

De Vitis Patrum, Book IX

by Heribert Rosweyde

The sermon emphasizes the importance of reading about the lives of virtuous men and emulating their virtues in order to overcome the devil and his minions.

Scripture: Jeremiah 9:21, Matthew 21:19, Luke 1:2, Acts 5:1, 1 Corinthians 9:27, 1 Corinthians 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:11, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 6:13

Topics: "Christian Virtue", "Divine Providence"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches on the lives of devout men, like Jacobus of Nisibis, who embraced a solitary life in pursuit of virtue and wisdom, demonstrating through their actions the power of God's grace and the importance of living a life worthy of emulation. Jacobus, akin to a latter-day Moses, performed miracles through prayer and divine intervention, showcasing his gentleness and compassion in dealing with those who erred. His humility and dedication to serving the poor, widows, and orphans led to his appointment as bishop, where he continued his selfless acts of kindness and displayed unwavering faith in God's providence.

Transcript

De Vitis Patrum, Book IX By Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrus Translated into Latin by Gentianus Hervetus
Prologue It is a beautiful thing indeed to read about the battles of those exemplary men who famously strove to acquire virtues. Such feasts for the eyes are of great benefit to us, for to understand them is to realise they are worthy of emulation. They stand out as examples to be embraced and imitated, compelling the readers to measure up to them. Those who know the stories of such great and virtuous deeds can bring no greater gift than this to the ears of those who have never heard of them.

Some say that these stories are for the ears of the faithful only, but from hearing comes faith, (Romans 10.17) as long as the narrators are trusted to be telling the truth. Just as the tongue and the palate can be relied upon to make a judgment and form an opinion on bitterness or sweetness or other such qualities, so the power of understanding speech is committed to the ear, which knows how to distinguish between things beneficial and things harmful. And as long as these useful narratives remain whole and incorrupt in the memory, and if a veil of darkness does not scatter them, causing them to vanish from the mind, it might seem to be superfluous to write them down, for whatever benefit there is in them can be conveyed to others fairly easily.

But it seems to me that in time, as the body declines towards old age and death, great and virtuous deeds fall into oblivion, and the memory of them is lost. So therefore, let no one rebuke us for being eager to write down the way that devout men, lovers of God, lived their lives. Those to whom is entrusted the care of our bodies prepare medicines to fight against disease and bring help to those who are suffering - just so do those who busy themselves in writing these stories provide wholesome medicines, so that things which were threatened with oblivion may be kept in mind.

Poets and writers quite normally celebrate the brave and famous things done in war, playwrights in their tragedies offer to the public calamitous events which would otherwise have remained hidden, some of the others produce works of comedy and suchlike trivial affairs, so should we then allow oblivion to be the fate of those men who in their mortal passionate flesh achieved passionlessness by striving after a nature which was not of this world? What punishments should we not deservedly incur if instead of remembering those deeds worthy of admiration we neglect them as being of nothing worth?

If the memory of those who in old times strove after the highest teachings of the saints has been preserved not in speech or writing but in lifelike pictures and statues which express all their virtues, what blame would deservedly be given to us if we did not pay due honour to their outstanding lives in writing also? The athletes and contortionists who compete at the Olympics are honoured with statues, even the charioteers in the races are given the same distinction. Not only this, but there are men and women - as well as effeminate people whose gender is uncertain - who delight in making spectacles of themselves, who get themselves into the record books, forever striving to keep their fame alive for as long as possible, even though the memory of them is not beneficial to the soul but debilitating.

So then, those worthy of admiration are honoured by one sort of picture, those who can only bring harm by another. And since death brings destruction to every mortal nature, they think that by producing judiciously coloured pictures of themselves their fame will last longer than a long life. We, however, shall be writing about lives governed by a love of wisdom ['philosophia', and translated thus passim], ways of life directed towards the heavenly, worthy of imitation. We shall not be describing bodily features and faces, nor shall we be offering anything from anyone who speaks from ignorance, but we shall be outlining the working of souls which is not normally open to view, and we shall lay bare hidden battles and conflicts which are not outwardly apparent.

This was the armour with which Paul, the general of his army and leader in battle, clothed his troops: 'Put on', he said, 'the armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all, to stand.' And again, 'Stand therefore with your loins girded about with truth, wearing the breastplate of justice, your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, at all times taking up the shield of faith, with which you may quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

And put on the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.' (Ephesians 6.13-17). And having clothed them in this armour he sent them forth to battle. The nature of the enemy is incorporeal, difficult to discern, obscurely invasive, secretly insidious, suddenly attacking when least expected. Our general gave the same instructions to his troops, saying, 'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world and the darkness of this age, against the spirits of wickedness in high places.' (Ibid. 12).

This band of saints had a great number of enemies like that; each one of them was surrounded by many powerful enemies (not that they all attacked at once - some of them attacked now one lot, now another),

so their victory was all the more famous when their adversaries fled. And when they had been put to flight and scattered, the flag of victory could be raised without any possible objection from anybody. It was not mortal human nature, full of countless contradictions, which won them that victory, but the divine grace which filled their souls.

For they burned with love for the divine beauty, and were resolved to do all things and suffer all things for the sake of him whom they loved. With a strong and generous spirit they bore the attacks of their own contradictions and agitations, they repulsed the violence of the devil with the sort of javelin which in apostolic terms consists of 'punishing the body and bringing it into subjection' (1 Corinthians 9.27). They quenched the fires of anger, they compelled raging greed to be still; by fasting and staying quietly at home they settled their troubled states of mind and banished all exaggerated flights of fancy, and compelled their vile bodies into harmony with their souls, thus winning the battle against their inborn nature.

Once peace had been established in all these things, they were able to expel the whole crowd of adversaries, for they had no inner thoughts of which the devils might take advantage. Deprived of any help which the human senses might give them the demons were unable to carry on their war. For the devil makes use of our senses as his weapons; if we ignore the sights that dazzle and the tempting sounds we hear, if our sense of feeling is not titillated by luxurious softness, if our minds give no admittance to depraved devices, then their labour is in vain who prepare assaults against us.

No enemy can capture a city built on a hill, fortified with strong defences and surrounded by deep ditches, for as long as no one inside helps the enemy by opening the gates. Just so, it is not possible for the demons, who wage war from outside us, to overcome a soul surrounded by divine grace, unless some slothfulness of thought opens some window in our senses which allows the enemy to enter in. Those whose praises we are celebrating learned this from opening the divine scriptures to hear God saying through the Prophet.

'Death has come up through the windows' (Jeremiah 9.21). So for them the laws of God served as bolts and bars to prevent their senses from straying, and they entrusted the keys to the rational mind; so that unless the mind gave the command, the tongue and lips did not open, nor was the eye permitted to range abroad; and the mind shut the door to all foolish and worthless voices as soon as they were heard approaching with threatening and vicious sounds. Only such voices as the mind approved of were allowed in.

And thus they taught that the sense of smell should not hanker after sweet perfumes whose inbuilt nature was softening and relaxing. They taught that the stomach should not be fully satisfied but be fed of practical necessity not for pleasure, and never given more than what was sufficient to keep them from death by starvation. Likewise they defeated the sweet tyranny of sleep; they escaped from being the slaves of their eyelids, and for servitude substituted domination, in that they made use of sleep not when sleep overcame them but when they briefly summoned sleep in order to satisfy the needs of nature.

So then, having taken care to guard the gates and walls and bring harmony to their inner thoughts, they could laugh at the invading adversaries outside, who were unable to get in by force because the grace of God overruled them, nor was any traitor to be found who was willing to let them in. Even though these enemies were by nature hidden from sight, they still had no power over a visible body subject to the needs of nature. For the mind, the governing charioteer of this body, skilfully and harmoniously holding the reins, directed the horses accurately and well; it continuously plucked the strings of the senses, producing

elegant and agreeable harmony in every part; by its skill in handling the rudder it withstood the pounding of the waves and broke the force of the winds.

These men therefore entered into life through countless labours, they subdued the body by hardships and sweat, they knew no laughter or relaxation, their whole life was one of tears and mourning, they reckoned their fasts as Sybaritic delights, their protracted vigils as the sweetest of slumbers, the hard ground as the gentlest of bedding, a life of praying and singing psalms as the greatest and most inexhaustible of pleasures. Who can fail to admire these men who embraced every kind of virtue?

Who will not praise and celebrate their worthiness? I know indeed that no speeches can adequately portray their virtues; nevertheless we can but try. They had an eager longing for their love of true wisdom to be perfected, but it would not nevertheless be right to neglect the praise of lesser lights. So I shall not assign one common measure of praise to all in what I write, for the gifts God gave them were varied, as the blessed Paul taught: 'To some is given by the Spirit a word of wisdom, to others a word of knowledge by the same Spirit, to others faith by the same Spirit, to others gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to others the working of miracles, to others prophecy, to others the gift of tongues, to others the interpretation of tongues.' (1 Corinthians 12. 8-10).

And in order to show the origin of them all he adds, 'But at work in all these is one and the same Spirit, dividing to each one separately how he will' (Ibid. 11). Since therefore the gifts they have been given are all different, it is right that I should make a separate story out of each one of them. I shall not itemise every single thing that they did, for a whole lifetime would be needed to do that, but to illustrate their manner of life I shall tell of a few things that each one has done.

Having outlined just a few things illustrating the character and shape of the life of each one, I shall then go on to the next. I shall not try to put into writing the history of every holy person who ever existed, and not even those whose fame we know to have been universally acknowledged, for it is not possible that one man could write about everyone. I shall describe only the lives of those who were like lights shining in the East sending out their rays to the ends of the earth.

But let my storytelling issue in prayer; judge it not by the laws of eulogising, but gather from it a few things that are true. This is a religious history, or description of monastic discipline (call it what you will, as long as you do not give less credence to the stories because you read of things which are beyond your own capabilities). And I beg whosoever lights upon it not to weigh its virtues up against what they themselves are capable of, but to recognise clearly that it is God from on high who measures out the gifts of the most holy Spirit on the souls of the devout, and more abundantly to those who are closer to perfection.

I say this for the benefit of those who are not yet fully initiated into the mysteries of divine things. It is the priests of the inner sanctum of the Spirit who know the glory of the Spirit and recognise the miracles which he performs among human beings through the ministrations of human beings, drawing the unbelieving towards the knowledge of God. It is clear that whoever does not believe the things which I am about to relate would not believe what Moses did either, or what Joshua did, or Elijah or Elisha, and holds as fables the deeds of the holy apostles.

But if they do accept those things to be true let them also give credence to these things. For the grace that worked in them is the same grace which enabled these others to do what they did. Grace is eternal, and chooses those who are worthy of it, passing over some, but pouring out over others the fulness of its working. I witnessed myself many of the things I shall tell about, and what I did not witness myself I heard

from those who did, men who loved virtue and were found worthy to be their witnesses and profit from their teachings.

Matthew and John are first and foremost among the Evangelists, for they actually saw the Lord's miracles, but Luke and Mark are also trustworthy gospel writers. They were taught by those who were from the beginning 'witnesses and ministers of the Word', (Luke 1.2) passing on accurate knowledge of what the Lord suffered and did, and what he constantly taught. And so although the blessed Luke did not actually see the Lord, he made it quite clear in the beginning of his gospel that he was telling of those things which had been delivered unto him (Ibid).

So then we also, if we have listened to someone who did not actually see what he is talking about but learnt about it from someone else, are able to give no less credence to him and to Mark than we do to Matthew and John. The narrative of one as well as the other is worthy of belief for they learned from those who were there. We therefore shall tell of some things which we actually saw, and other things trusting in the stories of those who did see, and who emulated them in their own lives. But I shall go into a bit more detail when I want to be convincing about the truth of what I am saying. And so, here I begin my story.

Chapter I JACOBUS of Nisibis Moses the divine lawgiver, who laid bare the bottom of the sea, caused water to flow in the barren desert and did many other miracles, wrote down the deeds of those saints who were of old. He was not prompted by the wisdom of the Egyptians, but by the splendour of grace given him from above. For unless he had been inspired by the all-knowing divine Spirit, how could he have learned about the virtues of Abel, Enoch's love of righteousness, the devout priesthood of Melchisedech, the calling of Abraham, and his faith, his courage, his meticulous attention to the duties of hospitality, the sacrifice of his son for the benefit of the world, and the whole catalogue of all the other deeds which he performed?

I likewise need help in this present work, trying as I am to describe the lives of those holy people who shone both in our own times and in the times a little before us, and whom I would wish to portray as examples for those who would wish to emulate them. I beg your prayers for this, and so I begin my tale. Nisibis is a state on the borders between the Romans and the Persians. At one time it was subject to the Romans and paid taxes to them. This is where the great Jacobus came from to embrace the quietness of a solitary life.

He chose the peaks of the highest mountains as his abode. In summer and autumn he frequented the woods, with only the sky for a roof over his head; in the winter he made use of a cave, which gave him some sort of shelter. His food was not such as is laboriously sown and cultivated, but what grew naturally; he gathered the fruits which grew of their own accord on the trees of the woods, and edible herbs which served him as vegetables. He ate them raw, providing his body with sufficient to preserve life.

He found it quite unnecessary for his clothing to be of wool; he used instead the prickly hair of goatskins, from which he made a tunic and simple cloak. By afflicting his body thus, he was able to feed his body with spiritual food, by contemplation he purified the faculty of thought, wherein as in a clear mirror of the divine Spirit, with open face looking to the glory of God, he was transformed into the same image from glory unto glory, as by the spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3.18).

Hence, his trust in God which came from God increased daily, and asking from God only what it was right to ask he immediately received what he asked for. As a result he was able to see the future prophetically, and by the grace of the most holy Spirit received the power of doing miracles. I shall tell of some of them,

and make known the brightness of his apostolic splendour to those who were previously unaware. An insane attraction to idols was flourishing among people at that time, the cult of worshipping inanimate statues was being promoted, and many neglected the worship of God.

Anyone who did not wish to join in their drunkenness was held in contempt, but those given above all to the pursuit of virtue saw things as they really were, and mocked the senselessness of idols while worshipping the maker of the universe. He had travelled into Persia at that time in order to see the new signs of true religion there, and what was equally important, to bring them some pastoral care. He happened to be passing by a pond where some girls were washing clothes by pounding them with their feet.

Far from showing the respect due to him not only as a stranger but as one wearing the habit with modesty and dignity, the girls shamelessly cast burning looks and impudent glances at the holy man, nor did they cover their heads or let fall the garments which they had tucked up round their waists. This made the man of God angry, and he called down a curse upon the pond, choosing this opportune moment to make manifest the power of God, and by performing a miracle to drive out wickedness.

The pond immediately dried up. He also cursed the girls and punished their youthful impudence by turning their hair prematurely grey. The lesson he drew from this was that the changed colour of their hair was like what had recently happened to the trees, which were now crowned with autumn leaves. The girls watched the waters drying up and stared at each other's heads. They knew these sudden changes were their punishment, and they fled back to the town to tell of what had happened.

The townspeople ran out and soon met up with the great Jacobus, whom they begged to restrain his anger and remove the punishment. Jacobus did not keep them waiting long, but prayed to God and commanded the waters to flow once more. They immediately began to gush up out of the depths again, obedient to the holy man's command. Having made that request they then begged that the colour of the girls' hair should be restored. He granted this even though the girls had not returned, for he sought them out and lifted the punishment from them.

This was a lesson to them that they should in future be temperate and well disciplined, and remember always how divine power had been shown forth on them. Such was the miracle of this latter-day Moses, performed not by striking with a rod, but by making the sign of the cross. Quite apart from the miracle I am astonished at his gentleness. For unlike the great Elisha he did not hand those impudent girls into the power of savage bears, (2 Kings 2.24), but shamed them by means of a fairly harmless punishment, and at the same time taught them to be respectful and restrained.

I say this, not to condemn the prophet for savagery (far be it from me to be so presumptuous!), but to demonstrate how Jacobus possessed the same sort of power, but used it in a manner compatible with the New Testament and the greatness of Christ. On another occasion he was present when a Persian judge handed down a judgment which was manifestly unjust, so Jacobus laid a curse on a large rock nearby, ordering it to be broken into fragments, showing by this how worthless the judgment was.

All those present were terrified at seeing the stone shattered into a thousand pieces, and it was such a shock to the judge himself that he overturned his previous judgment and issued a just one. In this likewise Jacobus was imitating the Lord, who when wishing to show that he was going cheerfully to his passion of his own free will, refrained from punishing his persecutors but showed that he had power to do so by withering the fig tree (Matthew 21.19). In imitation of such clemency Jacobus did not punish the judge, but

by destroying the rock induced him to judge justly.

His deeds became known, and made him so loved and respected by all that he was elevated to the bishopric of his own country. So through no desire of his own he was thrust into a very exalted way of life and social position. But he did not wear any different clothing or change his diet; his circumstances may have changed but his rule of life was not modified in the slightest. His labours increased, and were much greater than they were before. He was already fasting, sleeping on the ground and wearing rough clothing; to these labours were added the care of the poor, the widows and the orphans, and he also opposed those who dealt unjustly while supporting those who had suffered injustice.

But what a task it would be to enlighten all those who are unaware of the benefits received by those he cared for! His great distinction is that he went about his work as one who above all feared and loved him who was the master of his sheep. The greater his acts of kindness grew in number, so much the greater was the grace given to him by the most holy Spirit. On one occasion he was travelling through some village or town (I'm not quite sure where), when some poor people approached him carrying one of their number who they said was dead.

They humbly begged him for money to pay for his burial, but he simply prayed to God to forgive him the sins he had committed in life and count him worthy to be admitted into the company of the just. At the very moment when these words were being spoken, the soul departed from the man pretending to be dead, while Jacobus gave them money for a shroud. As soon as this admirable man had gone a little further on his way the perpetrators of this deed told the recumbent form to get up.

Receiving no response they suddenly realised that what they had been pretending had come true, the playacting had become real. They rushed back to Jacobus and threw themselves at his feet, protesting that it was poverty which had driven them to do what they had rashly done. They humbly begged him to pardon their transgression and restore the dead man to life. And in imitation of the mercy of the Lord he did offer prayers and perform a miracle, so that as life had been taken through prayer even so life through prayer was restored.

This all seems to have certain similarities to the miracle performed by the great Peter, who handed over to death those thieves and liars, Ananias and Saphiras (Acts 5,1-10), for Jacobus also brought death to him who murdered truth and traded in lies. But whereas Peter inflicted the punishment having become aware of the theft by the Spirit, Jacobus knew nothing of what those men were trying to achieve, but simply offered the prayers which brought about the pretender's death.

The divine Apostle did nothing to snatch back the dead from their fate, because he needed to inculcate some fear before could begin to preach salvation. Jacobus, overflowing with apostolic grace, brought about an opportune punishment, but also later remitted the punishment, for the need here was to bring enlightenment to the offenders.

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