

VOICES FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

On the Mortality



In the middle of the third century, a severe plague swept through North Africa, killing tens of thousands of people – Christian and pagan alike. In some places, the dead outnumbered the living. Some thought the end of the world was imminent. Many Christians were surprised that they too were afflicted by this deadly plague. Cyprian encouraged and challenged his fellow Christians with these words:

Although in very many of you, dearly beloved brethren, there is a steadfast mind and a firm faith, and a devoted spirit that is not disturbed at the frequency of this present mortality, but, like a strong and stable rock, rather shatters the turbulent onsets of the world and the raging waves of time, while it is not itself shattered, and is not overcome but tried by these temptations; yet because I observe that among the people some, either through weakness of mind, or through decay of faith, or through the sweetness of this worldly life, or through the softness of their sex, or what is of still greater account, through error from the truth, are standing less steadily, and are not exerting the divine and unvanquished vigor of their heart, the matter may not be disguised nor kept in silence, but as far as my feeble powers suffice with my full strength, and with a discourse gathered from the Lord's lessons, the slothfulness of a luxurious disposition must be restrained, and he who has begun to be already a man of God and of Christ, must be found worthy of God and of Christ.

For he who wars for God, dearest brethren, ought to acknowledge himself as one who, placed in the heavenly camp, already hopes for divine things, so that we may have no trembling at the storms and whirlwinds of the world, and no disturbance, since the Lord had foretold that these would come The kingdom of God, beloved brethren, is beginning to be at hand; the reward of life, and the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise, are now coming, with the passing

away of the world; already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small things, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude? Who, in the midst of these things, is trembling and sad, except he who is without hope and faith? For it is for him to fear death who is not willing to go to Christ. It is for him to be unwilling to go to Christ who does not believe that he is about to reign with Christ.

But, beloved brethren, this is so, because faith is lacking, because no one believes that the things which God promises are true, although He is true, whose word to believers is eternal and unchangeable. If a grave and praiseworthy man should promise you anything, you would assuredly have faith in the promise-giver, and would not think that you should be cheated and deceived by him whom you knew to be steadfast in his words and his deeds. Now God is speaking with you; and do you faithlessly waver in your unbelieving mind? God promises to you, on your departure from this world, immortality and eternity; and do you doubt? This is not to know God at all; this is to offend Christ

How great is the advantage of going out of the world. Christ Himself, the Teacher of our salvation and of our good works, shows to us, who, when His disciples were saddened that He said that He was soon to depart, spoke to them, and said, "If ye loved me, ye would surely rejoice because I go to the Father;" teaching thereby, and manifesting that when the dear ones whom we love depart from the world, we should rather rejoice than grieve. Remembering which truth, the blessed Apostle Paul in his epistle lays it down, saying, "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain;" counting it the greatest gain no longer to be held by the snares of this world, no longer to be liable to the sins and vices of the flesh, but taken away from smarting troubles, and freed from the envenomed fangs of the devil, to go at the call of Christ to the joy of eternal salvation.

But nevertheless it disturbs some that the power of this disease attacks our people equally with the heathens, as if the Christian believed for this purpose, that he might have the enjoyment of the world and this life free from the contact of ills; and not as one who undergoes all adverse things here and is reserved for future joy. It disturbs some that this mortality is common to us with others; and yet what is there in this world which is not common to us with others, so long as this flesh of ours still remains, according to the law of our first birth, common to us with them?

So long as we are here in the world, we are associated with the human race in fleshly equality, but are separated in spirit. Therefore until this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal receive immortality, and the Spirit lead us to God the Father, whatsoever are the disadvantages of the flesh are common to us with the human race. Thus, when the earth is barren with an unproductive harvest, famine makes no distinction; thus, when with the invasion of an enemy any city is taken, captivity at once desolates all; and when the serene clouds withhold the rain, the drought is alike to all; and when the jagged rocks rend the ship, the shipwreck is common without exception to all that sail in her; and the disease of the eyes, and the attack of fevers, and the feebleness of all the limbs is common to us with others, so long as this common flesh of ours is borne by us in the world.

Moreover, if the Christian know and keep fast under what condition and what law he has believed, he will be aware that he must suffer more than others in the world, since he must struggle more with the attacks of the devil...

Righteous men have ever possessed this endurance. The apostles maintained this discipline from the law of the Lord, not to murmur in adversity, but to accept bravely and patiently whatever things happen in the world; since the people of the Jews in this matter always offended, that they constantly murmured against God, as the Lord God bears witness in the book of Numbers, saying, "Let their murmuring cease from me, and they shall not die." We must not murmur in adversity, beloved brethren, but we must bear with patience and courage whatever happens, since it is written, "The sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; a contrite and humbled heart God does not despise;" ...

Thus Abraham pleased God, who, that he might please God, did not shrink even from losing his son, or from doing an act of parricide [sacrificing his son]. You, who cannot endure to lose your son by the law and lot of mortality, what would you do if you were bidden to slay your son? The fear and faith of God ought to make you prepared for everything, although it should be the loss of private estate, although the constant and cruel harassment of your limbs by agonizing disorders, although the deadly and mournful wrench from wife, from children, from departing dear ones.

Let not these things be offences to you, but battles: nor let them weaken nor break the Christian's faith, but rather show forth his strength in the struggle, since all the injury inflicted by present troubles is to be despised in the assurance of future blessings. Unless the battle has preceded,

there cannot be a victory: when there shall have been, in the onset of battle, the victory, then also the crown is given to the victors. For the helmsman is recognized in the tempest; in the warfare the soldier is proved. It is an empty show when there is no danger. Struggle in adversity is the trial of the truth. The tree which is deeply founded in its root is not moved by the onset of winds, and the ship which is compacted of solid timbers is beaten by the waves and is not shattered; and when the threshing-floor brings out the corn, the strong and robust grains despise the winds, while the empty chaff is carried away by the blast [gust] that falls upon it ...

What a grandeur of spirit it is to struggle with all the powers of an unshaken mind against so many onsets of devastation and death! What sublimity, to stand erect amid the desolation of the human race, and not to lie prostrate with those who have no hope in God ...

And further, beloved brethren, what is it, what a great thing is it, how pertinent, how necessary, that pestilence [disease] and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend the sick; whether relations affectionately love their kindred; whether masters pity their languishing servants; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients; whether the fierce suppress their violence; whether the rapacious can quench the ever insatiable ardour of their

raging avarice even by the fear of death; whether the haughty bend their neck; whether the wicked soften their boldness; whether, when their dear ones perish, the rich, even then bestow anything, and give, when they are to die without heirs. Even although this mortality conferred nothing else, it has done this benefit to Christians and to God's servants, that we begin gladly to desire martyrdom as we learn not to fear death. These are trainings for us, not deaths: they give the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown ...

We ought to remember that we should do not our own will, but God's, in accordance with what our Lord has bidden us daily to pray. How preposterous and absurd it is, that while we ask that the will of God should be done, yet when God calls and summons us from this world, we should not at once obey the command of His will! We struggle and resist, and after the manner of forward servants we are dragged to the presence of the Lord with sadness and grief, departing hence under the bondage of necessity, not with the obedience of free will; and we wish to be honored with heavenly rewards by Him to whom we come unwillingly. Why, then, do we pray and ask that the kingdom of heaven may come, if the captivity of earth delights us? Why with frequently repeated prayers do we entreat and beg that the day of His kingdom may hasten, if our greater desires and stronger wishes are to obey the devil here, rather than to reign with Christ? ...

To myself also, the very least and last, how often has it been revealed, how frequently and manifestly has it been commanded by the condescension of God, that I should diligently bear witness and publicly declare that our brethren who are freed from this world by the Lord's summons are not to be lamented, since we know that they are not lost, but sent before; that, departing from us, they precede us as travelers, as navigators are accustomed to do; that they should be desired, but not bewailed; that the black garments should not be taken upon us here, when they have already taken upon them white raiment there; that occasion should not be given to the Gentiles for them deservedly and rightly to reprehend us, that we mourn for those, who, we say, are alive with God, as if they were extinct and lost; and that we do not approve with the testimony of the heart and breast the faith which we express with speech and word.

And this, as it ought always to be done by God's servants, much more ought to be done now—now that the world is collapsing and is oppressed with the tempests of mischievous ills If in your dwelling the walls were shaking with age, the roofs above you were trembling, and the house, now worn out and wearied, were threatening an immediate destruction to its

“If in your dwelling, the walls were shaking with age, the roofs above you were trembling, and the house, now worn out and wearied, were threatening an immediate destruction ... would you not with all speed depart?”

structure crumbling with age, would you not with all speed depart? If, when you were on a voyage, an angry and raging tempest, by the waves violently aroused, foretold the coming shipwreck, would you not quickly seek the harbor? Lo, the world is changing and passing away, and witnesses to its ruin not now by its age, but by the end of things.

We should consider, dearly beloved brethren—we should ever and anon reflect that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the kingdom. Who that has been placed in foreign lands would not hasten to return to his own country? Who that is hastening to return to his friends would not eagerly desire a prosperous gale, that he might the sooner embrace those dear to him?

What a pleasure is there in the heavenly kingdom, without fear of death; and how lofty and perpetual a happiness with eternity of living! There the glorious company of the apostles—there the host of the rejoicing prophets—there the innumerable multitude of martyrs, crowned for the victory of their struggle and passion—there the triumphant virgins, who subdued the lust of the flesh and of the body by the strength of their continency—there are merciful men rewarded, who by feeding and helping the poor have done the works of righteousness—who, keeping the Lord's precepts, have transferred their earthly patrimonies to the heavenly treasuries. To these, beloved brethren, let us hasten with an eager desire; let us crave quickly to be with them, and quickly to come to Christ. May God behold this our eager desire; may the Lord Christ look upon this purpose of our mind and faith, He who will give the larger rewards of His glory to those whose desires in respect of Himself were greater!

Treatise VII, The Treatises of Cyprian
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