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## The Theatre of the World

### The theatre of martyrdom

A great theatre is filled with spectators to watch your contests and your summons to martyrdom, just as if we were to speak of a great crowd gathered to watch the contests of athletes supposed to be champions. And no less than Paul you will say when you enter the contest, “We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9). Thus, the whole world and all the angels of the right and the left, and all men, those from God’s portion (cf. Deut. 32:9; Col. 1:12) and those from the other portions, will attend to us when we contest for Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

### “And forgive us our sins, as we forgive our debtors”

And if we are in a theatre of the world both of angels and of men, we must know that, just as the person in a theatre is a debtor to say or to do certain things in the view of the spectators and if he fails to do them is punished for having insulted the whole theatre, so also we are debtors to the whole world, both to all the angels and to the human race, for those things that we shall learn from Wisdom if we are willing.<sup>2</sup>

### The place of communal prayer possess grace – a “double church”

And a place of prayer, the spot where believers assemble together, is likely to have something gracious to help us, since angelic powers are placed near the throngs of believers, as well as the powers of our Lord and Saviour Himself, and the spirits of the saints - I think both of those who have already fallen asleep and clearly of those who are still alive, even though it is not easy to say how ... As a result, when the saints are gathered together, there is a double Church, one of men and the other of angels ... Therefore, let no one disdain prayers in the churches, since they have something exceptional for the person who assembles in them genuinely.<sup>3</sup>

### Assistance from our “neighbours”, the saints

One of the most supreme virtues according to the divine Word is the love of neighbour. And we must suppose that it is far more present in the saints who have already fallen asleep toward those struggling in life than in those who are still in human weakness and struggle alongside their inferiors. For it is not only here below that there applies to those who love the brethren the saying ‘If one member suffers, all the members suffer together; and if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice together’ (1 Cor. 12:26).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *An Exhortation to Martyrdom* 18 (pp.53-4)

<sup>2</sup> *On Prayer* 28.3 (p.148)

<sup>3</sup> *On Prayer* 31.5 (pp.166-7)

<sup>4</sup> *On Prayer* 11.2 (p.102)

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## Prayer

### Even being inclined to an attitude of prayer is beneficial

I believe that profit often meets and joins the person who prays as he ought or who makes every effort to do so as far as he is able. First, the person who composes his mind for prayer is inevitably profited in some way. Through his very disposition for prayer he adorns himself so as to present himself to God and to speak to Him in person as to someone who looks upon him and is present. For just as various impressions and memories of the various things of which they are the memories defile the thoughts that arise under such impressions, in the same way we must believe that remembering God is profitable... if this happens frequently, those who have given themselves over to prayer with great constancy know by experience how many sins it prevents and how many virtuous actions it brings about. For if our remembering and considering a highly respected man who has prospered by wisdom urges us on to rival him and often thwarts impulses to a baser course of life, how much more will remembering God, the Father of the universe, along with prayer to Him, profit those who have persuaded themselves that they stand beside Him present and listening and are speaking with God?<sup>1</sup>

### Contemplation effects a transformation of the soul

What David says is, “To you have I lifted up my eyes, you who dwell in heaven” (Ps. 123:1) and “To you, O God, have I lifted up my soul” (Ps. 25:1). For the eyes of the mind are lifted up from their preoccupation with earthly things and from their being filled with the impression of material things. And they are so exalted that they peer beyond the created order and arrive at the sheer contemplation of God and at conversing with Him reverently and suitably as He listens. How would things so great fail to profit those eyes that gaze at the glory of the Lord with unveiled face and that are being changed into His likeness from glory to glory (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18)? For then they partake of some divine and intelligible radiance. This is demonstrated by the verse “The light of your countenance, O Lord, has been signed upon us” (Ps. 4:6). And the soul is lifted up and following the Spirit is separated from the body. Not only does it follow the Spirit, it even comes to be in Him. This is demonstrated by the verse “To you have I lifted up my soul,” since it is by putting away its existence that the soul becomes spiritual.<sup>2</sup>

### Spoken prayer is part of our constant prayer

He prays “constantly” (deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments are included as part of prayer) who unites prayer with the deeds required and right deeds with prayer. For the only way we can accept the command to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17) as referring to a real possibility is by saying that the entire life of the saint taken as a whole is a single great prayer. What is customarily called prayer is, then, a part of this prayer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *On Prayer* 8.2 (pp.97-8)

<sup>2</sup> *On Prayer* 9.2 (p.99)

<sup>3</sup> *On Prayer* 12.2 (p.104)

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## Christ the Adaptive Food from Heaven

### The Word is milk, herbs or solid food

Nor will [the seeker's] palate suffer any other taste, when it has *tasted the good Word of God*, and His Flesh, and *the Bread that cometh down from heaven*. Because He tastes so sweet and so delightful, all other flavours will seem harsh and bitter to him now; and therefore he will feed on Him alone. For he will find in Him all the sweetness that ever he desired; for He adapts and fits Himself to all requirements. Again, to those *who are being born again of incorruptible seed*, He is made *the rational and guileless milk*; while to those who are weak in some respect He offers Himself like healing herbs in friendly and gracious hospitality. And again, to *them who, are able, have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evil*, He presents Himself as solid food.<sup>1</sup>

### Christ is apprehended by all the senses of the soul

And perhaps, as the Apostle says, *for those who have their senses exercised to the discerning of good and evil*, Christ becomes each of these things in turn, to suit the several senses of the soul. He is called the true Light, therefore, so that the soul's eyes may have something to lighten them. He is the Word, so that her ears may have something to hear. Again, He is the Bread of life, so that the soul's palate may have something to taste. And in the same way, He is called the spikenard or ointment, that the soul's sense of smell may apprehend the fragrance of the Word. For the same reason He is said also to be able to be felt and handled, and is called the Word made flesh, so that the hand of the interior soul may touch concerning the Word of Life. But all these things are the One, Same Word of God, who adapts Himself to the sundry tempers of prayer according to these several guises, and so leaves none of the soul's faculties empty of His grace.<sup>2</sup>

### The self-adapting food of the Word

Commenting on "Strengthen me with ointments, encompass me with apples, because I am wounded by Charity" (Song of Songs 2:5) Origen says:

And let it not surprise you that He should be called the apple tree, as well as the tree of life and various other things; seeing that He also bears the title of the true Bread, and the true Vine, and the Lamb of God, and many others. For the Word of God becomes all these things to each and every one according as the capacity or the desire of the participant requires; in just the same way the manna also, although it was one food, yielded its flavour to each person after his desire. So He does not offer Himself only as bread to those who hunger, and as wine to those who thirst, but He presents Himself also as fragrant apples to those who crave delights.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.4 (p.78) (with ref to John 6:33-58)

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2.9 (p.162) (refs to Heb. 5:14; John 1:1-4, 6:35; 1 John 1:1; John 1:14)

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.8 (pp.197-8)

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## God the Physician

### Healing can be painful

For if in regard to bodily health we occasionally find it necessary to take some very unpleasant and bitter medicine as a cure for the ills we have brought on through eating and drinking, and sometimes, if the character of the ill demands it, we need the severe treatment of the knife and a painful operation, yes, and should the disease have extended beyond the reach even of these remedies, in the last resort the ill is burnt out by fire, how much more should we realise that God our physician, in his desire to wash away the ills of our souls, which they have brought on themselves through a variety of sins and crimes, makes use of penal remedies of a similar sort, even to the infliction of punishment of fire on those who have lost their soul's health.<sup>1</sup>

### God's healing is not quick but thorough

Since a quick and too brief healing causes some to think lightly of the diseases into which they have fallen, as though they were easy to heal, and since this results in their falling into the same diseases a second time after they have been healed, God in such cases will reasonably overlook the evil as it increases to a certain point, even disregarding it when it progresses so far in them as to be incurable. His purpose is that they may become satiated by long exposure to evil, and by being filled with the sin they desire may so perceive the harm they have taken. Then they hate what they previously welcomed; and since they have been healed more firmly, they are able to profit from the health of their souls, which is theirs by the healing.<sup>2</sup>

### God's cure is with a view to eternity, not the mere span of our earthly life

For physicians also, even though they may be able to heal a man quickly, yet act in a contrary way whenever they suspect the existence of a hidden poison in the body. They do this because they wish to heal the patient more surely, considering it better to let him remain in his fever and sickness for a long time in order that he may regain permanent health, rather than appear to restore him quickly to strength and afterwards to see him relapse and this quicker cure prove only temporary.

In the same way God, who knows the secrets of the heart and foreknows the future, perhaps in his longsuffering allows the hidden evil to remain while he draws it out by means of external circumstances ... For God deals with souls not in view of the fifty years, so to speak, of our life here, but in view of the endless world. He has made our intellectual nature immortal and akin to himself, and the rational soul is not shut out from healing, as if this life were all.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *On First Principles* 2.10.6 (p.143)

<sup>2</sup> *On Prayer* 29.13 (pp.157-8)

<sup>3</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.13 (pp.181-2)

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## The Kisses of Christ

*“Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth”<sup>1</sup>*

### The Church pleads with the Father

I [the Bridal Church] pour out my petition to Thee, the Father of my Spouse, beseeching Thee to have compassion at last upon my love, and to send Him, that He may now no longer speak to me only by His servants the angels and the prophets, but may come Himself, directly, and kiss me with the kisses of His mouth - that is to say, may pour the words of His mouth into mine, that I may hear Him speak Himself, and see Him teaching. The kisses are Christ's, which He bestowed on His Church when at His coming, being present in the flesh, He in His own person spoke to her the words of faith and love and peace, according to the promise of Isaiah who, when sent beforehand to the Bride, had said: *Not a messenger, nor an angel, but the Lord Himself shall save us.*<sup>2</sup>

### The soul is kissed by the Word

For as long as [the soul] was incapable of receiving the solid and unadulterated doctrine of the Word of God Himself, of necessity she received ‘kisses,’ that is, interpretations, from the mouth of teachers. But, when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to unravel what was tangled, to unfold what was involved, to interpret parables and riddles and the sayings of the wise along the lines of her own expert thinking, then let her believe that she has now received the kisses of the Spouse Himself, that is, the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

### The soul asks for a kiss

As often, therefore, as we find some problem pertaining to the divine teachings and meanings revealed in our heart without instructors' help, so often may we believe that kisses have been given to us by the Bridegroom-Word of God. But, when we seek the meaning of something of this sort and cannot find it, then let us make this prayer our own and beg from God the visitation of His Word, saying: ‘Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.’ For the Father knows each single soul's capacity and understands the right time for a soul to receive the kisses of the Word in lights and insights of this sort.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Song of Songs 1:2

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.1 (p.60)

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.1 (p.61)

<sup>4</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.1 (p.63)

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## The Fragrance of Christ

**“My spikenard has yielded its (or His) odour”<sup>1</sup>**

Let us see the Bride Church in this passage in the character of that Mary of whom it is said with all fitness that she brings a pound of ointment of great price, and anoints the feet of Jesus, and wipes them with her hair.<sup>2</sup> Through the hair of her head she as it were gets that ointment back, and receives it again for herself, steeped in the character and virtue of His body; thus through the hair with which she wiped His feet, she draws to herself the odour not so much of the ointment as of the very Word of God, and what she has put on her own head is the fragrance of Christ, rather than that of the nard. Wherefore she says: ‘My spikenard, having been given to the body of Christ, has yielded me back His odour.’<sup>3</sup>

**“Thy name is as ointment emptied out. Therefore have the maidens loved Thee, have they drawn Thee. We will run after Thee into the fragrance of Thine ointments.”<sup>4</sup>**

Every soul draws and receives to itself the Word of God according to the measure of its capacity and faith. But when souls have thus drawn the Word of God to themselves, and have ingrafted Him into their minds and understandings, and have experienced the pleasantness of His sweetness and odour, when they have received the fragrance of His ointments and have grasped at last the reason for His coming, the motives of the Redemption and Passion, and the love whereby He, the Immortal, went *even to the death of the cross* for the salvation of all men, then these maiden souls, attracted by all this as by the odours of a divine and ineffable perfume and being filled with vigour and complete alacrity, run after Him and hasten to the odour of His sweetness, not at a slow pace, nor with lagging steps, but swiftly and with all the speed they can; even as did he who said: *I so run, that I may obtain.*<sup>5</sup>

**The soul makes herself fair to draw the Bridegroom down from heaven**

‘And the odour of Thy perfumes is above all spices.’<sup>6</sup> Not with one perfume only does He come anointed, but with all. And if He will condescend to make my soul His Bride too and come to her, how fair must she then be to draw Him down from heaven to herself, to cause Him to come down to earth, that He may visit His beloved one! With what beauty must she be adorned, with what love must she burn that He may say to her the things which He said to the perfect Bride, about *thy neck, thine eyes, thy cheeks, thy hands, thy body, thy shoulders, thy feet!*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Song of Songs 1:12

<sup>2</sup> See John 12:3 for the account of Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet.

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2.9 (p. 160)

<sup>4</sup> Song of Songs 1:3-4

<sup>5</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.4 (pp.75-6) (with ref to 1 Cor. 9:24)

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 1:3

<sup>7</sup> *Homily on the Song of Songs* 1.3 (p.272)

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## The Exercise of Free Will

### Navigating the ship of the soul

So, too, our perfection does not come to pass without our doing anything, and yet it is not completed as a result of our efforts, but God performs the greater part of it. And in order to produce a clearer conviction that this is the meaning of the passage we will take an illustration from the art of navigation. To what extent should we say that the navigator's art helps in bringing the ship back to the harbour, when compared with the force of the winds and the favourable state of the atmosphere and the shining of the stars, all of which co-operate to preserve those who sail? Why, even the sailors themselves from feelings of reverence do not often venture to claim that they have saved the ship but attribute it all to God; not that they have performed nothing, but that the efforts of God's providence are very much in excess of the effects of their art. So indeed with our salvation the effects of God's work are very much in excess of the effects of what we can do.<sup>1</sup>

### The same Sun illuminates and hardens

Perhaps it is in this sense that God is said to have hardened the heart of Pharaoh, because the substance of his heart was obviously such as to elicit from the Sun of Justice not His illumination, but His power to harden and to scorch; that no doubt was the reason why this same Pharaoh afflicted the life of the Hebrews with hard works, and wore them out with clay and bricks. And certainly the works that he devised came from a heart as miry and muddy! And, as the visible sun contracts and hardens the substance of clay, so with the selfsame rays wherewith He enlightened the People of Israel by means of those rays' selfsame properties, the Sun of Justice hardened the heart of Pharaoh, that harboured muddy devices.<sup>2</sup>

### God's "rain" stimulates the production of our "fruit" or "thorns"

Now it seems almost irreverent to represent the giver of the rain as saying: 'It is I who made the fruits and the thorns that are in the earth'; yet in spite of this it is true. For if there had been no rain, there would have been neither fruits nor thorns, but after the rain has fallen in due time and measure, both spring up. For it says: 'the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, if it beareth thorns and thistles, is rejected and nigh unto a curse'.<sup>3</sup> So then the blessing of the rain comes also on the inferior land, but this, being neglected and untilled, brings forth thorns and thistles. Thus the marvellous works done by God are as it were the rain, while the differing wills of men are like the tilled and the neglected land, though as land they are both of one nature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.19 (p.199)

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.2 (p.111)

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 6:7,8

<sup>4</sup> *On First Principles* 3.1.10 (pp.173-4)

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## Presence & Absence

### The presence/ absence of the Word to the Church/ soul

The Bridegroom is thus sometimes present and teaching, and sometimes He is said to be absent; and then He is desired. And either of these will suit either the Church or the dutiful soul. For when He allows the Church to suffer persecution and tribulations, He seems to her to be absent; and again, when she goes forward in peace and flourishes in faith and good works, He is understood as being present with her.

So also is it with the soul. When she is trying to understand something and desiring to know some obscure and secret matters, as long as she cannot find what she is looking for, the Word of God is surely absent from her. But when the thing she sought comes up to meet her, and appears to her, who doubts but that the Word of God is present, illuminating her mind and offering to her the light of knowledge? And again we perceive He is withdrawn from us and comes again, in every matter that is either opened or closed to our understanding.<sup>1</sup>

### The Biblical exegete is like a hunting dog

[In trying to puzzle out this difficult passage of Scripture, I am like] a man who pursues his quarry by means of the power of scent, such as a wise dog has. For sometimes it happens that when the hunter, following a hot trail, thinks that he has come close to the hidden lairs, he is all of a sudden forsaken by the track-marks. And, having urged his hound to pursue the scent more carefully, he goes back along the same trails that he had traced before, until he finds the place where his quarry, now thoroughly aroused, has secretly betaken itself on to another trail. When the hunter finds this, he follows it up with more alacrity, more sure now of his prey and more certain that he is on the right tracks. So, when the tracks of the explanation that we thought to find have in some way failed us, we likewise hope that after a little search and after pursuing a plainer sort of explanation than appeared possible before, the Lord our God may deliver the prey into our hands.<sup>2</sup>

### The absence of the Bridegroom

The Bride then beholds the Bridegroom; and He, as soon as she has seen Him, goes away. He does this frequently throughout the Song; and that is something nobody can understand who has not suffered it himself. God is my witness that I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing near me and being most intensely present with me; then suddenly He has withdrawn and I could not find Him, though I sought to do so. I long, therefore, for Him to come again, and sometimes He does so. Then, when He has appeared and I lay hold of Him, He slips away once more; and, when He has so slipped away, my search for Him begins anew.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.11 (pp.210-11)

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.13 (pp.229-30)

<sup>3</sup> *Homily on the Song of Songs* 1.7 (p.280)

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## References

The above quotations (and page numbers) are taken from the following books:

### ***An Exhortation to Martyrdom and On Prayer***

*Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book V, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, translated by R.A. Greer, published by Paulist Press, 1979

### ***Commentary on the Song of Songs and Homily on the Song of Songs***

*Origen: The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, translated by R. P. Lawson, (Ancient Christian Writers, No 26), published by Paulist Press, 1957

### ***On First Principles***

*On First Principles*, translated by G.W. Butterworth, published by Harper & Row (1966) or Peter Smith (1973 or 2002)