1. **THE GOAL AND THE END OF THE MONK**

1. **WHEN** I was in the desert of Scete, where are the most excellent monastic fathers and where all perfection flourishes, in company with the holy father Germanus (who had since the earliest days and commencement of our spiritual service been my closest companion both in the coenobium and in the desert, so that to show the harmony of our friendship and aims, everybody would say that a single heart and soul existed in our two bodies), I sought out Abbot Moses, who was eminent amid those splendid flowers, not only in practical but also in contemplative excellence, in my anxiety to be grounded by his instruction. [...] 

2. **ALL** the arts and sciences, said he, have some goal or mark; and end or aim of their own, on which the diligent pursuer of each art has his eye, and so endures all sorts of toils and dangers and losses, cheerfully and with equanimity, e.g., the farmer, shunning neither at one time the scorching heat of the sun, nor at another the frost and cold, cleaves the earth unweariedly, and again and again subjects the clods of his field to his ploughshare, while he keeps before him his goal; viz., by diligent labour to break it up small like fine sand, and to clear it of all briers, and free it from all weeds, as he believes that in no other way can he gain his ultimate end, which is to secure a good harvest, and a large crop; on which he can either live himself free from care, or can increase his possessions. Again, when his barn is well stocked he is quite ready to empty it, and with incessant labor to commit the seed to the crumbling furrow, thinking nothing of the present lessening of his stores in view of the future harvest. [...] 

And our profession too has its own goal and end, for which we undergo all sorts of toils not merely without weariness but actually with delight; on account of which the want of food in fasting is no trial to us, the weariness of our vigils becomes a delight; reading and constant meditation on the Scriptures does not pall upon us; and further incessant toil, and self-denial, and the privation of all things, and the horrors also of this vast desert have no terrors for us. And doubtless for this it was that you yourselves despised the love of kinsfolk, and scorned your fatherland, and the delights of this world, and passed through so many countries, in order that you might come to us, plain and simple folk as we are, living in this wretched state in the desert. [...] 

4. He proceeded: The first thing, as I said, in all the arts and sciences is to have some goal, i.e., a mark for the mind, and constant mental purpose, for unless a man keeps this before him with all diligence and persistence, he will never succeed in arriving at the ultimate aim and the gain which he desires. For, as I said, the farmer who has for his aim to live free from care and with plenty, while his crops are springing has this as his immediate object and goal; viz., to keep his field clear from all brambles, and weeds, and does not fancy that he can otherwise ensure wealth and a peaceful end, unless he first secures by
some plan of work and hope that which he is anxious to obtain. [...] And so the end of our way of life is indeed the kingdom of God.

But what is the (immediate) goal you must earnestly ask, for if it is not in the same way discovered by us, we shall strive and wear ourselves out to no purpose, because a man who is travelling in a wrong direction, has all the trouble and gets none of the good of his journey. And when we stood gaping at this remark, the old man proceeded: The end of our profession indeed, as I said, is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven: but the immediate aim or goal, is purity of heart, without which no one can gain that end: fixing our gaze then steadily on this goal, as if on a definite mark, let us direct our course as straight towards it as possible, and if our thoughts wander somewhat from this, let us revert to our gaze upon it, and check them accurately as by a sure standard, which will always bring back all our efforts to this one mark, and will show at once if our mind has wandered ever so little from the direction marked out for it.

5. As those, whose business it is to use weapons of war, whenever they want to show their skill in their art before a king of this world, try to shoot their arrows or darts into certain small targets which have the prizes painted on them; for they know that they cannot in any other way than by the line of their aim secure the end and the prize they hope for, which they will only then enjoy when they have been able to hit the mark set before them; but if it happens to be withdrawn from their sight, however much in their want of skill their aim may vainly deviate from the straight path, yet they cannot perceive that they have strayed from the direction of the intended straight line because they have no distinct mark to prove the skillfulness of their aim, or to show up its badness: and therefore while they shoot their missiles idly into space, they cannot see how they have gone wrong or how utterly at fault they are, since no mark is their accuser, showing how far they have gone astray from the right direction; nor can an unsteady, look help them to correct and restore the straight line enjoined on them. So then the end indeed which we have set before us is, as the Apostle says, eternal life, as he declares, "having indeed your fruit unto holiness, and the end eternal life;" but the immediate goal is purity of heart, which he not unfairly terms "sanctification," without which the afore-mentioned end cannot be gained; as if he had said in other words, having your immediate goal in purity of heart, but the end life eternal. Of which goal the same blessed Apostle teaches us, [...] saying as follows, "Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those that are before, I press toward the mark, lot the prize of the high calling of the Lord."

[...] Whatever then can help to guide us to this object; viz., purity of heart, we must follow with all our might, but whatever hinders us from it, we must shun as a dangerous and hurtful thing. For, for this we do and endure all things, for this we make light of our kinsfolk, our country, honours, riches, the delights of this world, and all kinds of pleasures, namely in order that we may retain a lasting purity of heart. And so when this object is set before us, we shall always direct our actions and thoughts straight towards the attainment of it; for if it be not constantly: fixed before our eyes, it will not only make all our toils vain.
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and useless, and force them: to be endured to no purpose and without any reward, but it will also excite all kinds of thoughts opposed to one another. For the mind, which has no fixed point to which it may return, and on which it may chiefly fasten, is sure to rove about from hour to hour and minute to minute in all sorts of wandering: thoughts, and from those things which come to it from outside, to be constantly changed into that state which first offers itself to it.

6. For hence it arises that in the case of some who have despised the greatest possessions of this world, and not only large sums of gold and silver, but also large properties, we have seen them afterwards disturbed and excited over a knife, or pencil, or pin, or pen. Whereas if they kept their gaze steadily fixed out of a pure heart they would certainly never allow such a thing to happen for trifles, while in order that they might not suffer it in the case of great and precious riches they chose rather to renounce them altogether. For often too some guard their books so jealously that they will not allow them to be even slightly moved or touched by any one else, and from this fact they meet with occasions of impatience and death, which give them warning of the need of acquiring the requisite patience and love; and when they have given up all their wealth for the love of Christ, yet as they preserve their former disposition in the matter of trifles, and are sometimes quickly upset about them, they become in all points barren and unfruitful, as those who are without the charity of which the Apostle speaks: and this the blessed Apostle foresaw in spirit, and “though,” says he, “I give all my goods to feed the poor, and give my body to be burned, but have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.” And from this it clearly follows that perfection is not arrived at simply by self-denial, and the giving up of all our goods, and the casting away of honours, unless there is that charity, the details of which the Apostle describes, which consists in purity of heart alone. For “not to be envious,” “not to be puffed up, not to be angry, not to do any wrong, not to seek one’s own, not to rejoice in iniquity, not to think evil” etc. what is all this except ever to offer to God a perfect and clean heart, and to keep it free from all disturbances?

7. Everything should be done and sought after by us for the sake of this. For this we must seek for solitude, for this we know that we ought to submit to fastings, vigils, toils, bodily [nakedness, reading, and all other virtues that through them we may be enabled to prepare our heart and to keep it unharmed by all evil passions, and resting on these steps to mount to the perfection of charity, and with regard to these observances, if by accident we have been employed in some good and useful occupation and have been unable to carry out our customary discipline, we should not be overcome by vexation or anger, or passion, with the object of overcoming which, we were going to do that which we have omitted. For the gain from fasting will not balance the loss from anger, nor is the profit from reading so great as the harm which results from despising a brother. Those things which are of secondary importance, such as fastings, vigils, withdrawal from the world, meditation on Scripture, we ought to practice with a view to our main object, i.e., purity of heart, which is charity, and we ought not
on their account to drive away this main virtue, for as long as it is still
found in us intact and unharmed, we shall not be hurt if any of the things
which are of secondary importance are necessarily omitted; since it will
not be of the slightest use to have done everything, if this main reason of
which we have spoken be removed, for the sake of which everything is to
be done. For on this account one is anxious to secure and provide for one’s
self the implements for any branch of work, not simply to possess them
to no purpose, nor as if one made the profit and advantage, which is
looked for from them, to consist in the bare fact of possession but that by
using them, one may effectually secure practical knowledge and the end of
that particular art of which they are auxiliaries. Therefore fastings, vigils,
meditation on the Scriptures, self-denial, and the abnegation of all
possessions are not perfection, but aids to perfection: because the end of
that science does not lie in these, but by means of these we arrive at the
end. He then will practice these exercises to no purpose, who is contented
with these as if they were the highest good, and has fixed the purpose of
his heart simply on them, and does not extend his efforts towards reaching
the end, on account of which these should be sought: for he possesses
indeed the implements of his art, but is ignorant of the end, in which all
that is valuable resides. Whatever then can disturb that purity and peace of
mind — even though it may seem useful and valuable — should be
shunned as really hurtful, for by this rule we shall succeed in escaping
harm from mistakes and vagaries, and make straight for the desired end and
reach it.

8. This then should be our main effort: and this steadfast purpose of heart
we should constantly aspire after; viz., that the soul may ever cleave to
God and to heavenly things. Whatever is alien to this, however great it
may be, should be given the second place, or even treated as of no
consequence, or perhaps as hurtful. We have an excellent illustration of
this state of mind and condition in the gospel in the case of Martha and
Mary: for when Martha was performing a service that was certainly a
sacred one, since she was ministering to the Lord and His disciples, and
Mary being intent only on spiritual instruction was clinging close to the
feet of Jesus which she kissed and anointed with the ointment of a good
confession, she is shown by the Lord to have chosen the better part, and
one which should not be taken away from her: for when Martha was
toiling with pious care, and was cumbered about her service, seeing that of
herself alone she was insufficient for such service she asks for the help of
her sister from the Lord, saying: “Do you not care that my sister has left
me to serve alone: ask her therefore to help me” — certainly it was
to no unworthy work, but to a praiseworthy service that she summoned
her: and yet what does she hear from the Lord? “Martha, Martha, you are
anxious and troubled about many things: but few things are needful, or
only one. Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away
from her.” You see then that the Lord makes the chief good consist in
meditation; i.e., in divine contemplation: whence we see that all other
virtues should be put in the second place, even though we admit that they
are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for
the sake of this one thing. For when the Lord says: “You are careful and troubled about many things, but few things are needful or only one,” He makes the chief good consist not in practical work however praiseworthy and rich in fruits it may be, but in contemplation of Him, which indeed is simple and “but one”; declaring that “few things” are needful for perfect bliss, i.e., that contemplation which is first secured by reflecting on a few saints: from the contemplation of whom, he who has made some progress rises and attains by God’s help to that which is termed “one thing,” i.e., the consideration of God alone, so as to get beyond those actions and services of Saints, and feed on the beauty and knowledge of God alone. “Mary” therefore “chose the good, part, which shall not be taken away from her. And this must be more carefully considered. For when He says that Mary chose the good part, although He says nothing of Martha, and certainly does not appear to blame her, yet in praising the one, He implies that the other is inferior. Again when He says “which shall not be taken away from her” He shows that from the other her portion can be taken away (for a bodily ministry cannot last forever with a man), but teaches that this one’s desire can never have an end.

9. To which we, being deeply moved, replied what then? will the effort of fasting, diligence in reading, works of mercy, justice, piety, and kindness, be taken away from us, and not continue with the doers of them, especially since the Lord Himself promises the reward of the kingdom of heaven to these works, when He says: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me to drink;” etc. How then shall these works be taken away, which admit the doers of them into the kingdom of heaven?

10. MOSES. I did not say that the reward for a good work would be taken away, as the Lord Himself says: “Whosoever shall give to one of the least of these, a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward:” but I maintain that the doing of a thing, which either bodily necessity, or the onslaught of the flesh, or the inequalities of this world, compel to be done, will be taken away. […]

As long then as this inequality lasts in this world, this sort of work will be needful and useful to the man that practices it, as it brings to a good purpose and pious will the reward of an eternal inheritance: but it will come to an end in the life to come, where equality will reign, when there will be no longer inequality, on account of which these things must be done, but all men will pass from these manifold practical works to the love of God, and contemplation of heavenly things in continual purity of heart: to which those men who are urgent in devoting themselves to knowledge and purifying the heart, have chosen to give themselves up with all their might and main, betaking themselves, while they are still in the flesh, to that duty, in which they are to continue, when they have laid aside corruption, and when they come to that promise of the Lord the Saviour, which says “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”
11. AND why do you wonder that those duties enumerated above will cease, when the holy Apostle tells us that even the higher gifts of the Holy Spirit will pass away: and points out that charity alone will abide without end, saying “whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease: whether there be knowledge, it will Come to an end,” but of this he says “Charity never faileth.” For all gifts are given for a time as use and need require, but when the dispensation is ended they will without doubt presently pass away: but love will never be destroyed. For not only does it work usefully in us in this world; but also in that to come, when the burden of bodily needs is cast off, it will continue in far greater vigour and excellence, and will never be weakened by any defect, but by means of its perpetual incorruption will cling to God more intently and earnestly.

12. GERMANUS. Who then, while he is burdened with our frail flesh, can be always so intent on this contemplation, as never to think about the arrival of a brother, or visiting the sick, or manual labour, or at least about showing kindness to strangers and visitors? And lastly, who is not interrupted by providing for the body, and looking after it? Or how and in what way can the mind cling to the invisible and incomprehensible God, this we should like to learn.

12. MOSES. To cling to God continually, and as you say inseparably to hold fast to meditation on Him, is impossible for a man while still in this weak flesh of ours. But we ought to be aware on what we should have the purpose of our mind fixed, and to what goal we should ever recall the gaze of our soul: and when the mind can secure this it may rejoice; and grieve and sigh when it is withdrawn from this, and as often as it discovers itself to have fallen away from gazing on Him, it should admit that it has lapsed from the highest good, considering that even a momentary departure from gazing on Christ is fornication. And when our gaze has wandered ever so little from Him, let us turn the eyes of the soul back to Him, and recall our mental gaze as in a perfectly straight direction. For everything depends on the inward frame of mind. […]

JOHN CASSIAN, Conferences, 1 (Abba Moses), 1-13