

ON PARADISE

ST EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise, and the mind, which is spiritual, stood in amazement and wonder as it entered. The intellect grew dizzy and weak as the senses were no longer able to contain its treasures - so magnificent they were - or to discern its savors and find any comparison for its colors, or take in its beauties so as to describe them in words.

The tongue cannot relate the description of innermost Paradise, nor indeed does it suffice of the outer part; for even the simple adornments by the Garden's fence cannot be related in an adequate way. For the colors of Paradise are full of joy, its scents most wonderful, its beauties most desirable, and its delicacies glorious. There is no mirror adequate to reflect its beauty, nor paints which may portray it.

Paradise delighted me as much by its peacefulness as by its beauty: in it there resides a beauty that has no spot; in it exists a peacefulness that knows no fear. How blessed is that person accounted worthy to receive it, if not by right, yet at least by grace; if not because of good works, yet at least through mercy.

Blessed is the poor man who gazes on that place; riches are poured in profusion outside and around it; chalcedony and other gems lie there cast out to prevent their defiling the glorious earth of Paradise; should someone place there precious stones or beryls, these would appear ugly and dull compared with that dazzling land. Both men and women are clothed in raiment of light; the garments provided to cover their nakedness are swallowed up in glory; all the limbs' vile emotions are silenced, the fountains of lust are stopped up, anger is removed and the soul purified and, like wheat, it flourishes in Eden, unchoked by thorns.

The mourner can find comfort therein, the child be educated thereby, the chaste become radiant through it, the needy find provision from it.

Bind up your thoughts, Old Age, in Paradise whose fragrance makes you young; its wafting scent rejuvenates you, and your stains are swallowed up in the beauty with which it clothes you. No blemish is in them, for they are without wickedness; no anger is in them, for they have no fiery temper; no mocking scorn is in them, for they are without guile. They do not race to do harm - and so themselves be harmed; they show no hatred there, for there they are without envy; they pronounce no judgment there, for there no oppression exists. People behold themselves in glory and wonder at themselves, discovering where they are.

The nature of their bodies, once troubled and troublesome, is now tranquil and quiet, resplendent from without in beauty, and from within with purity, the body in evident ways, the soul in hidden ways.

I was in wonder as I crossed the borders of Paradise ...and when I reached the shore of earth, the mother of thorns(Gen. 3:18), I encountered all kinds of pain and suffering. I learned how, compared to Paradise, our abode is but a dungeon; yet the prisoners within it weep when they leave it!

I was amazed at how even infants weep as they leave the womb – weeping because they come out from darkness into light and from suffocation they issue forth into this world! Likewise, death, too, is for the world a symbol of birth, and yet people weep because they are born out of this world, the mother of suffering, into the Garden of splendors. Blessed is He Who through His Cross has flung open Paradise.

Paradise surrounds the limbs with its many delights: the eyes, with its handiwork, the hearing, with its sounds, the mouth and the nostrils, with its tastes and scents. If Paradise be so glorious, how much more glorious should Adam (mankind) be, who is in the image(Gen. 1:27) of its Planter, and how much fairer the Cross, upon which the Son of its Lord rode.

It was not Paradise that gave rise to the creation of mankind; rather, it was for Adam (mankind) alone that Paradise had been planted, for to its buds Adam's heart is superior, to its fruits his words, because rational speech has more savor than the produce of Paradise; truth in mankind surpasses its plants, and love is likewise more comely than its sweet scents.

God planted the fair Garden, He built the pure Church(Eph. 5:27); upon the Tree of Knowledge He established the injunction. He gave joy, but they took no delight, He gave admonition, but they were unafraid. In the Church He implanted the Word which causes rejoicing with its promises, which causes fear with its warnings: he who despises the Word, perishes, he who takes warning, lives.

In Paradise the cripples, who had never walked, leap around; the deformed, who had never even crawled, fly about through the air; the eyes of the blind and deaf, who had yearned from the womb, hungering for the light which they had failed to see, now rejoice to behold the beauty of Paradise, and the mighty sound of its harps gives comfort to their ears.

At him who has uttered no curse or abuse does Paradise's blessing rejoice all the more; upon him whose eyes' glance remained always chaste does Paradise's beauty gaze the more; in the limbs of him who quelled the venom of his thoughts do its springs of sweetness well up.

Whoever has washed the feet of the saints will himself be cleansed in that dew; to the hand that has stretched out to give to the poor will the fruits of the trees themselves stretch out; the very footsteps of him who visited the sick in their affliction do the flowers make haste to crown with blooms, jostling to see which can be first to kiss his steps. Nothing there in Paradise is useless: both grass and roots bring benefit and profit; whoever tastes them is rejuvenated, whoever breathes in their scent grows fair; in the

bosom of its blossoms and flowers is hidden a veritable treasure, a gift for those who pluck it; the fruits of Paradise bear rich wealth for those who gather them.

None toil there, for none go hungry there; none endure shame there, for none do wrong there; none feel contrition there, for there is no cause to repent there.

Those who run the course find rest and quiet. None grow old there, for none die there; none are buried there, for none are born there.

They know no worry, for they have no suffering; they have no fear, for no snare awaits them; they have no adversary, for they have passed through the contest.

They count themselves blessed unendingly, for their warfare is over; they have taken up their crowns and found rest in their new abode.

I saw that place, my brethren, and I sat down and wept, for myself and for those like me, at how my days have reached their fill, dissipated one by one, faded out, stolen away without my noticing; remorse seizes hold of me because I have lost crown, name and glory, robe and bridal chamber of light.

How blessed is the person who of that Heavenly table is held worthy!

The assembly of Saints bears resemblance to Paradise: in it each day is plucked the Fruit (Holy Communion) of Him Who gives life to all; in it, my brethren, is trodden the cluster of grapes, to be the Medicine of Life. Among the Saints none is naked, for they have put on glory; nor is any clad in those leaves or standing in shame, for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve...

Happy indeed is the person accounted worthy to behold in Paradise the glorious fruits of the trees which so surpass – but which then take second place once they behold the fruits of the victorious!

The flowers of Paradise took the victory, but then were vanquished at the sight of the blossoms of the Saints at whose garlands both creation and its Creator rejoice.

The fruits of the righteous were more pleasing to the Knower of all than the fruits and produce of the trees. The beauty that exists in nature extolled the human mind, and Paradise lauded the intellect; the flowers gave praise to virtuous life, the Garden to free will, and the earth to human thought.

Let us take leave of the trees and tell of the victors, instead of the inheritance let us celebrate the inheritors.

If the beauty of Paradise strikes us with astonishment, how much more should we be astonished at the beauty of the (saintly) mind: one is the product of nature, the other of the will.

Who has ever beheld gatherings of Saints ? Their garment is light, their countenance full of radiance; as they ruminate on the abundance of His gift there burst forth from their mouths springs of wisdom; tranquility reigns over their thought, truth over their knowledge, reverence over their enquiry, and love over their offering of praise. The Lord of all is the treasure of all things; upon each according to his capacity He bestows a glimpse of the beauty of His hiddenness, of the splendor of His Majesty.

All who look upon You, o Lord, will be sustained by Your beauty! Praises be to Your splendor!

...Blessed is the person who is worthy to look upon their raiment, blessed is the person who is worthy and has heard their wisdom, blessed are the ears that have drunk to the full of their voices, blessed is the person who has achieved their blessed state, blessed is the person who has toiled to be among the first, woe to him who made no effort even to be among the last(Matt. 20:8).

Praises to the Just One Who rules with His grace; He is the Good One Who never draws in the limits of His goodness; even to the wicked He stretches forth in His compassion. His Divine cloud hovers over all that is His; it drips dew even on that fire of punishment so that, of His mercy, it enables even the embittered to taste of the drops of its refreshment.

Praise to Your grace that has compassion on sinners.

The East has grown luminous with the Saints, with them the West has become brilliant, the North is raised up by them, from them the South has learned.

...With love and instruction, commingled with truth, the intellect can grow and become rich with new things, as it meditates with discernment on the treasures store of hidden mysteries.

Look at how great is our shame in comparison: our very confinement in darkness has become for us a source of pleasure; we are proud of the land of curses(Gen. 3:17), how we love our confinement in a pit! O Lord, grant that we may recognize the place where we are held prisoners.

In the world there is struggle, in Eden, a crown of glory. At our resurrection both earth and Heaven will God renew(Isaiah 65:17, 66:22), liberating all creatures, granting them Paschal joy, along with us.

In times of temptation console yourselves with God's promises, for there is no deceit in the word of Him who repays all, and His treasure house is not so paltry that we should doubt His promise; He has surrendered His own Son for us so that we might believe in Him; His Body is with us, His assurance is with us, He came and gave us His keys, since it is for us that His treasures lie waiting.

Blessed is He who, with His keys, has opened up the Garden of Life.

Weary not, my brethren, nor suppose that your struggle will last long, or that your resurrection is far off, for our death is already behind us, and our resurrection before us. Bear up, O life of mourning, so that you may attain to Paradise; its dew will wash off your squalor, while what it exudes will render you fragrant; its support will afford rest after your toil, its crown will give you comfort.

Paradise is a harbor of joys, a Haven of pleasures; light and rejoicing have their home there; gathered there are to be found harps and lyres, with shouts of Hosanna, and the Church crying "Alleluia."