Discourse 3.-Thaleia

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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Chapter I.-Passages of Holy Scripture Compared.

You seem to me, O Theophila, to excel all in action and in speech, and to be second to none in wisdom. For there is no one who will find fault with your discourse, however contentious and contradictory he may be. Yet, while everything else seems rightly spoken, one thing, my friend, distresses and troubles me, considering that that wise and most spiritual man-I mean Paul-would not vainly refer to Christ and the Church the union of the first man and woman, if the Scripture meant nothing higher than what is conveyed by the mere words and the history; for if we are to take the Scripture as a bare representation wholly referring to the union of man and woman, for what reason should the apostle, calling these things to remembrance, and guiding us, as I opine, into the way of the Spirit, allegorize the history of Adam and Eve as having a reference to Christ and the Church? For the passage in Genesis reads thus: ”And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. But the apostle considering this passage, by no means, as I said, intends to take it according to its mere natural sense, as referring to the union of man and woman, as you do;

for you, explaining the passage in too natural a sense, laid down that the Spirit is speaking only of conception and births; that the bone taken from the bones was made another man, and that living creatures coming together swell like trees at the time of conception. But he, more spiritually referring the passage to Christ, thus teaches: ”He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.”

Chapter II.-The Digressions of the Apostle Paul; The Character of His Doctrine: Nothing in It Contradictory; Condemnation of Origen, Who Wrongly Turns Everything into Allegory.

Let it not disturb you, if, in discussing one class of subjects, he, i.e., Paul, should pass over into another, so as to appear to mix them up, and to import matters foreign to the subject under consideration, departing from the question, as now for instance. For wishing, as it seems, to strengthen most carefully the argument on behalf of chastity, he prepares the mode of argument beforehand, beginning with the more persuasive mode of speech. For the character of his speech being very various, and arranged for the purpose of progressive proof, begins gently, but flows forward into a style which is loftier and more magnificent. And then, again changing to what is deep, he sometimes finishes with what is simple and easy, and sometimes with what is more difficult and delicate; and yet introducing nothing which is foreign to the subject by these changes, but, bringing them all together according to a certain marvellous relationship, he works into one the question which is set forth as his subject. It is needful, then, that I should more accurately unfold the meaning of the apostle's arguments, yet rejecting nothing of what has been said before. For you seem to me, O Theophila, to have discussed those words of the Scripture amply and clearly, and to have set them forth as they are without mistake.

For it is a dangerous thing wholly to despise the literal meaning, as has been said, and especially of Genesis, where the unchangeable decrees of God for the constitution of the universe are set forth, in agreement with which, even until now, the world is perfectly ordered, most beautifully in accordance with a perfect rule, until the Lawgiver Himself having re-arranged it, wishing to order it anew, shall break up the first laws of nature by a fresh disposition.

CHAPTER II.-THE DIGRESSIONS OF THE APOSTLE PAUL; THE CHARACTER OF HIS DOCTRIN

But, since it is not fitting to leave the demonstration of the argument unexamined-and, so to speak, half-lame-come let us, as it were completing our pair, bring forth the analogical sense, looking more deeply into the Scripture; for Paul is not to be despised when he passes over the literal meaning, and shows that the words extend to Christ and the Church.

Chapter III.-Comparison Instituted Between the First and Second Adam.

And, first, we must inquire if Adam can be likened to the Son of God, when he was found in the transgression of the Fall, and heard the sentence, ”Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” For how shall he be considered ”the first-born of every creature,” who, after the creation of the earth and the firmament, was formed out of clay? And how shall he be admitted to be ”the tree of life” who was cast out for his transgression, lest ”he should again stretch forth his hand and eat of it, and live forever? ” For it is necessary that a thing which is likened unto anything else, should in many respects be similar and analogous to that of which it is the similitude, and not have its constitution opposite and dissimilar. For one who should venture to compare the uneven to the even, or harmony to discord, would not be considered rational. But the even should be compared to that which in its nature is even, although it should be even only in a small measure; and the white to that which in its nature is white, even although it should be very small, and should show but moderately the whiteness by reason of which it is called white. Now, it is beyond all doubt clear to every one, that that which is sinless and incorrupt is even, and harmonious, and bright as wisdom; but that that which is mortal and sinful is uneven and discordant, and cast out as guilty and subject to condemnation.

Chapter IV.-Some Things Here Hard and Too Slightly Treated, and Apparently Not Sufficiently Brought Out According to the Rule of Theology.

Such, then, I consider to be the objections urged by many who, despising, as it seems, the wisdom of Paul, dislike the comparing of the first man to Christ. For come, let us consider how rightly Paul compared Adam to Christ, not only considering him to be the type and image, but also that Christ Himself became the very same thing, because the Eternal Word fell upon Him. For it was fitting that the first-born of God, the first shoot, the only-begotten, even the wisdom of God, should be joined to the first-formed man, and first and first-born of mankind, and should become incarnate. And this was Christ, a man filled with the pure and perfect Godhead, and God received into man. For it was most suitable that the oldest of the Aeons and the first of the Archangels, when about to hold communion with men, should dwell in theoldest and the first of men, even Adam. And thus, when renovating those things which were from the beginning, and forming them again of the Virgin by the Spirit, He frames the same just as at the beginning. When the earth was still virgin and untilled, God, taking mould, formed the reasonable creature from it without seed.

Chapter V.-A Passage of Jeremiah Examined.

And here I may adduce the prophet Jeremiah as a trustworthy and lucid witness, who speaks thus: "Then I went down to the potter's house; and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it." For when Adam, having been formed out of clay, was still soft and moist, and not yet, like a tile, made hard and incorruptible, sin ruined him, flowing and dropping down upon him like water. And therefore God, moistening him afresh and forming anew the same clay to His honour, having first hardened and fixed it in the Virgin's womb, and united and mixed it with the Word, brought it forth into life no longer soft and broken; lest, being overflowed again by streams of corruption from without, it should become soft, and perish as the Lord in His teaching shows in the parable of the finding of the sheep; where my Lord says to those standing by, "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost until he find it? and when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders rejoicing; and when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."

Chapter VI.-The Whole Number of Spiritual Sheep; Man a Second Choir, After the Angels, to the Praise of God; The Parable of the Lost Sheep Explained.

Now, since He truly was and is, being in the beginning with God, and being God, He is the chief Commander and Shepherd of the heavenly ones, whom all reasonable creatures obey and attend, who tends in order and numbers the multitudes of the blessed angels. For this is the equal and perfect number of immortal creatures, divided according to their races and tribes, man also being here taken into the flock. For be also was created without corruption, that he might honour the king and maker of all things, responding to the shouts of the melodious angels which came from heaven. But when it came to pass that, by transgressing the commandment (of God), he suffered a terrible and destructive fall, being thus reduced to a state of death, for this reason the Lord says that He came from heaven into (a human) life, leaving the ranks and the armies of angels. For the mountains are to be explained by the heavens, and the ninety and nine sheep by the principalities and powers which the Captain and Shepherd left when He went down to seek the lost one. For it remained that man should be included in this catalogue and number, the Lord lifting him up and wrapping him round, that he might not again, as I said, be overflowed and swallowed up by the waves of deceit.

For with this purpose the Word assumed the nature of man, that, having overcome the serpent, He might by Himself destroy the condemnation which had come into being along with man's ruin. For it was fitting that the Evil One should be overcome by no other, but by him whom he had deceived, and whom he was boasting that he held in subjection, because no otherwise was it possible that sin and condemnation should be destroyed, unless that same man on whose account it had been said, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shall return," should be created anew, and undo the sentence which for his sake had gone forth

on all, that ”as in Adam” at first ”all die, even so” again ”in Christ,” who assumed the nature and position of Adam, should ”all be made alive.”

Chapter VII.-The Works of Christ, Proper to God and to Man, the Works of Him Who is One.

And now we seem to have said almost enough on the fact that man has become the organ and clothing of the Only-begotten, and what He was who came to dwell in him. But the fact that there is no moral inequality or discord may again be considered briefly from the beginning. For he speaks well who says that that is in its own nature good and righteous and holy, by participation of which other things become good, and that wisdom is in connection with God, and that, on the other hand, sin is unholy and unrighteous and evil. For life and death, corruption and incorruption, are two things in the highest degree opposed to each other. For life is a moral equality, but corruption an inequality; and righteousness and prudence a harmony, but unrighteousness and folly a discord. Now, man being between these is neither righteousness itself, nor unrighteousness; but being placed midway between incorruption and corruption, to whichever of these he may incline is said to partake of the nature of that which has laid hold of him. Now, when he inclines to corruption, he becomes corrupt and mortal, and when to incorruption, he becomes incorrupt and immortal. For, being placed midway between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of the Fruit of which he tasted, he was changed into the nature of the latter, himself being neither the tree of life nor that of corruption;

but having been shown forth as mortal, from his participation in and presence with corruption, and, again, as incorrupt and immortal by connection with and participation in life; as Paul also taught, saying, "Corruption shall not inherit incorruption, nor death life," rightly defining corruption and death to be that which corrupts and kills, and not that which is corrupted and dies; and incorruption and life that which gives life and immortality, and not that which receives life and immortality. And thus man is neither a discord and an inequality, nor an equality and a harmony. But when he received discord, which is transgression and sin, he became discordant and unseemly; but when he received harmony, that is righteousness, he became a harmonious and seemly organ, in order that the Lord, the Incorruption which conquered death, might harmonize the resurrection with the flesh, not

suffering it again to be inherited by corruption. And on this point also let these statements suffice.

Chapter VIII.-The Bones and Flesh of Wisdom; The Side Out of Which the Spiritual Eve is Formed, the Holy Spirit; The Woman' the Help-Meet of Adam; Virgins Betrothed to Christ.

For it has been already established by no contemptible arguments from Scripture, that the first man may be properly referred to Christ Himself, and is no longer a type and representation and image of the Only-begotten, but has become actually Wisdom and the Word.

For man, having been composed, like water, of wisdom and life, has become identical with the very same untainted light which poured into him. Whence it was that the apostle directly referred to Christ the words which had been spoken of Adam. For thus will it be most certainly agreed that the Church is formed out of His bones and flesh; and it was for this cause that the Word, leaving His Father in heaven, came down to be "joined to His wife; " and slept in the trance of His passion, and willingly suffered death for her, that He might present the Church to Himself glorious and blameless, having cleansed her by the laver, for the receiving of the spiritual and blessed seed, which is sown by Him who with whispers implants it in the depths of the mind; and is conceived and formed by the Church, as by a woman. so as to give birth and nourishment to virtue. For in this way, too, the command, "Increase and multiply," is duly fulfilled, the Church increasing daily in greatness and beauty and multitude, by the union and communion of the Word who now still comes down to us and falls into a trance by the memorial of His passion;

for otherwise the Church could not conceive believers, and give them new birth by the laver of regeneration, unless Christ, emptying Himself for their sake, that He might be contained by them, as I said, through the recapitulation of His passion, should die again, coming down

from heaven, and being "joined to His wife," the Church, should provide for a certain power being taken from His own side, so that all who are built up in Him should grow up, even those who are born again by the laver, receiving of His bones and of His flesh, that is, of His holiness and of His glory. For he who says that the bones and flesh of Wisdom are understanding and virtue, says most rightly; and that the side is the Spirit of truth, the Paraclete, of whom the illuminated receiving are fitly born again to incorruption. For it is impossible for any one to be a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and to be chosen a member of Christ, unless the Word first came down upon him and fell into a trance, in order that he, being filled with the Spirit, and rising again from sleep with Him who was laid to sleep for his sake, should be able to receive renewal and restoration. For He may fitly be called the side of the Word, even the sevenfold Spirit of truth, according to the prophet;

of whom God taking, in the trance of Christ, that is, after His incarnation and passion, prepares a help-meet for Him -I mean the souls which are betrothed and given in marriage to Him. For it is frequently the case that the Scriptures thus call the assembly and mass of believers by the name of the Church, the more perfect in their progress being led up to be the one person and body of the Church. For those who are the better, and who embrace the truth more clearly, being delivered from the evils of the flesh, become, on account of their perfect purification and faith, a church and help-meet of Christ, betrothed and given in marriage to Him as a virgin, according to the apostle, so that receiving the pure and genuine seed of His doctrine, they may co-operate with Him, helping in preaching for the salvation of others. And those who are still imperfect and beginning their lessons, are born to salvation, and shaped, as by mothers, by those who are more perfect, until they are brought forth and regenerated unto the greatness and beauty of virtue; and so these, in their turn making progress, having become a church, assist in labouring for the birth and nurture of other children, accomplishing in the receptacle of the soul, as in a womb, the blameless will of the Word.

Chapter IX.-The Dispensation of Grace in Paul the Apostle.

Now we should consider the case of the renowned Paul, that when he was not yet perfect in Christ, he was first born and suckled, Ananias preaching to him, and renewing him in baptism, as the history in the Acts relates. But when he was grown to a man, and was built up, then being moulded to spiritual perfection, he was made the help-meet and bride of the Word; and receiving and conceiving the seeds of life, he who was before a child, becomes a church and a mother, himself labouring in birth of those who, through him, believed in the Lord, until Christ was formed and born in them also. For he says, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you; " and again, "In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel." It is evident, then, that the statement respecting Eve and Adam is to be referred to the Church and Christ. For this is truly a great mystery and a supernatural, of which I, from my weakness and dulness, am unable to speak, according to its worth and greatness. Nevertheless, let us attempt it. It remains that I speak to you on what follows, and of its signification.

Chapter X.-The Doctrine of the Same Apostle Concerning Purity.

Now Paul, when summoning all persons to sanctification and purity, in this way referred that which had been spoken concerning the first man and Eve in a secondary sense to Christ and the Church, in order to silence the ignorant, now deprived of all excuse. For men who are incontinent in consequence of the uncontrolled impulses of sensuality in them, dare to force the Scriptures beyond their true meaning, so as to twist into a defence of their incontinence the saying, ”Increase and multiply; ” and the other, ”Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother; ” and they are not ashamed to run counter to the Spirit, but, as though born for this purpose, they kindle up the smouldering and lurking passion, fanning and provoking it; and therefore he, cutting off very sharply these dishonest follies and invented excuses, and having arrived at the subject of instructing them how men should behave to their wives, showing that it should be as Christ did to the Church, ”who gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the Word,” he referred back to Genesis, mentioning the things spoken concerning the first man, and explaining these things as bearing on the subject before him, that he might take away occasion for the abuse of these passages from those who taught the sensual gratification of the body, under the pretext of begetting children.

Chapter XI.-The Same Argument.

For consider, O virgins, how he, desiring with all his might that believers in Christ should be chaste, endeavours by many arguments to show them the dignity of chastity, as when he says, Now, concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman," thence showing already very clearly that it is good not to touch a woman, laying it down. and setting it forth unconditionally. But afterwards, being aware of the weakness of the less continent, and their passion for intercourse, he permitted those who are unable to govern the flesh to use their own wives, rather than, shamefully transgressing, to give themselves up to fornication. Then, after having given this permission, he immediately added these words, "that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency; "which means, "if you, such as you are, cannot, on account of the incontinence and softness of your bodies, be perfectly continent, I will rather permit you to have intercourse with your own wives, lest, professing perfect continence, ye be constantly tempted by the evil one, and be inflamed with lust after other men's wives."

Chapter XII.-Paul an Example to Widows, and to Those Who Do Not Live with Their Wives.

Come, now, and let us examine more carefully the very words which are before us, and observe that the apostle did not grant these things unconditionally to all, but first laid down the reason on account of which he was led to this. For, having set forth that ”it is good for a man not to touch a woman,” he added immediately, ”Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife” -that is, ”on account of the fornication which would arise from your being unable to restrain your voluptuousness ”-and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it tie with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment.” And this is very carefully considered. ”By permission” he says, showing that he was giving counsel, ”not of command; ”for he receives command respecting chastity and the not touching of a woman, but permission respecting those who are unable, as I said, to chasten their appetites. These things, then, he lays down concerning men and women who are married to one spouse, or who shall hereafter be so; but we must now examine carefully the apostle’s language respecting men who have lost their wives, and women who have lost their husbands, and what he declares on this subject.

”I say therefore,” he goes on, ”to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.” Here also he persisted in giving the preference to continence. For, taking himself as a notable example, in order to stir them up to emulation, he challenged his hearers to this state of life, teaching that it was better that a man who had been bound to one wife should henceforth remain single, as lie also did. But if, on the other hand, this should be a matter of difficulty to any one, on account of the strength of animal passion, he allows that one

who is in such a condition may, "by permission," contract a second marriage; not as though he expressed the opinion that a second marriage was in itself flood, but judging it better than burning. Just as though, in the fast which prepares for the Easter celebration, one should offer food to an other who was dangerously ill, and say," In truth, my friend, it were fitting and good that you should bravely hold out like us, and partake of the same things, for it is forbidden even to think of food to-day; but since you are held down and weakened by disease, and cannot bear it, therefore, 'by permission, ' we advise you to eat food, lest, being quite unable, from sickness, to hold up against the desire for food, you perish." Thus also the apostle speaks here, first saying that he wished all were healthy and continent, as he also was, but afterwards allowing a second marriage to those who are burdened with the disease of the passions, lest they should be wholly defiled by fornication, goaded on by the itchings of the organs of generation to promiscuous intercourse, considering such a second marriage far preferable to burning and indecency.

Chapter XIII.-The Doctrine of Paul Concerning Virginity Explained.

I have now brought to an end what I have to say respecting continence and marriage and chastity, and intercourse with men, and in which of these there is help towards progress in righteousness; but it still remains to speak concerning virginity-if, indeed, anything be prescribed on this subject. Let us then treat this subject also; for it stands thus: ”Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress; I say, that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you. Having given his opinion with great caution respecting virginity, and being about to advise him who wished it to give his virgin in marriage, so that none of those things which conduce to sanctification should be of necessity and by compulsion, but according to the free purpose of the soul. for this is acceptable to God, he does not wish these things to be said as by authority, and as the mind of the Lord, with reference to the giving of a virgin in marriage;

for after he had said, ”if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned,” directly afterwards, with the greatest caution, he modified his statement, showing that he had advised these things by human permission, and not by divine. So, immediately after he had said, ”if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned,” he added, ”such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you. By which he means: ”I sparing you, such as you are, consented to these things, because yon have chosen to think thus of them, that I may not seem to hurry you on by violence, and compel any one to this. But yet if it shall please you who find chastity hard to bear, rather to turn to marriage; I consider it to be profitable for you to restrain yourselves in the gratification of the flesh, not making your marriage an occasion for abusing your own vessels to uncleanness. Then he adds, ”But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none. And again, going on and challenging them to the same things, he confirmed his statement, powerfully supporting the state of virginity, and adding expressly the following words to those which he had spoken before, he exclaimed, ”I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the

things that belong to the Lord: but he that is married careth for f the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.

There is a difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. Now it is clear to all, without any doubt, that to care for the things of the Lord and to please God, is much better than to care for the things of the world and to please one's wife. For who is there so foolish and blind. as not to perceive in this statement the higher praise which Paul accords to chastity? "And this," he says, "I speak for your own profit, not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is comely."

Chapter XIV.-Virginity a Gift of God: the Purpose of Virginity Not Rashly to Be Adopted by Any One.

Consider besides how, in addition to the words already quoted, he commends the state of virginity as a gift of God. Wherefore he rejects those of the more incontinent, who, under the influence of vain-glory, would advance to this state, advising them to marry, lest in their time of manly strength, the flesh stirring up the desires and passions, they should be goaded on to defile the soul. For let us consider what he lays down: ” But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely towards his virgin,” he says,” if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let him marry; ”properly here preferring marriage to ”uncomeliness,” in the case of those who had chosen the state of virginity, but afterwards finding it intolerable and grievous, and in word boasting of their perseverance before men, out of shame, but indeed no longer having the power to persevere in the life of a eunuch. But for him who of his own free will and purpose decides to preserve his flesh in virgin purity, ”having no necessity,” that is, passion calling forth his loins to intercourse, for there are, as it seems, differences in men’s bodies; such a one contending and struggling, and zealously abiding by his profession. and admirably fulfilling it, he exhorts to abide and to preserve it, according the highest prize to virginity. For he that is able, he says, and ambitious to preserve his flesh pure, does better; but he that is unable, and enters into marriage lawfully, and does not indulge in secret corruption, does well. And now enough has been said on these subjects.

Let any one who will, take in his hand the Epistle to the Corinthians, and, examining all its passages one by one, then consider what we have said, comparing them together, as to whether there is not a perfect harmony and agreement between them. These things, according to my power, O Arete, I offer to thee as my contribution on the subject of chastity. Euboulios. Through many things, O Gregorion, she has scarcely come to the subject, having measured and crossed a mighty sea of words. Gregorion. So it seems; but come, I must mention the rest of what was said in order, going through it and repeating it, while I seem to have the sound of it dwelling in my ears, before it flies away and escapes; for the remem-

brance of things lately heard is easily effaced from the aged. Euboulios. Say on, then; for we have come to have the pleasure of hearing these discourses.

Gregorion. And then after, as you observed, Thaleia had descended from her smooth and unbroken course to the earth, Theopatra, she said, followed her in order, and spoke as follows. Discourse IV.-Theopatra.

Chapter I.-The Necessity of Praising Virtue, for Those Who Have the Power.

If the art of speaking, O virgins, always went by the same ways, and passed along the same path, there would be no way to avoid wearying you for one who persisted in the arguments which had already been urged. But since there are of arguments myriads of currents and ways, God inspiring us ”at sundry times and in divers manners,” who can have the choice of holding back or of being afraid? For he would not be free from blame to whom the gift has been given, if he failed to adorn that which is honourable with words of praise. Come then, we also, according to our gifts, will sing the brightest and most glorious star of Christ, which is chastity. For this way of the Spirit is very wide and large. Beginning, therefore, at the point from which we may say those things which are suitable and fitting to the subject before us, I let us from thence consider it.

Chapter II.-The Protection of Chastity and Virginity Divinely Given to Men, that They May Emerge from the Mire of Vices.

Now I at least seem to perceive that nothing has been such a means of restoring men to paradise, and of the change to incorruption, and of reconciliation to God, and such a means of salvation to men, by guiding us to life, as chastity. And I will now endeavour to show why I think so concerning these things, that having heard distinctly the power of the grace already spoken of, you may know of how great blessings it has become the giver to us. Anciently, then, after the fall of man, when he was cast out by reason of his transgression, the stream of corruption poured forth abundantly, and running along in violent currents, not only fiercely swept along whatever touched it from without, but also rushing within it, overwhelmed the souls of men. And they, continuously exposed to this, were carried along dumb and stupid, neglecting to pilot their vessels, from having nothing firm to lay hold of. For the senses of the soul, as those have said who are learned in these things, when, being overcome by the excitements to passion which fall upon them from without, they receive the sudden bursts of the waves of folly which rush into them, being darkened turn aside from the divine course its whole vessel, which is by nature easily guided.

Wherefore God, pitying us who were in such a condition, and were able neither to stand nor to rise, sent down from heaven the best and most glorious help, virginity, that by it we might tie our bodies fast, like ships, and have a calm, coming to an anchorage without damage, as also the Holy Spirit witnesses. For this is said in the hundred and thirty-sixth psalm, where the souls send joyfully up to God a hymn of thanksgiving, as many as have been taken hold of and raised up to walk with Christ in heaven, that they might not be overwhelmed by the streams of the world and the flesh. Whence, also, they say that Pharaoh was a type of the devil in Egypt, since he mercilessly commanded the males to be cast into the river, but the females to be preserved alive. For the devil, ruling from Adam to Moses over this great Egypt, the world, took care to have the male and rational offspring of the soul carried

away and destroyed by the streams of passions, but he longs for the carnal and irrational offspring to increase and multiply.

Chapter III.-That Passage of David Explained; What the Harps Hung Upon the Willows Signify; The Willow a Symbol of Chastity; The Willows Watered by Streams.

But not to pass away from our subject, come, let us take in our hands and examine this psalm, which the pure and stainless souls sing to God, saying: ”By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down; yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof,” clearly giving the name of harps to their bodies which they hung upon the branches of chastity, fastening them to the wood that they might not be snatched away and dragged along again by the stream of incontinence. For Babylon, which is interpreted ”disturbance ”or” confusion,” signifies this life around which the water flows, while we sit in the midst of which the water flows round us, as long as we are in the world, the rivers of evil always beating upon us. Wherefore, also, we are always fearful, and we groan and cry with weeping to God, that our harps may not be snatched off by the waves of pleasure, and slip down from the tree of chastity. For everywhere the divine writings take the willow as the type of chastity, because, when its flower is steeped in water, if it be drunk, it extinguishes whatever kindles sensual desires and passions within us, until it entirely renders barren, and makes every inclination to the begetting of children without effect, as also Homer indicated, for this reason calling the willows destructive of fruit. And in Isaiah the righteous are said to ”spring up as willows by the water courses.

Surely, then, the shoot of virginity is raised to a great and glorious height, when the righteous, and he to whom it is given to preserve it and to cultivate it, bedewing it with wisdom, is watered by the gentlest streams of Christ. For as it is the nature of this tree to bud and grow through water, so it is the nature of virginity to blossom and grow to maturity when enriched by words, so that one can hang his body upon it.

Chapter IV.-The Author Goes on with the Interpretation of the Same Passage.

If, then, the rivers of Babylon are the streams of voluptuousness, as wise men say, which confuse and disturb the soul, then the willows must be chastity, to which we may suspend and draw up the organs of lust which overbalance and weigh down the mind, so that they may not be borne down by the torrents of incontinence, and be drawn like worms to impurity and corruption. For God has bestowed upon us virginity as a most useful and a serviceable help towards incorruption, sending it as an ally to those who are contending for and longing after Zion, as the psalm shows, which is resplendent charity and the commandment respecting it, for Zion is interpreted "The commandment of the watchtower. Now, let us here enumerate the points which follow. For why do the souls declare that they were asked by those who led them captive to sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Surely because the Gospel teaches a holy and secret song, which sinners and adulterers sing to the Evil One. For they insult the commandments, accomplishing the will of the spirits of evil, and cast holy things to dogs, and pearls before swine, in the same manner as those of whom the prophet says with indignation, "They read the law without; " for the Jews were not to read the law going forth out of the gates of Jerusalem or out of their houses;

and for this reason the prophet blames them strongly, and cries that they were liable to condemnation, because, while they were transgressing the commandments, and acting impiously towards God, they were pretentiously reading the law, as if, forsooth, they were piously observing its precepts; but they did not receive it in their souls, holding it firmly with faith, but rejected it, denying it by their works. And hence they sing the Lord's song in a strange land, explaining the law by distorting and degrading it, expecting a sensual kingdom, and setting their hopes on this alien world, which the Word says will pass away, where those who carry them captive entice them with pleasures, lying in wait to deceive them.

Chapter V.-The Gifts of Virgins, Adorned with Which They are Presented to One Husband, Christ.

Now, those who sing the Gospel to senseless people seem to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, of which Christ is not the husbandman; but those who have put on and shone in the most pure and bright, and unmingled and pious and becoming, ornament of virginity, and are found barren and unproductive of unsettled and grievous passions, do not sing the song in a strange land; because they are not borne thither by their hopes, nor do they stick fast in the lusts of their mortal bodies, nor do they take a low view of the meaning of the commandments, but well and nobly, with a lofty disposition, they have regard to the promises which are above, thirsting for heaven as a congenial abode, whence God, approving their dispositions, promises with an oath to give them choice honours, appointing and establishing them "above His chief joy; "for He says thus: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy; "meaning by Jerusalem, as I said, these very undefiled and incorrupt souls, which, having with self-denial drawn in the pure draught of virginity with unpolluted lips, are "espoused to one husband," to be presented "as a chaste virgin to Christ" in heaven, "having gotten the victory, striving for undefiled rewards.

Hence also the prophet Isaiah proclaims, saying, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Now these promises, it is evident to every one, will be fulfilled after the resurrection. For the Holy Spirit does not speak of that well-known town in Judea; but truly of that heavenly city, the blessed Jerusalem, which He declares to be the assembly of the souls which God plainly promises to place first, "above His chief joy," in the new dispensation, settling those who are clothed in the most white robe of virginity in the pure dwelling of unapproachable light; because they had it not in mind to put off their wedding garment-that is, to relax their minds by wandering thoughts.

Chapter VI.-Virginity to Be Cultivated and Commended in Every Place and Time.

Further, the expression in Jeremiah, ”That a maid should not forget her ornaments, nor a bride her attire,” shows that she should not give up or loosen the band of chastity through wiles and distractions. For by the heart are properly denoted our heart and mind. Now the breastband, the girdle which gathers together and keeps firm the purpose of the soul to chastity, is love to God, which our Captain and Shepherd, Jesus, who is also our Ruler and Bridegroom, O illustrious virgins, commands both you and me to hold fast unbroken and sealed up even to the end; for one will not easily find anything else a greater help to men than this possession, pleasing and grateful to God. There-fore, I say, that we should all exercise and honour chastity, and always cultivate and commend it. Let these first-fruits of my discourse suffice for thee, O Arete, in proof of my education and my zeal. ”And I receive the gift,” she said that Arete replied, ”and bid Thallousa speak after thee; for I must have a discourse from each one of you.” And she said that Thallousa, pausing a little, as though considering somewhat with herself, thus spoke.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.