

WRITINGS OF PHILO OF CARPASIA

by Philo of Carpasia

Writings of Philo of Carpasia (c. AD 400). Philo of Carpasia was an early church father whose writings have been preserved for the edification of the church.

2 Chapters

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Pseudo-Philo - Letter to Eucarpus

Philo, Bishop of Carpasia, Letter to Eucarpus

(Translation by Roger Pearse, Attribution to Pseudo-Philo)

1. I shall become a mediator for you in a matter of salvation, my true brother, if you gladly accept our advice on what you should do, especially regarding the things you yourself asked us to advise you about. For, although perhaps many have dared to begin this solitary life, it seems to me that few have bothered to sustain it worthily to the end. And the objective of it is not just the intention, but the objective is the reward of the effort. So there is no benefit to those who rush to reach the end of the goal while they remain merely at the beginning of the solitary life, and instead abandon it and become a laughing-stock, and are accused by outsiders of cowardice and vacillation. For the Lord says about such people, “Who, wanting to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate if he has the means to complete it, lest, after laying its foundation and not being able to finish it, passers-by begin to mock him, saying that this man started to build and was unable to finish?”[Luke 14:28]

Therefore let (those at) the beginning maintain a steady progress along this course, which hastens to reach the goal of the good deeds. For the bravest athlete, Paul, teaches us this with his own achievement: not to rest on our past good deeds but to move forward day by day, saying, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize of the heavenly calling.” [Phil. 3:13-16] Such is the whole life of men —to be not content with what they have achieved, but to delight in what is to come. For what’s the use of yesterday’s full stomach, if today the stomach is hungry for lack of food? Similarly, there is no profit for the soul for yesterday’s achievement if today’s act of righteousness is lacking. “For in whatever state I find you,” he says, “so I will judge you.”[1] So the toil of the righteous man is in vain, and the way of repentance of the sinner is irreproachable. So it is with both of them, the end (of the righteous man), who fell from the best to the worst? and of the other (the sinner), who changed from the worst to the best. You can see these things also in the prophet Ezekiel, who declares with the Lord’s mouth, “For if the righteous person strays and sins, I will not remember the righteous deeds that he did earlier, but he will die in his sin.” [Ez. 8:24] And again, he says, “And I will not remember the sins of the sinner, and if he turns to the right way and does justice, he will live in this righteousness.” [Ez. 18:21-3] For where then is Gehazi’s great companionship with Elisha, who, because of his greed, brought leprosy upon himself? And what was the benefit of Solomon’s immense wisdom and the great favour he previously received from God, since he later fell into idolatry because of his obsession with women? Even the blessed David was not left blameless by pride, for the wrong he did to Uriah. But the fall of Judas from the better to the worse would be sufficient for anyone living in obedience with God to avoid such errors; he, who for so many years was a disciple of the Lord, later, for a minor offence, sold his teacher and bought for himself a noose.

2. This, then, let it be known to you, brother, that it is not he who begins well and then comes to evil, who is righteous before God, but he who ends well, this is the righteous before God. Therefore brother, do not give sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids, “so that you may escape like a gazelle from the hunter’s trap, like a bird from the fowler’s snare.” [Prov. 6:5, Ps. 124:7] Be careful, for “you are stepping among snares, and walking on the battlements of a high wall,” [Sirach 9:13] and for this reason, a fall is not without danger for the one who falls. Therefore do not stretch yourself immediately to the extreme of asceticism, especially if you do not have confidence in yourself, so that you do not get dizzy and fall from the height of asceticism. For it is better to climb little by little, progressing step by step toward the height of your achievements, rather than descending step by step because of the weakening of your strength, which is reprehensible and even harmful to the soul. So free yourself little by little from the pleasures of life, eliminating each habit from yourself, for fear that, if you drop them all at once, you bring upon yourself a flood of temptations. But when you overcome one passion or one pleasure, take your stand against the next, and in this way, you will easily conquer all pleasures. For though pleasure is one word, its forms are many.

3. So, my brother, be patient in every temptation—for the faithful are tested with various temptations—they are tested with accusations, earthly losses, lies, disobedience, slanders, persecutions; by these and similar things, the faithful are tested. Do not be reckless in your words, nor argumentative, quarrelsome, vain, or ostentatious, but dignified; not a chatterbox, always eager not to teach but to be taught, as these faults bring you no benefit. Do not concern yourself with the life of the world, as the Psalm says, “that my mouth may not speak the works of men”; [Ps. 17:4] for he who delights in speaking of the deeds of sinners immediately stirs up thoughts of pleasures against himself. Do not neglect reading, especially the New Testament. “Examine everything and judge, hold onto what is good, avoid every evil thing.” [1 Thess. 5:21-22] Everything is permissible for you, but not everything is beneficial. [1 Cor. 10:23]

Therefore, with those you meet and with those with whom you associate, be in all things blameless, cheerful, loving, gentle, and humble. Avoid gold as a treacherous enemy of the soul, and the father of sin, and the ally of the devil. Avoid pleasures, pursue self-control, train your body to endure hard work and your soul to patiently bear trials, with the conviction that the perfect separation of soul and body is a release from every evil. Always seek to learn about the lives of the righteous, for in this way you will find benefit for your soul. Do not be fond of traveling or wandering around villages or cities, and do not leave your place under the pretext that you need something; for when you leave your place, maybe you will also leave behind your way of life. Do not seek out the favour of the crowd, nor be a lover of dancing, nor a friend of the cities, but rather be a friend of solitude, always remaining unmovable in your dwelling, considering prayer and psalmody your work. Don’t make hospitality hard because of a lack of luxurious foods, but be content with the necessities of the monastic life, and do not accept anything more than those from anyone; and don’t be greedy, not because gold is inherently bad, but because, for those who have a passion for it, it becomes evil.

Don’t make yourself a slave to greed under the pretext of helping the poor; and if someone brings you money for the poor and you know of people who are in need, advise the one who brought the money to take it directly to the brothers who are in need, in case the acceptance of the money stain your conscience.

4. But above all, wait for the enjoyment of the eternal blessings, of which all the saints have become partakers. And you, weighing everything with the scales of the mind, should put pious reasoning in the place of devil-thoughts, especially when a wicked thought arises and says to you:

“What is the benefit of your life in this desert place? And what have you gained from your withdrawal from human society? Haven’t you seen the God-appointed bishops of the churches of God, holy men, socializing with others and effortlessly celebrating the spiritual festivals, from which there is much benefit, especially for those who attend them? For there, explanations of proverbial riddles are made, interpretations of apostolic teachings, listening to theology, and encounters with spiritual brothers, all of which offer great benefit to those who meet together, as they witness Christian conduct. But you have alienated yourself from so many great blessings and sit here like a wild man, equal to the beasts; because here you see a lot of desolation, not a little inhumanity, lack of teaching, separation from brothers, and much idleness concerning God’s commandment.”

5. When, therefore, the wicked thought disturbs you with such seemingly reasonable arguments, you should counter it with pious reasoning based on your own experience, saying to it:

“Since you assert that the things of the world are good, well, that is why I live here, because I judged myself unworthy of the good things of the world, for, in the middle of its good things, the bad is always present. For when in the past I was present at spiritual festivals, I did with difficulty meet a brother who seemed to fear God, but in fact was possessed by the devil, and I heard from him beautifully spoken words, lying myths, and behaviour that deceived those present. I also met others after him—thieves, liars, many greedy and tyrannical people, many who were full of pride. I saw the vulgar gesturing of drunkards, the blood of the oppressed; I saw the beauty of women, which tormented my chastity. And though I escaped the act of fornication, I still stained my purity with the desires of my heart. Though I heard many edifying words, I found no teacher whose works were worthy of their words. I also heard countless songs, the obnoxious voices of foolish talk and indescribable profanity, the tears of those who were robbed, the cries of those captured and forcibly taken away by tyrants, the sighs of the tormented, the lamentations of the wronged; for sighs and lamentations follow the wronged to reveal the endurance of the poor. And I saw that it was not a spiritual festival, but a stormy and troubled sea that sought to engulf everyone with its waves.

Tell me then, O wicked thought and demon of fleeting pleasure and vanity, what is the benefit to me from seeing and hearing all these things, since I was not strong enough to help any wronged person, nor could I stop the violence of the wrongdoers, nor was it permitted for me to correct the guilty, who, together with the others, might have destroyed me as well? For, just as a little clean water disappears in much mud, so I was. The few things that we think is good to do in the lives of men are overshadowed by the multitude of evils. What, then, is my benefit? To lose my soul. That is why I go and live in the mountains; ‘like a sparrow, I have escaped from the snare of the hunters’ [Ps. 124:7] through the grace of Christ. For in this desert I live, O wicked thought, where the Lord dwelt with divine favour. Here is the oak of Mamre, under which the Lord appeared to Abraham. Here was the heavenly ladder and the army of angels that appeared to Jacob; here is the desert in which the people were purified and given the law, and thus entered the land promised by God. Here Moses saw God; here is Mount Carmel, where Elijah lived and became pleasing to God.

Here is the desert in which the blessed John, eating locusts, preached repentance to the people. Here is the Mount of Olives, where Christ went up and prayed, teaching us to pray alone; for He says, 'Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them.' [Mt. 18:20] Here is the 'narrow and difficult path that leads to life'; [Mt. 7:14] here are teachers and prophets who 'wander in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground'; [Heb. 11:38] here are apostles and evangelists, and the monastic life of desert dwellers.

These things, uncorrupted, I have accepted, and they have been commanded by the martyrs of Christ and the righteous one, so that I can say confidently: 'By means of the words of Your lips, I have kept to difficult paths'; [Ps. 17:4] for I have understood that the God-beloved Abraham obeyed the voice of God and dwelt in the desert, that the simple Isaac was oppressed, that the patriarch Jacob was exiled, that the wise Joseph was sold, that the three champions of endurance fought in the fire, that the devout Daniel was thrown a second time into the lions' den, that the outspoken Jeremiah was cast into a pit of mud, that Isaiah, the seer of mysteries, was sawn in two, that John, the reprover of adultery, was beheaded, that Peter was crucified upside down, that Paul was persecuted constantly and imprisoned and then beheaded, that the rest of the apostles and the martyrs of Christ were killed in various ways. And to avoid being long-winded, even our saviour Christ was crucified for our sake, to give us life through His death and to anoint us all with patience, and through patience to draw us to Himself.

Therefore, I hasten toward Him and His Father and the Holy Spirit, striving to be found genuine, having judged myself unworthy of the good things of the world; for I am not for the world, but the world is for me."

6. So think about these things and pursue them seriously and willingly, and according to the saying, "Fight for the truth until death." [Eccles. 4:28] Indeed the Apostle Paul says, "Take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" [Heb. 3:12-3] —for "Today" means all the time of our life.

If you live in this way, my brother, you will also save yourself and you will give joy to us and you will glorify God, whose glory and power are forever and ever. Amen.

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