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CONVERSATIONS ON CHARACTER

PLUTARCH'S
LIFE OF FABIUS

by Larry Hunt

"...it is my duty to dwell especially upon those actions which reveal the workings of my heroes' minds, and from these to construct the portraits of their respective lives." —Plutarch

Plutarch's Lives is a wealth of character studies, written in ancient times by a master biographer who wanted his readers to understand who the Greek and Romans were as people. By focusing on stories that show what the hero valued rather than on his accomplishments, Plutarch shines a spotlight on the character qualities of the men of ancient times.

Conversations on Character makes Plutarch accessible for students in fourth grade and up, providing interesting readings, helpful summaries of each section, and discussion questions that guide your student to consider the character of each hero studied. Everything you need is in this guide. The full reading from Plutarch is included, along with questions and narration prompts to spark conversations around each reading. The included companion videos guide your student with a reading of the full text and starting thoughts for the discussion questions.

Give your student the opportunity to grow in understanding character qualities with *Conversations on Character*!

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Conversations on Character: Plutarch's Life of Fabius

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PREFACE: WHO WAS PLUTARCH?

Usually, I love a book for its own sake. Something about its characters, plot, and setting captures my imagination and draws me in. But every once in a while, I love a book for the sake of its author as well. For instance, when I read a book by C. S. Lewis or George MacDonald, I feel like I am in the company of a friend and mentor, someone I could trust with my own children.

I feel the same way about Plutarch, and I am not alone. People have loved Plutarch for nearly 2,000 years. Indeed, he is one of the most beloved authors in the entire canon of literature, not merely because of his excellent work as a historian and philosopher, but because readers sense that he was a good man with a genuine desire to improve his own soul and theirs.

We know relatively little about the life of the man himself, which is ironic, given that he is famous for writing biographies. He was born around A.D. 45 in Chæronea, a small Greek city in the Boeotian plain. As a young man, he studied philosophy in Athens and distinguished himself in this discipline for the rest of his life. He even headed his own school in Chæronea where he taught philosophy.

Indeed, it was his work as a philosopher, teacher, and writer that made him quite popular in Rome, where he was invited to give a series of lectures on philosophical topics. While there, he traveled around Italy, sight-seeing and gathering knowledge

about the famous Romans who would later appear in his greatest work: *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

Plutarch also made a trip to Alexandria, Egypt, which was the intellectual center of the world in his lifetime. The wisdom of Egypt had long fascinated the ancient Greeks, and Plutarch must have been thrilled to explore the wonders of that land.

In spite of these travels, however, and the lure of celebrity, Plutarch was attached to his homeland. He chose to spend most of his life in the little town of his birth, joyfully devoting his active mind to family life, teaching, and civic duty. As a storyteller and historian, he loved the tales of adventure that he chronicled in his biographies, but as a philosopher, he understood that one's life does not need to be epic in order to be noble. He believed that a simple but virtuous life, a life crowned by love, reason, self-control, and humility, is far nobler than that of many a famous king.

In this series, we will be studying the biographies he wrote, known collectively as *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* or sometimes, simply, Plutarch's *Lives*. Plutarch himself called the collection *Parallel Lives* because he intended to present his biographies in pairs, one Greek and one Roman. He selected the pairs based on similarities of personality or circumstance. For instance, he paired Theseus, the founder-hero of Athens, with Romulus, legendary founder of Rome. Pairing them like this naturally invites a comparison of the two lives, which Plutarch often did in a concluding section. In these comparisons, Plutarch sifts the best qualities of each person by comparing and contrasting one with the other in the ways that each dealt with similar challenges.

And this gives us some insight into the true purpose of Plutarch's *Lives*.

Although his *Lives* is a useful source of historical knowledge, Plutarch made a very clear distinction between the purpose of his book and that of strict history.

> I am writing biography, not history; and often a man's most brilliant actions prove nothing as to his true character, while some trifling incident, some casual remark or jest, will throw more light upon what manner of man he was than the bloodiest battle, the greatest array of armies, or the most important siege. Therefore, just as portrait painters pay most attention to those peculiarities of the face and eyes, in which the likeness consists, and care but little for the rest of the figure, so it is my duty to dwell especially upon those actions which reveal the workings of my heroes' minds, and from these to construct the portraits of their respective lives, leaving their battles and their great deeds to be recorded by others.
>
> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*

So the essential aim of history is to record the momentous events of the past for their own sake. Plutarch's aim, however, was to present the moral qualities of those who were responsible for such great events, not primarily for their historical value but for their potential to inspire him and his readers to live a good, honorable, and satisfying life. He put it best when he wrote,

> It was for the sake of others that I first started to write biographies, but I soon began to dwell upon and delight in them for myself, endeavoring to the best of my ability to regulate my own life by them, and to mirror the virtues I saw in these great people. By the study of their biographies, we receive each person as a guest into our minds. . . and so train ourselves by constantly dwelling upon the memorials of the great and good, that should anything base or vicious be placed in our way by the society into which we are necessarily thrown, we reject it and expel it from our

> thoughts, by fixing them calmly and happily on what is noble.
>
> Plutarch, *Life of Timoleon*

This perfectly describes my experience of reading Plutarch's *Lives*, and I hope it will describe yours as well. Plutarch was a skilled storyteller, and his subjects led fascinating lives. As I read about these remarkable people, I feel as though I am living with them, sharing in their adventures, and fixing my thoughts "calmly and happily on what is noble."

But there is one noble life in particular that inspires me whenever I read these biographies, a simple life that does not appear in the collection as such but which gives the whole work its spirit and beauty, and that is the life of its author, who speaks to me over centuries of time to show me how to live well.

A NOTE ABOUT THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

The translation I have selected for these study guides is that of Aubrey Stewart and George Long, both Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge. Initially, I considered using John Dryden's translation since I first grew to love Plutarch in that translation. I also considered using Thomas North's translation since it has a good reputation and was the version that Shakespeare drew upon for the plays *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cæsar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but in the end I believe that Stewart and Long's is the best choice.

For one thing, the translations of North (1579) and Dryden (1683) contain many old-fashioned words, making them less accessible to the modern reader. Also, these two are not as accurate as Stewart and Long's translation. North's is a translation of Amyot's French translation, so it is a translation of a translation. The translation called by Dryden's name was

in fact the work of a committee, whose members had varying degrees of skill, so while it is "translated from the Greek," Dryden's translation is widely acknowledged to be inferior to North's.

Stewart and Long were both excellent scholars. Their translation is from the original Greek, and its relatively modern (1892) vocabulary is more accessible.

For the most part, the text appears entire and in its original order, but on rare occasions, I may take the liberty of rearranging a few sections for thematic reasons. Also, in a very few places, I have omitted content that may not be appropriate for younger readers. Where I have changed the text in these ways, I have noted the fact and summarized the omitted sections. Where applicable, spelling and punctuation have been updated to modern conventions.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can be used on its own or with my video lectures. You can go through all of the readings at whatever pace you like. However, if you decide to skip some, I suggest that you read my summaries of the omitted readings in order to provide continuity.

Each reading is set up in the following way: a preliminary summary, the text of the reading, a narration prompt, and discussion questions at the end.

Summaries

I have written a summary at the beginning of each reading in case the student (or parent) would like to get the essence of the reading ahead of time.

Readings and Narration

I read each of these sections in my videos before I talk about the reading itself. Each reading is around three pages long on average. If you are using my video, you could press pause during the reading, or immediately afterward, to allow the student to narrate what he or she remembers. (See the What is Narration section below.) Once this is done to your satisfaction, you could either return to the video to hear my thoughts on the reading and/or conduct your own discussion with the students. The book provides questions after each reading to help facilitate your own discussions.

Discussion Questions

I do not intend for these sections to be like quizzes over the reading. I only mean for them to invite students to think more deeply about aspects of the reading that seem to be the most important or interesting. Students should not feel bad if they do not know the answers. (Sometimes, the answers are not even directly given in the reading). I will address each of these discussion questions in the video after I read the text.

Companion Videos

Companion videos are available for each installment of the Conversations on Character: Plutarch series and include summaries, a live reading of the text, and the discussion questions. Due to the nature of the language in the translation, it is highly recommended to use the video companion while following along with the text. If you have any questions about accessing the videos through your SCM account, send an email to contact@simplycharlottemason.com.

Maps

Your purchase of this book includes access to maps that will familiarize students with the geography of the stories as well as the logistics

of particular events (such as battles). Use the QR code or this short url to access and download the maps: simplycm.com/plutarchs-fabius-maps.

WHAT IS NARRATION?

At the end of each of my readings, you are invited to narrate what you heard, so it is important to understand what narration is.

Narration and *intentional reading* are skills that Charlotte Mason emphasized, and I think they are very valuable skills, particularly these days when our ability to focus on a text deeply has been weakened by the hundreds of shiny promises of entertainment that flash around us constantly.

In order to narrate, you must first read or listen to a reading closely. Here are a few quotations from Charlotte Mason herself that will help get the idea across.

> This habit should be begun early; so soon as the child can read at all, he should read for himself, and to himself, history, legends, fairy tales, and other suitable matter. He should be trained from the first to think that one reading of any lesson is enough to enable him to narrate what he has read, and will thus get the habit of slow, careful reading, intelligent even when it is silent, because he reads with an eye to the full meaning of every clause.
>
> *Home Education*, p. 227

The sort of focus that Charlotte Mason is describing here can be developed while reading on your own or while listening to someone else read. (In Plutarch's lifetime, literature was copied out by hand, which made manuscripts rare. As a consequence, you would probably have *heard* his stories read aloud to you rather than read them yourself, so when you listen to me read aloud, not only will you be developing your ability to focus, you will also be participating in a very ancient tradition.)

After an intentional reading, you have prepared yourself to narrate. When you narrate, you take on the role of storyteller, retelling the events of the story you just heard. Here is how Charlotte Mason describes the practice.

> It is most interesting to hear children of seven or eight go through a long story without missing a detail, putting every event in its right order. These narrations are never a slavish reproduction of the original. A child's individuality plays about what he enjoys, and the story comes from his lips, not precisely as the author tells it, but with a certain spirit and colouring which express the narrator. By the way, it is very important that children should be allowed to narrate in their own way, and should not be pulled up or helped with words and expressions from the text. A narration should be original as it comes from the child—that is, his own mind should have acted upon the matter it has received. Narrations which are mere feats of memory are quite valueless.
>
> *Home Education*, p. 289

She has younger students in mind here simply because the skills of close reading (or listening) and narration should be developed early in one's life, not because they have no value for older students.

So if you are using my videos with this study guide, and you want to try your hand at narration, simply pause the video after the reading and narrate. You can do this in whatever way works best: to yourself or someone else, orally, or in writing. Also, if the reading is too long, you could pause the video and narrate once or twice before the end.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

WHO WAS FABIUS MAXIMUS?

If you have ever felt pressured to do something that you knew was foolish or wrong, then Plutarch wrote his *Life of Fabius* for you.

Fabius (FAY-bee-us) Maximus was not only one of Rome's greatest generals, he was also a model of prudence, courage, and patience, but we cannot truly appreciate the achievements of Fabius without also recognizing those of the enemy against whom he famously matched himself: Hannibal of Carthage. The invasion of Hannibal was the greatest external threat to Rome that the republic ever suffered. Writing two centuries later, the Roman Historian Livy described the war with Hannibal as "the most memorable war in history" (*The History of Rome from its Foundation*, Book XXI).

Carthage was a city in North Africa, a rival of Rome, and Hannibal's homeland. His father, Hamilcar, hated the Romans passionately and made his son swear an oath to be the lifelong enemy of Rome. Later, in fulfillment of this oath, Hannibal would lead his Carthaginian army from Spain, across the Alps, and down into Italy, where he met with stunning success on the battlefield because of his strategic and tactical brilliance. Indeed, Hannibal is considered by military historians to be among the very best generals the world has ever seen, belonging in the same class as Alexander the Great.

But Fabius proved his equal, at least insofar as he consistently frustrated Hannibal's desire to conquer the Romans. Fabius realized that the best way to defend Rome from Hannibal was to fight a sort of guerilla war, never committing to open battle but constantly harassing and worrying the Carthaginian as his army dwindled over time. This style of fighting, however, seemed cowardly to the Romans, so his own countrymen mercilessly mocked Fabius for using it.

Nevertheless, he was undeterred, and this resolve of his to do what he knew was best in spite of being publicly mocked and pressured to do otherwise, is his most celebrated virtue. All his skill as a general would have been useless if he had allowed himself to be swayed by his desire for approval. Indeed, he recognized that to act against his wisdom simply because people were calling him a coward, would, ironically, be an act of cowardice:

> If I did so, I should be more cowardly than I am now thought to be, in abandoning the policy which I have determined on because of men's slanders and sneers. It is no shame to fear for one's country, but to regard the opinions and spiteful criticisms of the people would be unworthy of the high office which I hold, and would show me the slave of those whom I ought to govern and restrain when they would fain do wrong.
>
> Plutarch, *Life of Fabius*

As I note in the Who Was Plutarch? section of this book, Plutarch tells us that he did not write his *Lives*, primarily, for their historical value but in order to inspire his readers to live good, moral lives. In the case of Fabius, we have an excellent example not merely of a talented general who saved his country, but of someone who understood that true bravery requires us to do what is right, even when people insult and mock us for doing so.

LIFE OF FABIUS

READING 1

SUMMARY

After spending some time sketching the origins of the family name, Plutarch goes on to describe the personality of Fabius as a child. In boyhood, Fabius is considered to be dull and stupid, but he soon proves to be quite the opposite and grows to be a leader of great thoughtfulness and intellect, serving as consul five times.

FROM PLUTARCH

Use the video for reading 1 to guide you through the following text:

Such a man did Perikles (PAIR-uh-kleez) show himself to be in his most memorable acts, as far as they are extant.

Let us now turn our attention to Fabius.

The first of the family is said to descend from one of the nymphs, according to some writers, according to others from an Italian lady who became the mother of Fabius by Hercules near the river Tiber. From him descended the family of the Fabii (FOB-ee-ee), one of the largest and most renowned in Rome. Some say that the men of this race were the first to use pitfalls in hunting, and were anciently named Fodii (FO-dee-ee) in consequence; for, up to the present day, ditches are called *fossae*, and to dig is called *fodere* in Latin, and thus in time the two sounds became confused, and they obtained the name of Fabii. The family produced many distinguished men, the greatest of whom was Rullus, who was for that reason named Maximus by the Romans. From him

Fabius Maximus, of whom I am now writing, was fourth in descent. His own personal nickname was Verrucosus (ver-ruh-KOH-sis), because he had a little wart growing on his upper lip. The name of Ovicula (oh-VEE-cue-la), signifying sheep, was also given him while yet a child, because of his slow and gentle disposition. He was quiet and silent, very cautious in taking part in children's games, and learned his lessons slowly and with difficulty—which, combined with his easy, obliging ways with his comrades—made those who did not know him think that he was dull and stupid. Few there were who could discern, hidden in the depths of his soul, his glorious and lion-like character. Soon, however, as time went on, and he began to take part in public affairs, he proved that his apparent want of energy was really due to serenity of intellect, that he was cautious because he weighed matters well beforehand, and that while he was never eager or easily moved, yet he was always steady and trustworthy. Observing the immense extent of the empire, and the numerous wars in which it was engaged, he exercised his body in warlike exercises, regarding it as his natural means of defence, while he also studied oratory as the means by which to influence the people, in a style suited to his own life and character. In his speeches there were no flowery passages, no empty graces of style, but there was a plain common sense peculiar to himself, and a depth of sententious maxims which is said to have resembled Thucydides (thoo-SID-id-eez). One of his speeches is extant, a funeral oration which he made in public over his son who died after he had been consul.

He was consul five times, and in his first consulship obtained a triumph over the Ligurians. They were defeated by him and driven with great loss to take refuge in the Alps, and thus were prevented from ravaging the neighboring parts of Italy as they had been wont to do. When Hannibal invaded Italy, won his first battle at the Trebia, and marched through Etruria, laying everything waste as he went, the Romans were terribly disheartened and cast down, and terrible prodigies took place, some of the usual kind, that is, by lightning, and others of an entirely new and strange character. It was said that shields of their own accord became drenched with blood,

that at Antium standing corn bled when it was cut by the reapers, that red-hot stones fell from heaven, and that the sky above Falerii (fuh-LAIR-ee-ee) was seen to open and tablets to fall, on one of which was written the words "Mars is shaking his arms."

None of these omens had any effect upon Caius Flaminius (KY-us fluh-MIN-ee-us), the consul, for, besides his naturally spirited and ambitious nature, he was excited by the successes which he had previously won, contrary to all reasonable probability. Once, against the express command of the Senate, and in spite of the opposition of his colleague, he engaged with the Gauls and won a victory over them. Fabius also was but little disturbed by the omens, because of their strange and unintelligible character, though many were alarmed at them. Knowing how few the enemy were in numbers, and their great want of money and supplies, he advised the Romans not to offer battle to a man who had at his disposal an army trained by many previous encounters to a rare pitch of perfection, but rather to send reinforcements to their allies, keep a tight hand over their subject cities, and allow Hannibal's brilliant little force to die away like a lamp which flares up brightly with but little oil to sustain it.

NARRATION

Tell about the prodigies, or omens, described in the passage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did people conclude that Fabius was dull and stupid when he was a child?
2. How does Fabius propose to deal with Hannibal?

READING 10

SUMMARY

In this reading, we learn of the clever and humane ways in which Fabius dealt with soldiers who were disobedient or potentially rebellious.

FROM PLUTARCH

Use the video for reading 10 to guide you through the following text:

> In the case of revolts and insurrections among the subject cities and allies, Fabius thought it best to restrain them and discountenance their proceedings in a gentle manner, not treating every suspected person with harshness, or inquiring too strictly into every case of suspected disloyalty. It is said that a Marsian soldier, one of the chief men of the allies for bravery and nobility of birth, was discovered by Fabius to be engaged in organizing a revolt. Fabius showed no sign of anger, but admitted that he had not been treated with the distinction he deserved, and said that in the present instance he should blame his officers for distributing rewards more by favor than by merit; but that in future he should be vexed with him if he did not apply directly to himself when he had any request to make. Saying this, he presented him with a war horse and other marks of honor, so that thenceforth the man always served him with the utmost zeal and fidelity. He thought it a shame that trainers of horses and dogs should be able to tame the savage spirit of those animals by careful attention and education rather than by whips and clogs, and yet that a commander of men should not rely chiefly on mild and conciliatory measures, but treat them more harshly than gardeners treat the wild fig-trees, wild pears, and wild olives, which they by careful cultivation turn into trees bearing good fruit. His captains informed him that a certain soldier, a Lucanian by birth, was irregular and often absent from his duty. He made inquiries as to what his general conduct was.

All agreed that it would be difficult to find a better soldier, and related some of his exploits. Fabius at length discovered that the cause of his absence was that he was in love with a certain girl, and that he continually ran the risk of making long journeys from the camp to meet her. Without the knowledge of the soldier, he sent and apprehended this girl, whom he concealed in his own tent. Then he invited the Lucanian to a private interview, and addressed him as follows: "You have been observed frequently to pass the night outside of the camp, contrary to the ancient practice and discipline of the Roman army. But also, you have been observed to be a brave man. Your crime is atoned for by your valiant deeds, but for the future I shall commit you to the custody of another person." Then, to the astonishment of the soldier, he led the girl forward, joined their hands, and said, "This lady pledges her word that you will remain in the camp with us. You must prove by your conduct that it was not from any unworthy motive, for which she was the pretext, but solely through love for her that you used to desert your post." This is the story which is related about him.

NARRATION

Tell about the problem Fabius has with the Lucanian soldier and how he handled it.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Fabius draws inspiration for how to correct his soldiers from animal trainers and gardeners. In what way do these professions influence his methods of discipline?