Shorter writings

Dionysius of Alexandria (d. AD 264)

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An Exposition of Luke 22. 46, Etc

This prayer He also offered up Himself, falling repeatedly on His face; and on both occasions He urged His request for not entering into temptation: both when He prayed, ”If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; ”and when He said, ”Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt. For He spoke of not entering into temptation, and He made that His prayer; but He did not ask that He should have no trial whatsoever in these circumstances, or that no manner of hardship should ever befall Him. For in the most general application it holds good, that it does not appear to be possible for any man to remain altogether without experience of ill: for, as one says, ”The whole world lieth in wickedness; ” and again, ”The most of the days of man are labour and trouble,” as men themselves also admit. Short is our life, and full of sorrow. Howbeit it was not meet that He should bid them pray directly that that curse might not be fulfilled, which is expressed thus: ”Cursed is the ground in thy works: in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; ” or thus, ”Earth thou art, and unto earth shall thou return. For which reason the Holy Scriptures, that indicate in many various ways the dire distressfulness of life, designate it as a valley of weeping.

And most of all indeed is this world a scene of pain to the saints, to whom He addresses this word, and He cannot lie in uttering it: ”In the world ye shall have tribulation. And to the same effect also He says by the prophet, ”Many are the afflictions of the righteous. But I suppose that He refers to this entering not into temptation, when He speaks in the prophet’s words of being delivered out of the afflictions. For He adds, ”The Lord will deliver him out of them all. And this is just in accordance with the Saviour’s word, whereby He promises that they will overcome their afflictions, and that they will participate in that victory which He has won for them. For after saying, ”In the world ye shall have tribulation,” He added, ”But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. And again, He taught them to pray that they might not fall into temptation, when He said, ”And lead us not into temptation; ”which means, ”Suffer us not to fall into temptation. And to show that this did not imply they should not be tempted, but really that they should be delivered from the evil, He added, ”But deliver us from evil. But perhaps you will say, What difference is there between being tempted, and falling or entering into temptation?

Well, if one is overcome of evil-and he will be overcome unless he struggles against it himself, and unless God protects him with His shield-that man has entered into temptation, and is

in it, and is brought under it like one that is led captive. But if one withstands and endures, that man is indeed tempted; but he has not entered into temptation, or fallen under it. Thus Jesus was led up of the Spirit, not indeed to enter into temptation, but ”to be tempted of the devil. And Abraham, again, did not enter into temptation, neither did God lead him into temptation, but He tempted (tried) him; yet He did not drive him into temptation. The Lord Himself, moreover, tempted (tried) the disciples. And thus the wicked one, when he tempts us, draws us into the temptations, as dealing himself with the temptations of evil; but God, when He tempts (tries), adduces the temptations as one untempted of evil. For God, it is said, ”cannot be tempted of evil. The devil, therefore, drives us on by violence, drawing us to destruction; but God leads us by the hand, training us for our salvation.

Of the One Substance

The plant that springs from the root is something distinct from that whence it grows up; and yet it is of one nature with it. And the river which flows from the fountain is something distinct from the fountain. For we cannot call either the river a fountain, or the fountain a river. Nevertheless we allow that they are both one according to nature, and also one in substance; and we admit that the fountain may be conceived of as father, and that the river is what is begotten of the fountain.

On John 8. 12

Now this word ”I am” expresses His eternal subsistence. For if He is the reflection of the eternal light, He must also be eternal Himself. For if the light subsists for ever, it is evident that the reflection also subsists for ever. And that this light subsists, is known only by its shining; neither can there be a light that does not give light. We come back, therefore, to our illustrations. If there is day, there is light; and if there is no such thing, the sun certainly cannot be present. If, therefore, the sun had been eternal, there would also have been endless day. Now, however, as it is not so, the day begins when the sun rises, and it ends when the sun sets. But God is eternal light, having neither beginning nor end. And along with Him there is the reflection, also without beginning, and everlasting. The Father, then, being eternal, the Son is also eternal, being light of light; and if God is the light, Christ is the reflection; and if God is also a Spirit, as it is written, ”God is a Spirit,” Christ, again, is called analogously Spirit.

On Luke 22. 42, Etc

But let these things be enough to say on the subject of the will. This word, however, ”Let the cup pass,” does not mean, Let it not come near me, or approach me. For what can pass from Him must certainly first come nigh Him, and what does thus pass from Him must be by Him. For if it does not reach Him, it cannot pass from Him. Accordingly, as if He now felt it to be present, He began to be in pain, and to be troubled, and to be sore amazed, and to be in an agony. And as if it was at hand and placed before Him, He does not merely say ”the cup,” but He indicates it by the word ”this. Therefore, as what passes from one is something which neither has no approach nor is permanently settled with one, so the Saviour’s first request is that the temptation which has come softly and plainly upon Him, and associated itself lightly with Him, may be turned aside. And this is the first form of that freedom from falling into temptation, which He also counsels the weaker disciples to make the subject of their prayers; that, namely, which concerns the approach of temptation: for it must needs be that offences come, but yet those to whom they come ought not to fall into the temptation.

But the most perfect mode in which this freedom from entering into temptation is exhibited, is what He expresses in His second request, when He says not merely, ”Not as I will,” but also, ”but as Thou wilt. For with God there is no temptation in evil; but He wills to give us good exceeding abundantly above what we ask or think. That His will, therefore, is the perfect will, the Beloved Himself knew; and often does He say that He has come to do that will, and not His own will,-that is to say, the will of men. For He takes to Himself the person of men, as having been made man. Wherefore also on this occasion He deprecates the doing of the inferior, which is His own, and begs that the superior should be done, which is His Father’s, to wit, the divine will, which again, however, in respect of the divinity, is one and the same will in Himself and in His Father. For it was the Father’s will that He should pass through every trial (temptation), and the Father Himself in a marvellous manner brought Him on this course; not indeed, with the trial itself as His goal, nor in order simply that He might enter into that, but in order that He might prove Himself to be above the trial, and also beyond it. And surely it is the fact that the Saviour asks neither what is impossible, nor what is impracticable, nor what is contrary to the will of the Father.

It is something possible, for Mark makes mention of His saying, ”Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; ”and they are possible if He wills them, for Luke tells us that He said,

"Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me. The Holy Spirit therefore, apportioned among the evangelists, makes up the full account of our Saviour's whole disposition by the expressions of these several narrators together. He does not then ask of the Father what the Father wills not. For the words, "if Thou be willing," were demonstrative of subjection and docility, not of ignorance or hesitancy. And just as when we make any request that may be accordant with his judgment, at the hand of father or ruler or any one of those whom we respect, we are accustomed to use the address, though not certainly as if we were in doubt about it, "if you please; "so the Saviour also said, "if Thou be willing: "not that He thought that He willed something different, and thereafter learned the fact, but that He understood exactly God's willingness to remove the cup from Him, and as doing so also apprehended justly that what He wills is also possible unto Him. For this reason the other scripture says, "All things are possible unto Thee. And Matthew again admirably describes the submission and the humility, when he says, "if it be possible.

For unless we adapt the sense in this way, some will perhaps assign an impious signification to this expression "if it be possible," as if there were anything impossible for God to do, except that only which He does not will to do. Therefore the request which He made was nothing independent, nor one which pleased Himself only, or opposed His Father's will, but one also in conformity with the mind of God. And yet some one may say that He is overborne and changes His mind, and asks presently something different from what He asked before, and holds no longer by His own will, but introduces His Father's will. Well, such truly is the case. Nevertheless He does not by any means make any change from one side to another; but He embraces another way, and a different method of carrying out one and the same transaction, which is also a thing agreeable to both; choosing, to wit, in place of the mode which is the inferior, and which appears unsatisfying also to Himself, the superior and more, admirable mode marked out by the Father. For no doubt He did pray that the cup might pass from Him; but He says also, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt. He longs painfully, on the one hand, for its passing from Him, but (He knows that) it is better as the Father wills. For He does not utter a petition for its not passing away now, instead of one for its removal;

but when its withdrawal is now before His view, He chooses rather that this should be ordered as the Father wills. For there is a twofold kind of withdrawal: there is one in the instance of an object that has shown itself and reached another, and is gone at once on being followed by it or on outrunning it, as is the case with racers when they graze each other in passing; and there is another in the instance of an object that has sojourned and tarried with another, and sat down by it, as in the case of a marauding band or a camp, and that after a time withdraws on being conquered, and on gaining the opposite of a success. For if they prevail they do not retire, but carry off with them those whom they have reduced; but if they prove unable to win the mastery, they withdraw themselves in disgrace. Now it was after the former similitude that He wished that the cup might come into His hands, and promptly pass from Him again very readily and quickly; but as soon as He spake thus, being at once strengthened in His humanity by the Father's divinity, He urges the safer petition, and desires no longer that should be the case, but that it might be accomplished

in accordance with the Father's good pleasure, in glory, in constancy, and in fulness. For John, who has given us the record of the sublimest and divinest of the Saviour's words and deeds, heard Him speak thus:

"And the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it? "Now, to drink the cup was to discharge the ministry and the whole economy of trial with fortitude, to follow and fulfil the Father's determination, and to surmount all apprehensions; and, indeed, in the very prayer which He uttered He showed that He was leaving these (apprehensions) behind Him. For of two objects, either may be said to be removed from the other: the object that remains may be said to be removed from the one that goes away, and the one that goes away may be said to be removed from the one that remains. Besides, Matthew has indicated most clearly that He did indeed pray that the cup might pass from Him, but yet that His request was that this should take place not as He willed, but as the Father willed it. The words given by Mark and Luke, again, ought to be introduced in their proper connection. For Mark says, "Nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt; "and Luke says, "Nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done. He did then express Himself to that effect, and He did desire that His passion might abate and reach its end speedily. But it was the Father's will at the same time that He should carry out His conflict in a manner demanding sustained effort, and in sufficient measure. Accordingly He (the Father) adduced all that assailed Him.

But of the missiles that were hurled against Him, some were shivered in pieces, and others were dashed back as with invulnerable arms of steel, or rather as from the stern and immoveable rock. Blows, spittings, scourgings, death, and the lifting up in that death, all came upon Him; and when all these were gone through, He became silent and endured in patience unto the end, as if He suffered nothing, or was already dead. But when His death was being prolonged, and when it was now overmastering Him, if we may so speak, beyond His utmost strength, He cried out to His Father, "Why hast Thou forsaken me? "And this exclamation was in due accordance with the requests He had previously made: Why is it that death has been in such close conjunction with me all along up till now, and Thou dost not yet bear the cup past me? Have I not drank it already, and drained it? But if not, my dread is that I may be utterly consumed by its continuous pressure; and that is what would befall me, wert Thou to forsake me: then would the fulfilment abide, but I would pass away, and be made of none effect. Now, then, I entreat Thee, let my baptism be finished, for indeed I have been straitened greatly until it should be accomplished.-This I judge to have been the Saviour's meaning in this concise utterance. And He certainly spake truth then. Nevertheless He was not forsaken.

Albeit He drank out the cup at once, as His plea had implied, and then passed away. And the vinegar which was handed to Him seems to me to have been a symbolical thing. For the turned wine indicated very well the quick turning and change which He sustained when He passed from His passion to impassibility, and from death to deathlessness, and from the position of one judged to that of one judging, and from subjection under the despot's power to the exercise of kingly dominion. And the sponge, as I think, signified the complete transfu-

sion of the Holy Spirit that was realized in Him. And the reed symbolized the royal sceptre and the divine law. And the hyssop expressed that quickening and saving resurrection of His by which He has also brought health to us. But we have gone through these matters in sufficient detail on Matthew and John. With the permission of God, we shall speak also of the account given by Mark. But at present we shall keep to what follows in our passage.

On the Reception of the Lapsed to Penitence

But now we are doing the opposite. For whereas Christ, who is the good Shepherd, goes in quest of one who wanders, lost among the mountains, and calls him back when he flees from Him, and is at pains to take him up on His shoulders when He has found him, we, on the contrary, harshly spurn such a one even when He approaches us. Yet let us not consult so miserably for ourselves, and let us not in this way be driving the sword against ourselves. For when people set themselves either to do evil or to do good to others, what they do is certainly not confined to the carrying out of their will on those others; but just as they attach themselves to iniquity or to goodness, they will themselves become possessed either by divine virtues or by unbridled passions. And the former will become the followers and comrades of the good angels; and both in this world and in the other, with the enjoyment of perfect peace and immunity from all ills, they will fulfil the most blessed destinies unto all eternity, and in God's fellowship they will be for ever (in possession of) the supremest good. But these latter will fall away at once from the peace of God and from peace with themselves, and both in this world and after death they will abide with the spirits of blood-guiltiness. Wherefore let us not thrust from us those who seek a penitent return; but let us receive them gladly, and number them once more with the stedfast, and make up again what is defective in them.

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