

## CONCERNING SUCH WHOM GOD IS SLOW TO PUNISH.

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PATROCLEAS, PLUTARCH, TIMON, OLYMPICUS.

1. THESE and such like things, O Quintus! when Epicurus had spoken, before any person could return an answer, while we were busy at the farther end of the portico,\* he flung away in great haste. However, we could not but in some measure admire at the odd behavior of the man, though without taking any farther notice of it in words; and therefore, after we had gazed a while one upon another, we returned to walk as we were singled out in company before. At this time Patrocleas first breaking silence, How say ye, gentlemen? said he: if you think fitting, why may not we discuss this question of the last proposer as well in his absence as if he were present? To whom Timon replying, Surely, said he, it would but ill become us, if at us he aimed upon his departure, to neglect the arrow sticking in our sides. For Brasidas, as history reports, drawing forth the javelin out of his own body, with the same javelin not only wounded him that threw it, but slew him outright. But as for ourselves, we surely have no need to revenge ourselves on them that pelt us with absurd and fallacious reasonings; but it will be sufficient that we shake them off before our opinion has taken hold of them. Then, said I, which of his sayings is it that has given you the greatest cause to be moved? For the man dragged into his discourse many things confusedly, and nothing in

\* The scene of the dialogue is laid in the temple of Delphi. (G.)

order; but gleaning up and down from this and the other place, as it were in the transports of his wrath and scurrility, he then poured the whole in one torrent of abuse upon the providence of God.

2. To which Patrocleas: The slowness of the Supreme Deity and his procrastination in reference to the punishment of the wicked have long perplexed my thoughts; but now, puzzled by these arguments which he produces, I find myself as it were a stranger to the opinion, and newly beginning again to learn. For a long time I could not with patience hear that expression of Euripides,

Does he delay and slowly move;  
'Tis but the nature of the Gods above.\*

For indeed it becomes not the Supreme Deity to be remiss in any thing, but more especially in the prosecution of the wicked, since they themselves are no way negligent or dilatory in doing mischief, but are always driven on by the most rapid impetuosities of their passions to acts of injustice. For certainly, according to the saying of Thucydides, that revenge which follows injury closest at the heels presently puts a stop to the progress of such as make advantage of successful wickedness.† Therefore there is no debt with so much prejudice put off, as that of justice. For it weakens the hopes of the person wronged and renders him comfortless and pensive, but heightens the boldness and daring insolence of the oppressor; whereas, on the other side, those punishments and chastisements that immediately withstand presuming violence not only restrain the committing of future outrages, but more especially bring along with them a particular comfort and satisfaction to the sufferers. Which makes me no less troubled at the saying of Bias, which frequently comes into my mind. For thus he spake once to a notorious reprobate: It is not that I doubt thou wilt suffer the just reward of thy wickedness,

\* Eurip. Orestes, 420.

† See the speech of Cleon, Thuc. III. 38.

but I fear that I myself shall not live to see it. For what did the punishment of Aristocrates avail the Messenians who were killed before it came to pass? He, having betrayed them at the battle of Taphrus yet remained undetected for above twenty years together, and all that while reigned king of the Arcadians, till at length, discovered and apprehended, he received the merited recompense of his treachery. But alas! they whom he had betrayed were all dead at the same time. Or when the Orchomenians had lost their children, their friends, and familiar acquaintance through the treachery of Lyciscus, what consolation was it to them, that many years after a foul distemper seized the traitor, and fed upon his body till it had consumed his putrefied flesh?— who, as often as he dipped and bathed his feet in the river, with horrid oaths and execrations prayed that his members might rot if he had been guilty of treachery or any other villany. Nor was it possible even for the children's children of the Athenians who had been murdered long before, to behold the bodies of those sacrilegious caitiffs torn out of their graves and transported beyond the confines of their native soil. Whence, in my opinion, Euripides absurdly makes use of these expressions, to divert a man from wickedness :

If thou fear'st heav'n, thou fearest it in vain ;  
 Justice is not so hasty, foolish man,  
 To pierce thy heart, or with contagious wound  
 Or thee or weaker mortals to confound ;  
 But with slow pace and silent feet his doom  
 O'ertakes the sinner, when his time is come.

And I am apt to persuade myself that upon these and no other considerations it is, that wicked men encourage and give themselves the liberty to attempt and commit all manner of impieties, seeing that the fruit which injustice yields is soon ripe, and offers itself early to the gatherer's hand, whereas punishment comes late, and lagging long behind the pleasure of enjoyment.

3. After Patrocleas had thus discoursed, Olympicus taking him up, There is this farther, said he, O Patrocleas! which thou shouldst have taken notice of; for how great an inconveniency and absurdity arises besides from these delays and procrastinations of divine justice! For the slowness of its execution takes away the belief of providence; and the wicked, perceiving that calamity does not presently follow at the heels of every enormous crime, but a long time after, look upon their calamity as a misfortune, and calling it chance, not punishment, are nothing at all thereby reformed; troubled indeed they well may be at the dire accident befallen them, but they never repent of the villanies they have committed. For as, in the case of the horse, the lashing and spurring that immediately pursue the transgression correct and reduce him to his duty, but all the tugging at the bit and shouting which are late and out of time seem to be inflicted for some other reason than to teach or instruct, the animal being thereby put to pain without understanding his error; in like manner, were the impieties of enormous transgressors and heinous offenders singly scourged and repressed by immediate severity, it would be most likely\* to bring them to a sense of their folly, humble them, and strike them with an awe of the Divine Being, whom they find with a watchful eye beholding the actions and passions of men, and feel to be no dilatory but a speedy avenger of iniquity; whereas that remiss and slow-paced justice (as Euripides describes it) that falls upon the wicked by accident, by reason of its uncertainty, ill-timed delay, and disorderly motion, seems rather to resemble chance than providence. So that I cannot conceive what benefit there is in these millstones of the Gods which are said to grind so late,† as thereby

\* I follow Wyttenbach's emendation *μάλιστα ἄν* for *μόλις ἄν*. (G.)

† Referring to the verse, Ὅψι θεῶν ἄλέουσι μύλοι, ἄλέουσι δὲ λεπτά, *the mills of the Gods grind late, but they grind fine*. (G.)

celestial punishment is obscured, and the awe of evil doing rendered vain and despicable.

4. These things thus uttered, while I was in a deep meditation of what he had said, Timon interposed. Is it your pleasure, said he, that I shall give the finishing stroke to the difficulties of this knotty question, or shall I first permit him to argue in opposition to what has been propounded already? Nay then, said I, to what purpose is it to let in a third wave to drown the argument, if one be not able to repel or avoid the objections already made?

To begin therefore, as from the Vestal hearth, from that ancient circumspection and reverence which our ancestors, being Academic philosophers also, bare to the Supreme Godhead, we shall utterly decline to speak of that mysterious Being as if we could presume to utter positively any thing concerning it. For though it may be borne withal, for men unskilled in music to talk at random of notes and harmony, or for such as never experienced warfare to discourse of arms and military affairs; yet it would be a bold and daring arrogance in us, that are but mortal men, to dive too far into the incomprehensible mysteries of Deities and Daemons, — just as if persons void of knowledge should undertake to judge of the methods and reason of cunning artists by slight opinions and probable conjectures of their own. And while one that understands nothing of science finds it hard to give a reason why the physician did not let blood before but afterwards, or why he did not bathe his patient yesterday but to-day; it cannot be that it is safe or easy for a mortal to speak otherwise of the Supreme Deity than only this, that he alone it is who knows the most convenient time to apply most proper corrosives for the cure of sin and impiety, and to administer punishments as medicaments to every transgressor, yet being not confined to an equal quality and measure common to all distempers, nor to one and the same time. Now that the

medicine of the soul which is called justice is the most transcendent of all sciences, besides ten thousand other witnesses, even Pindar himself testifies, where he gives to God, the ruler and lord of all things, the title of the most perfect artificer, as being the grand author and distributor of Justice, to whom it properly belongs to determine at what time, in what manner, and to what degree to punish every particular offender. And Plato asserts that Minos, being the son of Jupiter, was the disciple of his father to learn this science; intimating thereby that it is impossible for any other than a scholar, bred up in the school of equity, rightly to behave himself in the administration of justice. or to make a true judgment of another whether he does well or no. For the laws which are constituted by men do not always prescribe that which is unquestionable and simply decent, or of which the reason is altogether without exception perspicuous, in regard that some of their ordinances seem to be on purpose ridiculously contrived; particularly those which in Lacedaemon the Ephori ordain at their first entering into the magistracy, that no man suffer the hair of his upper lip to grow, and that they shall be obedient to the laws to the end they may not seem grievous to them. So the Romans, when they asserted the freedom of any one, cast a slender rod upon his body; and when they make their last wills and testaments, some they leave to be their heirs, while to others they sell their estates; which seems to be altogether contrary to reason. But that of Solon is most absurd, who, when a city is up in arms and all in sedition, brands with infamy the person who stands neuter and adheres to neither party. And thus a man that apprehends not the reason of the lawgiver, or the cause why such and such things are so prescribed, might number up several absurdities of many laws. What wonder then, since the actions of men are so difficult to be understood, if it be no less difficult to determine concerning

the Gods, wherefore they inflict their punishments upon sinners, sometimes later, sometimes sooner.

5. Nor do I allege these things as a pretence to avoid the dispute, but to secure the pardon which I beg, to the end that our discourse, having a regard (as it were) to some port or refuge, may proceed the more boldly in producing probable circumstances to clear the doubt. But first consider this ; that God, according to Plato, when he set himself before the eyes of the whole world as the exemplar of all that was good and holy, granted human virtue, by which man is in some measure rendered like himself, unto those that are able to follow the Deity by imitation. For universal Nature, being at first void of order, received its first impulse to change and to be formed into a world, by being made to resemble and (as it were) partake of that idea and virtue which is in God. And the self-same Plato asserts, that Nature first kindled the sense of seeing within us, to the end that the soul, by the sight and admiration of the heavenly bodies, being accustomed to love and embrace decency and order, might be induced to hate the disorderly motions of wild and raving passions, and avoid levity and rashness and dependence upon chance, as the original of all improbity and vice. For there is no greater benefit that men can enjoy from God, than, by the imitation and pursuit of those perfections and that sanctity which is in him, to be excited to the study of virtue. Therefore God, with forbearance and at leisure, inflicts his punishment upon the wicked ; not that he is afraid of committing an error or of repenting should he accelerate his indignation ; but to eradicate that brutish and eager desire of revenge that reigns in human breasts, and to teach us that we are not in the heat of fury, or when our anger heaving and palpitating boils up above our understanding, to fall upon those who have done us an injury, like those who seek to gratify a vehement thirst or craving appetite, but that we should,

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