

Exhortation to the Heathen

by Clement of Alexandria

The sermon exhorts the listeners to abandon idolatry and turn to the Word of God for salvation.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:3, John 1:1, John 8:32, John 10:9, John 14:6, Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 1:24, Ephesians 2:1, Titus 2:11

Topics: "Idolatry", "Salvation Through Faith"

Description

Clement of Alexandria exhorts believers to abandon idolatry and embrace the adoration of the divine Word and God the Father. He contrasts the deceptive allure of myths and idol worship with the truth and salvation offered by Christ. Clement emphasizes the transformative power of the Word of God, which brings salvation, enlightenment, and freedom from the bondage of false beliefs. He highlights the eternal nature of the Word, who existed before the world began and now offers humanity the path to eternal life through faith and obedience.

Transcript

EXHORTATION TO ABANDON THE IMPIOUS MYSTERIES OF IDOLATRY FOR THE ADORATION OF THE DIVINE WORD AND GOD THE FATHER.

Amphion of Thebes and Arion of Methymna were both minstrels, and both were renowned in story. They are celebrated in song to this day in the chorus of the Greeks; the one for having allured the fishes, and the other for having surrounded Thebes with walls by the power of music. Another, a Thracian, a cunning master of his art (he also is the subject of a Hellenic legend), tamed the wild beasts by the mere might of song; and transplanted trees--oaks--by music. I might tell you also the story of another, a brother to these--the subject of a myth, and a minstrel--Eunomos the Locrian and the Pythic grasshopper. A solemn Hellenic assembly had met at Pytho, to celebrate the death of the Pythic serpent, when Eunomos sang the reptile's epitaph. Whether his ode was a hymn in praise of the serpent, or a dirge, I am not able to say. But there was a contest, and Eunomos was playing the lyre in the summer time: it was when the grasshoppers, warmed by the sun, were chirping beneath the leaves along the hills; but they were singing not to that dead dragon, but to God All-wise,--a lay unfettered by rule, better than the numbers of Eunomos. The Locrian breaks a string. The grasshopper sprang on the neck of the instrument, and sang on it as on a branch; and the minstrel, adapting his strain to the grasshopper's song, made up for the want of the missing string. The grasshopper then was attracted by the song of Eunomos, as the fable represents, according to which also a brazen statue of Eunomos with his lyre, and the Locrian's ally in the

contest, was erected at Pytho. But of its own accord it flew to the lyre, and of its own accord sang, and was regarded by the Greeks as a musical performer.

How, let me ask, have you believed vain fables and supposed animals to be charmed by music while Truth's shining face alone, as would seem appears to you disguised, and is looked on with incredulous eyes? And so Cithaeron, and Helicon, and the mountains of the Odrysi, and the initiatory rites of the Thracians, mysteries of deceit, are hallowed and celebrated in hymns. For me, I am pained at such calamities as form the subjects of tragedy, though but myths; but by you the records of miseries are turned into dramatic compositions.

But the dramas and the raving poets, now quite intoxicated, let us crown with ivy; and distracted outright as they are, in Bacchic fashion, with the satyrs, and the frenzied rabble, and the rest of the demon crew, let us confine to Cithaeron and Helicon, now antiquated.

But let us bring from above out of heaven, Truth, with Wisdom in all its brightness, and the sacred prophetic choir, down to the holy mount of God; and let Truth, darting her light to the most distant points, cast her rays all around on those that are involved in darkness, and deliver men from delusion, stretching out her very strong right hand, which is wisdom, for their salvation. And raising their eyes, and looking above, let them abandon Helicon and Cithaeron, and take up their abode in Sion. "For out of Sion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem, --the celestial Word, the true athlete crowned in the theatre of the whole universe. What my Eunomos sings is not the measure of Terpander, nor that of Capito, nor the Phrygian, nor Lydian, nor Dorian, but the immortal measure of the new harmony which bears God's name--the new, the Levitical song.

"Soother of pain, calmer of wrath, producing forgetfulness of all ills."

Sweet and true is the charm of persuasion which blends with this strain.

To me, therefore, that Thracian Orpheus, that Theban, and that Methymnaean,--men, and yet unworthy of the name,--seem to have been deceivers, who, under the pretence of poetry corrupting human life, possessed by a spirit of artful sorcery for purposes of destruction, celebrating crimes in their orgies, and making human woes the materials of religious worship, were the first to entice men to idols; nay, to build up the stupidity of the nations with blocks of wood and stone,--that is, statues and images,--subjecting to the yoke of extremest bondage the truly noble freedom of those who lived as free citizens under heaven by their songs and incantations. But not such is my song, which has come to loose, and that speedily, the bitter bondage of tyrannizing demons; and leading us back to the mild and loving yoke of piety, recalls to heaven those that had been cast prostrate to the earth. It alone has tamed men, the most intractable of animals; the frivolous among them answering to the fowls of the air, deceivers to reptiles, the irascible to lions, the voluptuous to swine, the rapacious to wolves. The silly are stocks and stones, and still more senseless than stones is a man who is steeped in ignorance. As our witness, let us adduce the voice of prophecy accordant with truth, and bewailing those who are crushed in ignorance and folly: "For God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham;" and He, commiserating their great ignorance and hardness of heart who are petrified against the truth, has raised up a seed of piety, sensitive to virtue, of those stones--of the nations, that is, who trusted in stones. Again, therefore, some venomous and false hypocrites, who plotted against righteousness, He once called "a brood of vipers." But if one of those serpents even is willing to repent, and follows the Word, he becomes a man of God.

Others he figuratively calls wolves, clothed in sheep-skins, meaning thereby monsters of rapacity in human form. And so all such most savage beasts, and all such blocks of stone, the celestial song has transformed into tractable men. "For even we ourselves were sometime foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another." Thus speaks the apostolic Scripture: "But after that the kindness and love of God our saviour to man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us."

Behold the might of the new song! It has made men out of stones, men out of beasts. Those, moreover, that were as dead, not being partakers of the true life, have come to life again, simply by becoming listeners to this song. It also composed the universe into melodious order, and tuned the discord of the elements to harmonious arrangement, so that the whole world might become harmony. It let loose the fluid ocean, and yet has prevented it from encroaching on the land. The earth, again, which had been in a state of commotion, it has established, and fixed the sea as its boundary. The violence of fire it has softened by the atmosphere, as the Dorian is blended with the Lydian strain; and the harsh cold of the air it has moderated by the embrace of fire, harmoniously arranging these the extreme tones of the universe. And this deathless strain, the support of the whole and the harmony of all,--reaching from the centre to the circumference, and from the extremities to the central part, has harmonized this universal frame of things, not according to the Thracian music, which is like that invented by Jubal, but according to the paternal counsel of God, which fired the zeal of David. And He who is of David, and yet before him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and harp, which are but lifeless instruments, and having tuned by the Holy Spirit the universe, and especially man,--who, composed of body and soul, is a universe in miniature, makes melody to God on this instrument of many tones; and to this instrument--I mean man--he sings accordant: "For thou art my harp, and pipe, and temple." --a harp for harmony--a pipe by reason of the Spirit a temple by reason of the word; so that the first may sound, the second breathe, the third contain the Lord. And David the king, the harper whom we mentioned a little above, who exhorted to the truth and dissuaded from idols, was so far from celebrating demons in song, that in reality they were driven away by his music. Thus, when Saul was plagued with a demon, he cured him by merely playing. A beautiful breathing instrument of music the Lord made man, after His own image. And He Himself also, surely, who is the supramundane Wisdom, the celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God. What, then, does this instrument--the Word of God, the Lord, the New Song--desire? To open the eyes of the blind, and unstop the ears of the deaf, and to lead the lame or the erring to righteousness, to exhibit God to the foolish, to put a stop to corruption, to conquer death, to reconcile disobedient children to their father. The instrument of God loves mankind. The Lord pities, instructs, exhorts, admonishes, saves, shields, and of His bounty promises us the kingdom of heaven as a reward for learning; and the only advantage He reaps is, that we are saved. For wickedness feeds on men's destruction; but truth, like the bee, harming nothing, delights only in the salvation of men.

You have, then, God's promise; you have His love: become partaker of His grace. And do not suppose the song of salvation to be new, as a vessel or a house is new. For "before the morning star it was;" and "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Error seems old, but truth seems a new thing.

Whether, then, the Phrygians are shown to be the most ancient people by the goats of the fable; or, on the other hand, the Arcadians by the poets, who describe them as older than the moon; or, finally, the Egyptians by those who dream that this land first gave birth to gods and men: yet none of these at least existed before the world. But before the foundation of the world were we, who, because destined to be in

Him, pre-existed in the eye of God before,--we the rational creatures of the Word of God, on whose account we date from the beginning; for "in the beginning was the Word." Well, inasmuch as the Word was from the first, He was and is the divine source of all things; but inasmuch as He has now assumed the name Christ, consecrated of old, and worthy of power, he has been called by me the New Song. This Word, then, the Christ, the cause of both our being at first (for He was in God) and of our well-being, this very Word has now appeared as man, He alone being both, both God and man--the Author of all blessings to us; by whom we, being taught to live well, are sent on our way to life eternal. For, according to that inspired apostle of the Lord, "the grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us, that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for the blessed hope, and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

This is the New Song, the manifestation of the Word that was in the beginning, and before the beginning. The Saviour, who existed before, has in recent days appeared. He, who is in Him that truly is, has appeared; for the Word, who "was with God," and by whom all things were created, has appeared as our Teacher. The Word, who in the beginning bestowed on us life as Creator when He formed us, taught us to live well when He appeared as our Teacher; that as God He might afterwards conduct us to the life which never ends. He did not now for the first time pity us for our error; but He pitied us from the first, from the beginning. But now, at His appearance, lost as we already were, He accomplished our salvation. For that wicked reptile monster, by his enchantments, enslaves and plagues men even till now; inflicting, as seems to me, such barbarous vengeance on them as those who are said to bind the captives to corpses till they rot together. This wicked tyrant and serpent, accordingly, binding fast with the miserable chain of superstition whomsoever he can draw to his side from their birth, to stones, and stocks, and images, and such like idols, may with truth be said to have taken and buried living men with those dead idols, till both suffer corruption together.

Therefore (for the seducer is one and the same) he that at the beginning brought Eve down to death, now brings thither the rest of mankind. Our ally and helper, too, is one and the same--the Lord, who from the beginning gave revelations by prophecy, but now plainly calls to salvation. In obedience to the apostolic injunction, therefore, let us flee from "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience," and let us run to the Lord the saviour, who now exhorts to salvation, as He has ever done, as He did by signs and wonders in Egypt and the desert, both by the bush and the cloud, which, through the favour of divine love, attended the Hebrews like a handmaid. By the fear which these inspired He addressed the hard-hearted; while by Moses, learned in all wisdom, and Isaiah, lover of truth, and the whole prophetic choir, in a way appealing more to reason, He turns to the Word those who have ears to hear. Sometimes He upbraids, and sometimes He threatens. Some men He mourns over, others He addresses with the voice of song, just as a good physician treats some of his patients with cataplasms, some with rubbing, some with fomentations; in one case cuts open with the lancet, in another cauterizes, in another amputates, in order if possible to cure the patient's diseased part or member. The Saviour has many tones of voice, and many methods for the salvation of men; by threatening He admonishes, by upbraiding He converts, by bewailing He pities, by the voice of song He cheers. He spake by the burning bush, for the men of that day needed signs and wonders.

He awed men by the fire when He made flame to burst from the pillar of cloud--a token at once of grace and fear: if you obey, there is the light; if you disobey, there is the fire; but. since humanity is nobler than the pillar or the bush, after them the prophets uttered their voice,--the Lord Himself speaking in Isaiah, in

Elias,--speaking Himself by the mouth of the prophets. But if thou dost not believe the prophets, but supposest both the men and the fire a myth, the Lord Himself shall speak to thee, "who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but humbled Himself," --He, the merciful God, exerting Himself to save man. And now the Word Himself clearly speaks to thee, Shaming thy unbelief; yea, I say, the Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God. Is it not then monstrous, my friends, that while God is ceaselessly exhorting us to virtue, we should spurn His kindness and reject salvation?

Does not John also invite to salvation, and is he not entirely a voice of exhortation? Let us then ask him, "Who of men art thou, and whence?" He will not say Elias. He will deny that he is Christ, but will profess himself to be "a voice crying in the wilderness." Who, then, is John? In a word, we may say, "The beseeching voice of the Word crying in the wilderness." What criest thou, O voice? Tell us also. "Make straight the paths of the LORD." John is the forerunner, and that voice the precursor of the Word; an inviting voice, preparing for salvation,--a voice urging men on to the inheritance of the heavens, and through which the barren and the desolate is childless no more. This fecundity the angel's voice foretold; and this voice was also the precursor of the Lord preaching glad tidings to the barren woman, as John did to the wilderness. By reason of this voice of the Word, therefore, the barren woman bears children, and the desert becomes fruitful. The two voices which heralded the Lord's--that of the angel and that of John--intimate, as I think, the salvation in store for us to be, that on the appearance of this Word we should reap, as the fruit of this productiveness, eternal life. The Scripture makes this all clear, by referring both the voices to the same thing: "Let her hear who has not brought forth, and let her who has not had the pangs of childbirth utter her voice: for more are the children of the desolate, than of her who hath an husband."

The angel announced to us the glad tidings of a husband. John entreated us to recognise the husbandman, to seek the husband. For this husband of the barren woman, and this husbandman of the desert--who filled with divine power the barren woman and the desert--is one and the same. For because many were the children of the mother of noble rule, yet the Hebrew woman, once blessed with many children, was made childless because of unbelief: the barren woman receives the husband, and the desert the husbandman; then both become mothers through the word, the one of fruits, the other of believers. But to the Unbelieving the barren and the desert are still reserved. For this reason John, the herald of the Word, besought men to make themselves ready against the coming of the Christ Of God. And it was this which was signified by the dumbness of Zacharias, which waited for fruit in the person of the harbinger of Christ, that the Word, the light of truth, by becoming the Gospel, might break the mystic silence of the prophetic enigmas. But if thou desirest truly to see God, take to thyself means of purification worthy of Him, not leaves of laurel fillets interwoven with wool and purple; but wreathing thy brows with righteousness, and encircling them with the leaves of temperance, set thyself earnestly to find Christ. "For I am," He says, "the door," which we who desire to understand God must discover, that He may throw heaven's gates wide open to us. For the gates of the Word being intellectual, are opened by the key of faith. No one knows God but the Son, and he to whom the Son shall reveal Him. And I know well that He who has opened the door hitherto shut, will afterwards reveal what is within; and will show what we could not have known before, had we not entered in by Christ, through whom alone God is beheld.

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