

# Plato: The Apology of Socrates

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## Introduction

Following Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), the victorious Spartans set up an oligarchic government under the Thirty Tyrants to rule Athens. The regime was cruel and unjust, and over the next eight months more than 1500 Athenian citizens were executed. During this time Critias, one of the Thirty, proposed a law prohibiting the teaching of rhetoric, presumably intended to stifle dissent. The Thirty Tyrants were deposed and a new Athenian democratic government installed, but when Socrates refused to wholeheartedly support the government he was eventually arrested in 399 B.C. and charged with two counts: "impiety" and "corrupting the youth." More specifically, his accusers cited two "impious" acts: "failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges" and "introducing new deities." *The Apology*\* is Plato's version of the speech given by Socrates as he defended himself before the Athenian assembly.

The Athenian historian **Xenophon** (c. 430-354 B.C.), who also wrote an *Apology of Socrates*, indicates that several writers published accounts of Socrates' defense. Many scholars believe that Plato's *Apology* was one of the first dialogues that he wrote, and it is commonly regarded as the most reliable source of information about the historical Socrates. During the course of the speech Socrates twice mentions Plato as being present, but there is no way of knowing how closely Socrates' words in the *Apology* correspond to his actual comments at the trial.

*The Apology* begins with Socrates saying he does not know if the jury, the men of Athens, have been persuaded by his accusers. He proceeds to correct and rebuke his enemies for their slanderous accusations by asking the jury to judge him not on the basis of his oratorical skills, but by the truth. Socrates vows not to use ornate words and clever



rhetorical devices to sway the assembly, but instead will speak plainly and extemporaneously. In other words, he will use the same manner of speaking that he always employed throughout his career as a street philosopher.

Despite his disclaimers, Socrates proves to be a master orator and logician who is not only eloquent and persuasive, but wise. Although he was offered the opportunity to appease the assembly with even a minimal concession to avoid the penalty, he consciously refuses to do so. Accordingly, Socrates is

condemned to death.

Regarding his chief accusers, the three men who bring the charges against Socrates represent three influential segments of society. **Anytus**, son of a prominent Athenian, represents the politicians and artisans of Athens. **Meletus**, the sole accuser to speak during Socrates' trial, is a prominent poet – a class of men regarded by some as the "oracles of the gods." The third antagonist, **Lycon** represents the scholars or rhetoricians.

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\* The term "apology" is taken from the Greek *apologia*, meaning to offer a defense for one's beliefs or actions.

Socrates addresses two sets of accusations: He is charged with impiety toward the gods and corrupting the youth. In his defense, he says that the charges stem from years of gossip and prejudice against him, and are therefore difficult to refute. Even more challenging is the fact that these allegations stem in part from the popular satirical play, "The Clouds," by the comic poet, **Aristophanes**. In his play, Aristophanes had lampooned Socrates by depicting him as an impractical and slightly mad sophist babbler. Yet it is unlikely that Aristophanes would have intended these charges to be taken seriously since Plato states that the playwright and Socrates had been on friendly terms.

*The Apology* is divided into three parts: First is Socrates' defense, followed by the verdict and his response, and finally his comments following the sentencing.

Two different interpretations of the *Apology* prevail. The traditional view is that the *Apology* is a historical recounting of the actual defense made by Socrates in 399 BC. Its proponents maintain that, as one of Plato's earliest works, it would not have been fitting to embellish and fictionalize the memory of his mentor while so many who remembered him were still living. On the contrary, a revisionist view was proposed by Johann Jakob Brucker in 1741, suggesting that Plato was not to be trusted as a reliable source about Socrates. Since that time, more scholars tend to regard the *Apology* as a fictional philosophical work rather than an actual historical account, but of course there is no compelling evidence to challenge the traditional view.

## The Apology

### Socrates' Defense

O men of Athens, I do not know how you feel after hearing the speeches of my accusers, but I know that their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was. Yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth. But for all their falsehoods, there was one which quite amazed me: I mean when they told you to be on your guard, and not to let yourselves be deceived by the force of my eloquence. They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency. They certainly did appear to be shameless in saying this, unless by "the force of eloquence" they mean the force of

truth, in which case I do indeed admit that I am eloquent – but in such a way much different from theirs!

Well, as I was saying, they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But you shall hear from me the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner, in a set oration with eloquent words and phrases. No indeed! But I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment, for I am certain that this is right, and that at my stage of life I should not be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator. Let no one expect this of me. And I must beg of you to grant me one favor, which is this: if you hear me using the same words in my defence which I have been in the habit of using, and which most of you may have heard me using in the agora [market place]... or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised at this, and not to interrupt me. For I am more than seventy years of age, and this is the first time that I have ever appeared in a court of law, and I am quite a stranger to the ways of the place. And therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a foreigner.... That, I think, is not an unfair request. Never mind my manner, which may or may not be good, but think only of the justice of my cause, and give heed to that. Let the judge decide justly and the speaker speak truly.

First, I have to reply to the older charges and to my first accusers, and then I will go to the later ones. For I have many accusers who have leveled false charges against me for many years.... telling of one Socrates, a "wise man," who speculated about heaven above and the earth beneath, and their hearers are apt to assume that those who speculate on these matters do not believe in the gods. And these slanderers are many, although I do not know their names, nor can I examine them here in court. Therefore I must simply fight with shadows in my own defence, and examine when there is no one to answer....

Well, then, I will make my defence, and I will endeavor in the short time which is allowed to do away with this evil opinion of me which you have held for such a long time. And I hope I may succeed, if this be well for you and me, and that my words may find favor with you. But I know that to accomplish this is not easy. I quite see the nature of the task. Let the outcome be as God wills: in obedience to the law I make my defence.

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what the accusation is which has given rise to this slander of me, and which has encouraged Meletus to proceed

against me. What do the slanderers say? “Socrates is an evil-doer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches these doctrines to others.” That is the nature of the accusation, and that is what you have seen yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes, who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he can walk in the air, and talking a great deal of nonsense concerning matters of which I never pretended to know.... But the simple truth is that I have nothing to do with these matters. Very many of those here present are witnesses to the truth of this, and to them I appeal. Speak then, you who have heard me, and tell your neighbors whether any of you have ever known me hold forth on matters of this sort....

Likewise, there is little basis for the report that I am a teacher who charges money for dispensing wisdom. That is no more true than the other. Although, if a man is able to teach, I honor him for being paid....

I dare say, Athenians, that someone among you will reply, “Then what is the origin of these accusations of you? For there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All this great fame and talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men. Tell us, then, why this is, as we do not want to judge you hastily.” Now I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavor to explain to you the origin of why I am called “wise,” and of this evil fame. Please listen then, and although some of you may think I am joking, I declare that I will tell you the entire truth.

Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess, which is attainable by man and for which I am inclined to believe that I am wise. But I admit to having no access to superhuman wisdom .... And he who says that I claim such wisdom speaks falsely, and is slandering my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and who will tell you about my wisdom – and that witness shall be the Oracle of Delphi.

I am certain that you knew Chaerephon. He was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours.... Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone

wiser than I, and the Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is now dead, but his brother, who is here in the court, will confirm the truth of this story....

When I heard the oracle’s answer, I said to myself, “What can the god mean, and what is the interpretation of this riddle? For I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie – that would be against his nature.” After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, “Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest.” Accordingly, I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, a politician whom I selected for examination, and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself. And I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise. And the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away, “Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is; for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows, while I neither know nor think that I know. In this respect, then, I seem to have a slight advantage over him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being aware of the hostility which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this. But necessity was laid upon me because, I thought, the word of God ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, “I must go to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle.” And I swear to you, Athenians, the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most honored were all but the most foolish, and that some men who were considered inferior were in fact really wiser and better....

When I left the politicians, I went to the poets. “And there,” I said to myself, “you will be detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are.” Accordingly, I took them some of

the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them, thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to speak of this, but still I must say that there is hardly a person present here who would not have explained their poetry better than the poets themselves. That showed me immediately that poets do not write poetry by wisdom but by a sort of genius and inspiration. They are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared to me to be much the same, and I further observed that because of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men – including in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, and I was sure that they knew many fine things. And in this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets. Because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom. Therefore, I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both respects, and I concluded that I was better off as I was.

This investigation has led to my having many enemies, and has given rise also to many slanderous accusations. And I am also called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others. But the truth is, O men of Athens, that only God is wise, and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing. He is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, "He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing." And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquiry into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who appears to be wise. And if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise. And this occupation absorbs all my time and energies, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of

my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

There is another thing: Young men of the upper classes, who have not much to do, come to me on their own accord. They like to hear the wise pretenders examined, and they often imitate me, and examine others themselves. There are plenty of persons, as they soon enough discover, who think that they know something, but really know little or nothing. And the result is that those who are examined by them, instead of being angry with themselves, become angry with me. "This confounded Socrates," they say. "This villainous corrupter of youth!" And then if somebody asks them, "Why – what evil does Socrates practice or teach?" they do not know, and cannot tell. But in order that they may appear to know, they repeat the ready-made charges that are used against all philosophers about teaching things up in the clouds and under the earth, and having no gods, and making the worse appear the better cause. For they do not like to confess that their pretence of knowledge has been exposed – which is the truth. And as they are numerous and ambitious and energetic, and are all combative and have persuasive tongues, they have convinced many with their loud and baseless accusations.

And this is the reason why my three accusers, Meletus and Anytus and Lycon, have set upon me. Meletus, who has a quarrel with me on behalf of the poets; Anytus, on behalf of the artisans; and Lycon, on behalf of the rhetoricians.... And this, O men of Athens, is the truth and the whole truth. I have concealed nothing. And yet I know that my plain talk makes them hate me. And what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth? This is the occasion and reason of their slander of me, as you will find out either in this or in any future inquiry.

I have said enough in my defence against the first group of my accusers, so I turn to the second group who are headed by Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he calls himself. And now I will try to defend myself against them. So what do these accusers say? Something of this sort:

Socrates is a doer of evil,  
and a corrupter of the youth,  
and he does not believe in the gods of the state,  
and has other new divinities of his own.

That is the charge, but let us now examine the particular counts. He says that I am a doer of evil, who corrupt the youth. But I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, and the evil is that he makes a joke of a serious matter, and is too eager to

bring other men to trial from a pretended zeal and interest about matters in which he really never had the smallest interest. And the truth of this I will endeavor to prove.

Come hither, Meletus, and let me ask a question of you....

[Socrates proceeds to interrogate Meletus, and defends himself against the charge that he is a corrupter of impressionable youth and an atheist. In the process he accuses Meletus of being “reckless and impudent,” and having “written this indictment in a spirit of unjust spite and youthful bravado.”]

Someone will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken. A man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong – acting the part of a good man or of a bad man....

Strange, indeed, would be my conduct, O men of Athens – if I who, when I was ordered by the generals whom you chose to command me at Potidaea and Amphipolis and Delium, remained where they placed me, facing death – if, I say, now, when, as I conceive and imagine, God orders me to fulfil the philosopher’s mission of examining myself and other men, I were to desert my post through fear of death or any other fear. That would indeed be strange. And I might justly be arraigned in court for denying the existence of the gods. Likewise, if I disobeyed the oracle because I was afraid of death, then I should be imagining that I was wise when in fact I was not. For this fear of death is merely the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being the appearance of knowing the unknown. Since no one knows whether death, which many believe to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good.

And this is the point in which I think I am superior to men in general, and in which I might perhaps consider myself wiser than others: that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know anything. But I do know that injustice and disobedience to one who is better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonorable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil. And therefore, if you let me go now, and... if you say to me, “Socrates, this time we will let you off on one condition, that you are not to inquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing this again you shall die” – if this is the condition on which you let me

go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet as is my manner, and convincing him, saying: “O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and wise city of Athens care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? Are you not ashamed of this?”

And if the person with whom I am conversing says, “Yes, but I do care [about riches, honor and reputation],” I do not let him go at once, but instead I question and examine and cross-examine him. And if I think that he has no virtue, but only says that he has, I rebuke him for undervaluing the greater things and overvaluing the lesser things. And this I should say to everyone whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren. For this is the command of God, as I would have you know. And I believe that to this day no greater good has ever happened in the state than my service to the God. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your body and your property, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of your soul. I tell you that virtue does not come by wealth, but that from virtue comes wealth and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, my influence is indeed ruinous. But if anyone says that this is not my teaching, he is lying. Therefore, O men of Athens, I say to you: Do as Anytus advises or not as Anytus advises, and either acquit me or not. But whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times.

Men of Athens, do not interrupt, but hear me; there was an agreement between us that you should hear me out. And I think that what I am going to say will do you good: for I have something more to say, at which you may be outraged; but I beg that you will hear me out. I would have you know that, if you kill such a one as I am, you will injure yourselves more than you will injure me. Meletus and Anytus cannot injure me, for it is not in the nature of things that a bad man should injure a better man than himself. I do not deny that he may, perhaps, kill him, or drive him into exile, or deprive him of civil rights; and he may imagine, and others

may imagine, that he is doing him a great injury. But in that I do not agree with him, for the evil of doing as Anytus is doing – of unjustly calling for the execution of another man – is far greater. And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God by condemning me. For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God.... I am that gadfly which God has given the state, and all day long and in all places I am always engaging you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me.... And the fact that I am given to you by God is proved by this: That if I had been like other men, I would not have neglected all my own concerns,... coming to you individually, like a father or elder brother, exhorting you to regard virtue. This, I say, would not be typical human nature. And had I gained anything monetarily, there would have been some sense in that. But now, as you will see, not even the impudence of my accusers dares to say that I have ever sought money from anyone. They have no witness of that. But I have a witness of the truth of what I am saying: my poverty is a sufficient witness.

Someone may wonder why I go about in private, giving advice and busying myself with the concerns of others, but do not venture to come forward in public and advise the state. I will tell you the reason of this. You have often heard me speak of an oracle or sign which comes to me, which is the divinity that Meletus ridicules in the indictment. This sign I have had ever since I was a child. The sign is a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything, and this is what stands in the way of my being a politician. And rightly so, as I think. For I am certain that if I had engaged in politics, I should have perished long ago and done no good either to you or to myself. And don't be offended at my telling you the truth, for the truth is that no man who opposes the injustice and unrighteousness of the state will survive. He who will really fight for the right, if he would live even for a little while, must have a private station and not a public one....

I have been always the same in all my actions, public as well as private, and never have I submitted to those who are slanderously termed my disciples or to anyone else. For the truth is that I have no

regular disciples, but if anyone likes to come and hear me while I am pursuing my mission, he may freely come. Nor do I converse only with those who pay, and not with those who do not pay, but anyone, whether he be rich or poor, may ask and answer me and listen to my words. And whether he turns out to be a bad man or a good one, that cannot be justly laid to my charge, as I never taught him anything. And if anyone says that he has ever learned or heard anything from me in private which all the world has not heard, I should like you to know that he is not speaking the truth.

But I shall be asked, "Why do people delight in continually conversing with you? I have told you already, Athenians, the whole truth about this. They like to hear me cross-examine those who pretend to be wise. There is amusement in this. And this is a duty which the God has imposed upon me, as I am assured by oracles, visions, and in every sort of way in which the will of divine power was ever signified to anyone. This is true, O Athenians. If it were not true, it would soon be refuted. For if I am really corrupting the youth,... those of them who have grown up and have become sensible should come forward as accusers, declare that I gave them bad advice, and take their revenge.... Now is their time. Many of them I see in the court. [Socrates proceeds to name several people present in the assembly with whom he has had considerable contact in the past, including Plato.].... For all these are ready to witness on behalf of "the corrupter," as Meletus and Anytus call me....

I am a man, and like other men, a creature of flesh and blood, and not of wood or stone, as Homer says. And I have a family, yes, and three sons – one of whom is growing up, and the two others are still young. And yet I will not bring any of them hither in order to petition you for an acquittal. And why not? Not from any self-will or disregard of you. Whether I am or am not afraid of death is another question, of which I will not now speak. But my reason simply is that I feel such conduct to be discreditable to myself, and to you, and to the whole state. One who has reached my years, and who has a name for wisdom, whether deserved or not, ought not to debase himself. At any rate, the world has decided that Socrates is in some way superior to other men. And if those among you who are said to be superior in wisdom and courage and any other virtue, demean themselves in this way, how shameful is their conduct! I have seen men of reputation, when they have been condemned, behaving in the strangest

manner. They seemed to fancy that they were going to suffer something dreadful if they died, and that they could be immortal if you only allowed them to live. And I think that they were a dishonor to the state....

But, setting aside the question of dishonor, there seems to be something wrong in petitioning a judge, and thus procuring an acquittal instead of informing and convincing him. For his duty is not to make a gift of justice, but to give judgment, and he has sworn that he will judge according to the laws, and not according to his own good pleasure. And neither he nor we should get into the habit of perjuring ourselves – there can be no piety in that. Do not then require me to do what I consider dishonorable and impious and wrong, especially now, when I am being tried for impiety. For if, O men of Athens, by force of persuasion and pleading I could overpower your oaths, then I would be teaching you to believe that there are no gods, and I would convict myself in my own defence of not believing in them. But that is not the case, for I do believe that there are gods, and in a far higher sense than that in which any of my accusers believe in them. And to you and to God I commit my cause, to be determined by you as is best for you and me.

### **[The jury finds Socrates guilty.]**

#### **Socrates' Proposal for his Sentence**

O men of Athens, there are many reasons why I am not grieved at the vote of condemnation. I expected it, and am only surprised that the votes are so nearly equal, for I had thought that the majority against me would have been far larger. But now, had thirty votes gone over to the other side, I should have been acquitted. And I may say that... without the assistance of Anytus and Lycon, Meletus would not have won a fifth part of the votes, as the law requires, in which case he would have incurred a fine of a thousand drachmae.

And so he proposes death as the penalty. And what shall I propose on my part? Clearly that which is my due. And what is that which I ought to pay or to receive? What shall be done to the man who has never had the wit to be idle during his whole life, but instead has been careless of what the many care about: wealth, family interests, military offices, speaking in the assembly, magistracies, and intrigues and parties. Reflecting that I was really too honest a man to live this way, I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself, but rather where I could do the greatest good privately to

every one of you. Thither I went, and I sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his own private interests, and look to his own moral state before he looks to the interests of the state, and that this should be the order which he observes in all his actions.

So what shall be done to such a one? Doubtless some good thing, O men of Athens, if he truly has his reward. And the good should be of a kind suitable to him. What would be a reward suitable to a poor man who is your benefactor, who desires leisure that he may instruct you? There can be no more fitting reward than free maintenance in the Prytaneum,\* This is a reward which he deserves far more than the citizen who has won the prize at Olympia in the horse or chariot race.... So if I am to suggest an appropriate penalty, I say that maintenance in the Prytaneum is just.

Perhaps you may think that I am being facetious,... but that is not the case. I speak rather because I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone.... But I cannot in a moment refute great slanders, and as I am convinced that I never wronged another, I will assuredly not wrong myself. I will not say of myself that I deserve any evil, or propose any penalty. Why should I? Because I am afraid of the penalty of death which Meletus proposes? When I do not know whether death is a good or an evil, why should I propose a penalty which would certainly be an evil? Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison and be the slave of the magistrates? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I would have to lie in prison, for I have no money, and I cannot pay. And if I say exile (and this may possibly be the penalty which you will affix).... what a life I should lead, at my age, wandering from city to city, living in constant exile, and always being expelled! For I am quite sure that wherever I go, as here so also there, the young men will come to me, and I will be treated much the same as here in Athens.

Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but can you not hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? But this would be disobedient to a divine command, and therefore I cannot hold my tongue .... And if I

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\* Each Greek city or village had its own sacred fire, which was constantly kept alight, that represented the unity and spirit of the community. The building in which this fire was kept was the Prytaneum.

say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me. And yet what I say is true.... Moreover, I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment. Had I money I might have proposed to give you what I had, but you see that I have none, and I can only ask you to proportion the fine to my means....

**[The jury votes to condemn Socrates to death, and orders him to drink hemlock.]**

### **Socrates Comments on his Sentence**

You have not gained much time, O Athenians, in return for the evil reputation which you will get from the enemies of Athens who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man. For they will call me wise, even though I am not wise, when they want to reproach you. But if you had waited a little while longer, your desire would have been fulfilled in the course of nature. For I am far advanced in years, as you may perceive, and I am not far from death....

I had not the intention of speaking to you as you would have liked me to address you, weeping and wailing and lamenting, and saying and doing many things which you have been accustomed to hear from others, and which, as I say, are unworthy of me. But I thought that I ought not to do anything common or demeaning in the hour of danger. Nor do I now regret the manner of my defence, and I would rather die having spoken the way I did than to speak as you would have preferred and live. For neither in war nor in law ought a man to use every means of escaping death. For often in battle there is no doubt that if a man will throw away his arms and fall on his knees before his pursuers, he may escape death. And in other dangers there are other ways of escaping death if a man is willing to say and do anything. The difficulty, my friends, is not in avoiding death, but in avoiding unrighteousness. I am old and move slowly, and my accusers are keen and quick. And now I depart condemned by you to suffer the penalty of death, and they, too, go their ways condemned by the truth to suffer the penalty of villainy. And just as I must abide by my award, let them abide by theirs. I suppose these things may be regarded as fated, and I think that they are fate.

And now, O men who have condemned me, I would fain prophesy to you, for I am about to die, and that is the time when men are gifted with prophetic power. And I prophesy to you who are

my murderers, that immediately after my death punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you.... This is the prophecy which I utter before my departure to the judges who have condemned me.

Friends, who would have acquitted me, I would like also to talk with you about this thing which has happened, before I go to the place at which I must die.... You are my friends, and I should like to show you the meaning of this event which has happened to me. O my judges – for you I consider true judges – I should like to tell you of a wonderful circumstance. Hitherto the familiar oracle within me has constantly been in the habit of opposing me even about trivial things if I was going to make a mistake about anything. And now as you see, there has come upon me that which is generally believed to be the last and worst evil. But the oracle made no sign of opposition, either as I was leaving my house and going out in the morning, or when I was going up into this court, or while I was speaking, at anything which I was going to say. I have often been stopped in the middle of a speech, but now in nothing I either said or did regarding this matter has the oracle corrected me. What do I take to be the explanation of this? I will tell you: I regard this as a proof that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. This is a great proof to me of what I am saying, for the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been intending to do evil rather than good.

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good thing, for one of two reasons: Either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as some men say, there is a transformation and a migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man will not find many such days or nights when compared with the others. Now if death is like this, then I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night.

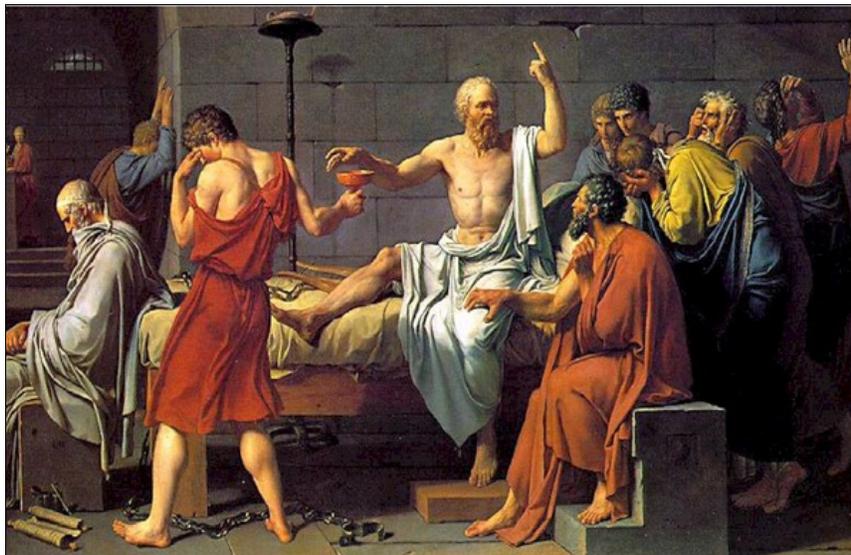
But if death is the journey to another place where all the dead reside, what good, O my friends and

judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below he is delivered from the professors of “justice” in this world and finds the true judges who are said to reside there – Minos, Aeacus, Rhadamanthus, Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life – that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would a man not give if he could converse with Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? No, if this be true, let me die again and again! I, too, shall have a wonderful interest in a place where I can converse with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and other heroes of old, who have suffered death through an unjust judgment, and there will be no small pleasure in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge.... I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise but is not. What would a man give, O judges, to be able to question the leader of the great Trojan expedition, or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numerous other men and women, too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! For in that world they do not put a man to death for seeking knowledge. And besides being happier in that world than in this, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.

Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know this of a truth: that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his family are not neglected by the gods. Nor has my approaching end happened by mere chance. But I see clearly that to die and be released was better for me, which is why the oracle gave me no warning sign. This is why I am not angry with my accusers or my condemners. They have done me no real harm, although they certainly did not meant to do me any good – and for this I may gently blame them.

Still I have a favor to ask of them. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to... trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches or anything else more than about virtue, or if they pretend to be something that they are not. Rebuke them, as I have rebuked you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care the most, and for thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, I and my sons will have received justice at your hands.

The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our separate ways: I to die, and you to live. Which is better, God only knows.



“The Death of Socrates” by Jacques-Louis David  
(1787)