

VI. THE CONFERENCE OF ABBA THEODORE
ON THE SLAUGHTER OF SOME HOLY PERSONS

Chapters

- I. A description of the desert, and a question about the slaughter of some holy persons.
- II. Abba Theodore's reply to the question that was asked.
- III. On the three things that exist in this world—the good, the bad, and the indifferent.
- IV. That no one can bring evil upon another person if that person is unwilling.
- V. An objection: How is God himself said to create evil?
- VI. The reply to the question that was asked.
- VII. A question as to whether someone who is responsible for the death of a righteous person is blameworthy inasmuch as the righteous person is rewarded at his death.
- VIII. The reply to the preceding question.
- IX. The example of Job tried by the devil and of the Lord betrayed by Judas, and that both prosperity and adversity serve for the salvation of the righteous person.
- X. On the virtue of the perfect man, who is figuratively referred to as ambidextrous.
- XI. The two kinds of trials, which occur in a threefold way.
- XII. How the righteous man should not be like wax but like an adamant seal.
- XIII. A question as to whether the mind can remain constantly in one and the same condition.
- XIV. The reply to the questioner's query.
- XV. What detriment there is in leaving one's cell.
- XVI. On the changeableness of even the supernal and heavenly virtues.
- XVII. That no one falls suddenly into ruin.

I.1. In the area of Palestine near the village of Tekoa, which had the honor of giving birth to the prophet Amos,¹ there is a vast desert that stretches to Arabia and the Dead Sea, into which the flowing waters of the Jordan empty, and, by a very large extension, to the ashes of Sodom. The monks who had lived there for a very long time—men of outstanding life and holiness—were suddenly killed by roving Saracen bandits. 2. We heard that their bodies were carried off by the bishops of that region and by the whole population of Arabia with great veneration and were placed among the relics of the martyrs, with the result that countless people from two towns got into a very serious conflict and that, as the situation grew aggravated, the holy plunder even occasioned a clash of weapons. They fought among themselves with pious devotion to see which of them had the greater claim to their burial place and their relics, the ones boasting of their proximity to where they had lived, the others of their nearness to their place of origin.

We, however, were considerably disturbed both on our own account and for the sake of the brothers who were scandalized, and we wondered why men of such great worthiness and of so many virtues would be slain by bandits and why the Lord had permitted such a crime to be perpetrated on his servants, that he would give men who were remarkable in every respect over into the hands of the impious. In a melancholy mood, then, we went to the holy man Theodore, who was exceptional by reason of his practical way of life. 3. He was living in Cellae, which is located between Nitria and Skete and in fact is five miles from the monasteries of Nitria and separated by eighty miles of wilderness from the desert of Skete, where we were living. We poured out our concern to him about the slaughter of the aforesaid men, marveling at such patience in God that he would permit men of this worth to be slain in such a way that those who should have freed others from a trial of this sort by the weight of their own holiness would not tear themselves from out of the hands of the impious, and

that God would have let such an evil deed happen to his servants. Then the blessed Theodore replied:

II.1. "This question usually disturbs the souls of those who have little faith and knowledge and who think that the deserts and rewards of holy persons, which are not bestowed in the present but reserved for the future, are given in the short space of this life. 2. But we must not take up their erroneous opinions, for we do not hope in Christ in this life only. Otherwise, according to the Apostle, 'we would be more miserable than all other men,'² because in this world we would receive none of the promises and in the one to come we would also lose them on account of our lack of faith. Unaware of the facts of the matter, we would be perplexed and anxious and fall into temptation if we saw ourselves given up to these same people, or if we ascribed (the mere saying of which is wicked) unrighteousness or unconcern for human affairs to God because he does not spare holy men and those who live rightly from trials or here and now requite the good with good things and the bad with bad things. 3. Then we would deserve to be condemned with those whom the prophet Zephaniah reproaches when he says: 'Who say in their hearts: The Lord will not do good, but neither will he do evil.'³ Or else we would certainly be found with those who are said to blaspheme God with this sort of complaint: 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and such people please him. But where indeed is the God of righteousness?'⁴ A little later they add the blasphemy which says: 'Whoever serves the Lord does so in vain. What gain is there in our having kept his precepts and in our having walked sad before the Lord? Therefore we now call the arrogant happy, for those who do iniquity are enriched, and they have tempted God and have been saved.'⁵

4. "In order to escape this ignorance, then, which is the root and cause of this most wicked error, we must first of all know what is really good and what is bad. Then, holding on to the true understanding of Scripture and not to the false one of the crowd, we shall never be deceived by the error of faithless persons.

III.1. "There are three things in this world—namely, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. We ought to know what, properly speaking, is good, what is bad, and what is indifferent, so that

our faith, strengthened by real knowledge, might remain undamaged by any temptation.

"As far as human affairs are concerned, then, nothing should be believed to be the chief good other than the virtue of the soul alone, which leads us by a sincere faith to divine realities and makes us cling unceasingly to the unchangeable good. On the other hand, nothing should be called bad other than sin alone, which separates us from a good God and joins us to the wicked devil.

2. "Indifferent things are those which can go in either direction depending on the desire and will of the user, such as wealth, power, honor, bodily strength, health, beauty, life itself and death, poverty, bodily sickness, insults, and other things similar to these which can have good or bad consequences according to the character and desire of the user.

"For even wealth frequently has good consequences, in the words of the Apostle who charges 'the rich of this world to give freely, to share with the poor, to store up for themselves a good foundation in the future, so that' in this way 'they may seize the true life.'⁶ In the words of the Gospel, it is good for those who 'make friends for themselves from wicked mammon.'⁷ 3. It can be turned to bad, again, when it is accumulated only for hoarding or for the sake of luxury and is not distributed for the needs of the poor.

"Likewise, that power and honor and bodily strength and health are indifferent and can veer to either side is clearly proven from the fact that many holy persons in the Old Testament possessed all these things, having been very rich and highly honored and strong in body, and they are also known to have been most acceptable to God. 4. On the other hand, those who misused these things in bad fashion and turned them to serve their own wickedness were not inappropriately either punished or destroyed, as is frequently indicated in the Book of Kings.

"That life and death themselves are indifferent is shown by the birth of Saint John and of Judas. So advantageous was the life of the one to himself that his birth is also said to have brought joy to others, as it is written: 'Many rejoiced at his birth.'⁸ Of the other's life, however, it is said: 'It would have been good for him if that man had not been born.'⁹ 5. It is said of the death of John, as of the death of all the holy ones: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord

is the death of his holy ones.’¹⁰ But of that of Judas and of those like him: ‘The death of sinners is very bad.’¹¹

“The blessedness of the poor Lazarus, full of sores, shows how useful even bodily sickness can sometimes be. Scripture mentions nothing virtuous about him apart from the mere fact that he very patiently bore deprivation and bodily sickness, and for this he deserved to possess Abraham’s bosom as his blessed destiny.¹² 6. Deprivation and persecutions and insults, which are considered to be bad in the opinion of the crowd, are also clearly shown to be beneficial and necessary from the fact that holy men have not only never desired to avoid them but have even, once having become the friends of God, sought them with all their strength, steadfastly endured them, and pursued them as the price of eternal life. The blessed Apostle says in agreement with this: ‘Therefore I am happy in sickness, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distress, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong, for power is made perfect in weakness.’¹³

7. “Therefore, those who are exalted by the greatest wealth and honor and power in this world must not be believed to have thereby obtained the chief good, which is understood in terms of virtue alone, but rather something indifferent. For just as these resources are seen to be beneficial and good to the righteous who use them correctly and unavoidably, since they offer the possibility of a good work and of fruit in eternal life, so likewise they are valueless and bad and offer an occasion of death and sin to those who misuse them in bad fashion.

IV.1. “Maintaining these distinctions as fixed and unchanging, therefore, and knowing that nothing is good other than virtue alone, which comes from the fear and love of God, and that the bad is nothing other than sin alone and separation from God, let us now discuss whether God has ever permitted evil to be brought upon his holy ones, either by himself or by someone else. You will certainly find that this has never happened at all, for no one has ever been able to bring the evil of sin upon someone who was unwilling and resistant, but only upon one who accepted it in himself due to a slothful heart and a corrupt will. 2. Even though the devil wished to bring the evil of sin upon the blessed Job by employing each of his wicked devices, and even though he not

only despoiled him of all his property but also—after the horrible and unexpected sorrow occasioned by the loss of his seven children—overwhelmed him with a terrible disease from the top of his head to the soles of his feet and with unendurable sufferings, he was utterly unable to taint him with sin because he remained unyielding through it all and did not give way to blasphemy.”

V. GERMANUS: “We frequently read in Holy Scripture that God created evil or that he has brought it upon human beings, as for example: ‘Apart from me there is no one. I the Lord, and no one else, form the light and create the darkness, make peace and create evil.’¹⁴ And again: ‘Is there evil in the city that the Lord has not done?’¹⁵

VI.1. THEODORE: “Sometimes Holy Scripture is accustomed to speaking loosely of evils rather than of afflictions, not because they are properly evils by nature but because they are thought to be evil by those upon whom they fall to their advantage. For it is necessary that the divine judgment, in communicating with human beings, express itself by way of human words and sentiments. Now an amputation or a cauterization for a healthful purpose, which a doctor carefully imposes on those who have suffered contact with some disease, is considered evil by those who endure it. Neither is a spur agreeable to a horse nor correction to a delinquent. 2. All forms of discipline are felt as bitter at the time to those who are being instructed, as the Apostle says: ‘At the time no discipline seems to be reason for gladness but for grieving. Afterward, however, it produces the peaceful fruit of righteousness for those who have been exercised by it.’¹⁶ And: ‘The Lord chastises the one whom he loves, and he scourges every son whom he receives. For what son is not corrected by his father?’¹⁷

“Hence things are sometimes spoken of as evils rather than as afflictions, as in the words: ‘God repented of the evil that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it.’¹⁸ And again: ‘You, Lord, are gracious and merciful, patient and very gracious and repenting of evils’¹⁹—that is, of the tribulations and hardships which you are obliged to bring upon us on account of our sins. 3. Another prophet, knowing that these things are beneficial for some people and not indeed begrudging them their salvation but looking out for their interests, prays: ‘Add evils to them, Lord,

add evils to the haughty of the earth.²⁰ And the Lord himself says: 'Behold, I will inflict evils upon them'²¹—that is, sorrows and desolation, by means of which, once they have been wholesomely chastised, they may at last turn and hasten to me, whom they despised in time of prosperity.

"Therefore we cannot understand these things as the chief evils, for they are of value to many people and are the cause of their eternal joy. Consequently (to return to the question that was asked) it should not be believed that all the evils that are thought to be brought upon us by our enemies or by other persons are evil; rather they are indifferent. For they will not be found to be such as he thinks they are who has inflicted them upon a raging soul, but such as he thinks who endures them. 4. Therefore when death befalls a holy man it is not to be believed that an evil has befallen him but rather something indifferent. Although this is an evil for the sinner, for the righteous it is repose and a liberation from evils. 'For death is repose to a man whose way is hidden.'²² Hence the righteous man does not undergo any loss from this because he has not suffered anything new. Instead, as the result of an enemy's wickedness he has endured what nature demanded of him—not without the reward of eternal life—and with the abundant profit derived from suffering and the recompense of a great reward he has paid the debt of death that is owed by human beings and that is exacted by an inflexible law."

VII. GERMANUS: "Therefore, if the righteous person who has been slain not only endures nothing evil but even receives a reward for his suffering, how can his murderer be called a criminal when he has not performed a disservice but rather a service?"

VIII.1. THEODORE: "We are discussing the nature of the good, the bad, and what we have referred to as the indifferent, not the disposition of those who do these things. For an impious and wicked person will not go unpunished because his wickedness was unable to harm a righteous person. The long-suffering and virtue of the righteous earn a reward not for the one who has inflicted death and torture but for the one who has patiently endured what was inflicted upon him. Hence the latter will be deservedly punished for his fierce cruelty because he desired to inflict evil, while the former has endured nothing evil because,

patiently sustaining trials and sorrows in his strength of soul, he caused the things that were inflicted upon him with bad intent to bring him to a better state and to the blessedness of eternal life.

IX.1. "For Job's patience earned no reward for the devil, who made him more illustrious by his trials, but for him who bore them courageously. Nor will Judas be compensated with immunity from everlasting punishment because his betrayal profited the salvation of the human race. It is not the result of the deed that must be considered but rather the disposition of the doer. Therefore we should hold firmly to this understanding—that no one can bring evil upon another person if he has not already brought it upon himself due to the slothfulness and weakness of his heart. The blessed Apostle confirms this very opinion in a brief passage: 'We know that for those who love God everything works together for the good.'²³ 2. When he says that 'everything works together for the good' he includes not only all the things that are fortunate but also all the things that are thought to be unfortunate.

"In another place the same Apostle describes himself as having passed through this when he says: 'By the arms of righteousness on the right hand and on the left'—that is, 'by glory and dishonor, by bad reputation and good reputation, as deceivers and truthful, as sad yet always rejoicing, as needy yet as enriching many,'²⁴ and so forth. 3. Everything, then, which is considered fortunate and which is said to be on the right side, which the holy Apostle refers to in terms of glory and a good reputation, and also everything which is thought to be unfortunate, which he clearly speaks of as dishonor and a bad reputation and which he puts at the left side, becomes the weaponry of righteousness for the perfect man if he sustains in great-hearted fashion whatever befalls him. For, struggling with these and using as weapons the very adversities by which he feels himself being attacked, and fortified by them as by a bow or a sword or a sturdy shield, against those who bear them, he will gain ground in patience and virtue, triumphing gloriously in the very face of the enemies' lethal spears, neither elated by prosperity nor dejected by adversity but always proceeding along on an even course and on the royal road, never moved away from that state of calm at the appearance of joy, as it were toward the right, nor as it were pushed to the left by an

onrush of adversity or when sadness predominates. For 'there is much peace for those who love your name, and for them there is no stumbling block.'²⁵

4. "But of those who change according to the nature and variety of circumstances it is said: 'A fool will change like the moon.'²⁶ Just as it is said of the perfect and the wise: 'For those who love God everything works together for the good,' so also it is declared of the weak and the foolish: 'Everything is against a foolish man.'²⁷ He is neither improved by prosperity nor corrected by adversity. For it belongs to the same virtue to endure calamity bravely and to moderate prosperity, and it is quite certain that he who is overcome in one of these can tolerate neither. Yet a person can be broken more easily by prosperity than by adversity. For sometimes the latter restrains and humbles the hesitant, causes them to commit fewer sins and corrects them with a beneficial compunction. But the former puffs up the mind with its flattering and dangerous seductions and ruinously casts down those who are secure in their happiness.

X.1. "These are the persons, then, who are referred to in Holy Scripture as ἀμφοτεροδεξιοί—that is, as ambidextrous. Ehud, 'who used either hand as if it were his right hand,'²⁸ is described as such in the Book of Judges. We shall also be able to possess this quality in a spiritual way if by a good and correct use we put the things which are considered fortunate and right-handed and the things which are called unfortunate and left-handed on the right side, so that whatever befalls may become for us, in the words of the Apostle, 'the arms of righteousness.' For we see that our inner man consists in two parts or, as I might say, two hands. No holy person can be without what we call the left hand, but perfect virtue is discerned in the fact that by proper use he turns both into a right hand.

2. "Let us make what we are saying more understandable: The holy person has a right hand—namely, his spiritual achievements. He has this when, fervent in spirit, he masters all his desires and lusts; when, safe from every diabolical attack, he rejects and cuts off the vices of the flesh without any effort or difficulty; when, raised up from the earth, he contemplates all present and earthly realities as mere smoke and an empty shadow

and disdains them as soon to disappear; when, with ecstatic mind, he not only ardently desires future realities but even sees them with clarity; when he is effectively fed by spiritual theoria; when he sees unlocked to himself the heavenly sacraments in all their brightness; when he sends prayers purely and swiftly to God; and when, inflamed with spiritual ardor, he passes over to invisible and eternal realities with such utter eagerness of soul that he cannot bring himself to believe that he is in the flesh.

3. "He also has a left hand when he is involved in the turmoil of trials; when the desires of his flesh are inflamed by seething emotions and impulses; when the fire of aggravations enkindles the fury of his wrath; when he is struck by the arrogance of pride or vainglory; when he is depressed by a death-dealing sadness; when he is disturbed by the ploys and the attack of acedia; and when, in the absence of any spiritual warmth, he is dulled by a kind of tepidity and irrational mournfulness, so that not only is he deserted by good and warm thoughts but psalmody, prayer, reading, and the solitude of his cell terrify him, and every virtuous practice takes on a certain unbearable and darkly loathsome quality. When a monk is struck by these things he realizes that he is being assailed from the left.

4. "Whoever, then, is on what we have referred to as the right side is not elated at the approach of vainglory and, courageously struggling with the things that are on the left side, is not disheartened by any despair. Rather he seizes the arms of patience from adversity for the sake of exercising his virtue, uses both hands as right hands, and, having triumphed in both respects, snatches the palm of victory from the left as much as from the right.

5. "This is what we read that the blessed Job deserved to obtain. He was crowned on the right, to be sure, when, going about as the wealthy and rich father of seven children, he offered daily sacrifices to the Lord for their purification,²⁹ not wishing to make them acceptable and pleasing to himself so much as to God; when he opened his doors to every stranger; when he was the foot of the lame and the eye of the blind;³⁰ when the shoulders of the sick were warmed by the wool of his sheep;³¹ when he was the

father of orphans and the protector of widows; and when he did not rejoice in his heart over his enemy's downfall.

6. "Thanks to a still more sublime virtue, though, the same man triumphed on the left side over his adversities when, bereaved of his seven children at one fell swoop, he did not, like a father, give way to bitter grief but, like a true servant of God, rejoiced in the will of his Creator; when, having gone from wealth to extreme poverty, from riches to nakedness, from health to sickness, from fame and renown to ignominy and contempt, he retained his strength of soul uncorrupted; when, bereft of all his property and wealth, he made a dunghill his home and, his own most severe tormentor, scraped his running sores with a potsherd and, plunging his fingers into his deepest ulcers, took out from every part of his body the masses of worms.

7. "In all these things he never despairingly fell into blasphemy or murmured against his Creator on any account. Quite to the contrary, so unshaken was he by the heavy burden and the harshness of his trials that his very cloak, which he had retained from his original possessions to cover his body and which alone was able to be saved from the devil's rampage because he was wearing it, he took off and laid aside, adding a voluntary deprivation to the terrible rapine that he had suffered.³² 8. He also cut off the hair of his head,³³ which alone had remained intact of his former glory, and cast it to his tormentor. Ridding himself of what his fierce enemy had left him, he exulted over him and reviled him with those heavenly words: 'If we have received good things from the hand of the Lord, shall we not accept evil? Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked shall I return there. The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. As it has pleased the Lord, so it has been done. May the name of the Lord be blessed.'³⁴

"I would also with good reason refer to Joseph as ambidextrous. In prosperity he was more thankful than his father, more devout than his brothers, and more acceptable to God. In adversity he was chaste, faithful to the Lord, most gentle to those who were imprisoned, heedless of insults, kind to his enemies, and not only respectful of his jealous and very nearly murderous brothers but even munificent in their regard.³⁵

9. "These men, therefore, and others like them are rightly

called ἀμφοτεροδεξιοί—that is, ambidextrous. For they used either hand as if it were their right hand and, passing through those things which the Apostle enumerates, they could all say alike: 'By the arms of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by glory and dishonor, by bad reputation and good reputation,³⁶ and so forth.

"Solomon also speaks of the right hand and the left hand in the Song of Songs in the person of the bride: 'His left hand is under my head, and his right hand will embrace me.'³⁷ Although she indicates that both are beneficial, yet she puts the former under her head because adversities should be subject to the guidance of the heart. They are only beneficial to the extent that they discipline us for a time, instruct us for salvation, and make us perfectly patient. But for being fondled and forever protected she desires the bridegroom's right hand to cling to her and to hold her fast in a saving embrace.

10. "We shall be ambidextrous ourselves, therefore, when neither an abundance nor a lack of present things changes us—when the former does not push us into harmfully lax pleasures and the latter does not draw us into despair and complaining, but when in either case we are thankful to God and draw similar fruit from both successes and failures. That the truly ambidextrous teacher of the Gentiles was this way himself he testifies when he says: 'I have learned to be satisfied in whatever I find myself. I know how to be humbled and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in everything I have been instructed how to be full and how to be hungry and how to abound and how to endure want. I can do everything in him who strengthens me.'³⁸

XI.1. "Now although we have said that trials are of two kinds, namely in reference to prosperity and adversity, nonetheless it should be realized that everyone is tried in a threefold way—frequently in order to be proven, sometimes in order to be cleansed, and occasionally on account of sins.

"We read that the blessed Abraham, like Job and many other holy persons, endured numberless tribulations in order to be proven. Consider also what is said by Moses to the people in Deuteronomy: 'You shall remember that entire way by which the Lord your God led you through the desert for forty years in order

to afflict and try you and so that what you were meditating in your soul would be made known, whether you were keeping his commandments or not.³⁹ And what is said in the psalm: 'I tested you at the water of contradiction.'⁴⁰ And also to Job: 'Do you think that I have spoken to you for any other reason than that you might appear righteous?'⁴¹

2. "This occurs for the sake of cleansing, however, when he humbles his righteous ones for their small and as it were insignificant sins or because of their proud purity, giving them over to various trials in order to purge away now all the unclean thoughts and—as I might say in the words of the prophet—dross⁴² which he sees have collected in their inmost being, and in order to submit them like pure gold to the judgment to come, permitting nothing to remain in them that the searching fire of judgment might afterwards find to purge with penal torment. As it is written: 'Many are the tribulations of the righteous.'⁴³ And: 'My son, do not neglect the discipline of the Lord, and do not be wearied when you are rebuked by him, for the Lord chastises the one whom he loves, and he scourges every son whom he receives. For what son is not corrected by his father? But if you are without discipline, in which all partake, then you are bastards and not sons.'⁴⁴ And in the Apocalypse: 'Those whom I love I reprove and chastise.'⁴⁵ 3. Jeremiah also, in the person of God, speaks to these people under the image of Jerusalem: 'I will consume all the nations in which I scattered you, but you I will not consume. But I will chastise you in judgment, so that you may not appear innocent to yourself.'⁴⁶ David prays for this salutary cleansing when he says: 'Examine me, Lord, and try me; stir up my reins and my heart.'⁴⁷ Isaiah, too, understands the value of this trial when he says: 'Correct us, Lord, but in judgment, and not in your wrath.'⁴⁸ And again: 'I shall confess to you, Lord, for you were angry with me. Your wrath has turned away, and you have consoled me.'⁴⁹

4. "The affliction of trials is brought to bear because of sin, however, as when the Lord warns that he will send afflictions upon the people of Israel, saying: 'I will set the teeth of wild animals upon them, with the fury of things that creep upon the earth.'⁵⁰ And: 'In vain have I struck your children; you have not accepted chastisement.'⁵¹ In the psalms also: 'Many are the

scourges of sinners.'⁵² And in the Gospel: 'See, you have been made whole. Sin no more lest something worse befall you.'⁵³

"We have also, in fact, come upon a fourth reason. Following the authority of Scripture we see that some sufferings are inflicted upon people simply in order to show forth the glory and the works of God, according to the Gospel text: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God might be shown forth in him.'⁵⁴ And again: 'This sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it.'⁵⁵

5. "But there are also other kinds of vengeance by which some people who have gone beyond the limits of wickedness are struck at the time. Thus we read that Dathan and Abiram and Korah were condemned,⁵⁶ and particularly those of whom the Apostle speaks: 'Therefore God gave them up to shameful passions and to a reprobate mind.'⁵⁷ This is to be considered more serious than other punishments. Of these the psalmist says: 'They are not in the labors of men, and they shall not be scourged with men.'⁵⁸ 6. For they do not deserve to be saved by the Lord's visitation or to be healed by temporal afflictions—they 'who in despair have handed themselves over to lasciviousness in the working of every error, unto uncleanness,⁵⁹ and who in their hardness of heart and with their frequent habit of sinning are beyond the purgation of this very brief age and the punishment of the present life. The divine word reproves them too through the prophet: 'I have destroyed you as God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and you have become like a firebrand snatched from the fire, and not even thus have you returned to me, says the Lord.'⁶⁰ And Jeremiah: 'I have slain and destroyed my people, and still they have not turned back from their ways.'⁶¹ And again: 'You struck them and they did not grieve; you bruised them and they refused to accept correction; they have hardened their faces more than rock, they have refused to return.'⁶²

7. "The prophet, seeing how no temporal medicine is able to cure them and already as it were despairing of their salvation, declares: 'The bellows have given way in the fire, the lead has melted in vain, for your iniquities have not been consumed. Call them reprobate silver, for the Lord has cast them away.'⁶³ The

Lord complains that he has applied this salutary purgative fire without effect to those who have grown hardened in their misdeeds, and he speaks to them as to a Jerusalem that is encrusted with a heavy rust of sinfulness: 'Set it empty upon live coals so that it may get hot and its brass may melt, and let its pollution melt in its midst. Much labor was expended and none of its rust has left it, not even with fire. Your uncleanness is disgraceful, for I have desired to cleanse you, and you were not cleansed from your filthiness.'⁶⁴ 8. Therefore, like a very skillful physician who has tried every treatment and sees that no remedy is left that could have an effect on their illness, the Lord is as it were overcome by the magnitude of their wickedness. He is forced to give up that merciful chastisement of his, and so he denounces them and says: 'I will no longer be angry with you, and my jealousy has departed from you.'⁶⁵

"With respect to others, however, whose hearts have not hardened because of frequent sinning and who have no need of that very severe and—as I might call it—caustic and fiery medicine, but for whom instruction in the saving word is enough for salvation, it is said: 'I will correct them by hearing of their tribulation.'⁶⁶

9. "We are not unaware of other causes for the censure and punishment that are brought upon those who have sinned very gravely, not in order to expiate their crimes or to abolish what their sinfulness deserves but in order to correct the living and inspire fear in them. We see clearly that this happened in the case of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, Baasha the son of Ahijah, and Ahab and Jezebel, as the divine judgment declares: 'Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and I will cut down your posterity, and of Ahab I will slay every male, and whoever is shut up and the last in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah because of what you did to provoke me to anger, and because you made Israel sin. The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the field of Jezreel. If Ahab dies in the city the dogs shall eat him, but if he dies in the country the birds of the air shall eat him.'⁶⁷ And there is what is proclaimed as a great threat: 'Your corpse shall not be interred in the burial place of your ancestors.'⁶⁸

10. "This short and momentary penalty would not suffice to

purge away the impious lies of the one who first invented golden calves to lead a people astray forever and who contributed to their wicked separation from the Lord,⁶⁹ or their countless and evil crimes of sacrilege. But the terror of these punishments might serve as an example to others who feared them and who, either neglectful of the future or not wholly believing, would only be moved by the consideration of present realities. Thus they might realize, thanks to the warning provided by this severity, that with that highest divine majesty there was no lack of concern for human affairs and for daily activity, and that, by way of things which they greatly feared, they might clearly see that God was the requiter of every act.

11. "We have in fact noticed that even for less serious faults some people have suffered the very sentence of death by which those who we said were the authors of sacrilegious prevarication were also punished. This happened in the case of the man who had been collecting wood on the sabbath,⁷⁰ as well as in that of Ananias and Sapphira, who by their misguided faithlessness kept back a little bit of their property.⁷¹ It is not that these sins were equally grave but that, when these persons had been found committing a new offense, they had to furnish a kind of example to others of the penalty and terror of sinfulness. Thus, from then on, whoever was tempted to do the same thing would know that at the future judgment he would receive the same condemnation as the others, even if in this life his punishment was deferred.

12. "Seeing that, since we wanted to run through the different kinds of trials and punishments, we have digressed from our narrative of how, as we were saying, the perfect man is always steadfast in either trial, let us now return to where we were.

XII. "The mind of the righteous man, then, must not be like wax or some other soft material, which always gets its form and shape from the mark that is stamped on it and that remains there until it receives the impression of another mark. Thus it never keeps its own character and always takes on the form of whatever is stamped on it. On the contrary, our mind must be like a kind of adamant seal, so that it always retains its own character inviolable and shapes and transforms whatever happens to it into its own

likeness, without, however, being stamped itself by the things that happen to it."

XIII. GERMANUS: "Is our mind able to hold on to one state constantly and to remain always in the same condition?"

XIV.1. THEODORE: "As the Apostle says, it is necessary for 'one who is renewed in the spirit of his mind'⁷² to make progress every day, 'always reaching out to what is ahead.'⁷³ The alternative is that the neglectful person reverses himself and falls back into a worse state. Therefore the mind will never be able to remain in one and the same condition. As in the case of a person who is trying hard to push forward a boat that is held back by the river's current, he will certainly either go upstream by cutting off the torrent with the strength of his arms or, letting his hands drop, be thrown headlong by the rushing water.

2. "It will be a clear sign of our setback, then, if we know that we have acquired nothing more, and we should not doubt that we have fallen back completely on the day when we do not notice that we have progressed to higher things. For, as I have said, the mind of man cannot remain constantly in the same state, nor will any holy persons, while living in this flesh, possess the height of the virtues in such a way that they will abide unchangingly. For something must always be either added to them or taken away from them, and no perfection will exist in any creature that is not subject to the passion of change. As it says in the book of the blessed Job: 'What is a human being that he should be spotless, and one who is born of woman that he should appear righteous? Behold, among his holy ones no one is changeless, and the heavens are not pure in his sight.'⁷⁴

3. "We confess that God alone is unchanging. Him alone does the prayer of the holy prophet address in this way: 'You yourself are the same.'⁷⁵ And he says of himself: 'I am God, and I do not change.'⁷⁶ For only he to whom nothing can ever be added and from whom nothing can ever be taken away is by nature always good, always complete, and always perfect. Therefore we must always push ourselves with unceasing care and concern to attain the virtues, and we must constantly occupy ourselves in their exercise, lest our progress suddenly cease and regression occur. For, as we have said, the mind cannot remain in one and

the same condition—that is, so that it does not either increase or decrease in virtue. Not to have gained is to have lost, because when the desire of making progress ceases, the danger of falling back will appear.

XV. "Therefore one must abide constantly in one's cell. For as often as a person has wandered out of it and has returned to it like a novice who is only starting to live there, he will waver and be disturbed. The person who stays in his cell has acquired an intensity of mind that, once let go slack, he will not be able to recover again without effort and pain. And when he has thus returned he will not think about the progress that he missed, which he would have been able to add if he had not left his cell, but he will be glad if he could think that he has gained back the condition from which he had fallen. Just as time that has passed and slipped away cannot be summoned up again, so neither can gains be won back once they have been lost. For however much this intensity of mind may be cultivated afterward, this will be the progress of that particular day and of that particular moment and not the recouping of a lost profit.

XVI.1. "But that even the heavenly powers, as we have said, are subject to change is proclaimed by those of their number who fell because of the sinfulness of their corrupt will. Therefore neither must those who have persevered in the blessedness in which they were created be thought of as possessing an unchanging nature because they, having acted differently, did not likewise behave wickedly. For it is one thing to possess an unchanging nature and another not to be changed because of zeal for virtue and perseverance in the good, which is due to the grace of an immutable God. 2. Whatever is acquired and maintained through diligence can also be lost through negligence. Consequently it is said: 'You should not call a person blessed before his death,'⁷⁷ because whoever is still involved in this struggle and—as I might say—wrestling match, even though he usually overcomes and obtains the palm of victory, still cannot be free of fear and of concern about an uncertain result.

3. "God alone, then, is said to be unchangeable and good—he who possesses goodness not because of laborious effort but by nature, and who cannot be anything other than good. Therefore

no virtue can be possessed unwaveringly by a human being, but for it to be firmly maintained once it has been acquired it must always be preserved with the same concern and effort with which it was obtained.

XVII.1. "But we must not believe that a slip is the cause of a person's sudden ruin. Rather, having been misled by wicked instruction at the beginning, or because of a longstanding spiritual unconcern, the virtue of the mind gradually decreases and thus, as sinfulness slowly increases, a person falls into a wretched condition. For 'injury precedes destruction, and an evil thought precedes ruin.'⁷⁸ In the same way a house never suddenly collapses except because of some old weakness in the foundation or because of extended disregard by its tenants. Thus the structure of the roof is eventually destroyed by what had begun as a tiny leak, but into which, through long neglect, a stormy tempest of rain pours like a river, once a large breach has been made. For 'by slothfulness a dwelling will be brought low, and through lazy hands a house will leak.'⁷⁹

2. "Solomon remarks that the same thing happens to the soul in a spiritual way when he says in other words: 'Leaks drive a person out of his house on a stormy day.'⁸⁰ Neatly, then, does he compare spiritual carelessness to a neglected roof, through which as it were certain tiny leaks of passion penetrate to the soul. If these little and insignificant leaks are let go unattended they weaken the structure of the virtues, and afterward they pour in in a heavy shower of sinfulness. As a consequence, on a stormy day—that is, in time of trial—the mind is expelled by the onrushing assault of the devil from the dwelling place of virtue, in which it had once reposed as if it were its own house when it maintained a careful watchfulness."

3. When this was over we took such boundless delight in our spiritual repast that we were filled with more joy of soul from this conference than we had been touched with sadness before because of the death of the holy ones. For not only were we instructed in matters where we were in doubt but, having posed that question, we even came to comprehend things that we did not know enough to ask about because of the poverty of our intelligence.

1. Cf. Am 1:1.
2. 1 Cor 15:19.
3. Zep 1:12.
4. Mal 2:17.
5. Mal 3:14-15.
6. 1 Tm 6:18-19.
7. Lk 16:9.
8. Lk 1:14.
9. Mt 26:24.
10. Ps 116:15.
11. Ps 34:21.
12. Cf. Lk 16:20-22.
13. 2 Cor 12:10, 9.
14. Is 45:6-7.
15. Am 3:6 LXX.
16. Heb 12:11.
17. Heb 12:6-7.
18. Jon 3:10 LXX.
19. Jl 2:13 LXX.
20. Is 26:15 LXX.
21. Jer 11:11.
22. Jb 3:23 LXX.
23. Rom 8:28.
24. 2 Cor 6:7-10.
25. Ps 119:165.
26. Sir 27:11.
27. Prv 14:7 LXX.
28. Jgs 3:15.
29. Cf. Jb 1:5.
30. Cf. Jb 29:15.
31. Cf. Jb 31:20.
32. Cf. Jb 1:20a.
33. Cf. Jb 1:20b.
34. Jb 2:10; 1:21.
35. Cf. Gn 37:2-47:12.
36. 2 Cor 6:7.
37. Sg 2:6.
38. Phil 4:11-13.

39. Dt 8:2.
40. Ps 81:7.
41. Jb 40:3 LXX.
42. Cf. Is 1:25.
43. Ps 34:19.
44. Heb 12:5-8.
45. Rv 3:19.
46. Jer 30:11.
47. Ps 26:2.
48. Jer 10:22.
49. Is 12:1.
50. Dt 32:24.
51. Jer 2:30.
52. Ps 32:10.
53. Jn 5:14.
54. Jn 9:3.
55. Jn 11:4.
56. Cf. Nm 16.
57. Rom 1:26, 28.
58. Ps 73:5.
59. Eph 4:19.
60. Am 4:11.
61. Jer 15:7.
62. Jer 5:3.
63. Jer 6:29-30.
64. Ez 24:11-13.
65. Ez 16:42.
66. Hos 7:12 LXX.
67. 1 Kgs 21:21-24.
68. 1 Kgs 13:22.
69. Cf. Ex 32.
70. Cf. Nm 15:32-36.
71. Cf. Acts 5:1-11.
72. Eph 4:23.
73. Phil 3:13.
74. Jb 15:14-15.
75. Ps 102:27.
76. Mal 3:6.

77. Sir 11:28.
78. Prv 16:18 LXX.
79. Eccl 10:18 LXX.
80. Prv 27:15 LXX.