

**339 BC**

**THE ORATION ON THE LETTER (PHILIP'S LETTER  
TO THE ATHENIANS)**

**Demosthenes**

**translated by Thomas Leland, D.D.**

**Notes and Introduction by Thomas Leland, D.D.**

**Demosthenes (383-322 BC) - Athenian statesman and the most famous of Greek orators. He was leader of a patriotic party opposing Philip of Macedon.**

**The Oration on the Letter (339 BC) - "Philip's Letter to the Athenians" complains about the deterioration of relations between Macedon and Athens. Philip concludes his letter by saying that Macedon will no longer tolerate what he calls Athens' repeated aggressions. In response, Demosthenes spoke this Oration on the Letter, his last oration against Philip.**

## INTRODUCTION

To Philip's Letter to the Athenians, and Demosthenes' Oration on the Letter -

THE former oration (The Fourth Philippic) inspired the Athenians with the resolution of sending succors to all the cities that were threatened by Philip's arms; and their first step was to despatch to the Hellespont a convoy with provisions; which weighed anchor in view of Selymbria, a city of the Propontis, then besieged by the Macedonians, and was there seized by Amyntas, Philip's admiral.

The ships were demanded by the Athenians, and returned by Philip, but with declarations sufficiently alarming.

The obstinate valor of the Perinthians had forced Philip to turn the siege into a blockade. He marched off with a considerable body of his army to attack other places, and made an incursion into the territories of Byzantium. The Byzantines shut themselves up within their city, and despatched one of their citizens to Athens to desire the assistance of that state; who, with some difficulty, prevailed to have a fleet of forty ships sent out, under the command of Chares.

As this general had not the same reputation in other places as at Athens, the cities by which he was to pass refused to receive him: so that he was obliged to wander for some time along the coasts, extorting contributions from the Athenian allies; despised by the enemy, and suspected by the whole world. He appeared at last before Byzantium, where he met with the same mortifying treatment as in other places, and was refused admission; and shortly after was defeated by Amyntas in a naval engagement, in which a considerable part of his fleet was either sunk or taken.

Philip had for some time perceived, that, sooner or later, he must inevitably come to a rupture with the Athenians. His partisans were no longer able to lull them into security. Their opposition to his designs, however imperfect and ineffectual, was yet sufficient to alarm him. He therefore determined to endeavor to abate that spirit which now began to break through their inveterate indolence; and for this purpose sent them a letter, in which, with the utmost art, he laid open the causes of complaint he had against them, and threatened them with reprisals. This letter was not received at Athens till after the news of Chares's defeat.

Philip had now laid siege to Byzantium, and exerted all his efforts to make himself master of that city. On the other hand, the Athenians were disheartened by the ill-success of their commander, and began to repent of having sent any succors, when Phocion, who always assumed the liberty of speaking his sentiments freely, assured them, that for once they themselves had not been in fault; but that their general only was to blame. He was immediately desired to take on himself the charge of relieving Byzantium; and set sail with a numerous body of forces.

He was received with the greatest demonstrations of joy; and his whole conduct expressed the utmost wisdom and moderation. Nor was his valor less conspicuous: he sustained many assaults with an intrepidity worthy of the early ages of the commonwealth, and at last obliged Philip to raise the siege.

Phocion then departed amid the general acclamations of the people whom he had saved. He proceeded to the relief of the colonies of the Chersonesus, who were ever exposed to the attacks of the Cardians. In this way he took some vessels laden with arms and provisions for the enemy, and obliged the Macedonians, who had attempted Sestos, to abandon their enterprise, and shut themselves up in Cardia.

And thus, after various expeditions highly honorable both to himself and to his country, Phocion returned home, where he found the Athenians engaged in a debate on Philip's letter: on which occasion Demosthenes pronounced his last oration against Philip. To have answered the letter particularly would have been very difficult; for, though Athens had the better cause, yet many irregularities had really been committed, which Philip knew how to display in their full force. The orator therefore makes use of his art to extricate himself from the difficulty; avoids all former discussions of facts, and applies himself at once to raise the lively passions: affects to consider this letter as an open declaration of war; inflames the imaginations of his hearers with this idea; and speaks only of the means to support their arms against so powerful an enemy.

## THE ORATION ON THE LETTER

Pronounced in the Archonship of Theophrastus, the year after the Fourth Philippic \*(1)  
 NOW, Athenians, it is fully evident to you all that Philip made no real peace with us, but only deferred hostilities. When he surrendered Halus to the Pharsalians, \*(2) when he completed the ruin of Phocis, when he overturned all Thrace, \*(3) then did he really attack the state, under the concealment of false allegations and unjust pretences; but now he hath made a formal declaration of war by this his letter. That we are not to look with horror on his power; that, on the other hand, we are not to be remiss in our opposition, but to engage our persons, our treasures, and our navies; in one word, our whole strength, freely, in the common cause; these are the points I would establish.

First, then, Athenians, the gods we may justly regard as our strongest allies and assistants; since in this unjust violation of his treaty he hath trampled on religion and despised the most solemn oaths. In the next place, those secret practices to which his greatness hath hitherto been owing, all his arts of deceiving, all his magnificent promises, are now quite exhausted. The Perinthians, and the Byzantines, and their confederates, \*(4) have at length discovered that he intends to treat them as he formerly treated the Olynthians. The Thessalians are no longer ignorant that he affects to be the master, and not the leader of his allies. The Thebans begin to see danger in his stationing a garrison at Nicaea, \*(5) his assuming the rank of an Amphictyon, his bringing into Macedon the embassies from Peloponnesus, \*(6) and his preventing them in seizing the advantage of an alliance with the people of that country. So that, of those who have hitherto been his friends, some are now irreconcilably at war with him; others no longer serve him with zeal and sincerity; and all have their suspicions and complaints. Add to this (and it is of no small moment) that the satraps of Asia have just now forced him to raise the siege of Perinthus, by throwing in a body of hired troops: and as this must make him their enemy, \*(7) and as they are immediately exposed to danger, should he become master of Byzantium, they will not only readily unite their force with ours, but prevail on the king of Persia to assist us with his treasure; who, in this particular, far exceeds all other potentates; and whose influence in Greece is so great, that formerly, when we were engaged in a war with Lacedaemon, he never failed to give the superiority to \*(8) that party which he espoused: and now, when he unites with us, he will with ease subdue the power of Philip.

I shall not mention, as a balance to these so considerable advantages, that he hath taken the opportunity of the peace to make himself master of many of our territories, our ports, and other like conveniences: for it is observable, that where affection joins and one common interest animates the confederating powers, there the alliance is never to be shaken; but where subtle fraud, and passions insatiable, and perfidy, and violence have formed it (and these are the means which he hath used), the least pretence, the slightest accident gives it the fatal shock, and in an instant it is utterly dissolved. And, from repeated observations, I am convinced, Athenians, that Philip not only wants the confidence and affection of his allies; but, even in his own kingdom, he is by no means happy in that well-established regularity and those intimate attachments which might be expected. The power of Macedon, indeed, as an ally, may have some effect; but, if left to itself, is insufficient; and when compared with his pompous enterprises, quite contemptible. And then his wars, his expeditions, and those exploits which have given him this splendor are the very means of rendering it yet weaker: for you are not to imagine, Athenians, that Philip and his subjects have the same desires. He is possessed with the love of glory; they wish only for security. The object of his passion must be

attended with danger; and they but ill endure a banishment from their children, parents, wives; a life worn out with toils, and exposed to continual perils in his cause.

Hence we may learn how his subjects in general are affected to their prince.

But then his guards and officers of his foreign troops: these you will find have some military reputation: yet they live in greater terrors than the obscure and mean. These are exposed only to their avowed enemies; the others have more to fear from calumny and flattery than in the field. The one, when engaged in battle, but share the common danger: the others, besides their part, and this not the least of that danger, have also their private apprehensions from the temper of their prince. Among the many, when one hath transgressed, his punishment is proportioned to his crime: the others, when they have most eminently distinguished themselves, are then, in open defiance of all decency, treated with the greatest insolence and disdain.

That these are incontestable truths no reasonable man can doubt: for they who have lived with him assure us, that his ambition is so insatiable that he will have the glory of every exploit ascribed wholly to himself: and is much more incensed against such commanders as have performed anything worthy of honor, than against those whose misconduct hath ruined his enterprises. But, if this be the case, how is it that they have persevered so long in their attachment to his cause? It is for this reason, Athenians, because success throws a shade on all his odious qualities (for nothing veils men's faults from observation so effectually as success): but let any accident happen, and they will all be perfectly discovered. Just as in our bodies; while we are in health our inward defects lie concealed; but when we are attacked by a disorder, then they are all sensible, in the vessels, in the joints, or wherever we are affected: so in kingdoms and governments of every kind, while their arms are victorious, their disorders escape the common observation; but a reverse of fortune (and this he must experience, as he hath taken up a burden much beyond his strength) never fails to lay them open to every eye.

If there be a man among you, Athenians, who regards Philip as a powerful and formidable enemy on account of his good fortune, such cautious foresight bespeaks a truly prudent mind. Fortune, indeed, does greatly influence, or rather has the entire direction, of all human affairs; but there are many reasons to expect much more from the fortune of Athens than that of Philip. We can boast of an authority in Greece, derived from our ancestors, not only before his days, but before any one prince of Macedon. They all were tributaries of Athens: Athens never paid that mark of subjection to any people. In the next place, the more inviolably we have adhered to piety and justice, the greater may be our confidence in the favor of the gods. But, if this be the case, how is it that in the late war his arms had such superior fortune? This is the cause (for I will speak with undaunted freedom); he takes the field himself; endures its toils, and shares its dangers; no favorable incident escapes him; no season of the year retards him. While we (for the truth must not be concealed) are confined within our walls in perfect inactivity, delaying, and voting, and wandering through the public places in search of news. Can anything better deserve the name of new, than that one sprung from Macedon should insult Athens, and dare to send such letters as you have just heard recited? that he should have his armies and his orators in pay? (yes, I call Heaven to witness, there are those among us who do not blush to live for Philip, who have not sense to perceive that they are selling all the interests of the state, all their own real interests, for a trifling pittance!)- while we never once think of preparing to oppose him; are quite averse to hiring troops, and want resolution to take up arms ourselves. No wonder, therefore, that he had some advantage over us in the late war: on the contrary, it is really surprising that we, who are quite regardless of all that concerns our cause, should expect to conquer him who leaves no means omitted that may assure his success.

Let these things be duly weighed, Athenians, and deeply impressed on your minds. Consider that it is not at your option whether to profess peace or no; for he hath now made a declaration of war, and hostilities are commenced. Spare no expenses, public or private: let a general ardor appear for taking arms: appoint abler commanders than you have hitherto chosen; for it must not be imagined that the men who, from a state of prosperity, have reduced us to these difficulties, will again extricate us, and restore us to our former splendor: nor is it to be expected that, if you continue thus supine, your cause will find other assertors. Think how infamous it is that you, whose ancestors were exposed to such incessant toils and so great dangers, in the war with Lacedaemon, should refuse to engage with resolution in defence of that rightful power which they transmitted to us! How shameful that this Macedonian should have a soul so daring, that, to enlarge his empire, his whole body is covered with wounds; and that the Athenians, they whose hereditary character it is to yield to none, but to give law to all their adversaries, are now supine and enervated, insensible to the glory of their fathers, and regardless of the interests of their country.

That I may not detain you, my sentence is this: that we should instantly prepare for war, and call on the other states of Greece to join in the common cause, not by words, but by actions; for words, if not attended with actions, are of no force. Our professions particularly have always had the less weight, as we are confessedly superior to the rest of Greece, in prompt address and excellence of speaking.

## NOTES

### To the Oration on the Letter

\*(1) It must be confessed that this oration consists almost wholly of repetitions. This great man seems to have thought himself superior to all vain criticisms; and, only concerned for the safety of Athens, was in no pain about his private glory. He speaks as an orator whose end is to persuade and convince; not as a declaimer, who seeks only to give pleasure and excite admiration: he therefore resumes those topics he had already made use of, and gives them new force by the close and lively manner in which he delivers them. \*(2) Hallus was a town of Thessaly on the river Amphrysus. Parmenio besieged and took it; after which Philip put the people of Pharsalia in possession of it. \*(3) This is the language of an orator, who, to represent Philip's outrages with the greater aggravation, takes the liberty of speaking of a part of that country as of the whole. Philip had, indeed, made himself master of the territories of Teres and Cersobleptes, both kings in Thrace, and allies of the Athenians: but Pausanias observes, that before the Romans, no one had ever made an entire conquest of Thrace. -

\*(4) The inhabitants of Chios, Rhodes, and some other places joined to defeat Philip's designs on Perinthus and Byzantium. \*(5) This town was situated near Thermopylae, and was counted among the principal towns of the Locrians (Epicnemidii), the neighbors and allies of the Boeotians and Thebans. Philip made himself master of it at the time that he seized Thermopylae, under pretence of putting an end to the Sacred War. \*(6) Probably this was at the time when he interested himself in the disputes between Sparta and the Argians and Messenians, as mentioned in the preface to the second Philippic oration. Strabo mentions an application of the Argians and Messenians to Philip to regulate a contest between them and Lacedaemon about their boundaries; and Pausanias declaims against the pride of Gallus, a Roman senator, who thought it derogated from his dignity to decide the differences of Lacedaemon and Argos, and disdained to meddle with a mediation which Philip had formerly not only accepted, but

courted. \*(7) This proved an exact prediction of what happened some time after. Alexander, in his letter to Darius, alleges, as one of the principal subjects of their rupture, the powerful succors which Perinthus received from the Persian satraps. Arrian, 1. i. \*(8) History represents the king of Persia as the supreme arbiter of the fate of Athens and Lacedaemon during the whole time of their quarrels. Darius Nothus joined with the Lacedaemonians; and Lysander their general destroyed Athens.

Artaxerxes Mnemon protected Conon, the Athenian general, and immediately Athens resumed her former splendor. Lacedaemon afterward joined in alliance with the great king; and this intimidated the Athenians, and obliged them to seek for peace. Artaxerxes dictated the articles of it, threatening to declare against those who should refuse to subscribe to them. Athens instantly obeyed. Thus it was that a foreign power lorded it over the Greeks, and by means of their divisions had the absolute command of their fate.

**THE END OF THE ORATION ON THE LETTER**