

INTRODUCTION TO THE FOURTH LETTER

As the year 332 began, St. Athanasius was still in Constantinople, answering the accusations of his enemies. They were refuted, and Emperor Constantine highly approved of the young bishop.

Athanasius' trip home was delayed by a number of things, including a long illness. The Easter Letter was sent on ahead of him, and he returned to Alexandria midway through the fast. At the end of the letter, Athanasius notes that he has put the letter in the hands of Ablavius, prefect of the Praetorium, who sent it to Alexandria by a soldier. Ablavius was a great favorite of Constantine, serving him well and, Athanasius says, "fears God in truth."

The message this year is that the Christian festival of the Resurrection celebrates the grand and complete fulfillment of all that was pictured in the ancient Feast of the Passover. Sin, death, and the devil are defeated, and we, putting on Christ, celebrate the Feast. No longer do we need to go to a certain city, such as Jerusalem; the celebration is commanded for every church everywhere.

In the Scriptures, Christ is recognized as the true and final Passover Lamb. Athanasius recognized that fact, and so do we today. It is still true and will always be. So this year, when you gather with the brothers and sisters for the Great Eucharist, hear the Savior say, "Take, eat and drink; this is My body and blood."

LETTER IV

A.D. 332

I know this letter is late, dear brothers and sisters. Still, I hope you will forgive the delay, which came about because I am traveling so far from home and because I have had a long illness. Since these two problems hindered my reply and since there have been some unusually severe storms, this letter will be quite late. However, in spite of the distance and my distressing illness, I have not forgotten you. Herein, then, as is my duty, I announce to you the Easter Feast.

Although this letter is much later than the usual announcement, it should not be considered ill-timed. Our enemies have been put to shame and reproved by the church because they persecuted us for no good reason. Therefore, we may now sing a festal song of praise, such as the triumphant hymn Israel sang against Pharaoh, "We will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exod. 15:1). Thus, we appropriately proceed as usual: from feast to feast. Once again holy self-examination stirs up our minds and keeps our consciences on guard to think on good things.

FEASTS ESTABLISHED ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS

We do not act like mourners during these days. Rather, we put down the appetites of our bodies in order to refresh ourselves with spiritual food. In this way we gain strength to

conquer our enemies (as, for example, Judith did when she fasted and prayed before killing Holofernes and overcoming the enemies of Israel¹). When the whole nation of Israel was about to perish, blessed Esther defeated the tyrant's anger simply by fasting and praying to God. By faith she changed the ruin of her people into safety (Esther 4:16)! Those days are feast days for Israel (Esther 9:20-28);² they used to call a feast when an enemy was slain or a conspiracy against the people was broken up, and Israel was delivered. That is why Moses established the Feast of the Passover — because Pharaoh was killed and the people were delivered from bondage.

So then, especially when tyrants were slain, temporal feasts and holidays were established in Judea. Now, however, the devil, that tyrant against the whole world, is slain. Therefore, our Feast does not relate only to time, but to eternity. It is a heavenly Feast! We do not announce it as a shadow or a picture or a type, but as the real thing.

THE GLORIOUS CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL

Israel ate the meat of a dumb lamb to complete the Passover, and having done so, they smeared their doorposts with blood and laughed at the destroyer. But we eat of the Word of the Father, the Son our Savior. We have the lintels of our hearts sealed with the blood of the New Covenant (Matt. 26:28). Therefore we acknowledge the grace given to us by our Savior, who said, "Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19).

Death does not reign anymore! Instead of death there is life, since our Lord said, "I am the life" (John 14:6). For His people everything is filled with gladness and rejoicing, as the Psalm says, "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice" (Ps. 97:1). For when death reigned, "sitting down by the rivers of Babylon, we wept" (Ps. 137:1) and mourned because we were experiencing

¹Judith 13:8.

²Judith 9.

the bitterness of captivity. But now that death and the kingdom of the devil is abolished, we are filled with joy and gladness. God is no longer known only in Judea, but in all the earth. "Their voice has gone forth, and the knowledge of Him has filled the whole earth" (Ps. 76:1; 19:4).

What follows, dear brothers and sisters, is obvious. We do not come to such a feast with dirty clothes, but with our consciences clothed, so to speak, with pure garments. We need to put on our Lord Jesus, so that we can celebrate the Feast with Him. We demonstrate that we are clothed with Him when:

- we love virtue;
- we are enemies of wickedness;
- we actively engage in temperance;
- we put to death erotic fantasies and attitudes;
- we love righteousness rather than wickedness;
- we aim to live without undue luxury;
- we have strength of mind;
- we do not forget the poor, but open our doors to all;
- we assist humility, but hate pride.

It was by these things that ancient Israel, after having fought the battle that pictured what was to come, came to the Feast. All that we would do and receive was foreshadowed in God's dealings with them.

PICTURES AND SHADOWS ARE NOW REALITY

Now the pictures and shadows and types have all been fulfilled and accomplished. So we, dear brothers and sisters, should no longer consider the Feast a figurative one. We do not go up to the earthly city of Jerusalem to sacrifice the Passover. That ancient Jewish practice is no longer suitable. If we followed their practice, we would be celebrating the Easter season inappropriately. No, in accordance with the directions of the apostles, let us go beyond the pictures and types and sing the new song of praise. They, being in the presence of the Truth, asked our Savior, "Where do you want us to make the Passover ready for You?" (Matt. 26:17).

No longer was the old Passover ceremony—belonging to the earthly Jerusalem—to be held. Nor was the New Feast³ to be celebrated only there, but rather wherever God wished it to be held. And now He wished it to be celebrated everywhere, so that “in every place incense and a sacrifice might be offered to Him” (Mal. 1:11).

In the historical account, Israel was commanded to keep the Feast of the Passover in Jerusalem and nowhere else. Nevertheless, everything pertaining to those times was finally fulfilled. When that had happened and the time had come for the gospel to be preached everywhere, the disciples, in preparation for spreading the Feast everywhere, asked our Savior that significant question, “Where do you want us to make ready?” Since our Savior was making the change from the type or shadow to the spiritual reality, He gave them the New Covenant promise. That is, He promised them that they would not eat the flesh of a lamb anymore, *but His own*: “Take, eat and drink; this is My body and My blood” (cf. Matt. 26:26–28).

Well, dear friends, when we are nourished by His body and blood, we *properly* keep the Feast of the Passover.

THE TIME FOR OBSERVING EASTER

We begin the fast of Easter Week on March 27 and end it on Saturday, April 1. Then we celebrate the Feast on Sunday, April 2. Afterward come the holy days of Pentecost, days which show forth the world to come. For in eternity we will be with Christ forever, praising God Almighty in Christ Jesus. Through Him, with all the saints, we say to the Lord, Amen.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the brothers and sisters who are with me greet you.

We have sent this letter from the emperor’s court through an attendant officer, to whom it was given by Ablavius, the prefect of the Praetorium, who truly fears God. I am still at the court, having been summoned by the emperor Constantine to see

³Easter, the Feast of the Resurrection.

him. Some Meletians⁴ who were present sought out of envy to influence the emperor against us. Their charges, however, were easily proven false, and they were driven away in shame as liars. Their names, by the way, were Callinicus, Ision, Eudaemon, and Geloëus⁵ Hieracammon, who because of the shame of his name calls himself Eulozius.

⁴The Meletians, remember, were a group that had split away from the church.
⁵The name means “laughable.”