching him visiting his anger unjustly upon another man than by one person observing him when he is having lawful intercourse with his wife.

20. The ridiculous indecency of the cynics

The Cynics,\(^{147}\) those canine philosophers, failed to observe this fact

\(^{147}\) Cynics. Some authorities derive this school from Antisthenes (fl. 400 B.C.), a pupil of Socrates, who taught in a gymnastic at Cynosarges, a suburb of Athens; and they derive the name 'Cynic' from this place-name. The more probable derivation of the sect, and the name, is from Diogenes of Sinope, a fourth-century disciple of Antisthenes, who was nicknamed ku\(\dot{\text{n}}\) (‘dog’) because of his rejection of the conventions of civilization and his determination to live on nothing — and in a tub. The Cynic ideal was freedom from wants, desires, and all involvements. There was a great revival of Cynicism in the first three centuries of the Christian era, manifested on two levels: there were educated philosophers, such as Dio Chrysostom (first century A.D.); and there were the beggar-philosophers who ostentatiously rejected conventional standards, reproducing the ‘shamelessness’ (\(\alpha\text{n\(\dot{\text{a}}\)ideia}\)) of Diogenes.