

present to me in words, of which you have plenty at your command. I must hope in vain for you to be generous in deeds if I am forced to endure your miserliness in words.

Until now, I really believed that I deserved better from you, since I have done everything for you and am still persevering in obedience to you. It was not religious devotion but your command alone that drove me in my youth to the harshness of the monastic life. But if I am to have no reward from you, you may judge that my efforts have been futile. I can expect no reward from God, since it is evident that I have not yet done anything for love of him.

I followed you when you hastened to God, or rather, I preceded you in taking the monastic habit. Before you gave yourself to God, you delivered me over to the sacred habit and the monastic calling, as if you were thinking of Lot's wife, who looked back. I confess that I was greatly saddened and ashamed that in this one thing you showed so little faith in me. God knows, I would not have hesitated for a moment to precede or follow you into the fires of hell, if you had given the word. For my heart is not mine but yours. Now, more than ever, if it is not with you, it belongs nowhere. Without you, it can find no place. But I beg you to behave in such a way that my heart may be happy with you, and it will be happy with you if it finds you kind, if you return love for love, little for much, words for deeds.

I wish, my love, that your love were less sure of me, so that you would be more anxious. But the more reason I have given you for confidence in the past, the more you neglect me now. Remember, I entreat you, what I have done and consider what you owe me. While I was enjoying the delights of the flesh with you, many people were not certain whether I was moved by love or by lust. But now the outcome shows clearly the spirit in which I began. In obedience to your will, I have forbidden myself every pleasure. I have kept nothing for myself but only this, to become more than ever yours alone. Think how unjust you would be if you gave back less—indeed, nothing at all—to one who deserves so much more, especially when what I ask of you is such a small thing and so very easy for you to do.

So in the name of God to whom you have offered yourself, I beg you to restore your presence in the way that lies open to you, I mean, by giving me the consolation of writing to me. Then at least I may be renewed in spirit and may take part more gladly in the divine service. When long ago you wanted me for shameful pleasures, you used to besiege me with letters and with your songs you put your Heloise's name on every lip. Every street rang with it; it echoed in every house. Should you not excite me toward God now, as you excited me then to desire for you? Think, I implore you, what you owe me! Listen to what I ask you, and I shall end this long letter with a brief word,

Farewell, my only love.

LETTER 3

ABELARD TO HELOISE

To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, from Abelard, her brother in the same.

If, since our conversion from the world to God, I have never written you a letter to comfort or encourage you, this should not be attributed to my negligence but to your prudence. I did not consider my help necessary for one upon whom the divine grace has so lavishly bestowed all that she needs. By your words and your example you are able to teach those who are in error, to strengthen the fainthearted, to exhort the lukewarm, as you have long been accustomed to do since you became prioress under the abbess.¹ If you watch over your daughters as carefully now as you watched over your sisters then, I consider it sufficient and I regard any teaching or encouragement on my part as superfluous. But if to you in your humility it seems otherwise, and you need me to instruct you and write to you concerning matters that pertain to God, tell me what you want, so that I may write to you again, according as the Lord may grant me.

I give thanks to God, who has inspired your hearts with anxiety for me in my most grave and constant dangers and thus made you partners in my afflictions, so that with the help of your prayers the divine mercy may protect me and swiftly crush Satan under my feet. For this reason, above all, I have hastened to send you the *Psalter* that you have earnestly requested, my sister once dear in the world, now most dear in Christ.² With it, I hope that you may offer a perpetual sacrifice of prayers to the Lord for our many and great transgressions and for the perils that daily threaten me.

There are many proofs and examples showing the great influence the prayers of the faithful may have with God and his saints, especially the prayers of women for their dear ones and of wives of their husbands. With this particularly in mind, the Apostle admonishes us to pray without ceasing. We read that the Lord said to Moses (Exod. 32:10): "Spare me your importunacy, let me vent my anger and destroy them." And he said to Jeremiah (7:16): "Nor do you... think to plead for this people of mine, or... thwart my will." By these words the Lord makes it

¹ That is, at Argenteuil.

² Probably not a *Psalter* in the usual sense, but the versicles, responses, and prayer ending.

clear that the prayers of the faithful place a bridle, so to speak, on his wrath and curb it. Thus his anger may not exact from sinners the penalties they deserve, and the supplication of his friends may turn aside one whom justice moves almost spontaneously to vengeance, and as if by force restrain him against his will. So he says to one who is praying or about to pray (Jer. 7:16): "Thwart my will, you shall have no hearing." The Lord commands that prayers shall not be offered for the wicked. But the just man prays, notwithstanding the Lord's injunction, and obtains from him what he asks, altering the judgment of the angry Judge. It is said of Moses (Exod. 32:14): "The Lord relented, and spared his people the punishment he had threatened." Elsewhere it is written of all the works of God (Ps. 32:9): "He spoke and they were made." But in this passage it is recorded also that he said the people deserved punishment but, restrained by the virtue of prayer, he did not do what he had promised.

Consider, then, how great is the virtue of prayer, if we pray as we are commanded, since by praying the prophet obtained that for which God had forbidden him to pray and turned him away from what he had ordained. Another prophet says to him (Hab. 3:2): "Though we have earned your anger, bethink you of mercy still." Let earthly princes hear this and take heed, those who in carrying out the justice they have ordained and decreed are found to be obstinate rather than just. They are afraid of appearing remiss if they should be merciful and false if they should change their decree, or should not carry out what they have decreed with little forethought, even if they rectify their words by their deeds. These, I may say, should be compared to Jephthah who, more foolishly performing what he had foolishly vowed, killed his only daughter. But the man who desires to be a member of God says with the Psalmist (Ps. 100:1): "Of mercy and of justice my song shall be; a psalm in your honor, Lord." Mercy, it is written, exalts justice; referring to this the Scripture elsewhere warns us (James 2:13): "The merciless will be judged mercilessly."

The Psalmist himself had this well in mind, when at the prayer of the wife of Nabal the Carmelite, he mercifully broke the oath he had justly sworn concerning her husband and the destruction of his house.³ So he put prayer before justice and the supplication of the wife wiped out the offense of her husband. In this instance, my sister, an example is set for you and a pledge is given, to teach you how much your prayer may win for me from God if this woman's prayer obtained so much from a man. For God who is our Father loves his children more than David loved the woman who begged a favor of him. He was rightly considered good and merciful, but God is kindness and mercy itself. And the woman who was a supplicant was a lay woman, who belonged to the world; she was not united to God by the vows of holiness.

But if you alone should prove unable to obtain what you desire, that holy community of virgins and widows who are with you will obtain what you cannot achieve by yourself. For when Truth says to his disciples (Matt. 18:20): "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst

³ 1 Kings 25:32-34. At the pleading of Nabal's wife, Abigail, David mercifully did not exact the vengeance he had sworn.

of them," and again, "If two of you agree over any request that you make on earth, it will be granted them by my Father who is in heaven," who can fail to see how influential with God is the frequent prayer of a holy congregation? If, as the Apostle asserts (James 5:16): "When a just man prays fervently, there is great virtue in his prayer," what can one hope for from the multitude of a holy community?

You know, dearest sister, from the thirty-eighth homily of St. Gregory, how much help the prayer of his brothers quickly brought to the unwilling or resistant monk.⁴ The story of how he was led to an extremity, of the grave anxiety and danger in which his wretched spirit labored, and the great despair and weariness of life in which he called his brothers from their prayers, is carefully set down there and cannot have escaped your prudent reading. May this example summon you and your community of holy nuns more confidently to prayer, so that he from whom, as St. Paul says, women have received their dead restored to life again, may keep me alive for you (Heb. 11:35).

If you consult the pages of the Old and New Testaments, you will find that the greatest miracles of resurrection have been displayed only, or chiefly, to women and were performed for them or with respect to them. The Old Testament tells of two dead men who were restored to life in answer to the prayer of their mothers, that is, by Elias and his disciple Elisha (3 Kings 17:17-24; 4 Kings 4:20-37). The Gospel contains the accounts of only three men being restored to life by the Lord and these miracles, which were performed especially for women, confirmed by deeds the apostolic saying quoted above (Heb. 11:35): "There were women, too, who recovered their dead...brought back to life." Moved by compassion, he restored her son whom he had raised to life to his mother, a widow, at the gate of the city of Naim (Luke 7:12-16). The Lord also raised his own friend, Lazarus, from the dead, at the prayer of his sisters, Mary and Martha (John 11:1-44). And when he granted this same favor to the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue at the petition of her father, "women obtained the resurrection of their dead," for when she was restored to life, she received her own body again from the dead, as the others had obtained the bodies of their dead (Luke 8:40-56; Mark 5:21-43; Matt. 9:18-26).

These resurrections were performed at the intercession of only a few; the many prayers of your devoted community, then, will easily obtain the preservation of my life. The self-denial and chastity these women have consecrated to God are so pleasing to him that they will find him the more merciful. Most of those who were raised from the dead were probably not numbered among the faithful; for example, it is not said that the widow to whom the Lord restored her son, though she had not asked it, was a believer. In our case, however, we are united not only by the integrity of our faith, but also by our profession of the same monastic vows.

I shall say no more now about your holy community of nuns, in which the devotion of so many virgins and widows serves the Lord perpetually, and I shall address you alone, whose holiness I am sure has such power with God. I have no doubt that you should do all you can for me, especially and above all when

⁴ Cf. Gregory, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 2.38, 16: PL 76, 1292b.

I am struggling in such great adversity. Remember always in your prayers, then, him who is especially yours and watch in prayer with more confidence, as you recognize that it is right for you to do so and for this reason more acceptable to him to whom you pray. Listen, I beg you, with the heart's ear to what you have heard so often with your bodily ears. It is written in Proverbs (12:4): "Crowned is his brow who wins a vigorous wife," and again (18:22): "A good wife found is a treasure found; the Lord is filling thy cup with happiness." And further on (19:14): "House and hoard a man may inherit; it is the Lord's gift only, if he have a wife that minds her ways." In Ecclesiasticus it is said (26:1): "Happy is the man that has a faithful wife," and a little further on (26:3): "He best thrives that best wives." According to the teaching of the Apostle (1 Cor. 7:14): "The unbelieving husband has shared in his wife's consecration."

The divine grace gave a special proof of all this in our own kingdom of France, when King Clovis was converted to the faith of Christ by the prayers of his wife rather than by the preaching of the saints, and submitted his entire kingdom to the divine laws, so that by the example of the great, the lesser people might be aroused to constancy in prayer.⁵ The parable of the Lord strongly urges us to this constancy, where it said (Luke 11:8): "I tell you, even if he will not bestir himself to grant it out of friendship, shameless asking will make him rise and give his friend all he needs." If I may say so, it was by this kind of importunity, as I remarked before, that Moses softened the severity of divine justice and changed its judgment.

You know, my beloved, how much loving charity your community used to show in prayer when I was with you there. Every day at the conclusion of each of the Hours, the sisters used to offer this special prayer to the Lord for me and, after a suitable response with its versicle had been said and chanted, they added to them prayers and a collect as follows:

Response: Forsake me not, O Lord, do not depart from me.

Versicle: O Lord, be always at hand to help me (Ps. 69:2).

Prayer: Save your servant, O my God, whose help is in you. O Lord, hear my prayer and let my cry come unto you (Ps. 101:2).

Let us Pray: God, who through your poor servant has deigned to gather your handmaids together in your name, we beseech you to grant that both he and we ourselves may persevere in your will. Through our Lord, etc.

But now that I am away from you, I need the help of your prayers even more, since I am fettered by the fear of a greater danger. So I beg and beseech you to let me find that, especially in my absence, you will be so generous and so truly charitable as to add this suitable form of prayer at the end of each of the Hours.

Response: O Lord, Father and Ruler of my life, do not forsake me, that I may not fall down in the sight of my adversaries; let not my enemy rejoice over me. (Ecclus. 23:3)

⁵ Clovis (ca. 466–511): In 496 (or perhaps 506) Clovis, King of the Franks, was persuaded to convert to the Catholic faith (as opposed to the Arian faith adopted by most of the other barbarian kingdoms) by his wife, the Catholic Burgundian princess Clothilde, who was later revered as a saint for her efforts. Heloise is here cast as a "conjugal evangelizer."

Versicle: Take up arms and shield and rise up to help me, lest my enemy rejoice over me. (Ps. 34:2)

Invocation: Save your servant, O my God, who hopes in you. Send him aid, O Lord, from your holy place, and watch over him from Sion. Be unto him, O Lord, a tower of strength in the face of his enemy. Lord, hear my prayer and let my cry come unto you.

Prayer: God, who through your servant was pleased to gather together your handmaids in your name, we implore you to protect him from all adversity, and restore him unharmed to your handmaids. Through our Lord, etc.

But if the Lord should deliver me into the hands of my enemies, so that they prevail over me and kill me, or if by any chance I go the way of all flesh while I am away from you, wherever my body may lie, whether exposed or buried, I beseech you to have it brought to your cemetery. There your daughters, or, rather, your sisters will often see my tomb and may be the more moved to send up prayers to God for me. I consider no place safer and more salutary for a soul grieving over its sins and desolate in its wandering than that place which is rightly consecrated to the Paraclete, the Comforter, and is distinguished by his name. I do not think there is a more fitting place for Christian burial among any of the faithful than among women devoted to Christ. It was women who were solicitous about the tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ and came to it both before and afterward with precious ointments, who preceded him and followed him, watching anxiously over his tomb and weeping over the death of the Bridegroom, as it is written: "The women sitting over against the tomb, and weeping, lamented the Lord." There, just before his Resurrection, they were comforted by the apparition and the words of an angel and at once they were found worthy to taste the joy of his Resurrection, when he appeared to them twice, and to touch him with their hands.

But, finally and above all, I ask this of you, that you, who are now troubled with too much anxiety about the dangers to my body, will then be especially anxious for the welfare of my soul and will show the dead man how you loved the living by giving me the special and proper help of your prayers.

Live, prosper, and your sisters with you,

Live, but in Christ, and I pray you, remember me.