

On the Trinity; Book 3 (Selections) – Hilary of Poitiers (Doctor)

1 1. The words of the Lord, *I in the [Father](#), and the Father in Me [John 14:11](#),*
2 confuse many minds, and not unnaturally, for the powers of [human](#) reason cannot
3 provide them with any intelligible meaning. It seems impossible that one object
4 should be both within and without another, or that (since it is laid down that the
5 Beings of whom we are treating, though They do not dwell apart, retain their
6 separate [existence](#) and condition) these Beings can reciprocally contain One
7 Another, so that One should permanently envelope, and also be permanently
8 enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelopes. This is a problem which the wit
9 of man will never solve, nor will [human](#) research ever find an analogy for this
10 condition of Divine [existence](#). But what man cannot understand, God can be. I do
11 not mean to say that the fact that this is an assertion made by [God](#) renders it at once
12 intelligible to us. We must think for ourselves, and come to [know](#) the meaning of
13 the words, *I in the [Father](#), and the Father in Me*: but this will depend upon our
14 success in grasping the [truth](#) that reasoning based upon Divine verities can
15 establish its conclusions, even though they seem to contradict the [laws](#) of the
16 [universe](#).

17 17. The name *Father* has thus been revealed to men; the question arises, What is
18 this Father's own name? Yet surely the name of God has never been unknown.
19 [Moses](#) heard it from the bush, Genesis announces it at the beginning of the history
20 of creation, the Law has proclaimed and the [prophets](#) extolled it, the history of the

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21 world has made [mankind](#) familiar with it; the very [heathen](#) have worshipped it
22 under a veil of [falsehood](#). Men have never been left in [ignorance](#) of the name of
23 [God](#). And yet they were, in very [truth](#), in [ignorance](#). For no man [knows](#) God unless
24 He confess Him as Father, Father of the Only-begotten Son, and confess also the
25 Son a Son by no partition or extension or procession, but born of Him, as Son of
26 Father, ineffably and incomprehensibly, and retaining the fullness of that Godhead
27 from which and in which He was born as [true](#) and [infinite](#) and perfect God. This is
28 what the *fullness of the Godhead* means. If any of these things be lacking, there
29 will not be that fullness which was pleased to dwell in Him. This is the message of
30 the [Son](#), His revelation to men in their [ignorance](#). The Father is [glorified](#) through
31 the Son when men recognise that He is Father of a Son so Divine.

32 18. The Son, wishing to assure us of the [truth](#) of this, His Divine birth, has
33 appointed His works to serve as an illustration, that from the ineffable power
34 displayed in ineffable [deeds](#) we may learn the lesson of the ineffable birth. For
35 instance, when water was made wine, and five loaves satisfied five thousand men,
36 beside [women](#) and children, and twelve baskets were filled with the fragments, we
37 see a fact though we cannot understand it; a deed is done though it baffles our
38 reason; the process cannot be followed, though the result is obvious. It is folly to
39 intrude in the spirit of carping, when the matter into which we enquire is such that
40 we cannot probe it to the bottom. For even as the Father is ineffable because He is

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41 Unbegotten, so is the Son ineffable because He is the Only-begotten, since the
42 Begotten is the Image of the Unbegotten. Now it is by the use of our senses and of
43 language that we have to form our conception of an image; and it must be by the
44 same means that we form our idea of that which the image represents. But in this
45 case we, whose faculties can deal only with visible and tangible things, are
46 straining after the invisible, and striving to grasp the impalpable. Yet we take no
47 shame to ourselves, we reproach ourselves with no irreverence, when we [doubt](#) and
48 criticise the [mysteries](#) and powers of [God](#). How is He the Son? Whence is He?
49 What did the Father lose by His birth? Of what portion of the Father was He born?
50 So we ask; yet all the while there has been confronting us the evidence of works
51 done to assure us that God's action is not limited by our power of comprehending
52 His methods.

53 19. You ask what was the manner in which, as the Spirit teaches, the Son was
54 born? I will put a question to you as to things corporal. I ask not in what manner
55 He was born of a [virgin](#); I ask only whether her flesh, in the course of bringing His
56 flesh to readiness for birth, suffered any loss. Assuredly she did not conceive Him
57 in the common way, or suffer the shame of [human](#) intercourse, in order to bear
58 Him: yet she bore Him, complete in His [human](#) Body, without loss of her own
59 completeness. Surely [piety](#) requires that we should regard as possible with God a

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60 thing which we see became possible through his power in the case of a [human](#)
61 being.

62 20. But you, whoever you are that would seek into the unsearchable, and in all
63 seriousness form an opinion upon the [mysteries](#) and powers of [God](#) — I turn to you
64 for counsel, and beg you to enlighten me, an unskilled and simple believer of all
65 that God says, as to a circumstance which I am about to mention. I listen to the
66 Lord's words and, since I [believe](#) what is recorded, I am sure that after His
67 Resurrection He offered Himself repeatedly in the Body to the sight of multitudes
68 of unbelievers. At any rate, He did so to Thomas who had protested that he would
69 not [believe](#) unless he handled His wounds. His words are, *Unless I shall see in His*
70 *hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and thrust*
71 *my hand into His side, I will not [believe](#). [John 20:25](#)* The Lord stoops to the level
72 even of our feeble understanding; to satisfy the doubts of unbelieving minds He
73 works a [miracle](#) of His invisible power. Do you, my critic of the ways of heaven,
74 explain His action if you can. The [disciples](#) were in a closed room; they had met
75 and held their assembly in secret since the Passion of the Lord. The Lord presents
76 Himself to strengthen the [faith](#) of Thomas by meeting his challenge; He gives him
77 His Body to feel, His wounds to handle. He, indeed, who would be recognised as
78 having suffered wounds must needs produce the body in which those wounds were
79 received. I ask at what point in the walls of that closed house the Lord bodily

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80 entered. The Apostle has recorded the circumstances with careful precision; *Jesus*
81 *came when the doors were shut, and stood in the midst.* Did He penetrate through
82 bricks and mortar, or through stout woodwork, substances whose very nature it is
83 to bar progress? For there He stood in bodily presence; there was no suspicion of
84 deceit. Let the eye of your [mind](#) follow His path as He enters; let your intellectual
85 vision accompany Him as He passes into that closed dwelling. There is no breach
86 in the walls, no door has been unbarred; yet lo, He stands in the midst Whose
87 might no barrier can resist. You are a critic of things invisible; I ask you to explain
88 a visible event. Everything remains firm as it was; no body is capable of
89 insinuating itself through the interstices of wood and stone. The Body of the Lord
90 does not disperse itself, to come together again after a disappearance; yet whence
91 comes He Who is standing in the midst? Your senses and your words are
92 powerless to account for it; the fact is certain, but it lies beyond the region of
93 [human](#) explanation. If, as you say, our account of the Divine birth is a [lie](#), then
94 prove that this account of the Lord's entrance is a fiction. If we assume that an
95 event did not happen, because we cannot discover how it was done, we make the
96 limits of our understanding into the limits of reality. But the certainty of the
97 evidence proves the [falsehood](#) of our contradiction. The Lord stood in a closed
98 house in the midst of the [disciples](#); the Son was born of the Father. Deny not that
99 He stood, because your puny wits cannot ascertain how He came there; renounce a

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100 disbelief in God the Only-begotten and perfect [Son of God](#) the Unbegotten and
101 perfect Father, which is based only on the incapacity of sense and speech to
102 comprehend the transcendent [miracle](#) of that birth.

103 21. Nay more, the whole constitution of nature would bear us out against the
104 impiety of doubting the works and powers of [God](#). And yet our disbelief tilts even
105 against obvious [truth](#); we strive in our fury to pluck even God from His throne. If
106 we could, we would climb by bodily strength to heaven, would fling into confusion
107 the ordered courses of sun and stars, would disarrange the ebb and flow of tides,
108 check rivers at their source or make their waters flow backward, would shake the
109 foundations of the world, in the utter irreverence of our rage against the paternal
110 work of [God](#). It is well that our bodily limitations confine us within more modest
111 bounds. Assuredly, there is no concealment of the mischief we would do if we
112 could. In one respect we are free; and so with [blasphemous](#) insolence we distort the
113 [truth](#) and turn our weapons against the words of [God](#).

114 22. The Son has said, *Father, I have manifested Your Name unto men*. What reason
115 is there for denunciation or fury here? Do you deny the Father? Why, it was the
116 primary purpose of the Son to enable us to [know](#) the Father. But in fact you do
117 deny Him when, according to you, the Son was not born of Him. Yet why should
118 He have the name of Son if He be, as others are, an arbitrary creation of [God](#)? I
119 could feel awe of God as Creator of Christ as well as Founder of the [universe](#); it

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120 were an exercise of power worthy of Him to be the Maker of Him Who made
121 Archangels and Angels, things visible and things invisible, heaven and earth and
122 the whole creation around us. But the work which the Lord came to do was not to
123 enable you to recognise the omnipotence of God as Creator of all things, but to
124 enable you to [know](#) Him as the Father of that Son Who addresses you. In heaven
125 there are Powers beside Himself, Powers mighty and [eternal](#); there is but one Only-
126 begotten Son, and the difference between Him and them is not one of mere degree
127 of might, but that they all were made through Him. Since He is the [true](#) and only
128 Son, let us not make Him a bastard by asserting that He was made out of nothing.
129 You hear the name *Son*; [believe](#) that He is the Son. You hear the name *Father*; fix
130 it in your [mind](#) that He is the Father. Why surround these names with [doubt](#) and
131 illwill and hostility? The things of God are provided with names which give a [true](#)
132 indication of the realities; why force an arbitrary meaning upon their obvious
133 sense? Father and Son are spoken of; [doubt](#) not that the words mean what they say.
134 The end and aim of the revelation of the Son is that you should [know](#) the Father.
135 Why frustrate the labours of the Prophets, the Incarnation of the Word, the Virgin's
136 travail, the effect of [miracles](#), the [cross](#) of [Christ](#)? It was all spent upon you, it is all
137 offered to you, that through it all Father and Son may be manifest to you. And you
138 replace the [truth](#) by a theory of arbitrary action, of creation or adoption. Turn your
139 thoughts to the warfare, the conflict waged by Christ. He describes it thus:—

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140 *Father, I have manifested Your Name unto men.* He does not say, *You have created*
141 *the Creator of all the heavens, or You have made the Maker of the whole earth.* He
142 says, *Father, I have manifested Your Name unto men.* Accept your Saviour's gift of
143 [knowledge](#). Be assured that there is a Father Who begot, a Son Who was born;
144 born in the [truth](#) of His Nature of the [Father](#), Who is. Remember that the revelation
145 is not of the Father manifested as [God](#), but of God manifested as the Father.

146 23. You hear the words, *I and the Father are one.* [John 10:30](#) Why do you rend
147 and tear the Son away from the Father? They are a unity: an absolute Existence
148 having all things in perfect communion with that absolute Existence, from Whom
149 He is. When you hear the Son saying, *I and the Father are one*, adjust your view of
150 facts to the Persons; accept the statement which Begetter and Begotten make
151 concerning Themselves. Believe that They are One, even as They are also Begetter
152 and Begotten. Why deny the common nature? Why impugn the [true](#) Divinity? You
153 hear again, *The Father in Me, and I in the Father.* [John 10:38](#) That this is [true](#) of
154 Father and of Son is demonstrated by the Son's works. Our science cannot
155 envelope body in body, or pour one into another, as water into wine; but we
156 confess that in Both is equivalence of power and fullness of the Godhead. For the
157 Son has received all things from the Father; He is the Likeness of [God](#), the Image
158 of His substance. The words, *Image of His substance* [Hebrews 1:3](#), discriminate
159 between Christ and Him from Whom He is, but only to establish Their distinct

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160 [existence](#), not to teach a difference of nature; and the meaning of *Father in Son*
161 *and Son in Father* is that there is the perfect fullness of the Godhead in Both. The
162 Father is not impaired by the Son's [existence](#), nor is the Son a mutilated fragment
163 of the Father. An image implies its original; likeness is a relative term. Now
164 nothing can be like God unless it have its source in Him; a perfect likeness can be
165 reflected only from that which it represents; an accurate resemblance forbids the
166 assumption of any element of difference. Disturb not this likeness; make no
167 separation where [truth](#) shows no variance, for He Who said, *Let us make man after*
168 *our image and likeness* [Genesis 1:26](#), by those words *Our likeness* revealed the
169 [existence](#) of Beings, Each like the Other. Touch not handle not, pervert not. Hold
170 fast the Names which teach the [truth](#), hold fast the Son's declaration of Himself. I
171 would not have you flatter the Son with praises of your own invention; it is well
172 with you if you be satisfied with the written word.

173 24. Again, we must not repose so blind a confidence in [human intellect](#) as to
174 [imagine](#) that we have complete [knowledge](#) of the objects of our thought, or that the
175 ultimate problem is solved as soon as we have formed a symmetrical and
176 consistent theory. Finite minds cannot conceive the Infinite; a being dependent for
177 its [existence](#) upon another cannot attain to perfect [knowledge](#) either of its Creator
178 or of itself, for its consciousness of self is colored by its circumstances, and bounds
179 are set which its perception cannot pass. Its activity is not self-caused, but due to

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180 the Creator, and a being dependent on a Creator has perfect possession of none of
181 its faculties, since its origin lies outside itself. Hence by an inexorable law it is
182 folly for that being to say that it has perfect [knowledge](#) of any matter; its powers
183 have limits which it cannot modify, and only while it is under the delusion that its
184 petty bounds are coterminous with infinity can it make the empty boast of
185 possessing wisdom. For of wisdom it is incapable, its [knowledge](#) being limited to
186 the range of its perception, and sharing the impotence of its dependent [existence](#).
187 And therefore this masquerade of a finite nature boasting that it possesses the
188 wisdom which springs only from [infinite knowledge](#) earns the scorn and ridicule of
189 the Apostle, who calls its wisdom folly. He says, *For Christ sent me not to [baptize](#),*
190 *but to preach the [Gospel](#), not in the language of wisdom, lest the [cross](#) of [Christ](#)*
191 *should be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to them that are*
192 *perishing, but unto them that are being saved it is the power of [God](#). For it is*
193 *written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the [prudent](#)*
194 *I will reject. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the enquirer of this*
195 *world? Hath not [God](#) made foolish the wisdom of this world? For seeing that in the*
196 *wisdom of God the world through its wisdom [knew](#) not [God](#), God decreed through*
197 *the foolishness of preaching to save them that [believe](#). For the [Jews](#) ask for signs*
198 *and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, unto [Jews](#)*
199 *indeed a stumbling-block and to [Gentiles](#) foolishness, but unto them that are*

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200 *called, both [Jews](#) and Greeks, Christ the power of [God](#) and the wisdom of [God](#).*

201 *Because the weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God is*

202 *wiser than men. [1 Corinthians 1:17-25](#) Thus all unbelief is foolishness, for it takes*

203 *such wisdom as its own finite perception can attain, and, measuring infinity by that*

204 *petty scale, concludes that what it cannot understand must be impossible. Unbelief*

205 *is the result of incapacity engaged in argument. Men are sure that an event never*

206 *happened, because they have made up their minds that it could not happen.*

207 25. Hence the Apostle, familiar with the narrow assumption of [human](#) thought that

208 what it does not [know](#) is not [truth](#), says that he does not speak in the language of

209 [knowledge](#), lest his preaching should be in vain. To save himself from being

210 regarded as a preacher of foolishness he adds that the word of the cross is

211 foolishness to them that perish. He [knew](#) that the unbelievers held that the only [true](#)

212 [knowledge](#) was that which formed their own wisdom, and that, since their wisdom

213 was cognisant only of matters which lay within their narrow horizon, the other

214 wisdom, which alone is Divine and perfect, seemed foolishness to them. Thus their

215 foolishness actually consisted, in that feeble imagination which they mistook for

216 wisdom. Hence it is that the very things which to them that perish are foolishness

217 are the power of God to them that are saved; for these last never use their own

218 inadequate faculties as a measure, but attribute to the Divine activities the

219 omnipotence of heaven. God rejects the wisdom of the wise and the understanding

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220 of the [prudent](#) in this sense, that just because they recognise their own foolishness,
221 [salvation](#) is granted to them that [believe](#). Unbelievers pronounce the verdict of
222 foolishness on everything that lies beyond their ken, while [believers](#) leave to the
223 power and majesty of God the choice of the [mysteries](#) wherein [salvation](#) is
224 bestowed. There is no foolishness in the things of [God](#); the foolishness lies in that
225 [human](#) wisdom which demands of [God](#), as the condition of belief, signs and
226 wisdom. It is the foolishness of the [Jews](#) to demand signs; they have a certain
227 [knowledge](#) of the Name of God through long acquaintance with the Law, but the
228 offense of the cross repels them. The foolishness of the Greeks is to demand
229 wisdom; with Gentile folly and the [philosophy](#) of men they seek the reason why
230 God was lifted up on the cross. And because, in consideration for the weakness of
231 our mental powers, these things have been hidden in a [mystery](#), this foolishness of
232 [Jews](#) and Greeks turns to unbelief; for they denounce, as unworthy of reasonable
233 credence, truths which their mind is inherently incapable of comprehending. But,
234 because the world's wisdom was so foolish — for previously through God's
235 wisdom it [knew](#) not [God](#), that is, the splendour of the [universe](#), and the wonderful
236 order which He planned for His handiwork, taught it no reverence for its Creator
237 — God was pleased through the preaching of foolishness to save them that [believe](#),
238 that is, through the [faith](#) of the cross to make everlasting life the lot of mortals; that
239 so the self-confidence of [human](#) wisdom might be put to shame, and [salvation](#)

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240 found where men had thought that foolishness dwelt. For Christ, Who is
241 foolishness to [Gentiles](#), and offense to [Jews](#), is the Power of [God](#) and the Wisdom
242 of [God](#); because what seems weak and foolish to [human](#) apprehension in the things
243 of God transcends in [true](#) wisdom and might the thoughts and the powers of earth.

244 26. And therefore the action of [God](#) must not be canvassed by [human](#) faculties; the
245 Creator must not be judged by those who are the work of His hands. We must
246 clothe ourselves in foolishness that we may gain wisdom; not in the foolishness of
247 hazardous conclusions, but in the foolishness of a modest sense of our own
248 infirmity, that so the evidence of God's power may teach us truths to which the
249 arguments of earthly [philosophy](#) cannot attain. For when we are fully conscious of
250 our own foolishness, and have felt the helplessness and destitution of our reason,
251 then through the counsels of Divine Wisdom we shall be initiated into the wisdom
252 of [God](#); setting no bounds to boundless majesty and power, nor tying the Lord of
253 nature down to nature's [laws](#); sure that for us the one [true faith](#) concerning God is
254 that of which He is at once the Author and the Witness.