
3.1 Letters

Letter To Marcellinus

PATRISTICS

A Handbook for the Psalms

The Letter to Marcellinus, written by St. Athanasius to his disciple Marcellinus, stands as the earliest known handbook for using the Psalms in personal devotional meditation, distinct from the communal singing of Psalms in a congregational setting. This significant text holds a special place in the history of Christian spiritual practices. One notable example of the early church's appreciation for the Psalms is St. Basil's account of his monks beginning each day by singing Psalm 50. This practice underscores the importance of the Psalms as a devotional tool for personal spiritual growth.

The Letter to Marcellinus gained such prominence that one of the earliest manuscripts of the Greek translations of the Bible, known as Codex Alexandrinus, included it directly before the book of Psalms. This manuscript is currently housed in the British Library in London and remains on display to this day.

Long before the Letter to Marcellinus, the Psalms had already played a central role in worship settings, with many individuals memorizing the entire Psalter. This tradition continues in the present day, as the Liturgy of the Hours, a form of daily prayer in the Catholic Church, incorporates substantial Psalmody. Notably, the Psalms found in the Liturgy of the Hours include those very prayers that Jesus Himself prayed during His time on earth.

The Letter to Marcellinus goes beyond devotional use, offering systematic instruction on the nature and appropriate use of the Psalms. It provides guidance on understanding the Psalms' literary forms, their theological themes, and their relevance to personal spiritual formation.

Who was Marcellinus?

Marcellinus was possibly a deacon or a monk who dedicated his life to studying and understanding the Bible. During an illness, his passion for the Scriptures led him to embark on a profound journey of exploration, seeking to uncover the hidden depths of wisdom within the Psalms.

Driven by an insatiable curiosity, Marcellinus questioned the significance of each Psalm, longing to unravel its unique message and symbolism. He desired to comprehend how the Psalter, a collection of poetic prayers and songs, intertwined with the rest of Scripture.

This pursuit impressed St. Athanasius, who in turn expressed his desire to share his mediation on the psalms to him: “Not only are you bearing well your present trial, with its attendant suffering; you are even living under rule and, so the bearer of your letter tells me, using the leisure necessitated by your recent illness to study the whole body of the Holy Scriptures and especially the Psalms. Of every one of those, he says, you are trying to grasp the inner force and sense. Splendid! I myself am devoted to the Psalms, as indeed to the whole Bible; and I once talked with a certain studious old man, who had bestowed much labour on the Psalter, and discoursed to me about it with great persuasiveness and charm, expressing himself clearly too, and holding a copy of it in his hand the while he spoke. So I am going to write down for you the things he said.”

Design of the Letter

St. Athanasius unveiled the intricate plan of his discourse, captivating his audience with a profound analogy. He likened each book of the Bible to a unique garden, each flourishing with its own distinctive fruit. However, the Psalter, he explained, stood apart as an extraordinary garden, for it not only bore its own special fruit but also embraced a mosaic of fruits from all the other gardens. “Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some those of all the rest. A demonstration of the Psalters recap of themes found in the Law and the Prophets.”

With eloquence and erudition, St. Athanasius embarked on a journey through the Psalms, demonstrating how this remarkable book encapsulated the themes and narratives found in both the Law and the Prophets. He revealed how the Psalter echoed the creation stories of Genesis, the wanderings of Exodus, the covenant promises of Deuteronomy, and the wisdom teachings of Proverbs. He unveiled how it resonated with the prophetic messages of Isaiah, the denunciations of Amos, and the lamentations of Jeremiah.

The analysis showcased the Psalter as a tapestry woven with threads from every corner of Scripture. He explored how the Psalms mirrored the joys of weddings, the anguish of funerals, the triumphs of victories, and the despair of defeats. He demonstrated how it reflected the hope of the righteous, the struggles of the oppressed, and the yearnings of the faithful.

Through his insightful exposition, St. Athanasius unveiled the Psalter as a microcosm of the entire biblical narrative, a garden where the fruits of faith, wisdom, love, justice, and redemption intermingled, creating a symphony of divine revelation. His audience, captivated by his eloquence and inspired by his insights, recognized the Psalter as more than a mere collection of songs; it was a living testament to the profound interconnectedness of God's Word.

Argument for the Uniqueness of the Psalter

The Psalms are considered immediate and personal, allowing individuals to express their emotions and connect with God through these words. The Psalms serve various purposes, including praise, thanksgiving, lament, and petition, making them versatile and relatable to a wide range of human experiences.

The classification of the Psalms is based on their content, style, and purpose. Some psalms are categorized as hymns of praise, expressing adoration and gratitude to God. Others are laments, in which the psalmist pours out their soul, expressing sorrow, doubt, and seeking comfort. Wisdom Psalms offer guidance and ethical teachings, while royal Psalms celebrate the authority and justice of the king.

Misunderstandings and abuses of the Psalter, the book containing the Psalms, have occurred over time. Some have misinterpreted the Psalms as mere historical records or literary compositions, neglecting their spiritual and devotional significance. Others have used the Psalms to justify violence, oppression, or personal gain, which is a gross misrepresentation of their intended purpose.

In Jewish worship, the Psalms play an integral role. They have been the liturgical texts of the Jews since ancient times and are incorporated into various services and celebrations. In the Temple, Psalms were chanted by Levites, accompanied by musical instruments, creating a sacred atmosphere. In synagogues, Psalms are recited during daily prayers, weekly Sabbath services, and major festivals like Passover.

The weekly synagogue worship includes a specific order of prayers, passages from the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), and the Nebi'im (prophets). Additionally, a Homily or "Explanation" is delivered to provide insights and teachings. Following this, a rotation of Psalms is chanted, typically including selections from Psalms 105-107, 111-119, 116-118, 135, 136, and 146-150.

The chanter recites each verse of the Psalm, and a choir responds by repeating the first verse. At the end of the Psalm, a doxology is offered, praising God and inviting the congregation to respond with "Amen." This call and response create a participatory and communal experience, allowing worshippers to engage actively in the liturgy.

Psalms in Jewish Worship

In daily Temple services, the psalms hold a significant place. One notable practice is the daily Psalm, recited at the morning and evening sacrifices. Israelites, as read in Deuteronomy 16:16, were required three times a year to appear before the LORD for the three Great Feasts observed: Passover/Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles. During these festivals, every adult male was required to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem, the holy city.

Jerusalem, the spiritual heart of Judaism, is situated atop a high hill, adding to its revered status. As Jews embarked on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for these festivals, they traditionally sang a collection of songs on the "ascent" or the uphill road leading to the city. These songs, known as 'the Psalms of Ascent', served as an expression of devotion and joy during their journey.

Comprised of Psalms 120 to 134, the Psalms of Ascent encompass a range of emotions and themes. They reflect on the beauty of Jerusalem, the longing for pilgrimage, and the joy of communal worship. Some psalms express trust in God's guidance and protection, while others celebrate the unity and solidarity of the Jewish people.

Within the Temple's two courts, there were fifteen steps that pilgrims had to ascend to reach the inner sanctum. It is believed that each Psalm was chanted as individuals ascended each step, creating a harmonious and uplifting atmosphere. The chanting of these psalms added a profound spiritual dimension to the pilgrimage, enhancing the sense of connection between the worshippers and the divine.

Various occasions throughout the religious calendar of Judaism call for specific psalms and hymns to be recited or chanted. One notable example is the "Great Hallel." This Hallel consists of Psalms 136, also known as the second Hos. The Great Hallel holds a prominent place in Jewish liturgy and is traditionally recited during significant festivals and holidays. During Passover, the Great Hallel is recited as part of the seder ritual, which commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The recitation of the Great Hallel serves to express gratitude and praise to God for the Exodus.

story and the deliverance of the Jewish people. Another occasion when the Great Hallel is recited is the Feast of Trumpets, also known as Rosh Hashanah, which marks the beginning of the Jewish civil new year. Additionally, the first day of each month also has its designated psalm, Psalm 81, with its opening line: "Blow the trumpet at the time of the New Moon..."

The Feast of Tabernacles also incorporates psalms into its celebrations, with Psalms 65 and 67 serving as appropriate words for the harvest and storing. Moreover, the four cups of wine during Passover are accompanied by Psalms 113 to 118 (Hallel), with Psalms 113 and 114 read after the fourth cup. It is believed that these psalms were likely chosen by our Lord Jesus Christ on the night of His suffering with His disciples, as mentioned in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26.

Christians in Later Centuries

St. Athanasius, in his letter to Marcellinus, specifically in Psalm 136, and in his *Apologia de Fuga* 24, emphasized the universal practice of praying with Psalms in churches worldwide. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, a renowned church historian of the early 4th century, the practice of praying with Psalms was prevalent in churches worldwide. This tradition was not confined to a particular region or sect but embraced by Christian communities far and wide. Eusebius's observations highlight the unifying power of Psalms, transcending geographical boundaries and cultural differences.

St. John Chrysostom, a prominent theologian and bishop of Constantinople in the 4th century, further solidified the significance of Psalms within church liturgy. He instituted daily Psalms prayers in the church, with Psalm 63 designated for the morning and Psalm 141 for the evening. These selections were thoughtfully chosen, as they align with the themes of hope and protection that accompany the rising and setting of the sun. By incorporating Psalms into the daily rhythm of church life, St. John Chrysostom emphasized their relevance and comfort for believers.

Moreover, St. John Chrysostom's interpretation of Psalm 42 provides a profound insight into the essence of faith. He explains that the Psalm emphasizes the importance of 'the reply,' which symbolizes the reciprocal nature of our relationship with God. According to his understanding, 'the reply' represents the covenant we make with our Lord, acknowledging His sovereignty and committing ourselves to His will. This interpretation underscores the significance of actively engaging with God through prayer and devotion, recognizing that a meaningful connection with the divine requires both our invocation and His response.

Interpretation of the Psalms

By the fourth century, Christian thinkers had developed various methods of analyzing and interpreting the Psalms. One notable approach originated in Alexandria, Egypt, and emphasized a gradual progression from simpler to more profound interpretations of the Scriptures. This approach allowed for the use of specific verses from the Psalms as "proof texts" in doctrinal disputes. For instance, Psalm 35:10—"In your light we shall see light"—was cited as evidence of the eternal nature of the Word.

Beyond their use as proof texts, the Psalms were also seen as a comprehensive summary of the Old Testament, preparing readers for the teachings of the New Testament. They were believed to present a vivid depiction of the soul's journey through life, offering guidance and inspiration for believers seeking spiritual growth and transformation.

In addition to their theological and practical significance, the Psalms were also valued for their literary and poetic qualities. Their diverse genres, including hymns of praise, prayers of lament, and songs of thanksgiving, showcased the broad range of human emotions and experiences. The vivid imagery, metaphors, and symbols found in the Psalms captivated readers and provided a rich source of spiritual contemplation and reflection.

Moreover, the Psalms played a vital role in shaping Christian liturgy and worship. They were incorporated into early Christian services and became an essential part of communal and private prayer, helping to shape the spiritual lives of believers throughout the centuries. The Psalms provided a common language for expressing devotion, repentance, praise, and thanksgiving, fostering a sense of unity and fellowship among Christians.

St. Athanasius offered a unique interpretation of the psalms that differed from the teachings of the Alexandrian School of theology, as exemplified by St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The Alexandrian School, known for its allegorical interpretation of Scripture, was heavily influenced by Platonic thought. Figures like St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen sought to find deeper, often mystical meanings in the Scriptures, including the Psalms. Origen, in particular, was known for his threefold method of interpretation: the literal, moral, and allegorical. He believed that the deeper, spiritual meaning was the most important aspect of Scripture.

Unlike many theological writings of his time, St. Athanasius's interpretation was not intended to be polemical or confrontational. Instead, he emphasized the practical and spiritual application of the Psalms in the life of the believer. He viewed the Psalms not just as texts for scholarly interpretation but as a guide for Christian living, prayer, and moral development. Through his interpretation of the psalms, St. Athanasius imparted profound spiritual wisdom and guidance. He explored various themes that resonated with the human experience, including the righteous and wicked, God's law, the end of one's life, and the conduct of leaders. He emphasized the importance of praise and thanksgiving to God for His goodness, mercy, and unique characteristics. Additionally, he delved into themes of repentance, trust in God during times of difficulty, sorrow accompanied by hope, and the need for divine help. St. Athanasius's interpretation sought to guide believers toward a deeper understanding of their faith and a closer relationship with God. Through his exegesis, St. Athanasius provided a framework for comprehending the psalms as a source of comfort, guidance, and inspiration.

His interpretation also highlighted the interconnectedness of the human soul with the divine realm. St. Athanasius emphasized that through the psalms, individuals could engage in a profound dialogue with God, expressing their emotions, seeking His wisdom, and finding solace in His presence. He viewed the psalms as a means of drawing closer to God and experiencing the transformative power of His love and grace.

Effects of the Psalms

While the Psalter's words are not more Holy than the other writings in the Bible, God honors the supplications made in the words of the Psalm. The person praying the Psalms may apply it to him/herself. Two people going through different trials, or tribulations, may pray the same Psalm yet apply it to their unique circumstance. Recall that liturgical prayer is personal, and personal prayer is liturgical. "It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given...but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself." The Psalms reveal your inner self, as well as teach you how to repent, or what words to say for perfect repentance and how to stay away from sin; "we are shown exactly with what words to voice our hope in God." In the rest of the Bible you are told what to do, but in the Psalms you are shown and told *how* to do it.

"He sketched the likeness of this perfect life for us in words, in this same book of Psalms; in order that, just as He revealed Himself in flesh to be the perfect,

heavenly Man, so in the Psalms also men of good-will might see the pattern life portrayed, and find therein the healing and correction of their own.”

For every and any condition, situation, or life’s occasion, the Psalms act like prescriptions, each one uniquely fit for the background at hand. St. Athanasius thus prescribes: “Suppose, then, for example, that you want to declare anyone to be blessed; you find the way to do it in Psalm 1, and likewise in 32, 41, 112, 119, and 128. If you want to rebuke the conspiracy of the Jews against the Saviour, you have Psalm 2. If you are persecuted by your own family and opposed by many, say Psalm 3; and when you would give thanks to God at your affliction's end, sing 4 and 75 and 116. When you see the wicked wanting to ensnare you and you wish your prayer to reach God's ears, then wake up early and sing 5; and if you feel yourself beneath the cloud of His displeasure, you can say 6 and 38. If any plot against you, as did Ahithophel against David, and someone tells you of it, sing Psalm 7, and put your trust in God Who will deliver you.”

On the Psalms Hymnology

In the world of hymnology, St. Athanasius elucidates the profound significance of the Psalms and their melodic recitation. He emphasizes that the purpose of melodies in the Psalms is not solely to create pleasant sounds but rather to serve as a tangible manifestation of the soul's harmony and spiritual tranquility. “Therefore the Psalms are not recited with melodies because of a desire for pleasant sounds. Rather, this is a sure sign of the harmony of the soul’s reflections.” Deacons, likewise, must approach hymnology with a similar mindset. Just as the Psalm were considered songs at the time, the hymnology praised by deacons, should not be a mere collection of beautiful sounds, but rather the elevation of the soul.

According to St. Athanasius, the harmonious reading of the Psalms symbolizes the undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts. He likens the ideas of the soul and their communication through words to the Lord's desire for the melody of the Psalms to represent the spiritual harmony within a soul. He underscores the importance of chanting the odes tunefully and reciting the Psalms with song as a symbolic act of aligning oneself with the divine.

St. Athanasius also highlights that those who do not recite the divine songs in this manner are not singing them wisely. While they may find personal enjoyment in their singing, they incur blame because a hymn of praise is not suitable on the lips of a sinner. However, when individuals chant in the way he describes, the melody of the phrases flows from the soul's good order and concord with the

Spirit. Such individuals not only benefit themselves but also greatly benefit those willing to hear them, as their singing resonates with the depth and beauty of their spiritual harmony.

“The harmonious reading of the Psalms is a figure and type of such undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts. For just as we discover the ideas of the soul and communicate them through the words we put forth, so also the Lord, wishing the melody of the words to be a symbol of the spiritual harmony in a soul, has ordered that the odes be chanted tunefully, and the Psalms recited with song...Those who do not recite the divine songs in this manner do not sing them wisely. They bring delight to themselves, but they incur blame, because a hymn of praise is not suitable on the lips of a sinner. But when they chant in the way mentioned earlier, so that the melody of the phrases is brought forth from the soul’s good order and from the concord with the Spirit, such people sing with the tongue, but singing also with the mind they greatly benefit not only themselves but even those willing to hear them.”

St. Athanasius further emphasizes the importance of preserving the original words of the Psalms and avoiding the temptation to alter or embellish them with profane phrases. He encourages the faithful to recite and chant the Psalms as they were written, recognizing that the holy men who provided these words will join in their prayers and that the Spirit who spoke through the saints will render assistance. He asserts that the words of the saints are superior to those we construct, carrying greater power and effectiveness due to the exalted nature of their lives and their profound spiritual connection.

“Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice, the things written just as they were spoken, in order for the holy men who supplied these, recognizing that which is their own, to join you in your prayer, or, rather, so that even the Spirit who speaks in the saints, seeing words inspired by him in them, might render assistance to us. For as much better as the life of the saints is than that of other people, by so much also are their expressions superior to those we construct and, if one were to speak the truth, more powerful as well.”

Through this discourse, St. Athanasius invites us to engage with the Psalms not merely as aesthetic compositions but as spiritual practices that reflect and cultivate the harmony of our souls. By embracing the Psalms' melodic recitation, we align ourselves with the wisdom and grace of the saints and open ourselves to the transformative power of the divine Spirit, enriching our worship and deepening our spiritual lives.

Letter to Marcellinus Summarized

Psalms hold a unique and profound significance as they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. This divine inspiration guides us in our prayers, offering a glimpse into how we ought to pray to God. Additionally, the Psalms embrace inclusivity, encompassing various aspects of Scripture within their verses. No other section of Scripture possesses this distinctive feature.

Many Psalms carry prophetic undertones, known as Messianic Psalms. For instance, Psalm 22, with its poignant words, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me,” foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Psalm 110, similarly, speaks of the enthronement of the Lord at the right hand of the Father: “The Lord said to My Lord, sit at My right hand...”

Furthermore, the Psalms serve as a mirror, reflecting the emotions and movements of the soul. They educate us on how we ought to feel while engaged in prayer. Conversely, they guide us on what prayers to offer when certain emotions arise, even if they involve expressions of complaint or frustration. In the Psalms, we witness David expressing his discontent, questioning God, “How long, O Lord, do You forget me, forever?” Despite his emotions, the Holy Spirit directs David's heart towards God, guiding him through his feelings.

The Psalms are deeply personal, though they may have been written by individuals such as David or Asaph. However, when we stand before the Lord, these prayers transcend their original authors and become our own personal expressions to God. The Psalms offer a profound connection, allowing us to communicate our innermost thoughts and emotions directly to the divine.

The Psalms in the Orthodox Church

Psalms lie at the core of our liturgical worship today. Their presence can be felt throughout the Agpeya, in the Psalmody that fills our churches, and in the very fabric of our liturgy and services. From the solemn observances of Good Friday to the monks adorned in the Eskim, Psalms accompany us on every sacred journey. They are recited before the departure of the Pope or Bishop, and their words are woven into the Orban, a special prayer that invokes God's blessings.

The beauty of Psalms extends beyond their liturgical significance. They are also a source of personal worship, a way for individuals to connect with the divine. By studying and memorizing Psalms, we open ourselves up to their transformative power. They become a constant companion,

guiding us through our daily lives and offering comfort in times of need. The words of Pope Shenouda III ring true: "Preserve the Psalms, and the Psalms will preserve you." By incorporating Psalms into our prayers and meditations, we create a sacred space within ourselves, a sanctuary where we can encounter the divine and find solace.

Liturgical worship and personal worship are not separate entities but intimately intertwined. In the act of singing Psalms together, we unite our voices in a symphony of praise and adoration. At the same time, each individual heart is touched by the words and melodies, creating a deeply personal experience of communion with God.

Whether we stand in a crowded church or sit in the quiet of our own homes, Psalms have the power to transcend time and space, connecting us with generations past and present. They are a bridge between heaven and earth, a reminder that we are part of a larger story, a story of faith, hope, and love that spans the ages.

So let us embrace the Psalms, committing them to memory and allowing their words to shape our hearts and minds. For in the Psalms, we find not only a rich tradition of worship but also a profound source of personal transformation and spiritual growth.



Review Questions

1. Where are some places where Psalms are used/found? (A: Agpeya, Psalmody, liturgy, services, Good Friday, monks wearing the Eskim, departure of Pope/Bishop, making Orban, etc.)
2. True or false? Psalms are used in Jewish worship. (A: True)
3. What did St. Athanasius say regarding Psalms? (A: "Therefore the Psalms are not recited with melodies because of a desire for pleasant sounds. Rather, this is a sure sign of the harmony of the soul's reflections.")
4. Who was Marcellinus? (A: He was perhaps a deacon or a monk.)
5. True or false? Jewish people recite a daily Psalm. (A: True)

3.1 Letters

Letter To Diognetus

PATRISTICS

Significance of the Letter

The author of this letter to Diognetus, a disciple to the Apostles, remains unknown. The letter, written in an epistle format, was addressed to a man named Diognetus, who some scholars believe may have been a pseudonym or a nickname. It is believed to have been composed in Asia Minor around 129 AD, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian.

The letter is significant for several reasons. It is the earliest surviving piece of Christian literature that was not written to a fellow Christian, but rather to a pagan. This suggests that the early Church was already reaching out to non-believers and engaging in dialogue with them. Moreover, the letter is considered an epistle of the Apostolic Fathers, a collection of writings attributed to the early leaders of the Church who may have had direct influence from Christ's disciples and apostles. This gives the letter a unique authority and historical significance.

The author's purpose in writing the letter was to provide a defense and explanation of the Christian faith to Diognetus. He begins by refuting common pagan misconceptions about Christians, such as the accusations that they were atheists or cannibals. The author then goes on to expound on the nature of God, the uniqueness of Christ, and the ethical teachings of Christianity. He argues that Christians are not opposed to society but rather offer a positive alternative to the moral decay and spiritual emptiness of the pagan world.

The letter to Diognetus is a powerful and eloquent defense of the Christian faith. It provides valuable insights into the early Church's understanding of its beliefs and practices. It also reveals the Church's willingness to engage in dialogue and apologetics with non-believers, a practice that continues to be important in contemporary times.

The Unknown Author

The author of the letter, though anonymous, seems profoundly cultured and educated, as evidenced by the flawless Greek rhetoric employed throughout the text. This author skillfully taps into the prevailing cynicism among the ruling class of the time, who had begun to question the divinity of the Greek and Roman gods. The ruling class, once revered as gods by the masses and worshiped with incense offerings, harbored a secret awareness of their own mortality, leading many to embrace agnosticism.

Amidst this atmosphere of skepticism, Christianity emerged as a novel and polarizing force. Recognizing the curiosity surrounding this new faith, the author strategically capitalizes on this sentiment. Through eloquent prose and persuasive arguments, the author endeavors to sway the hearts and minds of the ruling class, urging them to embrace Christianity as a beacon of hope and spiritual fulfillment. He skillfully attempts to bridge the gap between skepticism and faith, inviting the ruling class to embark on a journey of spiritual exploration and transformation.

Preaching to Non-Christians

One of the things this letter teaches is valuable insights into how to effectively preach the gospel to non-Christians. The writer's approach is to start by identifying the questions and concerns commonly raised by his audience. These questions reflect the pagan beliefs and perspectives prevalent at that time. Among the questions posed by the pagans are "Who is this God that you worship?", "What is the source of love that you all have for each other?", and "Why did it take so long for this new way of living to appear on earth?"

Addressing these questions, the writer refrains from using references that would be unfamiliar or incomprehensible to the pagan reader, like Jewish scripture or apostolic writings. Instead, the writer appeals to common sense and reason, seeking to establish a connection with the pagan mindset. The writer recognizes that the concept of Christianity is entirely new and unfamiliar to the pagans. Therefore, the writer repeatedly emphasizes a central theme: Christianity brings something brand new into the world. This message is conveyed to the pagans using arguments and illustrations that align with their understanding and experiences.

The writer's approach challenges the pagan worldview and offers a compelling alternative. By engaging with the questions and concerns of the pagans, the writer seeks to open their minds to the possibility of a new way of living and understanding the world. In this way, the letter provides a valuable model for gospel preaching in any era. It demonstrates the importance of adapting the

message to the specific audience, addressing their doubts and objections, and presenting Christianity as a transformative force that offers a fresh perspective on life and the divine.

Radical Newness

The author's words emphasize the importance of clearing one's mind of preconceptions and outdated perspectives in order to receive a truly new message: "Now, then, clear out all the thoughts that take up your attention, and pack away all the old ways of looking at things that keep deceiving you. You must be like a new man from the beginning, since, as you yourself admit, you are going to listen to a really new message." The metaphor of "packing away" old ways of thinking highlights the intentional act of letting go of limiting beliefs and biases. The emphasis on "listening to a really new message" invites the reader to embrace a transformative understanding. By encouraging the reader to "clear out all the thoughts that take up your attention," the writer emphasizes the importance of mental clarity and focus. This process of decluttering one's mind allows for the emergence of new ideas, perspectives, and insights.

In the text, the author emphasizes that Christianity stands apart from other sects and religions of its time by appealing to human nature rather than human ethnicity. Unlike ethnic religions such as Osiris in Egypt or Mithras in Persia, which retained local characteristics despite their potential for spread, Christianity surpassed cultural and geographic boundaries.

The author explains that Christians were not distinguished by their country, language, or customs. They did not reside in exclusive cities, use a unique dialect, or lead peculiar lifestyles. Their behaviors were not the product of human speculation or deliberation, nor did they advocate solely for human doctrines. Instead, Christians resided in both Greek and barbarian cities, adapting to local customs while simultaneously displaying their distinct way of life. They inhabited their homelands like sojourners, participating fully in civic life while remaining conscious of their foreign status. Every foreign land became their homeland, and every homeland became a foreign land.

"For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing,

food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.”

Several aspects of Christian living that exemplify their unique approach are highlighted by the author. Like others, Christians married and had children, but they refrained from infanticide, a practice in these ancient societies. They shared meals together, fostering a sense of community and equality, but they maintained separate sleeping arrangements, emphasizing the importance of an undefiled bed.

Christians, like the Soul within the Body

The author draws upon widely recognized concepts of Plato's works, particularly the distinction between body and soul, to elucidate the unique role of Christians within society. This comparison serves as a powerful analogy to illustrate their significance.

At the outset, the author equates Christians to the soul within the body. Just as the soul permeates and animates every part of the body, Christians are dispersed throughout all cities of the world, exerting a profound influence. However, while the soul inhabits the body, it remains distinct and transcendent. Likewise, Christians dwell in the world but are not defined or limited by its materialistic pursuits. The author further emphasizes the invisible nature of the soul, guarded by the visible body. In a similar vein, Christians may be physically present in the world, but their true godliness and spirituality remain invisible to the casual observer. This distinction highlights the contrast between the external, worldly existence and the inner, spiritual reality of Christians.

“To sum up all in one word — what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.”

The author also delves into the relationship between the soul and the flesh, drawing parallels to the interaction between Christians and the world. Just as the soul encounters resistance and hostility from the flesh, which seeks to indulge in worldly pleasures, Christians face opposition and

persecution from those who reject their values and beliefs. Despite these challenges, the soul demonstrates its capacity for love and compassion, cherishing the very body that opposes it. Similarly, Christians extend love and forgiveness to those who persecute them, embodying the teachings of their faith.

The author goes on to describe the soul's confinement within the body, yet its ability to uphold and sustain that body. This parallels the experience of Christians, who, while confined to the limitations of the physical world, serve as a unifying force, holding society together. Additionally, the soul's temporary dwelling in a mortal tabernacle mirrors the Christian's earthly existence, viewed as a transient sojourn in corruptible bodies. Their hope lies in an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens, representing their ultimate destination and eternal reward.

The flesh hates the soul, and wars against it, 1 Peter 2:11 though itself suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates the Christians, though in nowise injured, because they abjure pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and [loves also] the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet keeps together that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they keep together the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians dwell as sojourners in corruptible [bodies], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens. The soul, when but ill-provided with food and drink, becomes better; in like manner, the Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful for them to forsake.

The author then concludes by highlighting the remarkable resilience of Christians. Despite facing persecution and adversity, they thrive and grow in numbers, much like the soul that flourishes when deprived of excessive nourishment. This resilience stems from their divinely assigned position, which they are duty-bound to uphold.

Our God Actually Loves Us

In the ancient world of the 2nd century, the religious beliefs and practices of the Greeks, Romans, and Christians stood in stark contrast to one another. At the heart of this contrast lay the fundamental differences between the gods of the pagans and the God of the Christians.

The pagan gods of the Greeks and Romans were often depicted as flawed and capricious beings, more akin to powerful humans with superhuman abilities than to divine entities. They were known for their selfish desires, engaging in infidelity, manipulating mortals, and displaying volatile

and treacherous behavior. For the pagans, interacting with their gods required careful manipulation through bribery and gifts in order to curry favor and avoid divine wrath.

In stark contrast to the pagan gods stood the God of the Christians, a benevolent and compassionate deity who genuinely cared for and loved humanity. This concept of a God who was not only powerful but also deeply invested in the well-being of His creation was revolutionary for the pagans of the 2nd century. The Christian God was not a distant, aloof figure, but rather a philanthropist, a true friend of the human race.

This profound difference in the nature of God had a profound impact on the lives of those who embraced Christianity. For the first time, people had the assurance of a God who was not merely a force to be appeased, but rather a loving Father who cared deeply for their spiritual and physical well-being. This endearing concept of a God who was passionate about His creation brought comfort, hope, and purpose to countless individuals, transforming their lives and shaping the course of history.

The Love of the Incarnation

The love of God for humanity is made manifest in His incarnation. St. Gregory the Theologian, in the Gregorian Liturgy, eloquently expresses this truth, stating that “neither an angel nor an archangel, neither a patriarch nor a prophet have you entrusted with our salvation, but You without change, were incarnate and became man.”

Centuries before the convening of ecumenical councils and even before St. Gregory's time, the author of this letter, echoed a similar sentiment. He proclaimed that God did not send a subordinate being, such as an angel or a principality, to oversee our salvation. Rather, He sent the Designer and Maker of the universe Himself—the one who created all things.

“By sending to men some subordinate – an angel, or principality, or one of those who administer earthly affairs, or perhaps one of those to whom the government of things in heaven is entrusted. Rather, he sent the Designer and Maker of the universe himself...Now, did he send him, as a human mind might assume, to rule by tyranny, fear, and terror? Far from it! He sent him out of kindness and gentleness, like a king sending his son who is himself a king. He sent him as God; he sent him as man to men.”

This act of sending His Son to humanity was not motivated by a desire for tyranny, fear, or terror. Instead, it was an act of kindness and gentleness, akin to a king sending his son, who is also a

king, to rule over his people. God sent His Son as God and as man to humankind, demonstrating His profound love and care for us.

The Love of Free Will

In His infinite wisdom and compassion, God bestowed upon humanity the precious gift of free will. This profound expression of His love recognizes the inherent dignity and autonomy of each individual. Through free will, we possess the ability to make choices, shape our lives, and cultivate our relationship with God.

The author emphasizes God's deep respect for human freedom. He highlights that God does not employ force or compulsion to impose His will upon us. Instead, He chooses to engage with us through persuasion, inviting us to embrace His love and guidance. "He willed to save man by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God's way of working." This approach aligns with God's unwavering commitment to preserving our freedom and allowing us to grow in faith and understanding.

The idea that God respects human freedom was a prevalent theme in Christian discourse during the 2nd century. Numerous documents from that era reiterate this notion. By valuing our ability to choose, God empowers us to develop a genuine and meaningful relationship with Him, rooted in love and mutual respect.

Christian Love

Christian love, as defined by the ability of Christians to love, transcends mere ideas and is empowered by the supernatural power of God. This divine love enables martyrs to make the ultimate sacrifice, demonstrating the profound impact of this extraordinary force. As the author of the Epistle to Diognetus observed, "Do you not see how they are thrown to wild animals to make them deny the Lord, and how they are not vanquished? Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the more do others increase? These things do not seem to come from a human power; they are a mighty act of God, they are proofs of his presence."

Unlike the deities of Greek and Roman mythology, who utilized their extraordinary powers for their own personal gain, the Christian God employs His divinity to transform individuals into morally upright and virtuous beings. This divine intervention elevates humanity beyond its natural limitations, allowing Christians to embody the ideals of compassion, forgiveness, and unconditional love.

The transformative power of Christian love extends beyond individual acts of kindness. It has the potential to reshape entire societies, fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and cooperation. When individuals are empowered by this divine love, they become agents of positive change, working tirelessly to create a more just and equitable world.

The profound impact of Christian love is evident throughout history. From the early Christian communities that provided solace and support to the marginalized and oppressed to the countless individuals who have dedicated their lives to serving others. In essence, Christian love is not merely a human emotion but a divine gift that enables individuals to transcend their limitations and become beacons of hope and compassion in a world often characterized by division and conflict.

The Love and Mercy of Divine Delay

The question of why it took so long for God to send Christ has puzzled believers for centuries. Some have argued that God was indifferent to our suffering, while others have suggested that He was simply waiting for the right moment. However, the author of this passage offers a different perspective. He argues that God was actually showing us patience and forbearance during that time.

According to the author, God knew that we could not enter the Kingdom of God on our own. We are too sinful and corrupt. So He chose to wait until we had reached a point of desperation. He allowed evil to increase in the world so that we would see the futility of our own efforts to save ourselves. During this time, God was also teaching us through experience. He was showing us that we need Him. We need His forgiveness, His grace, and His love. And we need His help to overcome our sinfulness.

“In His mercy, He took up the burden of our sins. He himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us – the holy one for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins except his righteousness.”

Finally, when the time was right, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Jesus came to die on the cross for our sins. He took our place and paid the penalty that we deserved. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus made it possible for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God. Nothing else could cover our sins except for the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He was the only one who was holy enough, innocent enough, and righteous enough to pay the price for our sins.

In His mercy, God took up the burden of our sins and sent His Son to die in our place. This is the greatest act of love that has ever been known. And it is a love that is available to each and every one of us.

Invitation Not Just Appeal

The author of the letter goes beyond merely seeking toleration for Christians to exist peacefully. Instead, he extends an invitation to his pagan audience, urging them to embark on a journey of discovering and accepting the profound love of the Father. The letter encourages readers to contemplate the immense joy and love they will experience upon recognizing that God loved them first. “Think with what joy you will be filled! Think how you will love him, who first loved you so!” Through this personal connection with God, the author presents a transformative hope: the opportunity for readers to become imitators of God's divine nature.

By knowing God, the author suggests that readers can transcend their human limitations and embody the qualities of love and compassion that define God's character. This process of imitation is not merely about adhering to a set of rules or commandments but rather about aligning one's heart, mind, and actions with God's loving nature. The author invites readers to surrender their lives to this process, recognizing that it is through this intimate connection with God that they can truly flourish and experience the fullness of life.

Ultimately, the author's invitation is a call to embrace a life defined by love and purpose. By accepting God's love and choosing to imitate his divine nature, readers can become agents of transformation in their communities, spreading love, kindness, and compassion wherever they go; and thus receiving a taste of heaven. This transformative process has the potential to create a ripple effect, inspiring others to seek a deeper connection with God and to live lives that reflect his love and grace.

“On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbour; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God. Then you shall see, while still on earth, that God in the heavens rules over [the universe]; then you shall begin to speak the mysteries of God; then shall you both love and admire those that suffer punishment because they will not deny God; then shall you condemn the deceit and error of the world when you shall know what it is to live truly in heaven, when you shall despise that which is here esteemed to be death, when you shall fear what is truly death, which is

reserved for those who shall be condemned to the eternal fire, which shall afflict those even to the end that are committed to it.”



Review Questions

1. Who wrote this letter? (A: The author is unknown.)
2. What does the letter discuss? (A: It is a defense/explanation (apology) of the faith.)
3. What is free will defined as? (A: It is how God cares enough to respect human freedom since God doesn't force Himself on us.)
4. In the letter, how does the author define Christian love? (A: It is described by the ability for Christians to love by explaining that we're driven by the supernatural power of God.)
5. What took God so long to send us Christ? (A: God was actually showing us patience and forbearance. Teaching us through experience that we can not enter the Kingdom of God on our own but that we really need Him.)



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal grey lines.



Powerpoint Presentation

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The Cappadocian Fathers

- PATR04 - The Cappadocian Fathers - Intro and Saint Basil.pptx
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Letters

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- Pre-Servants Curriculum - Patristics
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