

LETTER III

A. D. 331

Again, brothers and sisters, Easter day is coming! This day above all others should be given over to prayer and praise, as the Scriptures command. As your bishop, I dare not forget to give you a message for the season. Those who trouble us have tried to make it impossible for us to announce this season to you. Nevertheless, thanks to God, "who comforts the afflicted" (2 Cor. 7:6), we have not been silenced or overcome by the wickedness of our accusers. Rather, obeying the voice of truth, we join you in announcing the Feast.

The God of all has commanded, "Speak and the children of Israel shall keep the Passover" (Num. 9:2). And in the Psalm the Spirit exhorts, "Blow the trumpet in the new moons, in the solemn day of your feast" (Ps. 81:3). Similarly, the prophet cried, "Keep your feasts, O Judah" (Nah. 1:15). So I'm not sending this letter to you as if you did not know what is going on. I'm sending it to people who understand, so that you will be aware that although men have separated us, God has brought us back together again. We come to the same Feast together and always worship the same God.

CHRIST: OBJECT OF THE FEAST

We do not keep the Easter festival as people who are superstitious about days having power in themselves. The apostle Paul chided those who do that sort of thing when he said, "You observe days, and months, and times, and years"

(Gal. 4:10). Rather, we consider the day to be special and holy because of the Feast. With that attitude, all of us who serve the Lord everywhere will be pleasing to God. When the blessed Paul announced the nearness of this joyful time of the Christian year, he did not stress the day. Instead, he spoke of the Lord, because of whom we keep the Feast: "Christ, our Passover is sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). He wanted all of us to turn our thoughts to the eternity of the Word—the Son of God—and draw near to Him. For what, after all, is the Feast, but an act of serving Him with the soul? And what is that service but extended prayer and continuous thanksgiving to God?

Unthankful people, having strayed from prayer and thanksgiving, deprive themselves of the resulting joy. For joy and gladness are truly "taken from their mouth" (Jer. 7:34). Consequently, the divine Word does not allow them to have peace, "For there is no peace to the wicked, says the Lord" (Isa. 48:22). Rather, they end up with anguish and sorrow.

That is why the one who owed ten thousand talents was not forgiven by the Lord (Matt. 18:34). Having been forgiven of a large debt, he was unkind to those who owed him small ones. In the end, he paid the penalty for both the large and the small debts. That was quite proper, because the right thing for him to have done, after having experienced kindness, would have been to be merciful to his fellow servant.

Similarly, the man who received one talent, tied it up in a napkin, and hid it in the ground was thrown out as an unthankful person. Because of his attitude he was told, "You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I sowed not, and gathered where I have not strewn; you ought therefore to have put my money into the bank, and on my return, I should have received my own. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it to the man that has ten talents" (Matt. 25:26-28).

Since it was his duty to return to his lord what belonged to him, he should have acknowledged the kindness of the one who gave it to him—and the value of what he had received. His lord wasn't really a hard man; if he had been, he wouldn't have given it to him in the first place. Nor was that which was given something unprofitable and useless, for then there would have

been no fault. No, his lord was really good, and that which was given was capable of bearing fruit.

USE PROFITABLY THE GRACE OF GOD

There is a proverb that says, "He who withholds corn in seed-time is cursed" (Prov. 11:26). In the same way, someone who is careless about grace and hides it without allowing it to work in him is appropriately thrown out as a wicked and thankless person. On the other hand, those who increase their talents are praised: "Well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful in a little, I will place you over much; enter into the joy of your Lord" (Matt. 25:23).

Now, dear brothers and sisters, our will to do should keep pace with the grace of God. For if our will sits idly by, neglecting His grace, the enemy will discover our emptiness and move in on us. That was what happened to the one from whom the demon went out: "for having gone through dry places, he took seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and returning and finding the house empty, he dwelt there, and the last state of that man was worse than the first" (Matt. 12:43-45). Why? Because turning away from virtue makes room for unclean spirits.

In addition, we have an apostolic injunction that the grace given to us should not be unprofitable. The things St. Paul wrote to his disciples personally, he lays on us through them, as for example, "Neglect not the gift that is in you" (1 Tim. 4:14). And there is a proverb to the same effect: "He who tills his land shall be satisfied with bread, but the paths of the lazy man are strewn with thorns" (Prov. 12:11; cf. 15:19).

Further, the Holy Spirit warns us not to fall into such things, saying, "Break up your fallow ground, do not sow among thorns" (Jer. 4:3). The reason is that when someone thinks so little of the grace God has given him that he neglects it, he is headed for trouble. Without doubt he will soon be all wrapped up in the cares of life, and shortly he will be living just for the pleasures of the flesh. Then when persecution comes, he rejects the faith and his life is barren.

SPIRITUAL ZEAL COMPARED WITH FIRE

As Jeremiah pointed out, such negligence is dangerous: "Cursed is he who is careless in the work of the Lord" (Jer. 48:10). Anyone who enlists in the service of the Lord should be diligent and attentive. Then when he has wiped sin out of his life by his zeal, he will be prepared to draw near to God—who the Scripture calls a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Heb. 12:29).

We must remember that God, "Who makes His angels spirits," is Himself a spirit, and He makes "flames of fire His servants" (Ps. 104:4). Thus, when Israel had left Egypt, He forbade the people to even touch the mountain where He was giving the Law, because they were far from being "on fire" for the Lord. He did, however, call the blessed Moses to that mountain. Moses was totally committed to Him and clung to His grace, so God said, "Let Moses alone draw near" (Exod. 24:2). So Moses climbed up the mountain into the cloud, and although that mountain smoked with the heat and presence of the Lord, Moses was unharmed. Rather, through "the words of the Lord which are pure silver refined in a furnace" (Ps. 12:6), he came down more pure than when he went up.

QUENCHING THE HOLY SPIRIT

We can thus see why Paul, not wanting the grace of the Spirit given to us to grow cold, exhorts us, "Quench not the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19). The only way we can continue to be partakers of Christ is to cling until the end to the Holy Spirit, who was given to us at the beginning (Matt. 10:22; Heb. 3:6). Paul said, "Quench not" not because the Spirit is under the power of men, but because evil and unthankful men certainly *do wish* to quench the Spirit. Demonstrating their impurity, they drive the Spirit away by their unholy deeds. "For the holy Spirit of admonition flees from guile, and dwells not in a body under the influence of sin; but departs from foolish thoughts."¹ But people

¹Wisdom 1:4,5.

like this are foolish and deceitful and love sin. They still walk as if they were in darkness, not having that "Light which lights every man who comes into the world" (John 1:9).

We are told that the word of the Lord was in Jeremiah like a burning fire. His response was, "Holding it back makes me very weary, I can no longer endure it" (Jer. 20:9). Our Lord Jesus Christ, being so good and loving humanity so much, came in the flesh to bring this kind of fire to the earth. "Oh! that it were already kindled!" He said (Luke 12:49). He wanted people to repent rather than to die (as we find in Ezekiel). Therefore, He wished to have the evil and the wickedness burned out of men so that, being purified, they would be fruitful (Ezek. 18:23,32). We know that the Word He sows will be productive—some thirty-, some sixty-, and some a hundredfold (Mark 4:20).

THE INGRATITUDE OF THE WICKED

As an example, consider Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). At first their faith was weak from lack of knowledge, but the words of our Savior fired them up and brought forth the fruits of knowing Him. And St. Paul, when caught by this fire of God, did not run around telling people about it. Nevertheless, after he had experienced God's grace he became a preacher of the Word.

On the other hand, we have nine lepers whom the Lord cleansed from their leprosy, yet who were not thankful to Him (Luke 17). They certainly were not like Paul! Judas, who had the privilege of being an apostle, was not called a disciple of the Lord. On the contrary, at the very end, while eating bread with our Savior, he "lifted up his heel against Him," and became a traitor (John 13:18).

People like that will get what they deserve for their foolishness. Because of their lack of gratitude, their hope will be futile, for there is no hope for the ungrateful. The final fire, prepared for the devil and his angels, awaits those who disregard divine light. And the unthankful belong in that category.

But the faithful and true servants of the Lord are very different. Knowing that the Lord loves thankful people, they never cease

to praise Him, and they regularly thank Him. In both good times and bad times they offer praise and thanksgiving to God. They worship the Lord, the God of times, without regard to what the times are like.

A good example from ancient days is Job, who thought about these things when he prospered. Then when troubles came, he patiently endured; when he suffered, he gave thanks. Or consider David, who sang praises in a time of great difficulty, saying, "I will bless the Lord at all times" (Ps. 34:1). Or St. Paul, who thanked God in every one of his letters. First of all, he didn't turn away from God in good times. But he also was happy to face problems, knowing that "trouble develops endurance and endurance builds strong character, which in turn strengthens our hope and hope is no mockery" (Rom. 5:3-5).

PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

With such men as these going before us as examples, let us give thanksgiving in all kinds of times. But right now especially, when we have tremendous tribulations and the heretics are inciting people against us, we will praise the Lord.² Yes, we will use the words of the ancient saints, "All these things have come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You" (Ps. 44:17). In those days the Jews were attacked by the Edomites and were oppressed by other enemies of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, they did not give themselves up for lost. Instead, they sang more praises to the Lord.

All right then, brothers and sisters, if they interfere with our speaking of the word of the Lord, we will proclaim it all the more. And if we are persecuted we will sing Psalms, because God counts us worthy to be despised and to work eagerly for the truth. Yes, the more we are harrassed, the more we will give thanks!

The apostle Paul, who thanked God all the time, urges us to

²Remember that this letter was written at a time when Athanasius had been called before the emperor to answer false charges made by the Arian heretics.

approach God in the same manner, "Let your requests, with thanksgiving, be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). And wanting us to continue in that, he says, "At all times give thanks; pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). He knew that believers are strong when engaged in thanksgiving. He also knew that when we rejoice we go right over the enemy's walls, like the saints who sang, "By your strength I can attack any enemy, go over any wall" (Ps. 18:29).

So then, let us stand firm all the time, but especially right now even though we have many troubles and many heretics are violently attacking us. Let us, dear brothers and sisters, celebrate with thanksgiving the holy Easter Feast coming up. Further, let us gird up our minds (1 Peter 1:13), like Jesus Christ our Savior, of whom it is written, "Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness shall gird His body" (Isa. 11:5). Each of us is to have in his hand the staff that came out of the root of Jesse (Isa. 11:1), and our feet are to be shod with the preparation of the gospel (Eph. 6:15).

Therefore, being so well prepared, let us keep the Feast as Paul tells us to keep it, "Not with the old leaven, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:7). That way we will reverently think of Christ and keep our faith in Him, and we will not dirty ourselves by getting mixed up with heretics and strangers to the truth—whose behavior and desires will destroy them. No, rejoicing in all our troubles, we break through the iron furnace of slavery to sin (Deut. 4:20) and cross over the terrible Red Sea to salvation (cf. Ps. 106:9).

And therefore when we see the confusion of the heretics, we will join Moses in that great song of praise, "We will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously" (Exod. 15:1). Then, singing praises and seeing the doom of sinners who have come against us, we will go on with the Lord.

Finally, purifying our hearts with the fast of forty days — along with prayers, discipline, and good works — we shall be ready to eat the holy Passover in the heavenly Jerusalem.

THE DATES OF THE EASTER SEASON

The beginning of the fast of forty days is March 1. Then, after

we have been purified and prepared by those days, we will begin the Holy Week of Easter on Monday, April 5. During that week we should continue to watch and pray and fast, preparing ourselves for that "anointing of our doorposts with precious blood, by which we escape the destroyer" (cf. Exod. 12:7,23). Our fast will cease on Saturday evening, April 10, for on that night we hear the angels say, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He has risen!" (Luke 24:5). Next day is the first day of the great week — April 11, the day on which the Lord rose and gave us peace toward our neighbors.

After we have kept the Easter Feast according to His will, let us keep an attitude of expectation through the seven weeks till Pentecost, the day of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then indeed, we shall give thanks to the Lord at all times, through whom to the Father be glory and dominion, by the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. The brothers and sisters who are with me greet you. I pray, dear ones, whom I long to see, that you may be healthy and that you may remember us in the Lord.