

50. Bernard of Clairvaux

THE VALLEY OF SORROW

Listen! Urgent cries for help pierce the air! Shouts of distress and fear and confused noises reach our ears! What's happening?

Then it becomes deathly quiet, oppressively quiet. We run as fast as we can to where we heard the noise. When we get there, we shudder and shrink back in shock! There, among the many trees, lie several dead bodies, almost naked and badly mutilated. Puddles of congealing blood on the churned-up ground show where a brief but severe struggle has just taken place, which ended with the death of these people. What has happened?

Who are those dead people?

And where are the murderers?

We do not know, but the people living in this area know very well!

They have heard those terrifying shrieks for help more often, but they are too afraid to interfere.

We are in Burgundy, a province of France. As we can see on the map, the Eastern part of France consists mainly of mountains. There the river Rhone flows from Switzerland to the south-west. Near the city of Lyons, the river turns south. At that bend, a stream flows into the Rhone from the north. The name of that stream is the "Saone". Both rivers have worn deep gullies into the mountains. The valley of the Saone is full of dense forests.

The gruesome event we just described happened in one of those forests. A group of merchants was travelling south through the Saone Valley to Lyons. They hoped to do business there. They wanted to sell the merchandise they were carrying and buy other goods to take home. Perhaps they were hoping to purchase expensive silk, which the people in Lyons made. Lyons is 'The Silk City'.

Full of good courage, those merchants travelled on. However, a gang of armed soldiers suddenly attacked them! That's why we heard that terrified

cry for help! They tried to defend themselves, but it didn't help. The soldiers struck them down unmercifully, robbed them of their goods and money, and now their bleeding bodies lie dead on the ground. Those soldiers cruelly murdered for the sake of a bit of money and merchandise.

But where are those murderers?

Look over there! On the distant mountain, the towers of a castle show up starkly against the skies. A knight and his soldiers live in that castle. Those soldiers go out into the dense forests, eager for plunder. Woe to the travellers and merchants they meet there! Those armed soldiers will suddenly attack, cruelly ill-treat them, and rob them of everything. Then, if they dare to defend themselves, they are struck down and killed without pity. After committing their atrocity, those robbers would quickly return to the castle and show their master the loot they stole. He would nod and grin wickedly. Terrible! That is what just happened to these merchants.

The knight of that castle is a robber knight who lives off stolen goods obtained by murder and manslaughter. And unfortunately, he is not the only one in this area who makes his living by committing such crimes.

On the slopes of the mountains stand more castles occupied by robber knights who seem to compete in cunning and cruelty. So that valley is a



Burgundy in France



Wood engraving, 1890, after a drawing by Gottfried Franz (1846–1905). Robber knights attacking a merchant.

dangerous place for travellers and merchants. That is why the people call it 'The Valley of Sorrow' or 'Valley of Darkness'.

BERNARD

In the year 1091, a boy was born in Burgundy, close to the city of Lyons. His parents belonged to a prominent family of knights. What will the future bring that child? Will he also become a robber knight just like the others? Will the diligent merchants and innocent travellers later tremble at the sound of his name? No one knows that yet, only God.

God's ways are usually entirely different to what we insignificant people generally imagine. God directs the life of the nations. God also leads the course of every person's life individually. The Almighty likewise governed the life of that little boy.

His parents called him Bernard. Historians tell us that he had a pious mother. Bernard was not a strong child. He was often sick and looked pale. Such children often died because medicine was not as advanced as it is now.

Would that boy become a knight, just like his father?

"Ah, no," sighed his mother, "not that. The life of a knight is so rough and demanding. My boy is much too delicate for that."

She had a better plan for her son. She would put him in a monastery. There he would be educated. That would be better for his weak health. Then the rough and tumble of the life of the knights would not harm him. And then he could start to serve the Lord at a young age already. Moreover, being in a monastery would protect him from many sins. Yes, to become a monk was the best thing she could think of for her delicate son.

However, Bernard's mother died while he was still very young. And all her plans for Bernard died with her. He trained for the life of a knight, and ... he enjoyed it! He served the things of the world and found his pleasure there. He lived a carefree life.

However, God had other plans for him!

When Bernard was twenty-two, God reached into his life and converted him. We do not know how that happened.

But one thing we do know. After his conversion, Bernard discovered he could no longer find his pleasure in the things of the world. So, he voluntarily entered a monastery. However, in most monasteries, the monks lived very wicked and sinful lives. For that reason, he entered a monastery built near the town of Chalons on the Saone. That monastery was known for its rejection of the flagrant, vulgar indulgences of others. The monks there lived extremely simply and soberly. That's why the monastery at Chalons on the Saone had an excellent reputation.

Since Bernard now hated the sins of the world, he felt at home at Chalons. He could live there without feeling offended by the behaviour of other monks.

It was not long before others noticed his piety.

He lived an exemplary life, punctually and precisely fulfilling his duties.

He would lock himself in his cell for hours on end.

In all he did, Bernard showed that he was serious about living a holy life.

The Lord had blessed him with the gift of eloquence. With great earnestness and emphasis, he warned the people against sin. His words made a deep impression on all who heard them. That was because he meant what he said. His words and actions were in harmony with each other. Then four of his brothers also left the rough knight's life and joined him. How glad he must have been!

BERNARD SETS THE STANDARDS IN HIS MONASTERY

At the age of twenty-three years, Bernard founded a new monastery a short distance from the other one, and although he was still young, he



The abbey was founded on June 25, 1115 by Bernhard von Clairvaux and twelve monks in what Bernhard called the 'bright valley' previously known as the 'Valley of Sorrow'. Wikipedia.

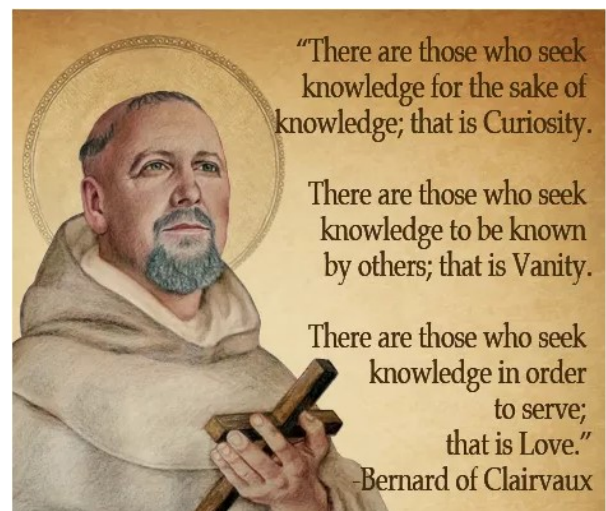
became abbot of that new monastery. And where do you think he built this new monastery?

In the 'Valley of Sorrows', in the middle of that dangerous area swarming with robber knights! How did he dare! He did not lack courage!

Did the monks spend their days safely behind the walls of the monastery? Would they dare to venture beyond those walls and enter that notorious neighbourhood?

Oh yes!

Every day at the crack of dawn, the abbot and his monks would leave the monastery armed with axes and shovels. By sheer hard work, they reclaimed entire fields and transformed them into fruitful fields. On these fields, they grew grain, vegetables, and other foods.



If only all monasteries had been like that!

Many travellers found safe refuge behind those monastery walls because not one robber knight dared to trouble or attack that monastery. Bernard even visited those robber knights and boldly confronted them. He took the merchants and travellers under his and his monks' protection. Many travellers owed their life to him!

Through Bernard and his monks' hard and courageous labour, the raids became less frequent and finally stopped altogether.

Once some brave men had captured a notorious robber knight. He was carried along in triumph. They would soon execute him! Just then, they met Bernard and some monks. Immediately Bernard approached them and said:

"Let *me* have that robber!"

Those men who had captured the criminal did not dare refuse this request, and Bernard took that robber knight with him to his monastery. He had long and serious discussions with him. That former criminal lived in that monastery for many years, and according to some writers, God converted him, and that when he died, he entered eternal glory. It is possible. God has converted more hardened sinners!

THE VALLEY OF CLAIRVAUX

Once a terrible famine broke out in the valley. The harvest failed. The country people who lived there were destitute. That was no wonder in *that* area! They would have perished from starvation because of the famine as they had no money to buy food. But when Bernard heard how much the farmers were suffering, he opened the doors of his monastery and generously provided for and fed all those hungry people. For several months, Bernard and his monks fed at least *two thousand* people *every day* in that monastery! The words of Scripture: 'The hand of the diligent makes rich' was confirmed by their actions.

Through the diligent and strenuous labour of those devoted monks, food was abundant in the monastery, while all around them, many suffered

hunger and want. So, then the name 'Valley of Sorrow' or 'Valley of Darkness' no longer applied, and they gave that former dangerous area a new name: 'Clairvaux Valley'. That means 'bright valley.' So, when they spoke about Bernard, they always called him 'Bernard of Clairvaux'. That was like a title of honour for him, which he deserved.

Although food was abundant in Bernard's monastery, they did not live in luxury. The monks lived a very simple life. There were no valuable ornaments. Other monasteries had beautiful stained-glass windows, which were very valuable. However, Bernard did not want them. Instead, he ordered the builders to fit the window frames with ordinary clear glass.

Other monasteries were full of images of a whole array of saints, especially many images of Mary, the mother of the Lord. Bernard of Clairvaux did not want all that image rubbish in his monastery. Only one image of Christ hung there. Bernard did not permit any other image in his monastery. But even that single image of Christ was too much. Here we see that Bernard was also a child of his time. But apart from that, it was a fact that his monastery was an example for thousands of other monasteries.

His monastery was a blessing for the entire neighbourhood. It had a good reputation with friend and foe. Others imitated his example. They built many other monasteries where they introduced the same rules and customs.



'Monks' is a painting by Granger.

When Bernard died, there were already one hundred and sixty similar monasteries. And after his death, they continued to build those types of monasteries.

In the year 1300, there were already eighteen hundred of them.

For a long time, they kept that same simplicity, order, and rules.

Yet eventually, corruption penetrated those monasteries, too.

How come?

Well, the *root* of monastery life is not correct, and when the root is not good, sooner or later, everything falls apart.

While Bernard was still alive, he carefully ensured that the abbots maintained stern discipline in his monasteries. He did not accept any deviation from the rules he had put in place and travelled from monastery to monastery to inspect them. Yet, Bernard was not harsh on his monks; on the contrary, he cared for them like a father. He assisted them in word and deed. For forty years, he was abbot of his monastery at Clairvaux. For forty years, he laboured faithfully there.

His superiors offered him the most brilliant and profitable positions. He refused.

The inhabitants of the prominent Italian city of Milan begged him to become archbishop of that city. That was a great honour!



They built many other monasteries....

Politely but firmly, Bernard declined that, too. He did not want to leave his lay brothers and continued as abbot until his death.

But if we think that Bernard had separated himself from the outside world and completely withdrew himself in the monastic life, we are mistaken.

He spent most of his life outside his monastery.

It is unbelievable how much work that man performed! He had a full and busy life, giving much attention to other matters like church, state, and society in general. We have already observed that as a child, he was not strong. In his later life, he fasted a lot, which was detrimental to his strength. True, he was a man of his time, and he was not free from the errors of his time. Later we hope to say more about that.

BERNARD'S PREACHING

However, he preached the pure gospel. See him standing in the pulpit while he addresses a great crowd who had come together from far and near to hear him. The wise monk's robe hangs in sloppy folds around his lean, wasted body. His face is pale and gaunt. His eyes lie deep in their sockets, but those eyes shine with enthusiasm, and when he addresses the people with glowing, inspiring words, they all listen with bated breath, and it is dead silent. He speaks so engagingly that they *must* listen to him whether they want to or not. Come, let us in thought also listen to him.

"Do not think that you will enter heaven by your good works", he declares. He speaks seriously and passionately.

"Do not think that you can build up a treasure of your own self-righteousness with which you can exist before God. Our good works have no value before God if we try to earn something with them. But if you are bowed down by the burden of your sins, when you hunger and thirst after righteousness, when you believe in Him Who justifies the ungodly, only then, through that faith, you have peace with God."

Did you notice that Bernard of Clairvaux preaches Christ as the only ground of salvation? He

preached the same gospel our ministers bring. Bernard of Clairvaux denounced the wicked, licentious life of the monks of the other monasteries. He energetically fought against the degeneration in the Church.

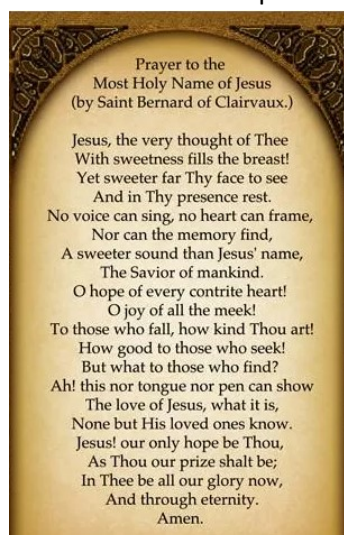
Once, he cried out:

"Oh, if only could I see the Church as it was in the days of the apostles! *Then* they preached the gospel to convert many to God. *Now* many preach, not to win souls for Christ and His service, but to obtain gold and silver!"

Yet Bernard also erred in various ways.

He acknowledged the pope as the head of Christ's Church on earth. That was a pity, but he could not seem to free himself from that false doctrine. But he *did* dare to tell the pope the truth. He neither feared nor spared him. We know that the popes had large pieces of land over which they ruled. This fact made the popes temporal, as well as ecclesiastical rulers. Bernard of Clairvaux was opposed to that. He once wrote to the pope: 'You cannot be a temporal and ecclesiastical ruler at the same time. If you join those two things together, then you shall lose them both.'

From all sides, people came to him for advice. The popes often listened to his wise counsel. Rulers came to him so that he could teach them how they should rule in specific circumstances. Many educated people came to speak with him and exchange ideas. As they left, they were often amazed at his clear insight and keen judgment. His name and fame spread through a large part of



Europe. Yet, it did not make him proud.

Another error was that he promoted the monastic life wherever he could. It was also a real shame that he encouraged and promoted the second crusade with much passion.

Like Peter of Amiens preached the first crusade, so Bernard of Clairvaux preached the second crusade. And ... Bernard had more influence than Peter did at that time.

PROMOTING THE SECOND CRUSADE

In chapter 48, we told you that the second crusade began because the Turks had conquered the tiny state of Edessa.

The pope now wanted to try to re-capture Edessa. He succeeded in persuading a reluctant Bernard to promote it. Though Bernard did not like the idea, he obeyed the pope. He succeeded in persuading the king of France to undertake a crusade to the Holy Land. However, this did not satisfy Bernard. Once he had decided to preach that crusade, he wanted to do it right!

At the time, Emperor Conrad III reigned in Germany. This ruler rejected the idea of a crusade. He thought it was madness. However, the pope wanted the emperor to go as well, as then the crusade was sure to succeed. So the pope sent Bernard to Germany to try to persuade the emperor. At first, he failed because the emperor continued to refuse. But Bernard did not give up easily.

BERNARD CONVINCES EMPEROR CONRAD III

Look, the cathedral in the German city of Speyer is packed.
Not a single empty seat to see!
Emperor Conrad III is also there.

Everyone is listening attentively.

The preacher on the pulpit is a thin monk with a pale, hollow face but enthusiastic, sparkling eyes. That monk is Bernard of Clairvaux. He speaks solemnly about the coming of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem's stable.

It is Christmas.

In glowing terms, he describes the deep humiliation of the Saviour. It is breathlessly quiet. Then he suddenly turns directly to the emperor and says:

"He did this for you; what are you doing for Him?"

If possible, it becomes even quieter in that large building when Bernard stops speaking, and with a piercing look at the emperor, waits for an answer. The tension grows.

Not a single sound breaks the intense silence. All those present hold their breath. The situation moves the emperor to tears, and he answers that he does not want to be unthankful. Okay then, he will prepare for the crusade. When the crowd hears that, they burst into cheers, and Bernard pins the cross on the emperor's chest. That was quite the victory for the plain monk! But Bernard of Clairvaux was completely wrong in this. We cannot understand how he could speak with such passion in favour of an evil cause.

The preparations for that second crusade were enormous. But eventually, tens of thousands march away. The ground rumbles under the footsteps of that colossal army.

But... that second crusade is a complete failure! They did not re-capture Edessa! Instead, it sent tens of thousands of people to their death!

Many of Bernard's most intimate friends blamed him for that! Scornfully, some of them even told



Emperor Conrad II. Word Press

him to his face that he was a false prophet, and in this case, they were right!

OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

From all this history, we see that Bernard was very influential. Rich and poor, high society people and ordinary people, they all listened to him.

During the second crusade, persecution of the Jews flared up again.

This had also happened during the first crusade.

Then hundreds, even thousands of Jews lost their lives because the crusaders hated the Jews as much as they hated the infidel Turks.

And now it happened again!

In Germany, a monk even preached a crusade against the Jews!

As soon as Bernard of Clairvaux heard about that, he wrote a letter to all Christians. He dared to stand and defend those oppressed, despised and universally reviled Jews. In that letter to the Christians, he appeals to them:

"Do not kill them, but try to bring them to repentance, and above all pray for them that God may open their eyes."

With that letter, he saved the lives of hundreds of Jews. So, we see that Bernard asserted his influence in many areas of life.

He also composed many beautiful hymns, which people sang in church.

Bernard lived a very active life!

In 1153 he died at the age of sixty-three years. Twenty years after his death, the pope proclaimed him a saint, which was foolish because Bernard was a sinful person, just like all of us. He, too, could only enter heaven through Christ's blood. There was no basis at all for declaring Bernard of Clairvaux holy. Here too, Rome showed how man-centred it is. When we consider the good that Bernard has performed, we must end up honouring *Christ*, Who gave him those gifts of grace.

I conclude this chapter with the words of Luther. When somebody asked him what he thought of Bernard of Clairvaux, he answered:

"If there has ever been a pious monk, then it was Bernard, who alone I value higher than all the other monks and papists on the whole earth."

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the younger years of Bernard of Clairvaux.
2. Describe his life in the monastery of Chalons on the Saone.
3. How did Bernard's new monastery affect plundering practices in the 'Valley of Sorrows' neighbourhood?
4. What other benefits did the monastery give this area?
5. How did Bernard get the name 'Bernard of Clairvaux'? How was this a title of respect?
6. How did Bernard's monastery compare with other monasteries of his time?
7. Why did corruption eventually take over in the monasteries built on the model introduced by Bernard?
8. Show how the errors of the time also affected Bernard. List these errors according to the following categories:
 - a. images
 - b. monastic life
 - c. crusades
 - d. the position of the pope
9. Show how Bernard explained the proper foundation for salvation.
10. What did Bernard mean when he warned the pope, "You cannot be a temporal and an ecclesiastical ruler at the same time; if you join those two things, you shall lose them both"?
11. What argument did Bernard use to convince Emperor Conrad III to join the second crusade? Was this argument valid? Explain.

12. What attitude did Bernard have concerning the Jews?

13. What did it mean when the Church declared him holy? Why was this wrong?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Bernard once wrote to the pope; "Who will permit me to see the Church of God as it was in the old days when the apostles cast their nets to fish for souls and not for gold and silver?"

What did he mean?

2. The hymn, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," was written by Bernard. Read the following verses:

O Sacred Head now wounded.
With grief and shame weighed down.
Now scornfully surrounded,
with thorns Thine only crown.
How art Thou pale with anguish,
With sore abuse and scorn!
How does that visage languish?
Which once was bright as morn!

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered
Was all for sinners' gain.
Mine, mine was the transgression.
But Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Saviour!
T'is I deserve Thy place.
Look on me with Thy favour.
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

Analyse these verses carefully. What is the central idea in these verses? What is the plea of the writer?