

PELAGIUS TO DEMETRIAS (A.D. 413)

Selections

HISTORICAL CONTEXT¹

At the age of 14, one Demetrias decided to vow herself to virginity, giving up her noble life and advantageous marriage for the sake of a life centred entirely on Christ. Her mother wrote to Jerome and to Pelagius, asking them to send her words of guidance for her new life and both complied. She presumably also asked Augustine, who apparently did not, but he did write, warning Juliana about the dangers of Pelagian views, a warning she received rather coldly.² The suspect views, which Pope Leo I would later attack in his own letter to Demetrias, deal with natural good rather than original sin, and with man's ability to choose between good and evil not necessarily relying on divine aid for the act itself. The general theological context, however, is the question of the relationship between the life of God and the life of the Christian—in what sense does Christian life depend on God's own activity?

TEXT OF THE LETTER³

Pelagius wishes to encourage Demetrias in the path that she has chosen.⁴

1, 1. . . . It is to Demetrias that I have to write, that virgin of Christ who is both noble and rich and, which is more important, spurns both nobility and riches; assuredly it is as difficult for me to instruct her as it is easy for all to praise her out of admiration for her outstanding virtue. . . . [For she,] though born in the highest station, brought up in the height of wealth and luxury, [and] held fast by the strength and variety of this life's delights as if in the grip of the most tenacious of fetters, suddenly broke free and exchanged all her bodily goods simultaneously for goodness of the soul. [I write] of one who cut off with the sword of faith, that is, her own free will, the very flower of a life still only just beginning and, by crucifying her flesh with Christ, dedicated it as a living and holy sacrifice to God and for love of virginity renounced the prospect of providing posterity for a very noble stock. . . .

2. . . . [A]lready noble in this world, she desires to be even nobler before God and seeks in her moral conduct values as precious as the objects which she spurned in this world. . . .

She must know her abilities, lest she despair of her task

2, 1. Whenever I have to speak on the subject of moral instruction and the conduct of a holy life, it is my practice first to demonstrate the power and quality of human nature and to show what it is capable of achieving, and then to go on to encourage the mind of my listener to consider the idea of different kinds of virtues, in case it may be of little or no profit to him to be summoned to pursue ends which he has perhaps assumed hitherto to be beyond his reach; for we can never enter upon the path of virtue unless we have hope as our guide and companion and if every effort expended in seeking something is nullified in effect by despair of ever finding it. . . . [I write] in order that the mind may not become more negligent and sluggish in its pursuit of virtue as it comes to believe less

¹ This note by Jordan Wales, Ph.D., Department of Philosophy and Religion, Hillsdale College.

² See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), 355–56.

³ Source: Latin: PL30.cc.15-45; English: B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991) [adapted].

⁴ **Note:** This and *all* summaries and titles are by the editor of this document.

in its ability to achieve it, supposing itself not to possess something simply because it is unaware that it is present within. . . . Let us then lay this down as the first basis for a holy and spiritual life: the virgin must recognize her own strengths, which she will be able to employ to the full only when she has learned that she possesses them. The best incentive for the mind consists in teaching it that it is possible to do anything which one really wants to do

These abilities come from God, who gave us freedom to do good or evil

2. First, then, you ought to measure the good of human nature by reference to its creator, I mean God, of course: if it is he who, as report goes, has made all the works of and within the world good, exceeding good, how much more excellent do you suppose that he has made man himself, on whose account he has clearly made everything else? And before actually making man, he determines to fashion him in his own image and likeness and shows what kind of creature he intends to make him. Next, since he has made all animals subject to man and set him as lord over creatures which have been made more powerful than men either by their bodily size and greater strength or by the weapons which they have in their teeth, he makes it abundantly clear how much more gloriously man himself has been fashioned and wants him to appreciate the dignity of his own nature by marvelling that strong animals have been made subject to him. For he did not leave man naked and defenseless nor did he expose him in his weakness to a variety of dangers; but, having made him seem unarmed outwardly, he provided him with a better armament inside, that is, with reason and wisdom, so that by means of his intelligence and mental vigour, in which he surpassed the other animals, man alone was able to recognize the maker of all things and to serve God by using those same faculties which enabled him to hold sway over the rest. Moreover, the Lord of Justice wished man to be free to act and not under compulsion; it was for this reason that ‘he left him free to make his own decisions’ (Sir.15.14)²² and set before him life and death, good and evil, and he shall be given whatever pleases him (ibid. 17). Hence we read in the Book Deuteronomy also: I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you may live (Dt.30.19). . . .

3, 2. [But man] could not claim to possess the good of his own volition, unless he were the kind of creature that could also have possessed evil. Our most excellent creator wished us to be able to do either but actually to do only one, that is, good, which he also commanded, giving us the capacity to do evil only so that we might do his will by exercising our own. That being so, this very capacity to do evil is also good - good, I say, because it makes the good part better by making it voluntary and independent, not bound by necessity but free to decide for itself. . . .

**The law written on our hearts is simply the conscience, implanted by God
that we might know good from evil**

4, 2. There is, I maintain, a sort of natural sanctity in our minds which, presiding as it were in the mind’s citadel,⁵ administers judgement equally on the evil and the good and, just as it favours honourable and upright actions, so too condemns wrong deeds and, on the evidence of conscience, distinguishes the one side from the other by a kind of inner law; nor, in fine, does it seek to deceive by any display of cleverness or of counterfeit brilliance in argument but either denounces or defends us by our thoughts themselves, surely the most reliable and incorruptible of witnesses. This is the

⁵ The “citadel of the mind” (*arx mentis*) is a Stoic phrase harkening to the writings of Marcus Aurelius and enjoying currency in some Christian writings. However, Pelagius is far more thoroughly Stoic than other writers of the Patristic period.

law which the apostle recalls when he writes to the Romans, testifying that it is implanted in all men and written as it were on the tablets of the heart: For when gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears them witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them (Rom.2.15,16). It is this law that all have used whom scripture records as having lived in sanctity and having pleased God between the time of Adam and that of Moses: some of these must be set before you as examples, so that you may not find it difficult to understand how great is the good of nature, when once you have satisfied yourself that it has replaced the law in the task of teaching righteousness.

5,1. . . . Noah is said to have been ‘a righteous man, blameless in his generation’ (Gen.6.9), and his holiness is all the more to be admired in that he alone was found to be righteous, when literally the whole world was declining from righteousness, nor did he seek a model of holiness from another but supplied it himself. . . .

God adopted Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as his own on account of their exemplary conduct

5, 3. What shall I say of Abraham, friend of God, what of Isaac and Jacob? How completely they fulfilled the will of the Lord we are able to determine even from this, that he wanted himself to be named their God as an intimate and special mark of distinction; I am, he said, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Mt.22.32); this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations (Ex.3.15). . . .

It is not human nature’s fault that many are unrighteous; for human nature has free will

7. After the many things which we have said about nature we have also shown its good by the examples of holy men and have proved it. And lest, on the other hand, it should be thought to be nature’s fault that some have been unrighteous, I shall use the evidence of the scriptures, which everywhere lay upon sinners the heavy weight of the charge of having used their own will and do not excuse them for having acted only under constraint of nature. . . . [Thus Jeremiah says]: And you sinned against the Lord and did not obey his voice and refused to walk in his commands and in his laws and in his testimonies (Jer.44.23). . . . The Lord also says in the gospel: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not (Mt.23.37)! When we see ‘willing’ and ‘not willing’, ‘choosing’ and ‘rejecting’, it is not the force of nature but the freedom of the will that is then understood to be at work. The books of both Testaments are full of evidence of this kind, wherein all good, as well as all evil, is described as voluntary

8.1. Yet we do not defend the good of nature to such an extent that we claim that it cannot do evil, since we undoubtedly declare also that it is capable of good and evil; we merely try to protect it from an unjust charge, so that we may not seem to be forced to do evil through a fault in our nature, when, in fact, we do neither good nor evil without the exercise of our will and always have the freedom to do one of the two, being always able to do either. . . . Neither would [Adam] have deserved to be punished nor [Enoch] to be chosen by a just God, unless both had been able to choose either course of action. . . . [For] it is will that is the sole cause of an action.

**Nor need one have the Law (for there is the conscience).
Those who find the good life difficult find it so because of ingrained habit,
absorbed from their culture and reinforced by their personal acts**

8, 2. Noah in his righteousness rejected the world when it was destroyed by flood because of its sins, Lot in his holiness passed judgement on the crimes of the Sodomites; and the fact that those first men were without the rebukes of the law for the space of so many years gives us no small grounds for acknowledging the good of nature, not, assuredly, because God at any time did not care for his creatures but because he knew that he had made human nature such that it would suffice them in place of the law for the practice of righteousness. In a word, as long as a nature which was still comparatively fresh was in vigorous use and long habituation to sinning did not draw a dark veil, as it were, over human reason, nature was set free and left without law; but when it had now become buried beneath an excess of vices and as if tainted with the rust of ignorance, the Lord applied the file of the law to it, and so, thoroughly polished by its frequent admonishments, it was enabled to recover its former brilliance.

8, 3. Nor is there any reason why it is made difficult for us to do good other than that long habit of doing wrong which has infected us from childhood and corrupted us little by little over many years and ever after holds us in bondage and slavery to itself, so that it seems somehow to have acquired the force of nature. We now find ourselves being resisted and opposed by all that long period in which we were carelessly instructed, that is, educated in evil, in which we even strove to be evil, since, to add to the other incentives to evil, innocence itself was held to be folly. That old habit now attacks our new-found freedom of will, and, as we languish in ignorance through our sloth and idleness, unaccustomed to doing good after having for so long learned to do only evil, we wonder why sanctity is also conferred on us as if from an outside source. . . .

**The grace given by Christ is simply this:
A clear instruction, a counter-example against our cultural and personal habits**

8, 3. . . . Even before the law was given to us, as we have said, and long before the arrival of our Lord and Saviour some are reported to have lived holy and righteous lives; how much more possible must we believe that to be after the light of his coming, now that we have been instructed by the grace of Christ and reborn as better men: purified and cleansed by his blood, encouraged by his example to pursue perfect righteousness, we ought surely to be better than those who lived before the time of the law, better even than those who lived under the law, since the apostle says: For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom.6.14).

**We receive this grace of instruction by reading the Scriptures,
which teach us concerning the will of God**

9, 1. Since we have said enough on these matters in my opinion, let us now begin our instruction of a perfect virgin who by the purity of her moral life bears witness at one and the same time to the good of nature and the good of grace, since she has always drawn her inspiration from both of these sources. A virgin's first concern and first desire ought therefore to be to get to know the will of her Lord and to seek out diligently what pleases and what displeases him; in this way she may render to God, in the words of the apostle, her 'spiritual obedience' (Rom.12.1 J, and may be enabled to direct the entire course of her life in accordance with his purpose. For it is impossible for anyone to please someone, if he does not know what it is that pleases him, and he could well give offence even by his

vow of obedience, if he has not learned in advance how to obey. . . . [F]or this reason that the prophet says: And you, Israel, be not ignorant (cf. Lev.4.; Num.15); and the blessed Paul: And if any one does not recognize this, he shall not be recognized (1 Cor.14.38), and likewise elsewhere: Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph.5.17). The beginning of obedience is wishing to know what is enjoined, and to have learned what you are to do is a part of your act of obedience.

2. So you must realize that in the divine scriptures, which alone enable you to understand the complete will of God, certain things are forbidden, some are allowed, some are advised: *evil* things are forbidden, *good* things are enjoined; *intermediate* things are allowed, *perfect* things are advised For righteousness is enjoined on everyone without exception, as the Saviour says, briefly but most comprehensively, in the gospel: Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them also (Mt.7.12). . . .

**To protest that you are somehow too weak to obey God's commands
is to imply that God is an incompetent Creator (i.e. he made you impotent)
or an unrealistic Legislator (i.e. he commands the impossible)
or an unjust Judge (i.e. he holds you responsible for errors that are not your fault)**

16, 2. It is God himself, however, that eternal, ineffable majesty and incalculable power, who sends us his holy scriptures and the writ of his own commandments truly worthy of our worship, and yet we fail to receive them at once with joy and reverence nor do we consider the command of so mighty, so illustrious an authority as a great kindness, especially when it is not the advantage of the one giving the order which is being sought but the interest of the one who obeys it; on the contrary, with a proud and casual attitude of mind, in the manner of good-for-nothing and haughty servants, we cry out against the face of God and say, 'It is hard, it is difficult, we cannot do it, we are but men, we are encompassed by frail flesh.' What blind madness! what unholy foolhardiness! We accuse God of a twofold lack of knowledge, so that he appears not to know what he has done, and not to know what he has commanded; as if, forgetful of the human frailty of which he is himself the author, he has imposed on man commands which he cannot bear. And, at the same time, oh horror!, we ascribe iniquity to the righteous and cruelty to the holy, while complaining, first, that he has commanded something impossible, secondly, that man is to be damned by him for doing things which he was unable to avoid, so that God—and this is something which even to suspect is sacrilege—seems to have sought not so much our salvation as our punishment!

And so the apostle [Paul], knowing that nothing impossible has been commanded by the God of justice and majesty, deprives us of this fault of ours of 'grumbling and questioning', which is wont to be found especially when commands are unjust or the standing of the one who gives them does not entitle him to do so. Why do we indulge in pointless evasions, advancing the frailty of our nature as an objection to the one who commands us? No one knows better the true measure of our strength than he who has given it to us nor does anyone understand better how much we are able to do than he who has given us this very capacity of ours to be able; nor has he who is just wished to command anything impossible or he who is good intended to condemn a man for doing what he could not avoid doing.

Therefore, discerning the Lord's will, await His coming in holiness

10, 2. So, distinguishing between these two by using your reason to the best of your ability, observe what you are offering and what you owe; or rather, now that you owe two debts, both your virginity, which you have voluntarily offered to God, and righteousness, which he himself has enjoined, pay both of these in full. . . . [Do not think that your vow of virginity grants you special privileges. Recall the Lord's words:] Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven, he shall enter the kingdom himself (Mt.7.21). . . .

But the path that you have to tread is far different, you who have trampled underfoot the love of this world and, by always considering the things which are of God, wish to show yourself a virgin of the apostles, you who await the Lord's coming as holy in spirit as you are in body and, continually pouring the oil of holy works into the lamp of your soul, are prepared to meet the bridegroom in the company of the wise virgins. . . .

**To be a son/daughter of God is to be blameless and innocent
by the exercise of your freedom in accord with God's will**

17, 1. The words which follow are: 'That you may be blameless and innocent' - that is, with reference to the fully perfect life. This one word 'blameless', which describes a qualification which God also orders to be investigated when electing a bishop, is quite sufficient; for how circumspect, how holy, is a life which incurs no blame! And who can be holier than the man who holds fast to the virtue of true innocence, never promising one thing in his heart and falsely declaring another with his lips? Again, 'As children of God without blemish': there is no more powerful exhortation than one in which divine scripture calls us to be children of God, for who would not blush and fear to do anything unworthy of so great a Father with the result that the man who is said to be a child of God is himself made a slave of vice? And that is why he adds: 'Without blemish', for it is not becoming that the stain of sin should be found in the children of God, because he himself is the fount of righteousness. 'In the midst of a crooked and perverse nation': that is to say, however vast the multitude of sinners that surrounds you, however countless the examples of vice, you ought still to be so mindful of your heavenly birth that, while living among evil men, you may yet overcome all evil. 'Among whom you shine as lights in this world': again we read in the gospel: Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Mt. 13.43).

Strive, therefore, to be a child of God by overcoming evil habits, in accord with grace (i.e. Christ's teaching). God will reward you with immortality in the next life.

17, 2. Life is compared to a reward, so that those who are to be given the brightness of the sun in the future shine forth here with a like splendour of righteousness and light up the blindness of unbelievers with works of holiness. That is the sense which is to be applied to this passage uttered by the same apostle in the course of a discussion with the Corinthians: There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor.15.41,42). In the kingdom of heaven there are different dwelling-places in accordance with the merits of individuals; for diversity in works makes for diversity of rewards, and a man will shine there in glory as much as he has shone here in holiness.

Now, therefore, direct your mind's attention to complete moral perfection and prepare yourself to lead a heavenly life for a heavenly reward: let a virgin's holiness shine forth for all to see in the

manner of a star and reveal the magnitude of her future reward by the unusual quality of her behaviour. Your progress in good is easier because you are not held back by the habit of evil in the mind nor have we any fear that vices will slow down your progress in virtue and the harmful seeds sown by the devil kill off the growing crops of Christ. For if even those who by long habit of sinning have somehow buried the good of nature are able to be restored by repentance and, by changing their chosen way of life, to wipe out one habit by another and leave the ranks of the worst for those of the best, how much more able are you to overcome evil habits which have never succeeded in overcoming you, since for you it is not so much a matter of driving vices out as of keeping them away! Without doubt there are pursuits which it is easier not to take up at all than to lay down again, once taken up. . . .

19, 1. Consider, I beseech you, that high rank with which you have been made glorious before God and through which you were reborn in baptism to become a daughter of God and, again, by your consecration as a virgin began to be a bride of Christ; let this honour conferred upon you remind you of the need to devote care to your vocation on both these counts. . . . It is for this reason that we are so often given the name ‘children of God’ in divine scripture, as it is said through the prophet: And I will be your Father, and you shall be my children, says the Lord Almighty (2 Sam.7.14), and the apostle says: Be imitators of God as beloved children (Eph.5.1), and the blessed John says: Beloved, we are God’s children now; and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him, let him purify himself as he is pure (1 Jn.3.2,3). He wishes frequently to impress upon us the high worth of the heavenly teaching given to us and to turn our sense of shame into a mark of honour.

Living thus, one is an imitator of God Himself

19, 2. That is why the Lord himself, when calling on us to practise benevolence, says: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you (Lk.6.27), and: Pray for those who persecute and slander you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven (Mt.5.44,45); for it is not the case that God so makes mankind capable of love that the gentleness of mind and kindness which ought to be so evident in the Christian are found in abundance in evil men also. But let the Christian imitate the loving-kindness of God, who makes his sun rise on the good and on the evil, and sends rain on the just and the unjust (ibid.45). So, let us not find you, above all else, harming anyone even by word, so that you may apply yourself instead to helping everyone you can in every possible way and, as the apostle says, repay no one evil for evil but only evil with good. And let no word of disparagement escape the virgin’s lips: we have enough worthless people, people seeking to make a name for themselves by making others out to be worthless; they imagine that they can win themselves a high reputation by disparaging others and, being unable to find favour on their own merits, wish to find it by comparison with those who are still worse than they. . . .

God will reward you with immortality

28. ‘The labour is great,’ you may perhaps say. True; but just think what we have been promised: all work tends to be lightened when the reward for it is considered, and it is hope of obtaining such a reward that consoles us for our labour. . . . Consider then, I beg you, the size of your reward, if something which is so immense can be considered at all. After the soul has departed, after the flesh has died, after the dust and the ashes, you, as a virgin, will be restored to a better state: the body that

has been entrusted to the earth will be lifted up high to heaven, and your mortality exchanged for immortality. Thereafter you will be given the company of angels, will receive the kingdom of heaven and will abide with Christ for ever. What then will you give in repayment to the Lord for all that he has given you in repayment (Ps. 116.12)? What will you consider difficult to do, when you have one who repays you with rewards so great? The answer is in the blessed apostle's words: None of the sufferings of the present time are worth comparing with the future glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom.8.18). What can we either do or suffer in this short life of ours that is worthy to be repaid with immortality?

29. It is for this reason that the same apostle says: For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor.4.17). . . .

29, 1. . . . Since all [earthly] things are thus to be dissolved [at the end], what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the Lord God, because of which the heaven will be kindled and dissolved, and all the elements will melt with fire (2 Pet.3.10—12)? . . .

2. . . . What terror, what darkness, what gloomy shadows will beset us then, when that day [of the Lord's judgment] finds us, so often and so many times forewarned, yet still unprepared! Then, he says, will all the tribes of the earth mourn over themselves, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with much power and glory; then they will say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us, and to the rocks, Open yourselves up for us (Mt.24.30; Lk.23.30).

3. So be it with those who are preoccupied with the manifold cares of this world and give no thought to its end. But as for you, whose meditation day and night is of the coming of Christ, whose pure conscience longs for the presence of God, who can afford to await the end of the world as the time appointed for your reward, you will have cause for rejoicing from heaven, not for fear. Then, mingling with the choruses of the blessed and accompanied by holy virgins, you will fly upwards to meet your bridegroom and will say: I have found him whom my soul has sought (Song 3.4). Nor will you have any more to fear that you will be separated from him at any time, since you will be given once and for all the glory of immortality and the splendour of incorruption, and you will be with Christ always No labour ought to seem too difficult, no time too long to wait, when the prize at stake is nothing less than everlasting glory.