



Philosophy and Christian Conversion

Justin Martyr

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

While I was going about one morning in the walks of the Xystus, a certain man, with others in his company, having met me, and said, "Hail, O philosopher!" And immediately after saying this, he turned round and walked along with me; his friends likewise followed him. And I in turn having addressed him, said, "What is there important?"

And he replied, "I was instructed," says he, "by Corinthus the Socratic in Argos, that I ought not to despise or treat with indifference those who array themselves in this dress, but to show them all kindness, and to associate with them, as perhaps some advantage would spring from the intercourse either to some such man or to myself. It is good, moreover, for both, if either the one or the other be benefited. On this account, therefore, whenever I see any one in such costume, I gladly approach him, and now, for the same reason, have I willingly accosted you; and these accompany me, in the expectation of hearing for themselves something profitable from you."

"But who are you, most excellent man?" So I replied to him in jest.

Then he told me frankly both his name and his family. "Trypho," says he, "I am called; and I am a Hebrew of the circumcision, and having escaped from the war lately carried on there, I am spending my days in Greece, and chiefly at Corinth."

And in what," said I, "would you be profited by philosophy so much as by your own lawgiver and the prophets?"

Why not?" he replied. "Do not the philosophers turn every discourse on God? And do not questions continually arise to them about His unity and providence? Is not this truly the duty of philosophy, to investigate the Deity?" "Assuredly," said I, "so we too have believed. But the most have not taken thought of this, whether there be one or more gods, and whether they have a regard for each one of us or not, as if this knowledge contributed nothing to our happiness; nay, they moreover attempt to persuade us that God takes care of the universe with its genera and species, but not of me and you, and each individually, since otherwise we would surely not need to pray to Him night and day. But it is not difficult to understand the upshot of this; for fearlessness and license in speaking result to such as maintain these opinions, doing and saying whatever they choose, neither dreading punishment nor hoping for any benefit from God. For how could they? They affirm that the same things shall always happen; and, further, that I and you shall again live in like manner, having become neither better men nor worse. But there are some others, who, having supposed the soul to be immortal and immaterial, believe that though they have committed evil they will not suffer punishment (for that which is immaterial is insensible), and that the soul, in consequence of its immortality, needs nothing from God."

And he, smiling gently, said, "Tell us your opinion of these matters, and what idea you entertain respecting God, and what you philosophy is."

CHAPTER 2

JUSTIN DESCRIBES HIS STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

“I will tell you,” said I, “what seems to me; for philosophy is, in fact, the greatest possession, and most honourable before God, to whom it leads us and alone commends us; and these are truly holy men who have bestowed attention on philosophy. What philosophy is, however, and the reason why it has been sent down to men, have escaped the observation of most; for there would be neither Platonists, nor Stoics, nor Peripatetics, nor Theoretics, nor Pythagoreans, this knowledge being one. I wish to tell you why it has become many-headed. It has happened that those who first handled it [i.e., philosophy], and who were therefore esteemed illustrious men, were succeeded by those who made no investigations concerning truth, but only admired the perseverance and self-discipline of the former, as well as the novelty of the doctrines; and each thought that to be true which he learned from his teacher: then, moreover, those latter persons handed down to their successors such things, and others similar to them; and this system was called by the name of him who was styled the father of the doctrine. Being at first desirous of personally conversing with one of these men, I surrendered myself to a certain Stoic; and having spent a considerable time with him, when I had not acquired any further knowledge of God (for he did not know himself, and said such instruction was unnecessary), I left him and betook myself to another, who was called a Peripatetic, and as he fancied, shrewd. And this man, after having entertained me for the first few days, requested me to settle the fee, in order that our intercourse might not be unprofitable. Him, too, for this reason I abandoned, believing him to be no philosopher at all. But when my soul was eagerly desirous to hear the peculiar and choice philosophy, I came to a Pythagorean, very celebrated--a man who thought much of his own wisdom. And then, when I had an interview with him, willing to become his hearer and disciple, he said, ‘What then? Are you acquainted with music, astronomy, and geometry? Do you expect to perceive any of those things which conduce to a happy life, if you have not been first informed on those points which wean the soul from sensible objects, and render it fitted for objects which appertain to the mind, so that it can contemplate that which is honourable in its essence and that which is good in its essence?’ Having commended many of these branches of learning, and telling me that they were necessary, he dismissed me when I confessed to him my ignorance. Accordingly I took it rather impatiently, as was to be expected when I failed in my hope, the more so because I deemed the man had some knowledge; but reflecting again on the space of time during which I would have to linger over those branches of learning, I was not able to endure longer procrastination. In my helpless condition it occurred to me to have a meeting with the Platonists, for their fame was great. I thereupon spent as much of my time as possible with one who had lately settled in our city,--a sagacious man, holding a high position among the Platonists,--and I progressed, and made the greatest improvements daily. And the perception of immaterial things quite overpowered me, and the contemplation of ideas furnished my mind with wings, so that in a little while I supposed that I had become wise; and such was my stupidity, I expected forthwith to look upon God, for this is the end of Plato’s philosophy.

CHAPTER 3

JUSTIN NARRATES THE MANNER OF HIS CONVERSION

“And while I was thus disposed, when I wished at one period to be filled with great quietness, and to shun the path of men, I used to go into a certain field not far from the sea. And when I was near that spot one day, which having reached I purposed to be by myself, a certain old man, by no means contemptible in appearance, exhibiting meek and venerable manners, followed me at a little distance. And when I turned round to him, having halted, I fixed my eyes rather

keenly on him.

“And he said, ‘Do you know me?’

I replied in the negative.

“Why, then,’ said he to me, ‘do you so look at me?’

“I am astonished,’ I said, ‘because you have chanced to be in my company in the same place; for I had not expected to see any man here.’

“And he says to me, ‘I am concerned about some of my household. These are gone away from me; and therefore have I come to make personal search for them, if, perhaps, they shall make their appearance somewhere. But why are you here?’ said he to me.

“I delight,’ said I, ‘in such walks, where my attention is not distracted, for converse with myself is uninterrupted; and such places are most fit for philology.’

“Are you, then, a philologist,’ said he, but no lover of deeds or of truth? and do you not aim at being a practical man so much as being a sophist?’

“What greater work,’ said I, ‘could one accomplish than this, to show the reason which governs all, and having laid hold of it, and being mounted upon it, to look down on the errors of others, and their pursuits? But without philosophy and right reason, prudence would not be present to any man. Wherefore it is necessary for every man to philosophize, and to esteem this the greatest and most honourable work; but other things only of second-rate or third-rate importance, though, indeed, if they be made to depend on philosophy, they are of moderate value, and worthy of acceptance; but deprived of it, and not accompanying it, they are vulgar and coarse to those who pursue them.’

“Does philosophy, then, make happiness?’ said he, interrupting.

“Assuredly,’ I said, ‘and it alone.’

“What, then, is philosophy?’ he says; ‘and what is happiness? Pray tell me, unless something hinders you from saying.’

“Philosophy, then,’ said I, ‘is the knowledge of that which really exists, and a clear perception of the truth; and happiness is the reward of such knowledge and wisdom.’

“But what do you call God?’ said he.

“That which always maintains the same nature, and in the same manner, and is the cause of all other things--that, indeed, is God.’ So I answered him; and he listened to me with pleasure, and thus again interrogated me:--

“Is not knowledge a term common to different matters? For in arts of all kinds, he who knows any one of them is called a skilful man in the art of generalship, or of ruling, or of healing equally. But in divine and human affairs it is not so. Is there a knowledge which affords understanding of human and divine things, and then a thorough acquaintance with the divinity and the righteousness of them?’

“Assuredly,’ I replied.

“What, then? Is it in the same way we know man and’ God, as we know music, and arithmetic, and astronomy, or any other similar branch?’

“By no means,’ I replied.

“You have not answered me correctly, then,’ he said; ‘for some [branches of knowledge] come to us by learning, or by some employment, while of others we have knowledge by sight. Now, if one were to tell you that there exists in India an animal with a nature unlike all others, but of such and such a kind, multiform and various, you would not know it before you saw it; but neither would you be competent to give any account of it, unless you should hear from one who had seen it.’

“Certainly not,’ I said.

“How then,’ he said, ‘should the philosophers judge correctly about God, or speak any truth, when they have no knowledge of Him, having neither seen Him at any time, nor heard Him?’

“But, father,’ said I, ‘the Deity cannot be seen merely by the eyes, as other living beings can, but is discernible to the mind alone, as Plato says; and I believe him.’

CHAPTER 4 THE SOUL OF ITSELF CANNOT SEE GOD

“Is there then,’ says he, ‘such and so great power in our mind? Or can a man not perceive by sense sooner? Will the mind of man see God at any time, if it is uninstructed by the Holy Spirit?’

“Plato indeed says,’ replied I, ‘that the mind’s eye is of such a nature, and has been given for this end, that we may see that very Being when the mind is pure itself, who is the cause of all discerned by the mind, having no colour, no form, no greatness--nothing, indeed, which the bodily eye looks upon; but It is something of this sort, he goes on to say, that is beyond all essence, unutterable and inexplicable, but alone honourable and good, coming suddenly into souls well-dispositioned, on account of their affinity to and desire of seeing Him.’

“What affinity, then,’ replied he, ‘is there between us and God? Is the soul also divine and immortal, and a part of that very regal mind? And even as that sees God, so also is it attainable by us to conceive of the Deity in our mind, and thence to become happy?’

“Assuredly,’ I said.

“And do all the souls of all living beings comprehend Him?’ he asked; ‘or are the souls of men of one kind and the souls of horses and of asses of another kind?’

“No; but the souls which are in all are similar,’ I answered.

“Then,’ says he, ‘shall both horses and asses see, or have they seen at some time or other, God?’

“No,’ I said; ‘for the majority of men will not, saving such as shall live justly, purified by righteousness, and by every other virtue.’

“It is not, therefore,’ said he, ‘on account of his affinity, that a man sees God, nor because he has a mind, but because he is temperate and righteous?’

“Yes,’ said I; ‘and because he has that whereby he perceives God.’

“What then? Do goats or sheep injure anyone?’

“No one in any respect,’ I said.

“Therefore these animals will see [God] according to your account,’ says he.

“No; for their body being of such a nature, is an obstacle to them.’

“He rejoined,’ If these animals could assume speech, be well assured that they would with greater reason ridicule our body; but let us now dismiss this subject, and let it be conceded to you as you say. Tell me, however, this: Does the soul see [God] so long as it is in the body, or after it has been removed from it?’

“So long as it is in the form of a man, it is possible for it,’ I continue, ‘to attain to this by means of the mind; but especially when it has been set free from the body, and being apart by itself, it gets possession of that which it was wont continually and wholly to love.’

“Does it remember this, then [the sight of God], when it is again in the man?’

“It does not appear to me so,’ I said.

“What, then, is the advantage to those who have seen [God]? or what has he who has seen more than he who has not seen, unless he remember this fact, that he has seen?’

“I cannot tell,’ I answered.

“And what do those suffer who are judged to be unworthy of this spectacle?’ said he.

“They are imprisoned in the bodies of certain wild beasts, and this is their punishment.’

“Do they know, then, that it is for this reason they are in such forms, and that they have committed some sin?’

“I do not think so.’

“Then these reap no advantage from their punishment, as it seems: moreover, I would say that they are not punished unless they are conscious of the punishment.’

“No indeed.’

“Therefore souls neither see God nor trans-migrate into other bodies; for they would know that so they are punished, and they would be afraid to commit even the most trivial sin afterwards. But that they can perceive that God exists, and that righteousness and piety are honourable, I also quite agree with you,’ said he.

“You are right,’ I replied.

CHAPTER 5 THE SOUL IS NOT IN ITS OWN NATURE IMMORTAL

“These philosophers know nothing, then, about these things; for they cannot tell what a soul is.’

“It does not appear so.’

“Nor ought it to be called immortal; for if it is immortal, it is plainly unbegotten.’

“It is both unbegotten and immortal, according to some who are styled Platonists.’

“Do you say that the world is also unbegotten?’

“Some say so. I do not, however, agree with them.’

“You are right; for what reason has one for supposing that a body so solid, possessing resistance, composite, changeable, decaying, and renewed every day, has not arisen from some cause? But if the world is begotten, souls also are necessarily begotten; and perhaps at one time they were not in existence, for they were made on account of men and other living creatures, if you will say that they have been begotten wholly apart, and not along with their respective bodies.’ “This seems to be correct.’

“They are not, then, immortal?’

“No; since the world has appeared to us to be begotten.’

“But I do not say, indeed, that all souls die; for that were truly a piece of good fortune to the evil. What then? The souls of the pious remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse, waiting for the time of judgment. Thus some which have appeared worthy of God never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and to be punished.’

“Is what you say, then, of a like nature with that which Plato in Timoeus hints about the world, when he says that it is indeed subject to decay, inasmuch as it has been created, but that it will neither be dissolved nor meet with the fate of death on account of the will of God? Does it seem to you the very same can be said of the soul, and generally of all things? For those things which exist after God, or shall at any time exist, these have the nature of decay, and are such as may be blotted out and cease to exist; for God alone is unbegotten and incorruptible, and therefore He is God, but all other things after Him are created and corruptible. For this reason souls both die and are punished: since, if they were unbegotten, they would neither sin, nor be filled with folly, nor be cowardly, and again ferocious; nor would they willingly transform into swine, and serpents, and dogs and it would not indeed be just to compel them, if they be unbegotten. For that which is unbegotten is similar to, equal to, and the same with that which is unbegotten; and neither in power nor in honour should the one be preferred to the other, and hence there are not many things which are unbegotten: for if there were some difference between them, you would not discover the cause of the difference, though you searched for it; but after letting the mind ever wander to infinity, you would at length, wearied out, take your stand on one Unbegotten, and say that this is the Cause of all. Did such escape the observation of Plato and Pythagoras, those wise men,’ I said, ‘who have been as a wall and fortress of philosophy to us?’

CHAPTER 6 THESE THINGS WERE UNKNOWN TO PLATO AND OTHER PHILOSOPHERS

“It makes no matter to me,’ said he, ‘whether Plato or Pythagoras, or, in short, any other man held such opinions. For the truth is so; and you would perceive it from this. The soul assuredly is or has life. If, then, it is life, it would cause something else, and not itself, to live, even as motion would move something else than itself. Now, that the soul lives, no one would deny. But if it lives, it lives not as being life, but as the partaker of life; but that which partakes of anything, is different from that of which it does partake. Now the soul partakes of life, since God wills it to live. Thus, then, it will not even partake [of life] when God does not will it to live. For to live is not its attribute, as it is God’s; but as a man does not live always, and the

soul is not for ever conjoined with the body, since, whenever this harmony must be broken up, the soul leaves the body, and the man exists no longer; even so, whenever the soul must cease to exist, the spirit of life is removed from it, and there is no more soul, but it goes back to the place from whence it was taken.’

CHAPTER 7

THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH TO BE SOUGHT FROM THE PROPHETS ALONE

“Should any one, then, employ a teacher?’ I say, ‘or whence may any one be helped, if not even in them there is truth?’

“There existed, long before this time, certain men more ancient than all those who are esteemed philosophers, both righteous and beloved by God, who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men, neither reverencing nor fearing any man, not influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled with the Holy Spirit. Their writings are still extant, and he who has read them is very much helped in his knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and of those matters which the philosopher ought to know, provided he has believed them. For they did not use demonstration in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to the truth above all demonstration, and worthy of belief; and those events which have happened, and those which are happening, compel you to assent to the utterances made by them, although, indeed, they were entitled to credit on account of the miracles which they performed, since they both glorified the Creator, the God and Father of all things, and proclaimed His Son, the Christ [sent] by Him: which, indeed, the false prophets, who are filled with the lying unclean spirit, neither have done nor do, but venture to work certain wonderful deeds for the purpose of astonishing men, and glorify the spirits and demons of error. But pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and His Christ have imparted wisdom.’

CHAPTER 8

JUSTIN BY HIS COLLOQUY IS KINDLED WITH LOVE TO CHRIST

“When he had spoken these and many other things, which there is no time for mentioning at present, he went away, bidding me attend to them; and I have not seen him since. But straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable. Thus, and for this reason, I am a philosopher. Moreover, I would wish that all, making a resolution similar to my own, do not keep themselves away from the words of the Saviour. For they possess a terrible power in themselves, and are sufficient to inspire those who turn aside from the path of rectitude with awe; while the sweetest rest is afforded those who make a diligent practice of them. If, then, you have any concern for yourself, and if you are eagerly looking for salvation, and if you believe in God, you may--since you are not indifferent to the matter -- become acquainted with the Christ of God, and, after being initiated, live a happy life.”

When I had said this, my beloved friends those who were with Trypho laughed; but he, smiling, says, “I approve of your other remarks, and admire the eagerness with which you study divine things; but it were better for you still to abide in the philosophy of Plato, or of some other man, cultivating endurance, self-control, and moderation, rather than be deceived by false words, and follow the opinions of men of no reputation. For if you remain in that mode of philosophy, and live blamelessly, a hope of a better destiny were left to you; but when you have forsaken God, and reposed confidence in man, what safety still awaits you? If, then, you are willing to listen to me (for I have already considered you a friend), first be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the

new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things which have been written in the law: and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God. But Christ--if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere--is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elias come to anoint Him, and make Him manifest to all. And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing.”

CHAPTER 9 THE CHRISTIANS HAVE NOT BELIEVED GROUNDLESS STORIES

“I excuse and forgive you, my friend,” I said. “For you know not what you say, but have been persuaded by teachers who do not understand the Scriptures; and you speak, like a diviner whatever comes into your mind. But if you are willing to listen to an account of Him, how we have not been deceived, and shall not cease to confess Him,--although men’s reproaches be heaped upon us, although the most terrible tyrant compel us to deny Him,--I shall prove to you as you stand here that we have not believed empty fables, or words without any foundation but words filled with the Spirit of God, and big with power, and flourishing with grace....”

Justin Martyr. “Dialogue with Trypho.” Chapters 1-9. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 1. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1895.

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