

# The Good Word

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WITH THE BLESSING OF BISHOP AUXENTIOS OF ETNA AND PORTLAND



## BACKGROUND HISTORY OF THESSALONIKI<sup>1</sup>

The founding of Thessaloniki occurred following the death in Babylon of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. Cassander, son of Antipater married the Princess Thessalonike, Alexander's half-sister, to legitimize his claim to Alexander's throne. In her honor, Cassander built the city of Thessaloniki in 315 BC.

The location of the city, in the deepest concavity in the eastern Macedonian coastline, assured its importance as a strategic transportation hub connecting sea routes with major land routes.

After their military conquest of Macedonia, the Romans constructed the *Via Egnatia* (see map below) between 146-120 BC connecting the Adriatic Sea to the west with Byzantium to the east further increasing Thessaloniki's importance in the Roman Empire.



About 50 AD, while on his second missionary journey, the Apostle Saint Paul (originally from Tarsus in Cilicia), reasoned with the Jews from the Scriptures in this city's chief synagogue on three successive Sabbaths planting Thessaloniki's first Christian church with a few Jews, many Greeks, and some of the chief women as its initial converts. Later, c. AD 51 and 53, St. Paul wrote his *First* and *Second Letters* to them.

In AD 306 the Holy Great Martyr and Myrrh-gusher


St. Demetrios of Thessaloniki, the son of wealthy and pious Christian parents, who had been promoted to commander of the Roman army in Thessaly by the Emperor Maximian, was martyred because of his bold witness for Christ. Through many miracles after his death, St. Demetrios became the patron saint and defender of Thessaloniki, both militarily and spiritually. Not only did he walk on the sea, he brought forth storms to wipe out enemy fleets. Then, as described in our previous issue, in AD 586, heavily armed, he charged down from the city walls and outward through its gates astride his white horse. Accompanied by a host of fierce cavalry, he caused the barbarian Avar and Slav raiders to flee to the mountains in fear for their lives, and to leave the area the next day out of fear that he would attack them again.

In AD 324 Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire. During his clash for power with his brother-in-law Licinius for control of the Roman Empire, Constantine established Thessaloniki as his headquarters and built the harbor at the south-western edge of the city. The harbor provided safe anchorage and logistical support for his fleet of 200 galleys and 2000 commercial ships. Following Constantine's victory over Licinius, the city became a prime contender to replace Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire, But Constantine selected Byzantium instead, renaming it Constantinople. Nevertheless, the status of Thessaloniki was greatly enhanced by the subsequent large scale infrastructure projects undertaken by Emperors Julian the Apostate and Theodosius the Great<sup>2</sup>, making it second only to Constantinople in importance.

Because of its important commercial, cultural, and military roles Thessaloniki has been subject to sieges, raids, and pillaging throughout its history. Examples of this include: (1) the Celtic invasion of Greece in 279 BC; (2) raids by the Goths in AD 253, 262, and 269; (3) the attack of the Avars in 499; (4) the attack of the Avars and Slavs in AD 586 foiled by St Demetrios as discussed in our previous issue; (5) the siege by the Slavs c. AD 677; (6) the raid of the Saracen (Muslim) pirates under Leo of Tripoli, who seized and looted the

1. Adapted from E Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, A Tourta, *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki*, Kapon Editions, Athens, Greece, 1997, pp. 12-15, and from Vasilis Sarafidis, *A Very Short History of Thessaloniki*, at <https://vasilissarafidis.wordpress.com/tag/short-history-f-thessaloniki/>

2. The Emperor (Saint) Theodosius the Great was baptized in Thessaloniki by Bishop Ascholios. He reigned from AD 379-395.



city in AD 904; (7) the sack of Thessaloniki by the Normans of Sicily AD 1185-1186; (8) its capture and occupation by the Franks (Roman Catholics) in AD 1204 during the Fourth Crusade; and, lastly, (9) its two conquests by the Ottoman Turks in AD 1387 and 1430.

Nevertheless, Thessaloniki repelled its attackers for nearly six centuries. It was apparent to the Orthodox people in Thessaloniki that the 4th century martyr St. Demetrios personally protected the city of Thessaloniki from the time of his martyrdom in AD 306 right up to its capture and sacking by Leo of Tripoli<sup>3</sup> in AD 904. For that siege there is only one eye-witness account -- that of John Kaminiates, a cleric and the son of a presbyter. He wrote an eloquent and heart-breaking description of the fall of the city and the fate of its inhabitants in a letter to Gregory of Kappadokia, whom he met during his captivity, and to whom he posted a letter from Tarsos<sup>4</sup> in late 904 or 905. Kaminiates provided his own observations as to how and why Thessaloniki fell and why St. Demetrios was unsuccessful in the defense of the city at that time.

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### THE CAPTURE OF THESSALONIKI AD 904

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#### JOHN KAMINIATES' EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE CAPTURE OF THESSALONIKI<sup>5</sup>

§3... [Thessaloniki] is a great city and the foremost city of the Macedonians. Though famed for all the other things on which a city prides herself and not admitting of any comparison with her nearest neighbors, she is nevertheless more famous for the true piety which she received from earliest times, and having once received, has preserved right up to the present day. Thessaloniki boasts as her instructor in true piety Paul himself, *the chosen vessel*, who having travelled around the world from Jerusalem to Illyricum preaching the gospel sowed the seed of the knowledge of God especially in her, and labored zealously to produce in abundance the harvest of faith.

After Paul, she had that great Martyr and amazing champion of the faith Demetrios to instruct her, whose relics exude fragrant oil in great abundance. He too, toiled unceasingly on behalf of true piety. He was indeed, in addition to the other virtues of which he could boast, a distinguished theologian, and was endowed with an exact understanding of dogma, whence it came about that ... his fame spread to the ends of the earth.

Then she had a succession of bishops who all clung steadfastly to the word of salvation. Constantly prepared and instructed by them in religious knowledge, she relegated devilish and abominable errors and opinions and idolatrous

mumbo-jumbo to those who honor demons. And protecting the faith with the seal of the orthodox teaching, she never ever mixed any tare<sup>6</sup>-like plant, either heretical or heathen with the seed the Lord had sown, and [thus] preserved pure and unadulterated her piety.

§8... Admittedly, the city did sustain the clash of much fierce fighting on numerous occasions both from the barbarians and from the Scythians whose territory adjoins theirs. These peoples used every kind of armament against her as their armies poured in as numberless as sand, and grimly determined that nothing should endure the shock of their arms. And in truth the fury of their onslaught knew no bounds, and they were clad in every kind of defensive armor. Yet the fighting was land-based, so to speak, and she repeatedly foiled their treacherous designs and kept them at bay with the strength of her walls<sup>7</sup> and by entrusting her safety to the champion who ever and ardently fought on her behalf: I refer of course to the all-glorious martyr Demetrios. For this savior of our homeland rescued her from many dangers and in his loving kindness often bestowed victory upon her when she had not yet even been put to the test of battle. But let us leave the explanation of these matters to the books in which his miracles are related, and proceed with the continuation of our narrative.

§9... Thanks to the fact that a public highway running eastwards from the west passes straight through this city, and provides travelers with a very strong inducement for stopping off with us and supplying themselves with everything they need, we made incalculable profits ... From this trade a great many private fortunes were made in gold, silver and precious stones, and silk garments were as common an item of manufacture as were woolens elsewhere. Not to mention, of course, the other materials, such as bronze, iron, tin, lead and glass, whereby the crafts that use fire make their livelihood, all of which were in such plentiful supply that another city could have been build and furnished with them

§10. And so, enjoying prosperity and abundance on every side, priding herself on the skills of her artisans, glorying in the splendor of her buildings, did she by any chance convey the impression of falling below the standard of other cities in her respect for the law or in the upholding of public order or in cultural attainments? Far from it! Learning was as important to her as sight is to the eyes, and orderly conduct was as vital a concern as the conduct of life. And young children could be seen devoting themselves exclusively to the pursuit of letters from which all sciences and crafts derive their strength. But how can I convey in language the effect of setting words to music or the heartwarming melodies the singers sing and the zeal of those who are entirely devoted to the service of God? But how could I set down in writing a meaningful account of these matters? ... If one were to liken that music which during the celebration of divine service wells up of one accord from every lip in hymns of praise to God, if one were to liken such music to the sound of the angels *keeping holyday* in the place where stand *the abode of all those who rejoice*, he would be drawing a perfectly legitimate comparison...

§11. Large and exquisitely decorated churches occupy a prominent position in the centre of the city and constitute a


3. Leo of Tripoli is called Raslq am Wardami in the Arabic sources.

4. Tarsos is an older name for Tarsus in Cilicia (south central Turkey), about 20 kilometers from the Mediterranean coast.

5. David Frendo and Athanasios Fotiou (*trs*), *John Kaminiates: The Capture of Thessaloniki*, *Byzantina Australiensia 12*, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, Perth, Australia, 2000, pp. 189. <https://epdf.pub/john-kaminiates-the-capture-of-thessaloniki.html>

6. A noxious weed, probably the darnel.

7. Her walls were second only to Constantinople in impregnability.



sort of public place of intercession with God, by far the most important of them being [1] the house of the all-fashioning and divine Wisdom of the supersubstantial Word, [2] that of the holy and ever-virgin Mother of God, and [3], that of the previously mentioned all-glorious and splendidly victorious martyr Demetrios, built over the spot where he accomplished his heroic feats in the contest for heaven and received the prize of victory. All these churches would gather unto themselves the entire people throughout the annually recurring succession of holy days and feasts and would bestow upon their congregations ineffable joy and spiritual delight. Each church had its allotted share of priestly offices for the performance of divine service and of the grades of *lector* to look after the singing of hymns, these latter chanting the responses, using the rhythmic movement of the hand to keep in tune, forming a huge and most impressive choir, dazzling the eye of the beholder with the brilliance of their apparel and entrancing the listener with the vocal music of the psalms. How worthless in comparison with these hymns were the mythical Orpheus, the muse of Homer or the foolish babbling of the sirens, all of them mere figments of the literary imagination, recorded fantasies and falsehoods with nothing to recommend them, calculated simply to beguile mankind and enslave it to deception! Much vain ranting.

§12. I am amazed, horrified, and astounded when I consider how hymns of such uniqueness and of a grandeur so far unrivaled by any other form of thank offerings have suddenly fallen silent, come to nothing, and receded like a dream. But it is my opinion that in the words of the psalmist, we *declare the statutes of God* when we were in a state of sin, and the wickedness of our ways rendered unacceptable this noble and venerable activity, since God deemed it unworthy, that He should receive honor and praise from profane and polluted lips. For how much longer shall we fail to state openly the real reason why every kind of peril has assailed us, so that future generations may learn through our example how one must worship the living and true God and keep oneself beyond the reach of every form of perdition, lest they slide imperceptibly into the same vices as we did, and draw down upon their heads the wrath of God? Yes, it was for no other reason that we came to experience the reality of that outrageous threat, the mere recollection of which unhinges my mind, save that of our own wicked and evil choosing. It was a situation brought about in part by the alteration in lifestyle and morals effected as the result of an influx of people from every nation and every region, as different people brought in with them different vices and transmitted them to their neighbors (and, in fact, because of the abundant supply of all needful commodities, which I referred to, people belonging to the neighboring regions and cities moved to Thessaloniki; and especially those from the islands already captured before, who had survived the incursion of the accursed Hagarenes<sup>8</sup>, fled to this city with the idea, as they imagined, that they would have no need there in future to worry about the enemy); in part it was also brought about by the ease and heedlessness of luxurious living and by pandering to every whim and refinement of a pleasure-seeking existence, as though we had forgotten all about God. And we

8. *Hagarenes*, i.e., descendants of Hagar, mother of Ishmael the son of Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 16). Kaminiates refers to the Muslim Arabs almost exclusively by this name.


wandered down a long road which offers no outlet, and as the apostle says, *we walked each one after his own lusts*, proceeding boldly along every course of sinfulness and having no regard for the path that leads to virtue.

§13. And to tell the truth, what kind of vice was not practiced among us? Fornication, adultery, impurity, hatred, lying, stealing, strife, contentiousness, abuse, anger, covetousness, injustice. And the originator of all mischief, envy, was daily the common preoccupation and vulgar pursuit. People were eager to know, not which of us would do his neighbor a good turn, but who was senselessly contriving to inflict upon him something spiteful; not who was prepared to do his charitable duty and share his wealth with the needy, but who was striving to rival his relatives in enriching himself at someone else's expense, engaging all the while in mutual deception, violence, calumny, devising every kind of mischief amongst themselves, strangling orphans, encroaching on the property of widows, stirring up enmity, and hatching plots. And what was the outcome of all this? I shrink from giving voice to such momentous events, and I could not bear to go over the details of those painful experiences which we have already endured. But since it is not possible to avoid the recital of such events which have left us as a novel and solemn warning to the world, I shall recount the magnitude of the peril which overtook us, in order that you too may learn for yourself what are the wages of sin. In fact it was just when we were wallowing in luxury and self-indulgence and devoting our lives to the practice of every kind of wrongdoing, when in the words of the psalm, *all had swerved aside, all alike had become debased* and there was *no one who seeks God*, that we experienced that fearful threat or rather catastrophe or, more properly speaking, our just deserts.

§ 14. And consider even at this point the loving kindness of God who does not wish for the death of the sinner but that he should mend his ways and live. For though He knew our wicked and ungovernable temper and that our minds were set on wrong doing, what did He contrive in order to check our evil impulse and give us cause for turning back? First of all He caused the neighboring city which I have already mentioned, I refer to Beroea [45 miles west-southwest of Thessaloniki], to fall down upon its inhabitants, our neighbors, so as to destroy many of those who were gathered there. With what end in view? It was in order that we, realizing fully the threats that hung over others, might call a halt, albeit belatedly, to our own wickedness and direct our activities to the pursuit of virtue.

Then, when in spite of this event we still showed no signs of relenting or inclination to turn over a new leaf, He turned to another expedient and gave us a prior demonstration in the case of others of what to expect in our own [city] should we fail to mend our ways.

In fact, another city in Greece, named Demetrias [135 miles south of Thessaloniki], situated at no great distance from us and superior to its neighbors in size of population and in all the other features on which cities greatly pride themselves, fell victim to the barbarian not long before the date of our own capture. And the fact that the siege had ended in massacre of practically all those who had taken refuge there was, moreover, a clear signal to us to reflect that a similar experience awaited us if we persisted in our evil ways and to read, as though written up in letters of blood, the proclamation



of our just desserts.

§15. But let no one suppose that in stating these facts I am suggesting that it was because of us that these cities suffered their terrible ordeal. They too were doomed by their own wickedness, I think, just as we in turn were by ours, for God metes out just punishment to each man according to his sins. Yet, in these events it was an easy matter for us to discover a powerful incentive for turning back to God and seeing the light and making their downfall the means to our own security. Nevertheless, when *He that searcheth the hearts* saw that our minds were set on following the path that leads to destruction, and that He had omitted no saving command or act of correction whereby the sober and perceptive soul at last learns virtuous conduct and eschews the deeds of scoundrels *of which cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience*, as the apostle says, and wickedness had to be destroyed, lest by its further progress it should harm others, He allowed that dreadful and horrific calamity to befall us. And He did this expressly in order that we might through our own sufferings serve as an example to others of what we had failed to learn from theirs.

§16 ... It was precisely at this juncture that a messenger from the ruler of the Roman world, the most pious Emperor Leo,<sup>9</sup> arrived post haste with news of the approach of the barbarians, I mean of the accursed Hagarenes, and advised us to arm and put ourselves on a war footing with all possible speed. He said that fugitives from the hands of those barbarians had arrived and had given the emperor prior information concerning their strategy, to the effect that they were now concentrating all their energies for a projected attack on the city, since they had been assured by many of those whom they had previously defeated that it [Thessaloniki] was practically unswalled on the seaward side and would be an easy target for a seaborne attack ...

§17. We decided, therefore, to concentrate on the wall, and to make its security and reinforcement our first priority ... Realizing that the whole of the south side of the city is washed by the sea and that, if an attack were mounted from that quarter, the barbarians would easily work their will there, since there would be nothing to prevent them from positioning themselves at a greater height than that of the wall, which was so low that the sterns of their ships would overtop it, and from being able to shoot down from high up at the soldiers manning the battlements, he [Petronas] decided to build a secret underwater fence and artificially contrived ambush, to serve at the same time as a safety-net for the city and an obstacle to the enemy. Now, there were large numbers of tombs carved out of single stone blocks on the east and west sides of the city, in which, in olden times, the pagans who dwelt there buried their dead. He had these collected and by a remarkable method, which was his own special invention, he had them lowered into the sea and hidden underwater at short intervals so as to form a row. Thus, he constructed at sea a novel kind of bulwark, one that in truth was both stronger and safer than the wall which rose up on land. And indeed it would have been accomplished and would have guaranteed the city complete security, so that ships would not have been able to get anywhere near in order to do their damage, except that owing to our wickedness this too was prevented and came to nothing.

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9. Leo VI (the Wise/the Philosopher) was Emperor from 886 to 912.

§18. But just when the fence designed to cross the seabed had reached a point somewhere around the middle of the threatened area and our fears were beginning to evaporate, along came another envoy from the emperor to take over all responsibility for the welfare of the city and to expedite the recall of Petronas, the man who had been appointed expressly for that purpose. This man was called Leo [Chitzilakes]. He had been appointed *strategos* [title for a military governor] of the whole region and put in charge of the entire conduct of operations. He decided to call a temporary halt to the work on the fence and to have the building up of the wall completed ... It was surmised that there were some fifty-four barbarian ships, each as big as and as well equipped as a city, and manned by a motley crowd of cut-throats, and desperados, Ishmaelites that dwell in Syria, and Ethiopians, whose country borders on Egypt, a bestial and bloodthirsty band of men, well-versed in the arts of murder and piracy. Mere talk of resistance was more than anyone could bear to listen to, as each man hastened to leave the land of his birth choosing rather to dwell on the mountains in the company of wild beasts than to fall into the hands of these men and suffer a cruel death ...

§22. And so, in spite of everything, we spent the next few days in a state of permanent indecision, with the result that we fell back on the one recourse left open to the helpless and invoked the limitless mercy of God's loving kindness and the intercession of the saints. Making our way, therefore, to the magnificent abode of the all-glorious martyr Demetrios, citizens and foreigners alike, people of every age and of every station, we set up a chorus of lamentation and in the following words called upon the martyr to be our protector against the barbarian attack that threatened to engulf us: "O noble martyr, in many dangers which on many occasions befell your city you vouchsafed your assistance, confounding every plot of the enemy and preserving her unscathed from destruction of every kind. Display on this occasion too, oh most merciful one, your boundless solicitude towards us, lest heathen and barbarian nations which know not God should boast against us. Do not allow this your house, which the whole world possesses jointly as its place of healing and of refuge, to be profaned by unholy and godless men, who scorn our faith and who set at nought our worship, whose only charge against us is our fear of God and who threaten us with untimely destruction. For even though we deserve countless punishments for the sins we have committed in this world and have indeed become liable to the catastrophe which is poised to descend on us, yet we recognize no other god than the God who bestowed on you the crown of martyrdom, for whose greater glory and in imitation of whose sufferings you suffered a martyr's death, and from whom you also received the grace of your many miracles, and have given us a firm rampart and an unshakeable bulwark, interceding with Him each time on our behalf and in pursuit of our best interests. Look therefore, now too upon the helplessness and perplexity of this people, listen to our petition, stand up with bold intercession on behalf of us your servants and rescue us from impending disaster, lest the children of the maidservant Hagar boast against us and say, 'Where is their protector?' For you see, most gracious one, that we do not put our trust in spears and shields, but have entrusted everything to your powerful intercession, pinning our hopes on engaging once again your

provident concern.” With anguish of heart we all kept addressing day and night these words of supplication to the martyr and washed the floor of the church with our tears as we awaited the onset of the enemy. Yet all the while our sins stood in the way and interposed a formidable barrier, which prevented the martyr’s intercessions from inclining God’s favor towards us. He was told, as was right, the same thing as Jeremiah of old had been told when he prayed on behalf of Israel, though it was unworthy of receiving God’s compassion: *Offer no prayer for this people; for I will not listen to you* (cf. Jeremiah 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). We were doomed, doomed to destruction, which once permitted must needs be accomplished, so that all those who live in sin might learn that nothing inclines the ear of God so effectively to requests brought forward through the agency of the saints as an upright life and diligence in the performance of good deeds.

§24. While we were in this situation, the leader of the barbarian forces decided to patrol the entire section of the wall that is washed by the sea. He was a sinister and thoroughly evil person, who flaunted a style of behavior singularly appropriate to the wild animal after which he was named [*Leo* - the *lion*] and for whose ferocious ways and ungovernable temper he was more than a match. Assuredly, you yourself also know the man by reputation, a reputation which celebrates his wickedness with the claim that he has outshone all previous paragons of impiety by descending to such depths of madness as to gaze insatiably upon the spilling of human blood and to love nothing better than the slaughter of Christians. He too was once a Christian, was reborn in the saving grace of baptism and taught the precepts of our religion. But when he was taken prisoner by the barbarians, he embraced their impiety in exchange for the true piety of the faith, and there is no way in which he more eagerly seeks to ingratiate himself with them than by making his deeds conform to his name, and by taking a particular pride in flaunting the actions of a felon and a brigand. And so Leo, this untamable beast, this felon, sailed around the wall gazing intently and searching out with studied malice a possible point from which to launch his attack ...

§25. But when that wild beast had surveyed the entire extent of the wall and had noticed that the entrance to the harbor was barred by an iron chain and obstructed by the sunken hulks of a number of ships, he decided to launch his attack just at those points which he perceived to be free of those blocks of stone which, lurking on the seabed where they had earlier been placed, impeded the access of his ships and where his fleet would not be under heavier fire from that part of the wall which had already been built up to some considerable height. He chose a location, in fact, where a great depth of sea water beat against a particularly low stretch of wall, made a careful note of his position, and then returning to his men, gave the signal for battle. They [then] swooped down with their ships towards those points which had been described to them, letting out harsh and savage cries and rowing furiously in the direction of the wall. And banging on rawhide drums, they raised a fearful din, and they tried with many other kinds of bluff to frighten the defenders on the battlements. But those who were manning the wall shouted back even louder and invoked the aid of the saving weapon of the cross against the enemy forces. And they did this to such

an effect that the barbarians, at the sound of so many people uttering a cry more fearsome than any they had previously heard, were dazed for a while and did not expect to achieve anything. Estimating the numbers of the citizens from the loudness of their shouts, they concluded that it would be no easy matter to enter the fray against such odds and to sack so great a city, the like of which they had never seen ...




Illustrated Manuscript: *The Sack of Thessalonica* by Skylitzes Matritensis, fol. 111v.

§29. But when daybreak came and announced the second day of fighting the *strategoi* [Leo Chitzilakes and Niketas] once more went to great lengths to put us on our mettle and prepare us for action. As the sun’s rays spread daylight over the air, the barbarians disembarked and launched a further attack against the wall. They deployed, distributing themselves along certain points in battle formation. And concentrating their greatest numbers on the openings in the wall where the gates stood, they brought the full weight of their weapons to bear against us. Some used bows and arrows, others the handmade thunder of stones. Others applied themselves to stone-throwing engines and sent giant hailstones of rock hurtling through the air ... Against the already-mentioned gate alone they placed seven stone-throwing engines heavily protected on all sides, which they had previously equipped specially for this purpose ...

§30... There were four gates in the wall on the east side of the city. Two of these, the previously mentioned Rome Gate, and the so-called Kassandreiotic Gate, they planned to burn down ...

§31. They set about their cunning plan in the following way: They found carts on which they placed upside down very small boats of the kind our fishermen use to fish with, adding a great quantity of firewood and a pile of brushwood. Then they sprinkled it all with pitch and sulphur, put their shoulders to the carts, set their wheels in motion and guided them with their hands until they reached the gates. Then they lit the wood from underneath, covering themselves with their shields, went back to the archers, having carried out their plan unnoticed. The fire took hold of the wood, feeding its flame until it flared up and caused the outer surface of the gates, which were iron-plated to turn white-hot. Then the white heat, spreading inwards, reduced the gate to a sheet of flame, so that in a short time they collapsed, which threw everyone into a state of abject fear. No sooner was the news reported throughout the city that the gates had been burnt down than the effect was as though everyone had been stabbed through the heart; such was the state of terror and dejection to which people were reduced, as the color drained from their cheeks, and as they abandoned abruptly every confident expectation. ... Nevertheless, now that the outer gates had been destroyed by fire, we quickly protected the inner ones with a new wall. And we put water in containers on the battlements and kept a



close watch in case the enemy should by any chance launch an attack against these gates too, so that when they tried to cause further damage, we might have some means of contending with the flames and preserving the gates from their treacherous designs. When they realized this, however, they no longer resorted to these particular evil tactics. Yet by resorting to other tactics still more cunning and more violent, they were destined to bring about our destruction by a means so effective and so far surpassing all contrivance that it was henceforth in no wise possible to stave it off ...

§32... Lighting lamps everywhere, they coupled the ships together in adjacent pairs and lashed their sides together with stout cables and iron chains so that they would not easily drift apart ... In this manner they devised towers that were more effective than those surmounting walls on dry land. In them they posted armed barbarians, an élite force mounted aloft on account of their physical strength and natural daring and destined to deal us the *coup de grace* ... thanks to the devilish invention already described, [they] had been placed on a higher level than the structure of the fortification, and they were thus provided with a useful vantage point for the accomplishment of their evil designs.

§34... the barbarians who were standing on top of the contraptions previously described uttered a loud and raucous cry, let fly with huge stones ... whose impact none could withstand, blew fire by means of air through tubes, hurled other receptacles also filled with fire into the fortifications, and struck such terror into the hearts of the defenders that they leaped down swiftly and took to their heels, leaving the entire stretch of wall deserted. When the enemy saw that they had achieved their end ... they sent against the fortifications a particularly daring barbarian with the complexion of an Ethiopian, who was apparently more frenzied than the others. He had a sword in his hand, which he brandished as he leaped down from the wall. Then he waited for the crowd to surge forward, trying to discover whether they had made off in feigned or in genuine flight ...

§35. Then, when the barbarians saw that the entire wall had been cleared and that the mass desertion of its defenders now guaranteed their safety, they sallied forth from the ships, leaped down on to the battlements and set fire to the gates, thus, signaling to the other ships that their mission had been accomplished ... Once the barbarians were inside, they slew all those whom they found writhing about on the ground in the vicinity of the wall, regardless of whether they found them prostrated and paralyzed with fear and so unable to move or languishing without any hope of flight owing to the injuries they had sustaining during their earlier falls. After that they split up, and moved down the main thoroughfares ...

§36...Some began to run off in the direction of their homes, others kept watching the roads. Some made for the holy churches, others hurried to get to the gates of the city ... They did not know how to react to the disaster, but in whatever part of the city they happened to be, they found themselves confronted with the prospect of death, since they knew full well that there was no longer any form of safety left for them to devise.

§38. Monks and nuns, who at a very early age had for love of virtue renounced all worldly attachments, living only for themselves and for God, came out of their cells, scattered about the streets of the city and sorrowfully bewailed the


general calamity. When I consider the many virtuous acts of those Nazirites which, each on his own account, they zealously pursued -- their all-night singing of the psalms, their consecrated virginity, their constant prayers and their incessant tears -- I am filled with amazement at how they failed to incline God's mercy towards us, how they failed to become pledges for the city's safety, how they failed to find their virtue rewarded with escape from danger. Instead, they were seized like sheep without a shepherd, each one of them fell victim to the sword and all were led to the slaughter to share the common lot of sinners.

Yet, I think that, as the psalmist says, *Their death was precious in the sight of the Lord* (Psalm 115:6), since in this regard, too, His wisdom honored His servants in order that they might crown a life of virtue with a martyr's death, that He might freely bestow on them the rewards of patient endurance and that recompense consisting of good things beyond all description. But the multitude of our transgressions rendered ineffective not only their petitions but even the intercession of martyrs, and so we suffered what we did in order that those who scorn God's commandments might learn that no saving power shall be able to rescue them in their excessive depravity from the threat of the Lord's wrath.

§39. As soon as the barbarians had penetrated the city, spreading themselves throughout it in all directions, there was wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter in which neither age nor sex was spared. They showed no mercy having long ago worked themselves up into a state of fury and insensate rage in which they thirsted for our destruction. The aged, those who were still in their prime, the young, the chance passer-by, all alike fell victim to their lust for blood. Nor did they dispatch them decently with mortal blows, but in order to prolong their agony they cut off their arms and legs and forced them to endure a lingering death. But even that was not enough to satisfy the fury which possessed them and they raged like maniacs at their inability to inflict death more than once. And in order to sate their bestial and uncontrollable appetite they did not at the outset of the disaster spare either women or even children, whose tender age often moves to pity the very stare of savage beasts. The blade fell equally on all, like a sickle on a grassy plain mowing down all that comes into its path, so that in one short moment what had been a crowded and populous city was reduced to a wilderness ...

§43... There were five of us in all: my father and I together with the two brothers already mentioned and another person also related to us, all five clerics and holding the position of *Lector*. We rested there a while, and as we reflected on the imminent prospect of death by the sword, we began to weep, each one bemoaning both his individual fate and our mutual separation. The first to give voice to lamentation was my father, a man already advanced in years and much practiced in the art of eloquence ...

§44... "For who, even if he had a heart of stone, would not be carried away by his present suffering into bewailing his own involvement and that of his family in so overwhelming a catastrophe? But there is nothing that God wills and brings to pass among men which is not designed to serve some useful purpose. Perhaps it is on account of our wickedness that such a death has been reserved for us. Behold, retribution for the way we lived stands visibly before us, demanding that our



lives be forfeit to the violence of the sword! But He who has permitted that we should suffer these things and endure this violent separation from the body and that we shall be made to pay in the judgment to come the full reckoning for our sins, He is not unjust. Therefore, stand your ground courageously and place all your hopes on Him alone who has the power to forgive sins on earth. And should we have to suffer some painful ordeal for the sake of our faith in Him, let us bear it without flinching and not be afraid of this bodily death, which, if not in this way, then at all events in some other way one must endure and pay one's debt to human nature. Let being deprived of our lives, therefore be in our eyes a cause for gratitude, so that we may not simply die but may do so on the grounds of our hope in the bliss of the life to come." With these words he sought to train us to endure death by the sword and inspired us to hope for martyrdom.

§52. Our foe was accompanied by a large retinue of murderous fiends. He leaped straightaway on to the consecrated altar, on which the priests perform the mystic rites of divine service ... Seizing my father and my brother and instructing our captors that we were to be held at the entrance, he signaled to the barbarians to start a massacre. With the speed of savage wolves falling upon their prey they butchered their unhappy victims without mercy. Then, still boiling with rage, they looked to that terrible judge to discover what he would have them do with us. But whereas he had so far prevented them from attacking us [because of the ransom of silver and gold "we" had given him], it seemed to us in the place where we were being detained that my father and my brother had perished in the general slaughter and that we were the only ones whose lives it had been decided to spare. They, on the other hand, being held on the altar, had been forced to the same conclusion with regard to our fate. However, we had no means of clarifying the situation and putting a stop to the anxiety which we felt on one another's behalf. When, in fact the slaughter of those unhappy wretches was concluded, and the entire floor was littered with corpses which swam in pools of blood, the foul murderer was unable to get out. So he gave orders to have the dead bodies stacked on top of one another along the alleyways on either side of the church. As soon as that was done, he leaped down from the altar, and taking my father and brother once more by the arm, he came over to us. So black was the darkness that engulfed our souls at those harrowing and horrific sights (at what we had seen happening to them and had imagined would happen also to us) that even though we were the sole survivors of such massive and indiscriminate slaughter our expressions showed no signs of visible relief ...

§54. For we knew that we need fear no further on account of our promise, and that we might, if anything, receive more sympathetic treatment in view of the scale of our contribution. And in fact, as soon as they laid hands on the treasure their mood changed from anger to pleasure and they told us not to worry. "With these things," they said, "you have guaranteed your safety, and it is thanks to them that we have granted you your lives today. But let us go to the commander of the army so that you may receive from him too a full guarantee of safety" ...

§55. "The fact that you were unarmed when you encountered your captors and the vast amount of treasure that has been displayed to my view have granted you your life, a

rare boon that most men may not hope for, and you have no further grounds for fearing death by treachery or any other form of molestation at the hands of my subjects. So, think what is best for you and entertain good hopes. We are bound for Syria and when we get there I shall send you immediately to the city of Tarsos in Kilikia [Tarsus in Cilicia] to be held along with the others who are in detention there until the currently awaited exchange of prisoners takes place. You have as hostages for your safety those fellow Hagarenes of ours who have on numerous occasions been captured by the Romans. When they come home, you too will be set free and will regain, each one of you, his homeland.

§61. In this way all the ships (fifty-four of them in all as I pointed out) were loaded up. But there was still a large number of people left over who had also been designated for transportation. Accordingly, the barbarians got together the ships belonging to the city, which our merchants occasionally used for importing grain in, and also those which we had sunk at the entrance to the harbor, hauling these latter up with the aid of an ingenious contrivance worked by windlasses which were fitted to the ramparts and made to revolve and draw up by means of suspended cables the sunken hull. In this way, therefore, they created a considerable number of additional ships and embarked everybody, so that no one for whom transportation had been intended was in fact left out. And out of all this crowd I doubt there was even one boy who had grown his first beard or one girl who was really a woman. They were all of tender age whatever their sex, and the youngest of them were mere babes. It was impossible for anyone who paused to consider them individually not to break down at the sight of their misfortune.

§68. In this way we came to an island called Patmos, where we spent six days and endured and experienced every kind of hardship. The place was waterless and the prisoners were in consequence subjected to the ravages of thirst. We were not, in fact, given enough water to keep us alive, but just enough to cause the ever-present threat of death to linger ... untold numbers of people were dying in droves every day.

§69. Another indescribable evil was the huge number of lice, which batted like a creeping death upon the lives of all ... I am filled with amazement at how we had the fortitude to bear so abundant and so varied an array of misfortunes, we who had the physical constitution of men with a dainty and luxurious lifestyle and one quite unaccustomed to the rigors and brutalities inflicted by pirates ... But it is my opinion that God's providence, which takes care of all things in a manner beyond all human comprehension, fortified us to endure all these tribulations in order that, later on, we might discover from what ills we had, at that time and against all odds, been delivered and that we might, by our own example, teach both ourselves and others a salutary lesson.

§72... What must they all have felt in such a situation, when they were being led off to slavery in a foreign land, where the worship of our faith is treated as an abomination and the most senseless passions are revered, where whoredom is held in high repute, where madness is honored and shamelessness prized, where males are made to play the part of females and creation is violated, and everything is topsy-turvy, confused, distorted, and directed towards evil ... Yet they bore everything, for God provided the nobility of soul to cope with each eventuality and regulated every detail they

## THE GOOD WORD

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bore everything, for God provided the nobility of soul to cope with each eventuality and regulated every detail according to His will.

§73 When they were once more separated from their relatives as a result of this order, they were made to sit under surveillance in various places until a second order came, to the effect that they must all be counted and that individuals were to be assigned to each ship on the basis of their particular physique and of the age group to which they belonged. The stated objective of this arrangement was to ensure an even distribution and unvarying proportion of prisoners to barbarians on board the ships. Accordingly, they first counted the entire crowd of people. it totaled twenty-two thousand, out of all of whom, with the exception of those of us were were being detained pending the exchange of prisoners, there was not a single boy who had grown his first beard, nor, in all those thousands, was there even one woman of mature years ... the barbarians who inhabit Crete bought a considerable number of them and were not unwilling to pay a lot of money for them in what was no random or casual purchase but a shrewd and extremely lucrative transaction. They knew in fact that they would get back many times what they had paid as soon as the time came for the exchange of prisoners and they awaited the return of their fellow countrymen who had been taken prisoner by the Romans. In fact the ransoming of prisoners is not conducted by them in the same way as it is in Syria; but a long-standing custom has in the course of time established itself amongst them whereby they rescue their barbarian, regardless of who he was, in exchange for the man whom they are holding, whilst demanding back twice the price which they paid for the man. For this reason the Cretans bought many prisoners, since they had discovered a means of turning our misfortune to their account. This went on for ten whole days, as the usual ships

kept taking on board their human merchandise and conveying it to the city. My brother's wife was among those sold, an occurrence which caused us considerable anguish. But my mother and my wife together with two children (the third child had perished at sea) and also my poor unhappy brother and our youngest sister happened by some dispensation of Providence to be in a ship from Sidon, and consequently destined for transportation to Syria ...

§77... Then we put out to sea again and reached Tripoli ... They brought us out too, as a sort of victory trophy, and paraded us in front of everybody and made a public display of our misfortune. How they shouted and jumped up and down when we reached the entrance to the city, openly gloating at our humiliation. It hurt us more than anything else and we felt it unbearable ... and we bowed our heads to the ground and prayed to God with tears in our eyes that our misfortunes might finally cease ...

§79... Here ends the memorable account of John Kaminiates, a Kouboukleisios [ecclesiastic chamberlain] of the most holy metropolis of Thessaloniki. Everyone, especially every native of Thessaloniki, ought to read it through carefully and attentively, since it is most excellent and most profitably to the good of one's soul. ❖ ❖ ❖



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