

Circa 415 PELAGIUS, EPISTLE TO DEMETRIAS (Epistola ad Demetriadem,)

From *The Letters of Pelagius*, edited by Robert Van de Wever.

Published by Little Giddings Books.

Even if I were able to write with elegance and fluency, I would still feel that the present task was beyond my capacities. I must write to Demetrias, a woman who has kept herself a virgin for the sake of Christ. She is noble and rich, and yet she spurns nobility and riches. I can easily praise such a person, but I have no right to instruct her, since her moral qualities are manifestly superior to my own. She was born in the very highest station; she grew up surrounded by wealth and luxury; the pleasures of this life seemed to bind her like the strongest of chains. Yet suddenly she broke free, exchanging her material goods for spiritual goodness. With the sword of faith she cut herself off from all earthly privilege. With the nails which pinned Christ on the cross she crucified her own flesh for his sake. Not only did she choose to live without wealth, but she renounced the right to inherit wealth when her parents died; she left herself no possibility of escape.

Demetrias is so eager to learn the way of perfection that no words of mine could meet her needs: almost as soon as I offer some new instruction, she has surpassed it. She is well aware of the wealth and honour she has spurned, the pleasures she has rejected, the privileges she has renounced; so she wants spiritual wealth and honour of even greater proportions. Compared with her desire, my life is very mediocre; compared with the divine riches to which she aspires, my teaching is cheap and shabby. She wants her love for God to be as ardent as her former love for luxury. She wants her conduct to be as noble in its moral qualities as her former life was noble in the eyes of the world. What wisdom uttered by a mere human such as myself can satisfy such hunger for truth? What power of speech can match the spiritual power she already possesses? Yet I write at her request. She is so humble that she seeks instruction from someone as poor in wisdom as I am. She asks me to water the seed which God has planted in her soul; so I have no choice but to pour as much water upon that seed as my spiritual strength permits.

Whenever I give moral instruction, I first try to demonstrate the inherent power and quality of human nature. I try to show the wonderful virtues which all human beings can acquire. Most people look at the virtues in others, and imagine that such virtues are far beyond their reach. Yet God has implanted in every person the capacity to attain the very highest level of virtue. But people cannot grow in virtue on their own. We each need companions to guide and direct us on the way of righteousness; without such companions we are liable to stray from the firm path, and then sink into the mud of despair. At first a companion who has achieved a high level of virtue can seem utterly different from oneself. But as friendship grows, one begins to see in the companion a mirror of oneself. The reason is that, in moral capacities, God has created us all the same: we are each capable

of achieving the same degree of moral goodness. Once people perceive this truth, they are filled with hope, knowing that in the fullness of time they can share the moral virtue of Christ himself

We measure the goodness of human nature in relation to its creator, whom we call God. When he created the world, God declared that everything he had made was good. So if every tree and animal, insect and plant is good, how much better is man himself! God made man in his own image; and so he intends each of us to be like him. God has made many animals stronger and faster than human beings. He has given many animals teeth and jaws that are more powerful and sharper than the finest sword. But he has given man intelligence and freedom. We alone are able to recognize God as our maker, and thence to understand the goodness of his creation. Thus we have the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. This capacity means that we do not act out of compulsion; nor need we be swayed by our immediate wants and desires, as animals are. Instead we make choices. Day by day, hour by hour, we have to reach decisions; and in each decision, we can choose good or evil. The freedom to choose makes us like God: if we choose evil, that freedom becomes a curse; if we choose good, it becomes our greatest blessing.

Many people out of ignorance claim that man is not truly good because he is capable of doing evil. In saying this they are denying the perfect goodness of God's creation. In fact man is truly good for the very reason that these people say he is not: that he has freedom to choose good or evil. Within the heart of man there is no overwhelming compulsion to act in one way or the other; whereas animals are compelled to act according to their instinct, human beings have free will, enabling them to control their actions. And within the mind of man there is the capacity of reason: human beings are able to consider rationally the consequences of different courses of action. It is the combination of free will and rationality which makes human beings superior to all other creatures. There would be no virtue in doing good by instinct, without exercising free will and reason. But when people, after due consideration, decide to do good, then they truly share in the goodness of God.

By granting us the wonderful gift of freedom, God gave us the capacity to do evil as well as do good. Indeed we would not be free unless God had given us this ability:

there is no freedom for the person who does good by instinct and not by choice. In this sense the capacity to do evil is itself good; evil actions are themselves signs of the goodness of God. A person might say that the world would be a better place if everyone within it were always good and never evil. But such a world would be flawed because it would lack one essential attribute of goodness, namely freedom. When God created the world he was acting freely; no other force compelled God to create the world. Thus by creating human beings in his image, he had to give them freedom. A person who could only do good and never do evil would be in chains; a person who can choose good or evil

shares the freedom of God.

All of us, out of ignorance and lack of faith, sometimes wish that God had made us differently. We are like a pot saying to the potter: 'Why have you molded me in this shape?' We wish that only good and loving emotions stirred our hearts, and that evil desires were banished. We wish that we always had the right words on our lips, and never uttered any words of malice or rudeness. We wish that we always behaved with gentleness and generosity, and were never harsh or mean. But if our emotions were always good, our words always right, our actions always kind, then we could never learn the difference between good and evil. Only by discovering within ourselves evil desires, only by speaking words of evil, only by our evil actions, do we learn the misery which evil brings. Then we have the knowledge to choose good. So let us thank God that he has given us the capacity for evil, and thence given us the freedom to choose good.

Those who follow Christ often believe that only Christians are capable of doing good. They assert that Christianity has a monopoly of virtue. But this assertion is quite contrary to what we can observe. All of us have met pagans who are tolerant, temperate, chaste, generous and kind; and we have met pagans who reject the pleasures and honours of this world, choosing instead the way of simplicity and humility. In short we have met pagans who reflect the virtues of Christ himself. If only Christians were good, then God would not be good, because he would have denied the rest of humanity the freedom to choose goodness. The goodness we see in pagans is proof of the goodness of God. He has granted every person, regardless of race or religion, the freedom to choose good or evil. The advantage of being a Christian is that through the teaching of Jesus Christ we learn more fully the nature of goodness; and through his example, we are inspired to choose good.

Come now to the secret places of the soul. Let us each inspect ourselves with care, looking at the emotions which stir our hearts and the thoughts which run through our minds. Let us learn the essential goodness of the heart from the heart itself; let us learn the goodness of the mind from the mind itself. Why do we blush with guilt or tremble with fear whenever we commit a sin? Because our hearts and minds are good, and so recoil from evil. Why do we shine with joy and dance with delight whenever we do good? Because our hearts and minds are good, and so rejoice at every good action. A murderer may try to conceal his identity, but the torments of his conscience are worse than any punishment which the state authorities could inflict. An innocent man who is wrongly accused of some crime may be imprisoned and tortured; but even when his body cries out with pain, there will be peace and serenity within his soul, because his conscience is clear.

Within our minds there is a kind of natural sanctity, which we call conscience. This conscience presides over the mind as a judge presides over a court. It favours honourable and righteous actions, and it condemns hurtful and wrong actions. Just as a judge is guided by a book of law, so the conscience is guided by an inner law which has been

written on the soul by God. But in one important respect the way in which conscience works is different from the way a court works. In a court lawyers on opposing sides try to win their case by brilliant argument; they are not trying to reveal the truth, but merely to win the judge to their side. Conscience, by contrast, rejects brilliant argument, and instead wants only the truth of each and every situation; and only when it has discerned the truth will conscience make its judgement. When we read scriptures and remark that Moses or Abraham were good people, we are simply saying that in them conscience was a firm and strong judge.

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge they were exercising their freedom of choice; and as a consequence of the choice they made, they were no longer able to live in the Garden of Eden. When we hear that story we are struck by their disobedience to God; and so we conclude that they were no longer fit to enjoy the perfect happiness of Eden. And we should also be struck by the nature of that tree and its fruit. Before eating the fruit they did not know the difference between good and evil; thus they did not possess the knowledge which enables human beings to exercise freedom of choice. By eating the fruit they acquired this knowledge, and from that moment onwards they were free. Thus the story of their banishment from Eden is in truth the story of how the human race gained its freedom: by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve became mature human beings, responsible to God for their actions.

How is it possible, then, for an act of disobedience to God to bring such a blessing? When Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden they were like small children: they simply obeyed God's instructions without considering the moral reasons for those instructions. To become mature they needed to learn the distinction for themselves between right and wrong, good and evil. And God gave them the opportunity to become mature by putting within the garden the tree of knowledge, by which they could learn this distinction. But if God had simply instructed Adam and Eve to eat from the tree, and they had obeyed, they would have been acting like children. So he forbade them from eating the fruit; this meant that they themselves had to make a decision, whether to eat or not to eat. Just as a young person needs to defy his parents in order to grow to maturity, so Adam and Eve needed to defy God in order to share his knowledge of good and evil. By defying God, Adam and Eve grew to maturity in his image.

We sometimes point to particular people, and say that those people are incapable of doing good; they seem so corrupt that they are compelled to be malicious and evil. We point to other people, and say that they are incapable of doing evil; they seem so kind, gentle and generous in spirit that they are compelled to do good. In truth no one is totally evil nor totally good; every person at every moment is capable of choosing good or choosing evil. Yet habit is very important. If a person gets into the habit of choosing evil, then at each moment of choice his inclination will be to choose evil again. Equally if a person gets into the habit of choosing good, then at each moment of choice his inclination

will be to choose good again. So as parents we should encourage our children to get into good habits. And we ourselves should retain good habits. If we habitually choose good, then it is much easier to make right choices in the future.

When we read the stories of the Old Testament, we see what a bumpy path the Hebrew people had to travel. Although they had numerous written laws, they were often confused about the inner spiritual law of good and evil. Thus they frequently committed acts of terrible cruelty and injustice. Yet they were not ignorant or stupid. God puts the inner spiritual law on every person's heart; and many of the great leaders and prophets were extremely proficient at discerning the spiritual law. For this reason we can admire their wonderful holiness. We by contrast have a much smoother road to travel. In the person of Jesus Christ the inner spiritual law is made fully manifest for us. His words explain the spiritual law, and his life and death exemplify it. Through him we are reborn as new men and women, because we can see clearly how we should live. We no longer need outer written laws, because in Christ we understand fully the inner spiritual law.

When a wife wants to please her husband, she finds out what her husband wants, and acts accordingly. A husband wanting to please his wife acts in the same way. As human beings our first desire should be to please God. He created us in his own image; and for this reason true joy consists in loving him, as a husband loves his wife and a wife loves her husband. And in order to love and please God, we must find out what he wants; we must discern his will. In the teachings and the example of Jesus Christ we learn the general principles of behaviour which pleases God. Then, at each moment of choice, we must apply those principles in practice. To do this God has given us two vital tools. The first is reason: we can use reason to work out how God's spiritual law applies in each and every situation. The second is prayer: we can talk to God, asking him to guide our thoughts. We can be sure that, if we consider every choice carefully, and if we seek divine guidance, our decisions will please God.

A person may pray at length before each decision, and may think deeply, weighing up all the possible consequences; and yet later it seems that he made the wrong decision. God possesses perfect reason, so he can see all the consequences of every possible decision. Since human reason is partial and imperfect, we invariably fail to anticipate all the consequences of our decisions; so without any evil or malicious intentions, a decision may hurt or damage others. Does this mean that God has not answered our prayers? Does it mean that he has not guided our thoughts? The world is exceedingly complex; so the decisions made by one person cannot be judged in isolation, but must be seen in the context of the hundreds and thousands of decisions being made by others at the same time. Even if one person reaches a decision with good intentions, those intentions may be undermined by the bad intentions of others. It is for this reason that good decisions may seem sometimes to have bad consequences. What matters is that each person thinks, decides and acts with a pure conscience.

A person may make a decision without prayer or serious thought; and yet that decision seems to have good consequences. A person may even make a decision with evil intentions, and good consequences may flow from it. Does this mean that the world which God has created is irrational? Does it mean that God himself cannot distinguish between good and evil? Again we must remember how complex the world is. Human society is like a spider's web; and if you pull only one tiny thread of the web, the shape of the entire web changes. Our small minds cannot begin to grasp this complexity. Yet we can observe how evil intentions do indeed sometimes have good consequences: a person may intend to hurt and damage other people, and yet does them a service. This is surely the greatest miracle of God's creation. He has so designed and ordered things that there is a natural tendency towards good and away from evil. Thus even our evil intentions can be thwarted by the benign genius of God.

It is important to distinguish that which is good from that which is perfect. For example a good person may eat meat and drink wine; but perfection requires a person to abstain from meat and wine. A good person may enjoy a degree of wealth and luxury; but perfection requires a person to live with as few material possessions as is compatible with survival. A good person may marry, enjoying the comfort and the pleasure which marriage brings; but perfection requires a person to be celibate. God has created all things for our enjoyment; and therefore physical pleasure is good. Yet the person who seeks perfection acquires more and more pleasure from less and less. The perfect person derives the greatest pleasure from the simplest food. The perfect person rejoices in a tiny hut with a few sticks of furniture. The perfect person sees beauty in every human being, so has no need to possess the beauty of a spouse. Contrary to what some religious leaders teach, perfection is not the denial of pleasure, but the enhancement of it.

Do not be deceived by those who seem to seek perfection, yet do not keep the basic commandments of God. There are people who eat little, who live simply and who are celibate; yet they show no love and compassion towards their neighbours. Before seeking perfection a person must first learn to love others and to be generous towards them. This world would be a most wonderful place if everyone was loving and generous, yet no one sought perfection; perfection is, as it were, a spiritual luxury, not a necessity. So even if you do aspire towards perfection, do not neglect the basic duties of love. If you see someone who is hungry, share your food. If you see someone who is thirsty, share your drink. If you see someone weeping, offer comfort. If you see someone in despair, offer hope. If you see someone utterly confused and bewildered, try to understand the confusion and then seek clarity. Unless you are loving and generous in these ways, seeking perfection is like trying to build a magnificent palace without first putting in strong foundations.

If you were besotted with the things of this world, you would want to surpass all others in the luxury of your house, in the magnificence of your garments and jewelry, in the

abundance of food on your table, in the splendour of the carriage which took you from one place to another. You would never be satisfied with what you already possessed, but would always want more. And you would constantly be comparing yourself with others, looking with envy at those even richer than you. Your wealth would be like a spiritual prison; and your limitless desires would be the chains that bound you. Thus in giving up all these things, you have smashed the chains and broken free. You have little; yet you are satisfied with what you have. You are poorer than most; yet you feel no envy towards the riches of others. To you a simple tunic is like a royal robe; a tiny hut is like a palace; a bowl of porridge is like a feast; a pair of sandals is like a golden carriage.

As one looks around at friends and neighbours, one sees great enthusiasm and ambition. There are people who love to write, and each is ambitious to become the finest writer in the world. There are people who love political power, and each wants to attain the very highest ambition. There are people who relish military glory, and each wants to lead an army to a famous victory. There are people who enjoy buying and selling, and each wants to become the richest person in their city. There are people who keep animals, and each wants the finest herd of cattle or sheep in their region. We must admit that civilisation depends on men of ambition, whose enthusiasm and energy create prosperity and security for everyone. Yet how very few people are enthusiastic about holiness, and are ambitious to become saints. If the world is to become truly civilized we need far more people with holiness as their aim. They radiate joy and love which all can share.

People love feasts. They love to prepare huge amounts of rich food, and to choose the finest wine; the excitement of preparing a feast is an important part of its pleasure. Then on the appointed day they love to gather in a great crowd, to sing and dance, and then to eat the food and drink the wine. When a child is born people hold feasts; when a young man and woman get married their families hold a feast; when a person dies, his or her children have a feast. There are feasts to celebrate military victories. And there are feasts to mark all the great religious anniversaries. It is good and natural that people should enjoy feasts, because they are a sign of the greatest feast of all, to which God invites us: the feast in his heavenly kingdom around his throne. There the singing and dancing, the eating and drinking, will last for all eternity. But we do not need to prepare food and choose wine for this heavenly feast; we need to prepare ourselves by learning always to choose righteousness.

During the first five years of a child's life the parents should devote every effort to instilling good and holy habits. Just as a sapling is supple and flexible, and so can be directed in one way or another by means of tying it to a strong stick, so the soul of a child is supple and flexible, and can be directed towards good or evil by strong discipline. But if a person has been brought up by weak or bad parents, and so has not acquired good habits, all is not lost. Even a mature tree can be induced to grow in a new direction by means of careful pruning. All actions which arise from bad habits or intentions must

cease. At first the soul will cry with pain, just as a tree, if it had feelings, would cry with pain when branches are pruned. But if bad actions cease, then eventually the heart and the soul will change. The person will no longer have evil thoughts and emotions, and instead will begin to feel love and compassion towards others.

Your family has produced many great men. It has provided generals whose military prowess thrilled the entire world. It has provided consuls whose wisdom and firmness in the exercise of power has been widely admired and imitated. It has provided lawyers whose passion for truth and justice has struck fear in the hearts of criminals and gratitude in the hearts of the innocent. When you were born, your mother and grandmother looked forward to your marrying a general, a consul or a lawyer of similar repute. So when you told them of your intention to remain a virgin, and to devote yourself to prayer and good works, they were at first bitterly disappointed. But it is to their great credit that they now support you in your way of life. They can see that the seeds of goodness which they sowed within you as a child are now bearing a rich harvest. Your mother would have liked a harvest of grandchildren; but she is now taking even greater pleasure in a harvest of virtue.

Inevitably when we read the scriptures, some of the sayings of Christ strike us as especially important, while we ignore other sayings. Our minds select those sayings which suit our particular needs and desires. To some degree this process of selection is right. At each period in our lives we need to concentrate on some particular aspects of Christ's teaching; we cannot acquire all the virtues at once, so we focus our attention on one or two virtues at a time. But we must beware of selecting only those passages of scripture which we find congenial, while remaining blind to those which are difficult. As we walk in the footsteps of Christ, the road becomes increasingly rough and bumpy. At the beginning we acquire virtues which come easily to us; but later we must acquire virtues which are much harder. We will be tempted to stop and even turn back; but that would mean turning our faces away from Christ. Once we have started along his road, we must continue until we reach the end - which is heaven.

When you decided to follow the path of holiness, you accepted - indeed you embraced - Jesus Christ as your guide. You did not know where the path would lead; you had no maps, nor had you ever travelled on that path before. So you had to rely on Jesus completely, obeying his commands without question. Every person who decides to travel on this path must make the same act of obedience. Yet obedience brings a new temptation: to grumble. A person who has control over his life may be selfish and greedy, but does not grumble, because he cannot blame anyone else for his own discomforts and misfortunes. But a person who has submitted himself to the will of another - as you have submitted to Christ - is tempted to complain and to grumble at even the most minor discomfort. Do not be surprised if you feel tempted to grumble at Jesus, complaining of the humps and the bumps on the road to holiness. But resist that temptation: he would not cause you any

discomfort unless it was necessary for the good of your soul.

The person who makes evil choices is stupid and foolish. The person who makes good choices is intelligent and wise. Evil people often pride themselves on their cunning plans and their crafty schemes; they congratulate themselves on being able to outwit others. Yet even when their plans and schemes succeed, they derive no real pleasure and joy. So in fact they are stupid, acting against their own true interests. Good people by contrast are straight and honest, and they recoil from any plan which is crooked and devious, preferring only to do things which may benefit their neighbours. Yet even when their efforts seem to fail, they can still enjoy a peaceful conscience; and when their efforts succeed, they rejoice in the happiness which others derive; So good people are intelligent, acting in their own true interests. And when we confront a bad person, there is little point in showing outrage or even disapproval. Instead we should try to open their eyes, so that they can see that the most effective way to be selfish is to be unselfish; that in doing good to others you earn the greatest rewards.

The most cunning strategy which the devil uses against those who aspire to holiness is depression. Those who devote themselves to outward, worldly ambitions are lifted from depression by the stimulus of physical pleasure. Those who devote themselves to spiritual ambitions reject this stimulus, in order to find a deeper source of joy. But there is a long gap between rejecting the pleasures of the world and receiving the fullness of joy which comes from God. During this long gap people can easily begin to despair; and their souls can sink into lethargy and melancholy. Depression of the spirit can become like a thick black cloud which even the light of Christ cannot penetrate. Sometimes the cloud lifts of its own accord. But more often the person must make an initial effort to blow it away. There is only one means of doing this: prayer. Through constantly talking to God, and trying to hear him, we eventually receive a taste of his heavenly joy; and even the smallest taste can restore our spiritual energy and ambition. So when you feel depressed, pray even harder and more constantly than when you feel happy.

A second strategy which the devil uses to induce people to do evil is speed. A feeling can enter a person's heart, a thought can enter the mind, and this feeling and thought can lead to an action being done all within a matter of seconds. So although a person always has the freedom and the power to choose between good and evil, speed can prevent that freedom and power being properly exercised. Indeed most evil actions are done impetuously, without serious thought. Thus if you are to be sure always to do good, you must learn to be slow, giving yourself time to reflect on your emotions, and to consider carefully the consequences of different courses of action. Only act when you know that your emotions are pure, and that you have assessed as fully as possible the consequences of your action. In this way you will be certain of defeating the devil.

Two kinds of thought go through our minds. The first are thoughts which are clear and deliberate, which involve the faculty of reason. Such thoughts may stay within the mind

for many minutes, hours and days; indeed this kind of thought may constantly recur over a whole lifetime. The second are thoughts which are mere impressions, flitting through the mind like insubstantial shadows. These thoughts may only remain within the mind for a few seconds. A person who wishes to do good has nothing to fear from the first kind of thought. There is ample time to hone and to shape such thoughts, to ensure that they conform to God's law. The second kind of thought, however, is potentially more dangerous. In the case of a person in the habit of doing good, impressions will tend to be benign; but even within a good person the devil can easily distort impressions to give them a malicious twist. In the case of a person with evil habits, impressions will generally be malign. A person who acts on impressions becomes the slave of them, failing to exercise freedom of choice. A person who truly wants to be free must never act on impressions; then he will become their master.

A third strategy which the devil uses is complacency. As we grow in goodness, we are tempted to congratulate ourselves on our progress. We compare our present level of moral achievement with our past level, and we feel satisfied with the success of our efforts. Worse still we compare ourselves with other people, thinking that we are morally far superior to most of those whom we know. It may indeed be true that we have made giant strides on the way of Christ; it may also be true that we are far ahead of most other people. Yet we must not allow such thoughts to fill our minds. The further a person travels along the way of holiness, the further he realizes the road ahead stretches. When a person first sets out on the road, he imagines that after a short distance he will be almost perfect. But with each pace a person takes, he sees two more paces ahead. Thus as we make progress, we should become less, not more, complacent. We should become more, not less, aware of our faults and failures.

A fourth strategy which the devil uses is myopia: making the immediate future seem more important than the distant future. The nature of human desire is that immediate joys and pleasures seem very attractive; and we feel impelled to follow our desires. Often this is quite right: if a person is hungry, he should eat; if a person is cold, he should go and sit near a fire. But sometimes it is wrong. A person may be on fire with sexual desire; yet to satisfy that desire could mean committing adultery or breaking a vow of perpetual virginity. A person may be on fire with desire for gold; yet to satisfy that desire could involve dishonesty and fraud. In both cases the long-term consequence would be terrible, leading eventually to punishment at the hands of God himself. The devil, however, puts into the mind all sorts of reasons for submitting to evil desire; the devil may even convince the mind that God himself sanctions illicit sexual behaviour or greed for gold. In this way all thought for the longer-term consequences is pushed from the mind. The way to defeat this strategy is, at every moment of choice, to look at both the immediate and the distant consequences of each course of action, and to give distant consequences as much weight as immediate ones.

Of all the emotions and desires within the human breast, the one that is most often misunderstood and misused is ambition. This emotion distinguishes us from all the other creatures which inhabit the world. An animal, bird, fish or insect has no ambition; it simply looks for food in order to sustain itself for another day. But the human being can look ahead, anticipating the consequences far into the future of present actions. And our ambitions determine the course of our present actions. Ambition in itself is neither good nor bad; what matters is how it is directed. Ambition may be directed towards the accumulation of power and wealth, towards material superiority over others. Such ambition is evil, because power and wealth can only be gained at the expense of others. Or ambition may be directed towards holiness and moral perfection, towards becoming like Christ himself. The emotion which lusts after power and wealth is the same as the emotion which yearns for holiness and perfection; the difference lies in the way in which the emotion is directed.

To a small child every week seems like a year. To a young man or woman every year seems like a decade. To an old person every decade seems like a year. As we grow older, the days, weeks, months and years seem to pass more quickly. This is a sign that as we grow older, we also grow wiser. Our life on earth is very short compared with eternity: it is no more than the blink of an eye. We should constantly remind ourselves of the shortness of earthly life, and thence the proximity of death. The pleasures and joys of this world are trivial and fleeting, and so are the pains and the sorrows. But the joy of heaven, which is the reward for making good and wise choices on earth, lasts for all eternity. And the agony of hell, which is the punishment for making bad choices on earth, also lasts for all eternity. The day of judgement, when God will decide where to send us, is imminent; even if a person is young, and destined to live for a hundred years, the day is still imminent. By remembering this truth day by day, you will always make good choices.

I am writing to you at great length, and I hope that much of what I say is of value to you. Yet I know that most of the words which are spoken or written in this world are useless or even harmful; and I must admit that the same may be true of my words. We should each be discreet and sparing in our words. We should only speak and write when we are sure that our motives are pure, and that our words will do good to those who hear or read them. Let our speech always be modest and calm; let sweetness mix with dignity; let wisdom mingle with modesty. Let us be firm in what we say, and yet also fair, seeing both sides of every argument. Let us use words and phrases which most aptly convey our meaning to those who are listening to us. Let us never be pompous or self-important in our speech, and never resort to harsh words. If I have been guilty of pomposity or harshness in what I have written to you, please forgive me.