

Jerome, *Letter 3* (to Rufinus, ca. 374 CE)

**1** **1** That God bestows more than is requested, and often grants those things "which the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, and which have not entered into human hearts" (1 Cor 2:9), I knew before from the authority of the Sacred Books; nevertheless, in my own case, I have now proven it, dearest Rufinus. Indeed I, who believed it already a bold wish, should I by some chance deserve the literary image of your presence, I hear that you are penetrating the inner reaches of Egypt (*Aegypti secreta penetrare*), that you visit the chorus of monks and move amongst that heavenly family on earth. **2** Oh, if only the Lord Jesus Christ would grant that I be transported suddenly, like Philip to the eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) or Habakkuk to Daniel (Dan 14:33-39), how closely I would cling to your neck with embraces, and that mouth, which has been both foolish and wise with me, how I would press kisses upon it! But since I am not worthy, and my weak little body, even healthy, has been broken by recurring illness, I send these substitutes in my place to you, the loving embrace of which will draw you to me.

**2** **1** The first delight of unexpected joy was announced by Heliodorus. I wasn't sure, even though I wanted to be sure, especially since he even said he heard it from someone else, and the novelty of the thing detracted from its reliability. Again--hanging by a wish, mind wavering--a certain Alexandrian monk, who had been sent forth by in pious obedience of the people to the Egyptian confessors (indeed, by will already martyrs), made me believe the news by his very presence. **2** I confess even in this my opinion wavered. For even though he didn't know your name or country, in this it seemed to agree at least which someone else had already hinted at. Then the full weight of the truth burst forth: the report came in over and over, from a

hoard of travelers: Rufinus is indeed at Nitria and has arrived at the feet of the blessed Macarius. **3** At this point I relaxed all the constraints of belief, and then grieved that I was sick. If the force of my weakened body by some fetter had not impeded me, not the burning of midsummer nor a sea always uncertain for sailors have had the power to stop me from going forth with faithful haste. May you believe, brother, that I desire this: not so does the storm-tossed sailor gaze upon the port; not so do the thirsting fields long for storms; not so does the anxious mother await her son, sitting along the curved coast (cf. Horace, *Carmina* 4.5.14).

**3** **1** After that sudden whirlwind rolled me from your side, after that impious wrenching pulled apart that which held together our affection, then "a dark-blue stormcloud rested over my head," then "seas and sky all around" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 3.194, 5.9). At length as I wandered in uncertain pilgrimage, Thrace, Pontus and Bithynia, the whole path of Galatia and Cappadocia, and the land of Cilicia with burning heat shattered me. Syria came forth like a most faithful port in a storm. There, having experiences whatever illness was possible, I lost one of my two eyes: for Innocentius, that part of my very soul, was unexpectedly snatched away by a burning fever. **2** Now I enjoy my one and only eye, Evagrius, to whom I, always ill, have become a heap of toil. Also Hylas, the servant of holy Melania, was with me, who, by the purity of his conduct, has cleansed the stain of servitude; but that one reopened the scar not yet healed. Yet since we are forbidden by the apostle's word to mourn for those who are sleeping, and since the excessive force of my mourning has been tempered by the arrival of this joyful news, let me inform you so that, if you don't know it, you may learn and, if you have already learned of it, we can rejoice equally.

**4** **1** Your Bonosus--well, no less my own--more truly, I should say, *our*--he even now climbs the ladder Jacob envisioned in his sleep (Gen 28:12): he bears his own cross (cf. Matt 16:24), he thinks not of today (Matt 6:34) nor does he look back behind himself. He sows in tears, so that he may reap in joy, and like the mystery of Moses, he raises up a serpent in the desert (cf. Num 21:9). Those fables invented falsely by Greeks as well as Romans make way for this true story. **2** Behold: a young man formed with us in the noble arts of the secular world, who had abundant wealth, exceeding honor among his peers, has left his mother forsaken, with his sisters and his dearest brother; he has installed himself--like some new settler in Paradise--on a shipwrecked island in a roaring sea, whose harsh crags and bare rocks and isolation are fearsome. There are no farmers, no monks, not even that little fellow whom you knew, Onesimus, whom he enjoyed like a brother, remains his sidekick in such a wasteland. **3** He is alone there (except insofar as he is never alone, with Christ as his companion), he sees God's glory, which even the apostles did not see except in the wilderness (*nisi in deserto*). He looks down on no towering cities, but he has given his name for the roster of a New City. His limbs bristle in misshapen sackcloth, yet all the better will he be seized up into the clouds to meet Christ (1 Thess 4:16). He takes delight in no pleasant canals, but drinks the water of life from the side of the Lord (John 19:34). Set this before your eyes, my sweetest friend, and make the whole thing present in your mind and soul; then will you be able to praise the victory, when you acknowledge how hard he is fighting. **4** A raging sea roars around the whole island and the water echoes as it dashes against the winding hills and cliffs. No blade of grass greens the land; no verdant field thickens up shadows; broken crags shut him in like some horrible prison. But he, secure, brave, and fully armed with the apostle, now

listens to God, as he pores over the Scriptures, and now he speaks with God, when he prays to the Lord, and perhaps--following John's example--he sees something while he tarries on that island.

**5** **1** What tricks--do you think--the Devil is contriving? What ambushes--do you reckon--he is preparing? Perhaps, recalling an older deceit, he will try to persuade him with hunger. But the answer has already been given to him, that a person does not live by bread alone (Matt 4:4). Perhaps he will set forth wealth and glory; but it will be said to him: "Those who desire to be made rich, they fall into traps and temptations" (1 Tim 6:9), and "all glory is to me in Christ" (1 Cor 1:31). He will strike limbs, weak from fasts, with a heavy illness; but he will be repelled with apostolic speech: "When I am ill, I am stronger" and "strength is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). He will threaten death, but he will hear: "I wish to be dissolved and to be with Christ" (Phil 1:23). He will brandish fiery darts, but they will be received by the shield of faith. And, to be brief, Satan will attack him, but Christ will defend him. **2** Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus, that on this day I have someone who can pray to you on my behalf! You yourself know (indeed, the hearts of every person lie open to you, you who expose the heart's secrets, you who see in the depths the prophet shut inside the belly of so great a beast!) how he and I both grew to flowering maturity from tender childhood, in the bosom of the same nurses, how the same embraces of carriers caressed us, and, after our studies in Rome we enjoyed similar hospitality, and the same food, on the half-barbarian banks of the Rhine; how I first began to want to serve you, recall, I ask, how that fighter of yours was formerly a young recruit with me. I possess the promise of your majesty: "whoever teaches and does not do, he shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt 5:19). **3** May he enjoy the crown of virtue and for his daily martyrdoms

may he follow the white-stoled Lamb (cf. Rev 7:9), but as for me--“there are many mansions in my Father’s house, and one star differs from another in its brightness” (John 14:2, 1 Cor 15:41)--as for me, grant me that I may be able to lift my head to the level of the saints’ heels! Although *I* desired it, that one has achieved it: pardon me, since I could not satisfy, and grant him the prize which he has earned!

**6 1** Perhaps I have dragged out my speech more than a letter’s brevity should allow, but this usually happens to me whenever any praise is to be spoken about our Bonosus. But let me return to my point, from which I set out: I implore you not to let a friend--daily sought, rarely found, kept with difficulty--pass out of sight, out of mind. To whoever will allow, let gold dazzle and gleaming gems in packages beam forth borne on glitzy litters: love cannot be valued; affection has no price; friendship which can desist was never really there.