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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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Section VII.

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VIII. Thus we see what opportunities the learned and inquisitive heathens had of informing themselves of the truth of our Saviour's history, during the three first Centuries, especially as they lay nearer one than another to the fountain-head: beside which, there were many uncontroverted traditions, records of Christianity, and particular histories, that then threw light into these matters, but are now entirely lost, by which, at that time, any appearance of contradiction, or seeming difficulties, in the history of the Evangelists, were fully cleared up and explained: though we meet with fewer appearances of this nature in the history of our Saviour, as related by the four Evangelists, than in the accounts of any other person, published by such a number of different historians who lived at so great a distance from the present age.

IX. Among those records which are lost, and were of great use to the primitive Christians, is the letter to *Tiberius*, which I have already mentioned; that of *Marcus Aurelius*, which I shall take notice of hereafter; the writings of *Hegeſippus*, who had drawn down the history of Christianity to his own time, which was not beyond the middle of the second Century; the genuine *Sibylline* oracles, which in the first ages of the Church were easily distinguished from the spurious; the records preserved in particular Churches, with many other of the same nature.

SECTION VII.

- I. *The sight of miracles in those ages a further confirmation of Pagan Philosophers in the Christian faith.*
- II. *The credibility of such miracles.*
- III. *A particular instance.*
- IV. *Martyrdom, why considered as a standing miracle.*
- V. *Primitive Christians thought many of the Martyrs were supported by a miraculous power:*
- VI. *Proved from the nature of their sufferings.*
- VII. *How Martyrs further induced the Pagans to embrace Christianity.*

I **T**HERE were other means, which I find had a great influence on the learned of the three first Centuries, to create and confirm in them the belief of our blessed Saviour's history, which ought not to be passed over in silence. The first was, the opportunity they enjoyed

joyed of examining those miracles, which were on several occasions performed by Christians, and appeared in the Church, more or less, during these first ages of Christianity. These had great weight with the men I am now speaking of, who, from learned *Pagans*, became fathers of the Church; for they frequently boast of them in their writings, as attestations given by God himself to the truth of their religion.

II. At the same time, that these learned men declare how disingenuous, base and wicked it would be, how much beneath the dignity of Philosophy, and contrary to the precepts of Christianity, to utter falsehoods or forgeries in the support of a cause, though never so just in it self, they confidently assert this miraculous power, which then subsisted in the Church, nay tell us that they themselves had been eye-witnesses of it at several times, and in several instances; nay appeal to the heathens themselves for the truth of several facts they relate, nay challenge them to be present at their assemblies, and satisfy themselves, if they doubt of it; nay we find that *Pagan* Authors have in some instances confessed this miraculous power.

III. The letter of *Marcus Aurelius*, whose army was preserved by a refreshing shower, at the same time that his enemies were discomfited by a storm of lightning, and which the heathen historians themselves allow to have been supernatural and the effect of magic: I say, this letter, which ascribed this unexpected assistance to the prayers of the Christians, who then served in the army, would have been thought an unquestionable testimony of the miraculous power I am speaking of, had it been still preserved. It is sufficient for me in this place to take notice, that this was one of those miracles which had its influence on the learned Converts, because it is related by *Tertullian*, and the very letter appealed to. When these learned men saw sickness and frenzy cured, the dead raised, the oracles put to silence, the *Demons* and evil spirits forced to confess themselves no Gods, by persons who only made use of prayer and adjurations in the name of their crucified Saviour; how could they doubt of their Saviour's power on the like occasions, as represented to them by the traditions of the Church, and the writings of the Evangelists?

IV. Under this head, I cannot omit that which appears to me a standing miracle in the three first Centuries, I mean that amazing and supernatural courage or patience, which was shewn by innumerable multitudes of Martyrs, in those slow and painful torments that were inflicted on them. I cannot conceive a man placed in the burning iron chair at *Lyons*, amid the insults and mockeries of a crowded Amphitheatre, and still keeping his seat;

or stretched upon a grate of iron, over coals of fire, and breathing out his soul among the exquisite sufferings of such a tedious execution, rather than renounce his religion, or blaspheme his Saviour. Such tryals seem to me above the strength of human nature, and able to over-bear duty, reason, faith, conviction, nay, and the most absolute certainty of a future state. Humanity, unassisted in an extraordinary manner, must have shaken off the present pressure, and have delivered it self out of such a dreadful distress, by any means that could have been suggested to it. We can easily imagine, that many persons, in so good a cause, might have laid down their lives at the gibbet, the stake, or the block: but to expire leisurely among the most exquisite tortures, when they might come out of them, even by a mental reservation, or an hypocrisy which was not without a possibility of being followed by repentance and forgiveness, has something in it, so far beyond the force and natural strength of mortals, that one cannot but think there was some miraculous power to support the sufferer.

V. We find the Church of *Smyrna*, in that admirable letter which gives an account of the death of *Polycarp* their beloved Bishop, mentioning the cruel torments of other early Martyrs for Christianity, are of opinion, that our Saviour stood by them in a vision, and personally conversed with them, to give them strength and comfort during the bitterness of their long continued agonies; and we have the story of a young man, who, having suffered many tortures, escaped with life, and told his fellow-christians, that the pain of them had been rendered tolerable, by the presence of an Angel who stood by him, and wiped off the tears and sweat, which ran down his face whilst he lay under his sufferings. We are assured at least that the first Martyr for Christianity was encouraged in his last moments, by a vision of that divine person, for whom he suffered, and into whose presence he was then hastening.

VI. Let any man calmly lay his hand upon his heart, and after reading these terrible conflicts in which the ancient Martyrs and Confessors were engaged, when they passed through such new inventions and varieties of pain, as tired their tormentors; and ask himself, however zealous and sincere he is in his religion, whether under such acute and lingering tortures he could still have held fast his integrity, and have professed his faith to the last, without a supernatural assistance of some kind or other. For my part, when I consider that it was not an unaccountable obstinacy in a single man, or in any particular set of men, in some extraordinary juncture; but that there were multitudes of each sex, of every age, of different

rent countries and conditions, who for near 300 years together made this glorious confession of their faith, in the midst of tortures, and in the hour of death: I must conclude, that they were either of another make than men are at present, or that they had such miraculous supports as were peculiar to those times of Christianity, when without them perhaps the very name of it might have been extinguished.

VII. It is certain, that the deaths and sufferings of the primitive Christians had a great share in the conversion of those learned *Pagans*, who lived in the ages of Persecution, which with some intervals and abatements lasted near 300 years after our Saviour. *Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Lactantius, Arnobius*, and others, tell us, that this first of all alarmed their curiosity, roused their attention, and made them seriously inquisitive into the nature of that religion, which could endue the mind with so much strength, and overcome the fear of death, nay raise an earnest desire of it, though it appeared in all its terrors. This they found had not been effected by all the doctrines of those Philosophers, whom they had thoroughly studied, and who had been labouring at this great point. The sight of these dying and tormented Martyrs engaged them to search into the history and doctrines of him for whom they suffered. The more they searched, the more they were convinced; till their conviction grew so strong, that they themselves embraced the same truths, and either actually laid down their lives, or were always in a readiness to do it, rather than depart from them.

SECTION VIII.

- I. *The completion of our Saviour's prophecies confirmed Pagans in their belief of the Gospel.*
- II. *Origen's observation on that of his Disciples being brought before Kings and Governours;*
- III. *On their being persecuted for their religion;*
- IV. *On their preaching the Gospel to all nations;*
- V. *On the destruction of Jerufalem, and ruin of the Jewish oeconomy.*
- VI. *These arguments strengthened by what has happened since Origen's time.*