The epistle of Mara, son of Serapion

Mara bar Serapion (2nd–3rd century)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

The epistle of Mara, son of Serapion

THE EPISTLE OF MARA, SON OF SERAPION.
MARA, SON OF SERAPION, TO SERAPION MY SON, GREETING.

WHEN thy master and tutor wrote to me a letter, and informed me that thou art very dililgent in learning for a child of few years, I blessed God, that thou, being a little boy without one to guide thee, hast begun with a good intention; and as for me myself this has been a consolation to me, that respecting thee, a little boy I have heard, of this greatness of mind and good conscience, such as does not readily remain in many. On this account, lo! I have written to thee this memorial of what I have experienced in the world; for the manner of men's living has been experienced by me, and I have walked in instruction, and all those things of the instruction of the Greeks I have found them wrecked together with the birth of life. Be careful, therefore, my son, of those things which are suitable for such as be free, to meditate upon learning, and to pursue after wisdom: and in this manner reckon to be confirmed in that with which thou hast begun; and remember my injunctions with diligence, as a quiet man, who loveth discipline: and although it appear to thee to be very bitter, when thou shalt experience it for a little while, it will be very pleasant to thee, because so also it hath happened to me.

But a man when he shall be departed from among his family, and shall be able to retain his own habit, and shall do with justice whatsoever is proper for him, he is that chosen man who is called the Blessing of God, and with whose liberty nothing else can be compared. For such men as are called to discipline, seek to disentangle themselves from the struggle of the time; and such as lay hold upon wisdom are elevated by the hope of righteousness; and those that stand in the truth exhibit the standard of their virtue; and those that devote themselves to philosophy look to escape from the miseries of the world. But thou, too, my son, conduct thyself so wisely in these things, as a wise man who endeavoureth to spend a pure life: and beware lest the acquisition of wealth, which the many thirst after, subdue thee, and |71 thy mind be turned to desire riches which are not real; for neither when men obtain their desire do they abide, not even while they continue in righteousness: and all

these things which are seen by thee in the world, as of one who is for a short time, are to be dissolved like a dream; for they are the ups and downs of the times.

And as to vain glory, which occupies the life of men, thou considerest not that it is one of those things which give us joy: speedily it becometh an injury to us: and especially the birth of beloved children. For in both these things the contest of feelings hurts us: for as to the good, love for them torments us, and we are attracted by their manners; and as to the vicious, we labour for their correction, and grieve over their vices.

For I have heard respecting our companions, that when they were departing from Samosta it grieved them; and like those who blame the time, they also spake after this manner: "Henceforth we are driven far away from the habitation of men, and we are not allowed to return to our city, and to behold our men, and to embrace our gods with praise." It is meet that that should be called a day of lamentation, because one heavy grief laid hold upon them all equally. For with tears they remembered their fathers, and with sighs their mothers, and they grieved over their brethren, and sorrowed over their betrothed whom they left behind: and when we heard the report of their former companions, that they were going to Seleucia, we went secretly on the way towards them, and joined our trouble with theirs. Then was our sorrow very vehement, and justly was our weeping augmented by our loss, and the dark cloud collected our sighs, and our trouble was increased from the mountain, for not one among us was able to quell the miseries which were upon him. For the love of life was retained together with the pains of death, and our misfortunes drove us out of the way; for we beheld our brethren and our children as captives, and we remembered our companions that were dead, who were, laid in a country not their own: and each of us was also anxious about himself, lest affliction should be added to affliction, or another grief should overtake the one which preceded it.

What advantage do men that are imprisoned gain from having | 72 experienced these things! But as for thee, my beloved, let it not grieve thee that thy loneliness has been driven from place to place; because men are born for this end, to receive the accidents of the time. But thus reckon thou, that for wise men every place is equally the same; and for the virtuous, fathers and mothers abound in every city. Even indeed from thine own self take the trial. How many men, who know thee not, love thee as their own children, and a multitude of women receive thee like their own beloved ones. Verily as a stranger thou hast been successful, verily for thy little love many men have desired thee. What, then, have we to say touching the error which has come into the world? Both the progress in it is with heavy labour, and we are shaken by its commotions like a reed by the wind. For I have wondered at many that cast away their children, and I have marvelled at others that brought up those which were not their own: there are some that acquire the riches in the world, and I have also marvelled at others who inherit that which is not their own. Thus understand and see that it is in the path of error we are walking.

A sage among men once began to say to us: On which of all possessions can a man rely? Or respecting what things can we speak as if they are enduring? On abundance of riches?

they are snatched away. On fortresses? they are plundered. On cities? they are laid waste. On greatness? it is brought low. On splendour? it is overthrown. On beauty? it withereth. On laws? they pass away. On poverty? it is despised. On children? they die. On friends? they become false. On honours? envy goeth before them. Let a man therefore rejoice in his empire like Darius, and in his prosperity like Polycrates, or in his valour like Achilles, or in his wife like Agamemnon, or in his offspring like Priam, or in his skill like Archimedes, or in his wisdom like Socrates, or in his learning like Pythagoras, or in his enlightenment like Palamedes----the life of men, my son, departs from the world, but their praises and their virtues continue for ever.

But thou, my little sou, choose for thyself that which fadeth not away, because they that occupy themselves in such things are called |73 modest and beloved, and lovers of a good name: but whenever any evil thing opposeth thee, blame not man, nor be angry against God, neither murmur against thy time. If thou continue in this mind, thy gift is not a small one which thou hast received from God, which standeth not in need of riches, nor is brought near to poverty, because thou wilt perform thy part in the world without fear, and with rejoicing: for fear and excuse of that which cometh naturally is not for the sake of the wise, but for the sake of those who walk without law; because a man has never been stripped of his wisdom in the same manner as of his wealth. Be careful for knowledge rather than for riches, for by how much the more possessions increase, by so much the more does evil abound. For I have seen that where good things abound, so also misfortunes oppose; and where honours are brought, there also sorrows collect themselves; and where riches are multiplied, there is the bitterness of many years. If, therefore, thou art wise, and diligently keepest watch, God will not cease from helping thee, nor men from loving thee. Whatsoever thou art able to acquire, let that be sufficient for thee; and if indeed thou be able to do without possessions, then shalt thou be called blessed, because no one will even envy thee.

And remember this too, that nothing troubles thy life very greatly except possessions, that no man after his death is called master of possessions: because weak men are led captive by the lust of them, and know not that a man dwells like a stranger in his possessions: and they are fearful because they are not secured for them; for they have forsaken that which is their own, and seek that which is not theirs.

For what else have we to say, when wise men are forcibly dragged by the hands of tyrants, and their wisdom is taken captive by calumny, and they are oppressed in their intelligence without defence? For what advantage did the Athenians gain by the murder of Socrates, the recompense of which they received in famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, because in one hour their country was entirely covered with sand? Or the Jews by the death of their wise king because from that same time their kingdom was taken away? |74 For with justice did God make recompense to the wisdom of these three: for the Athenians died of famine; and the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, are scattered through

every country. Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor the Wise King, because of the laws which he promulgated.

But I, my son, have experienced in what wretched misery men stand; and I have wondered that they are not overwhelmed by the evils which surround them. Not even wars are sufficient for them, nor griefs, nor sicknesses, nor death, nor poverty; but like vicious beasts they attack one another in hatred, which of them shall inflict the greater evil upon his fellow. For they have gone beyond the limits of truth, and transgress all good laws, because they hang upon their own lust: for so long as a man coveteth that which he lusteth after, how is he able to do with justice that which is befitting him? And they acknowledge no moderation, and seldom do they stretch forth their hands towards truth and virtue, but conduct themselves in their manner of living like the dumb and the blind. The wicked rejoice, and the righteous are troubled: he that hath denieth, and he that hath not striveth to acquire: the poor beg, and the rich conceal: and every one laugheth at his neighbour: the drunken are crazy, and those that have recovered themselves repent: some of them weep, and some sing, and others laugh; others, care has seized upon them: they rejoice in evil things; and they reject the man who speaketh the truth. A man may then wonder, while the world consumes in derision, while they have not one manner of living, they are anxious about these things; and one of them is looking when he shall acquire the name of victory in battle;

and the brave look not to how many foolish lusts a man is led captive in the world. But I could wish also that repentance had recurred to them a little, who conquer by their might, and are condemned by their cupidity. For I have tried men; and thus have I tried them, that they look to this one thing----to abundance of riches; and on this account they have no firm counsel, but by the change of their minds each is |75 speedily cast down to be absorbed in grief; and they regard not the vast riches of the world, that whatever there be of trouble it brings us all equally to the same time; for they depend upon the majesty of the belly, that great disgrace of the corrupt.

But this which comes into my mind to write to thee, it is not enough to read it, but it should also proceed to practise. For I know too, that when thou shalt experience this manner of living, it will please thee much, and thou wilt be free from evil indignation, that on children's account we endure riches. Separate henceforth from thee the cherished grief of men, a thing which never profits at all; and drive away from thee that care which produceth no advantage, for we have no means and discretion except in magnanimity, to be equal to the misfortunes and to endure the griefs, which we are always receiving at the hands of the times; for it behoveth us to look to these things, and not to those which pertain to joy and a good name. Apply thyself to wisdom, the fountain of all good things, and the treasure which fadeth not, and there shalt thou lay thine head and rest, for she will be to thee a father and a mother, and a good companion for life. Have all familiarity with perseverance and patience, which are able to meet all the tribulations of weak men; for in this manner is their power great, because they can bear hunger) and endure thirst, and they refresh every grief. But of labour

and death they also declare. Attend to these, and thou shalt pass a tranquil life, and thou wilt be to me a consolation, while thou shalt be called the Ornament of his parents.

For at that former time, while our city was standing in its magnificence, thou mayst know that against many men abominable words were uttered. But we also acknowledged from the Time, that we fully received from its majesty appropriate love and beauty; but the Time forbade us to complete those things which were resolved upon in our mind. And here, too, in prison we give thanks to God that, we have obtained the Jove of many; for we essayed our soul to continue in wisdom and in rejoicing. But if any drive us by force, he will proclaim the witness against himself, that he is far removed from all good things, and will receive disgrace and |76 shame from the vile object of shame. For we have shewn our truth, that we have no vice in an empire. But if the Romans will permit us to return to our country in justice and righteousness, let them act like humane men, and they will be called good and righteous, and the country in which they abide will also be in tranquillity. For let them shew their own greatness by leaving us free. Let us be obedient to that dominion which the Time has assigned to us, and let them not, like tyrants, treat us as slaves; and whatever may be decreed to take place, we shall not receive any thing more than the tranquil death which is reserved for us.

But thou, my little son, if thou desirest diligently to know these things, first govern lust, and apply moderation to that in which thou abidest, be satisfied, and beware lest thou be angry: and instead of rage be obedient to virtue. For I now am meditating upon this, that, as I recollect, I may leave for myself a book, and with a prudent mind may accomplish the path to which I am condemned, and may escape without sorrow from the evil destruction of the world. For I pray to receive dissolution, and what death, it matters not to me. But and if any grieve or be anxious, I counsel him not: for there in the way of life of the whole world he will find us before him. One of his friends asked Mara, the son of Serapion, when he was in bonds by his side, ”On thy life, Mara, I pray thee tell me what laughable thing has appeared to thee that thou laughedst?” Mara said to him, ”I was laughing at the Time, because, without having borrowed any evil from me, it repays me.”

HERE ENDETH THE EPISTLE OF MARA, SON OF SERAPION. [Selected endnotes moved here and numbered] 1. P. 70, L. 11. Wrecked together with the birth of life, ... These words are obscure. I suppose they refer to the new birth of a Christian rendering the precepts of Greek philosophy superfluous. Compare what Ambrose says, p. 61 above. There are several very obscure passages in this letter. Although I have endeavoured to give the meaning of them as accurately as I could, I cannot confidently assert that I have in no instances failed. M. Renan has given a short extract from this letter in the Journal Asiatique; and has left off in the middle of a sentence omitting the words which I have just mentioned, and consequently destroying the sense of the passage. He has made several mistakes in the texts... 2. P. 71, L. 36. Imprisoned. The original work ... means also, a recluse, a monk practising a certain mode of asceticism, concerning which see Assemani

Disser. de Syris Monophysitis. This would well agree with the meaning here; but at P. 75, L. 32, the writer speaks as if he were actually in prison or bondage at the time.

3. P. 73, L. 33. Or the people of Samos. See respecting the burning of Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius, De vitis et dogm. Philosoph. lib. viii. seg. 39, with Menagius' Notes; and Stanley's History of Philosophy, second edit, p. 506. The Sibylline Oracles were said to have foretold the destruction of Samos. .... See Sybil. Orac. p. 405, and Gale's Notes illustrating this matter. 4. P. 74, L. 6. Statue of Juno: This was the statue which the Romans erected in honour of Pythagoras, when they were commanded by the Oracle of Delphi to erect statues to the bravest and the wisest of the .Greeks. 5. P. 75, L. 4. The majesty of the belly: Compare Tertullian. ... De Jejunio, c. xvi. vol. i. p, 877.

Source. English translation: an out-of-copyright translation as transcribed, or commissioned and given to the public domain, by Roger Pearse for his collection ***Early Church Fathers – Additional Texts*** (tertullian.org/fathers). SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Footnotes are left out, and Greek or Latin words, square brackets and any transcription error are as the source prints them. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

Licence. published 1855.