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## War and peace

### The sacking of the city of Rome

The sacking of the city of Rome by Alaric in 410 led pagans to blame Christianity for the loss of the gods' favour. Even some Christians sympathised with this view, while others were led to question the justice of God. Augustine's *City of God* will eventually provide an extensive reply to the first problem; here he deals more immediately and more concisely with the second.

### The sacking of the city of Rome

410/411

(1) Let us now turn our attention to the first reading, from the holy prophet Daniel. There we heard him praying; and we were amazed to hear him confessing his own sins, and not just the sins of the people. Now after this prayer – and his words show that he was not simply pleading but also confessing – after this prayer, then, he said, *When I was praying and confessing my sins, and the sins of my people, to the Lord my God* [Dan 9.20]. Can anyone claim to be sinless when Daniel confesses his own sins? Surely it was to a proud man that the following words were addressed through the prophet Ezekiel: *Are you wiser than Daniel?* [Ezek 28.3].

Again, God placed Daniel among the three holy men whom he used as symbols of the three types of human beings he intends to free when the great trial comes upon the human race; he added that no one would be set free from it except Noah, Daniel and Job [Ezek 14.14]. And it is certainly clear that God uses those three names to symbolise three types of human beings (as I have said). For those three men have fallen asleep by now; their spirits are with God, while their bodies have decayed in the earth. They have been placed at the right hand of God. They could not desire to be freed from any trials in this world: they have no such thing to fear.

How is it, then, that Noah, Daniel and Job will be freed from such trials? When Ezekiel spoke those words only Daniel, possibly, was in his body. Noah and Job had long since fallen asleep and were laid near their forefathers in the sleep of death. How then could they be freed from the trials that threatened them, when they had already long since been set free from their flesh?

Noah, though, is used to symbolise good men in positions of responsibility who govern and rule the church, just as Noah steered the ark during the flood. Daniel is used to symbolise all holy people who are celibate; Job, all who are married and live well. God sets free these three types of men from the coming trial.<sup>2</sup> It is clear from the fact that Daniel deserved to be named as one of the three how highly he has been commended. Despite that, he is confessing his own sins! Even Daniel can confess his sins! Wouldn't anyone's pride, then, be shaken, anyone's self-importance collapse? Wouldn't anyone feel his arrogance and conceit being checked? *Who could boast of having a chaste heart? Who could boast of being cleansed from sin?* [Prov 20.9].

People are also amazed (if only they would be amazed without also blaspheming!) when God rebukes the human race, when he subjects it to a lashing, chastising it as a devoted father.<sup>3</sup> He imposes discipline before he executes judgement;<sup>4</sup> and he is not usually selective about those he will lash; for he does not want to find anyone to condemn. Indeed, his lash falls upon the just and the unjust alike; although if Daniel confesses his own sins, who is there who is just?

(2) You have also heard the reading from the book of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> If I am not mistaken, it made us all very attentive when Abraham asks the Lord whether if he finds fifty just individuals in the city he will spare the city for their sake, or if he will destroy the city with them in it. The Lord replies to him that if he finds fifty just men in the city he will spare it. Then Abraham pressed his inquiry and asked whether, if there were five less, and forty-five just individuals remained, he would spare the city in the same way. The Lord replied that he would spare it for the sake of forty-five. Need I say more? By asking questions and reducing the number step by step, he reached ten, and asked the Lord whether if he found ten just individuals in the city, he would destroy them along with the countless others who were bad, or whether he would spare the city for the sake of ten just individuals. God replied that even on account of ten just individuals he would not destroy the city.

So what are we to say, my brothers? We are confronted forcefully and

powerfully with this question, especially by those who are laying siege to our scriptures out of unbelief, rather than asking questions of them as believers. Particularly in view of the recent sack of so great a city, they ask us this:

So weren't there fifty just individuals in Rome? The vast number of the faithful, all those consecrated women, all those celibates, all those servants and handmaids of God — and yet not fifty, not forty, not thirty, not twenty, not ten, could be found who were just? But if that can't be believed, then why didn't God spare the city for the sake of those fifty, or even those ten?

Scripture does not deceive anyone, unless human beings deceive themselves. Now we are asking questions about the justice of God, and God's reply is about justice. Surely then he is looking for people who are just according to divine rules, not human ones.

And so I reply at once, 'Well, either he did find enough people there who were just, and spared the city; or else, if he didn't spare the city, he didn't find enough who were just.' But they answer me that it's obvious that God did not spare the city. I reply, 'No, it is not obvious to me.'

Indeed the city of Rome has not been destroyed in the way that Sodom was destroyed. When Abraham questioned God the city under examination was Sodom. Moreover, God's words were, 'I will not *destroy* the city'; he did not say, 'I will not *lash* the city.' He did not spare Sodom, he destroyed it. He swallowed Sodom up completely in flames. He didn't postpone dealing with it until the last judgement, but executed on Sodom the sentence reserved until the judgement for other bad cities. Not a single person from there survived [cf. Gen 19.24–5]. Nothing was left of their animals, nothing of their people, nothing of their homes: the fire consumed absolutely everything. You see what it is like when God does destroy a city!

Contrast the city of Rome: look how many left there, and will return; how many remained there and escaped; how many more were in holy places and could not be touched! 'But', they object, 'there were many taken captive'. That happened to Daniel too, not to punish him, but to provide comfort for the others.

'But', they object once more, 'many people were killed'. That happened to a lot of just prophets *from the blood of Abel the just to the blood of Zachariah* [Mt 23.35; Lk 11.51]. That also happened to a lot of the apostles; and it even happened to the Lord of the prophets and apostles himself, Jesus.

'But', they object, 'many people suffered a variety of cruel tortures'. Do we think that anyone suffered as much as Job did?<sup>6</sup>

(3) The most awful things have been reported to us: slaughter, arson, looting, murder, human torture have taken place. It is true; we have heard many reports, we have grieved about it all, we have often been in tears; it is hard for us to be comforted. I deny none of this; I accept that we have heard many such reports and that many such things have been done in the city.

Despite that, my brothers, please may your loving selves attend to what I am saying. We have heard from the book of the holy Job how his property was destroyed, and his children were destroyed, and then he could not even keep safe his own flesh which was all he had left. For then he was afflicted with painful sores from head to foot. He sat there on some dung, rotten with ulcers, flowing with pus, teeming with worms, tortured by bitter and agonising pain.<sup>7</sup>

If we had heard reports that the entire city was enduring this sort of things, that no one there was healthy, that it was suffering from painful sores and that living men were rotten and worm-ridden, decaying as if they were dead — well, which would be more serious, that or the war? It seems to me that the violence of iron on human flesh is gentler than that of worms, that it is easier to endure blood flowing from wounds than pus dripping from gangrene. You may look at a corpse rotting and shudder, but the corpse's suffering is lighter, indeed it is no suffering at all, because the soul is gone. As for Job his soul was present, and capable of feeling; it was tied down so that it couldn't escape; it was subjected to pain, and goaded to blasphemy. Despite it all, Job endured his trials and it *was counted to him as great justice* [Gen 15.6; cf. Rom 4.3, 5, 9; Gal 3.6; Jas 2.23]. And so no one should concentrate on what he suffers, but rather on what he does. Power over what you suffer is not yours to have: you are human. What is yours is the will in what you do, whether it is guilty or innocent.

Job was suffering; his wife, left all alone, stood at his side, a temptation, though, rather than a comfort. She was not so much bringing medicine as prescribing blasphemy: *Say something against God, and die!* [Job 2.9].

You see how death would have been a boon for him, yet no one offered him that boon. Despite this, throughout all the suffering that his saintly soul endured, he put patience to use, he put his faith to the test, he put his wife to shame, he put the devil to defeat. His virtue provided an outstanding spectacle, shining with beauty through the ugliness of his physical decay.

The enemy causes widespread devastation; his feminine accomplice openly advocates evil, she assists the devil rather than her husband. She is the new Eve; but he is not the old Adam. She says, '*Say something against God, and die!* Blasphemy, and extort what you can't obtain through prayer.' He replies, *You have spoken like a foolish woman. If we accept good things from the hand of the Lord, why do we not also put up with the bad?* [Job 2.9–10].

Note the words of this brave man of faith. Note the words of someone who is rotten on the outside, but whole within: *You have spoken like a foolish woman. If we accept good things from the hand of the Lord, why should we not also put up with the bad?* He is our father; surely we should not love him when he caresses us, and then reject him when he corrects us? Surely he is our father both when he promises us life and when he imposes discipline? You have forgotten the following:

*My son, when entering the service of God, stand in justice and fear; prepare your soul for testing. Accept everything that is brought on you; endure in pain, and when you are humiliated show forbearance. For gold and silver are tested in the fire, but the acceptable are tested in the furnace of humiliation* [Eccles 2.1, 4–5].

You have also forgotten this: *If the Lord loves someone, he corrects him; he lashes every son whom he receives* [Prov 3.12, LXX; Heb 12.6].<sup>8</sup>

(4) Think of any torment you like, cast your mind over any human pain you like. Compare that with hell, and all your suffering is light. In the one case both tormentor and tormented are temporary, in the other, everlasting. Surely the victims from the time that Rome was devastated aren't still suffering? However, that rich man [cf. Lk 16.19–31] is still suffering among the dead: he has been burning, he is burning, he will burn.<sup>9</sup> He will come to judgement, and he will receive back his flesh not as a benefit, but for punishment. If we fear God, that is the penalty we should fear.

Anything a person has suffered here counts as amendment if he is reformed. If he is not reformed, his condemnation is doubled. He will pay a temporary penalty here and endure an everlasting one there.

My brothers, I say this to your loving selves: we certainly praise, glorify and admire the holy martyrs. We celebrate their feast-days with devoted solemnity; we revere their merits; if we are able, we imitate them. In short, the martyrs have great glory; but I am not sure that the glory that belonged to the holy Job was any less. It is true that he was not told, 'Burn incense to idols, sacrifice to foreign gods, or else deny Christ.' However,

he was told, 'Blaspheme God'. This wasn't said to him meaning, 'If you blaspheme him all your gangrene will disappear and your health will return', but rather, 'If you blaspheme' (as his incompetent and dull wife put it), 'you will die, and by dying you will be rid of your agony'. As if, when a blasphemer dies, no everlasting pain follows!

The foolish woman was horrified by the cruel decay that was before her, but gave no thought at all to the everlasting flames. But he was enduring his present suffering to avoid facing suffering in the future. He was keeping his heart from evil thoughts, and his tongue from cursing; he was preserving his soul uncorrupted while his body rotted. He was able to see what he was escaping in the future, and that is why he bore his present sufferings.

Every Christian should meditate on hell in this way when he is suffering some physical hardship; then he may see how lightly he is suffering. He should not mutter against God; he should not say, 'My God, what have I done to you? Why should I suffer like this?'

No. Rather he should speak as Job himself spoke, although he was a saint: *You have sought all my sins, and you have sealed them as if in a bag* [Job 14.16-17]. He didn't dare to say that he was without sin, even though his suffering was not a punishment but a test. Each of us should say the same whenever we are suffering.

(5) There were indeed fifty just people in Rome. In fact, if you consider human standards, there were thousands of just people. If you examine the rule of perfection, then there is no one just in Rome. If anyone is bold enough to call himself just, he should listen to the truth: *Are you wiser than Daniel?* [Ezek 28.3]. Listen to him then confessing his sins. Or perhaps he was lying when he made his confession? Well, if so, then he did sin, because he lied to God about his sins! Sometimes there are people who reason as follows: 'A just person ought to say to God, "I am a sinner"; and even if he knows that he has no sin, he should say to God, "I am sinful." I'd be amazed if that should be called sane advice.

Who made you sinless? If you have no sin at all, surely it is God who has healed your soul. (If in fact you do have no sin: reflect a little, and you will find not a sin, but rather sins.) But if you really have no sin, then surely that is a gift from God. As you prayed to him, *I said, Lord have mercy on me; heal my soul, for I<sup>10</sup> have sinned against you* [Ps 41(40).4].

If, then, your soul is sinless, your soul has been completely healed. If your soul has been completely healed, then why are you ungrateful to the doctor, saying that you are still wounded, when he has already restored

you to full health? If you were to show a doctor that your body was weak or wounded, and ask him to make it his concern to cure you, and then he were to restore you to health and fitness, and you still said you were not very well, surely you would seem ungrateful, and insulting toward the doctor?

Similarly, God has healed you, and you still have the nerve to say, 'I am wounded.' Aren't you afraid of his replying to you: 'Well, then, didn't I do anything?<sup>11</sup> Or have I wasted everything I did? I receive no pay; don't I deserve some praise?'

May God spare us from such madness, from this sort of empty reasoning! When someone says, 'I am a sinner', let him do so because he is a sinner; let him say, 'I am sinful', because he is sinful. For if he is not, he is wiser than Daniel.

Well, then, my brothers, I should conclude this debate at some point. If the just are to be named in this way (being called just by certain human standards, because they live irreproachable lives among other people) then there are many such in Rome; and God spared the city for their sake. Many escaped; but God also in fact spared those who are dead. Look, if the dead lived good lives that were truly just and faithful, then aren't they now free from human uncertainty and misery? Haven't they reached their God-given place of refreshment?

'But they died after various trials.' What of the poor man at the rich man's gate? Were they hungry? So was he. Were they wounded? So was he, and perhaps the dogs licked them less. Are they dead? So is he. But listen to the end of his story: *It happened that the poor man died, and was carried by angels into the bosom of Abraham* [Lk 16.22].

(6) If only we could actually look at the souls of the saints who died in that war. Then you would see how God has spared the city. Indeed there are thousands of saints in the place of refreshment. They are rejoicing and saying to God, 'Thanks be to you, Lord, because you have rescued us from physical hardship and agonising injuries. Thanks be to you that we now fear neither barbarians nor the devil, that we do not fear hunger on earth, that we do not fear enemies or pursuers or oppressors. But on earth we are dead; in your presence, though, God, we will not die. This is by your gift, not by our own merits.' What sort of a city is it, with its humble citizens, that speaks such words? Or perhaps, my brothers, you think that what counts in a city is its walls, and not its citizens?<sup>12</sup> In short, suppose God were to say to the Sodomites, 'Flee, because I am going to burn down this place!' If they did flee, and the flames swept down from the sky and

flattened only the city-walls and buildings, then we'd be tempted to say that they had won a great reward. Surely God would have spared the city, if the city had moved out and escaped the havoc wreaked by the fire?

(7) Didn't something happen a few years ago in Constantinople when Arcadius was emperor?<sup>13</sup> (Perhaps some of you listening to me know about it. Some of our local people were present at the event.)<sup>14</sup> Didn't it happen that God wanted to frighten the citizens, and by frightening them to chasten them and convert them, cleanse them and change them? Don't they say that he appeared in a vision to one of his faithful servants, an official, and told him that fire was going to fall from heaven and ruin the city? God warned him to tell the bishop; he did so, and the bishop did not make light of it, but addressed the people. The city was converted to a penitential state of mourning, as once was the case with the ancient city of Nineveh [cf. Jon 3-5].

However, God didn't want people to think that the man who had spoken up had been deceived by a false vision, or was telling lies so as to deceive them. The day arrived with which God had threatened them. With everyone waiting for the end intently, and very fearfully, a fiery cloud appeared from the east at nightfall, when the world was growing dark. It was small at first, then gradually, as it approached the city, it grew, until a vast and terrifying threat menaced the entire town. A dreadful flame was seen hanging from the sky; the smell of sulphur was in the air. Everyone fled to the church, which was too small to hold such a big crowd. People were wringing baptism out of anyone they could. They begged for the saving sacrament not only in the church, but in their homes, in the streets, in the squares, wanting to escape the wrath of God – not in the immediate present, of course, but in the future.

However, after this great trial, once God had proved his servant's trustworthiness, and his servant's vision, the cloud began to shrink, just as it had grown, and gradually disappeared. The people were safe for a short while; then they heard once more that they must evacuate the city, because it would be destroyed the following Saturday. The entire city left with the emperor. No one remained at home; no one locked his house. As they moved far away from the walls, they looked back at their sweet roofs, and said farewell in sorrowful voices to the dear homes they had abandoned.

The enormous crowd advanced a few miles and gathered together in one place to pour out prayers to the Lord. Suddenly they saw a huge billow of smoke; and they cried out to the Lord in a loud voice.

Eventually, when they saw that peace was restored, they sent scouts to report back to them. Once the anxious hour predicted had passed, and the scouts had reported that all the city-walls and buildings stood undamaged, everyone returned home giving profound thanks. No one lost anything from his house; everyone found it just as he had left it, though it had been left open.

(8) What are we to say? Was that an example of God's anger, or of his mercy? Does anyone doubt that our very merciful father wanted to use fear to reform rather than punish, when the great disaster that was present and threatening in fact harmed none of the people, none of the houses and none of the walls? Yes – just as you might well lift a hand to hit someone, but when your victim reacts with terror withdraw the blow out of pity. The city was dealt with in the same way. But what if it had been devastated during the time when it was abandoned, when all the population had left? What if the entire city had been destroyed, like Sodom, leaving not a single ruin standing? Even then no one could doubt that God had saved the city: for the city would have been forewarned and frightened, it would have departed and moved away, and only then would the place have been swallowed up.

Similarly, we should have no doubt that God spared the city of Rome: in many places much of her population had moved away before the enemy set fire to it. Those who had fled had moved away; and those who had left their bodies prematurely<sup>15</sup> had moved away. Many of those who remained hid as best they could; many were kept alive and safe within the shrines of the saints.<sup>16</sup> Consequently we should say that the city was corrected by the improving hand of God rather than destroyed,<sup>17</sup> just as a servant who knows the will of his master, yet behaves in a way that deserves a beating, will suffer for it heavily.

(9) If only this served effectively as an example and deterrent. The Lord demonstrates how unsteady and fragile are all worldly trivialities and all deceitful madness. If only evil desires, in their thirst for the world and their quest to enjoy the most destructive pleasures, might be restrained instead of muttering against the Lord at the lashes they thoroughly deserve.

However, the threshing-floor bears a single threshing-sledge to remove the stubble and purge the grain. Again, the furnace of a goldsmith accepts only one fire for the dross to be reduced to ash, and the gold to be freed from impurities.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Rome too has endured a single time of trial. The pious have been chastened by this, but the impious have

been condemned. I say condemned, whether they were snatched from this life to pay the justest penalties elsewhere, or whether they remain here to blaspheme and invite greater condemnation. For surely God, in his indescribable mercy, would preserve those whom he knew were to be saved, so that they could repent.

The burden borne by the pious should not, then, disturb us: its role is to train them.<sup>19</sup> Or do we perhaps shudder at the sight of someone just facing hard and undeserved suffering on this earth, while failing to remember what the justest of the just, the most saintly of the saints, suffered? Everything that the city as a whole has suffered was suffered by one man. You can see who that one is: *The king of kings and lord of lords* [Rev 19.16] arrested, bound, whipped, treated to all kinds of insults, hung from a plank and crucified, and killed.

Weigh Rome against Christ; weigh the whole earth against Christ, weigh heaven and earth against Christ. No creature balances its creator, no handiwork bears comparison with its craftsman. *Everything was made through him and without him nothing was made* [Jn 1.3]; yet still he was handed over to his pursuers. Let us, then, endure whatever God wishes us to endure. He sent his own son to care for us and bring us healing, and like a doctor, he knows which pains are beneficial. Indeed, we find in scripture: *Let patience have a perfect work* [as 1.4]. What will the work of patience be if we suffer nothing adverse? Why, then, do we refuse to endure temporary ills? Are we perhaps afraid of being made perfect? But, surely, we should pray in sorrow to the Lord, in the hope that the words of the apostle may hold true in our case, *a faithful God, who does not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity; but when you are tested, he will provide an escape so that you may be able to endure it* [1 Cor 10.13].

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Augustine sends greetings in the Lord to Boniface,<sup>1</sup> his distinguished, deservedly illustrious, and honoured son.

(1) I had already written to your beloved self;<sup>2</sup> however, when I was looking for the opportunity to get my letter to you, my dearest son Faustus arrived on the scene, on his way to your distinguished self. When

he agreed to carry the letter that I had already written to your kind self, he intimated to me that you were very eager to have me write you something that would fortify you for the everlasting security<sup>3</sup> for which you hope in Christ Jesus our Lord. Although I was busy, he pressed me not to postpone doing this, with an urgency that you will recognise, as his affection for you is indeed single-minded. In order therefore to meet his haste, I preferred to write something to you rather hurriedly, than to hamper your eagerness for matters religious, my distinguished and deservedly illustrious and honoured son.

(2) Briefly, then, I am able to say the following: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself* [Mt 22.37, 39; Mk 12.30-1; Lk 10.27; cf. Deut 6.5; Lev 19.18].

That is the saying which the Lord gave us as a summary when he was on earth; as he said in the Gospel: *On these two commandments hang the whole of the Law and the prophets* [Mt 22.40]. Make daily progress, then, in this love, both through prayer and through doing good. Then, with the help of God, who both commanded and granted that love, it may be nourished and grow, until it is perfect, and makes you perfect. For it is charity itself, which (as the apostle says) *is spread in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us* [Rom 5.5]. This is also what he referred to in the words, *Charity is the fullness of the Law* [Rom 13.10]. It is charity again through which faith works, to quote the apostle once more: *Neither circumcision nor the foreskin has any value, but faith, which works through love* [Gal 5.6].

(3) In this love all our holy forefathers and patriarchs and prophets and apostles found favour with God. In it all the true martyrs fought against the devil to the point of shedding their blood; and they were victorious just because it neither failed nor *grew cold* [cf. Mt 24.12]. In it all the worthy faithful make daily progress in their desire to reach not a kingdom of mortals but the kingdom of heaven, not a temporary but an everlasting inheritance, not gold and silver but the incorruptible riches possessed by angels, to attain not a few of this world's goods – which cause you fear while you are alive and which you cannot take with you when you die – but rather the vision of God.

The sweetness and delight of the vision of God surpasses in beauty not only earthly bodies, but the heavenly bodies also; it surpasses in splendour every single just and holy soul; it surpasses in loveliness the angels and powers above. It surpasses anything that we can say of it – or rather