



Plutarch Selection

For our Plutarch selection, we have chosen the chapter "The Savior of Athens," a study of Themistocles from *The Children's Plutarch: Stories of the Greeks*, and included it on the following pages. The book may also be purchased on Amazon.

If your children are 6th grade or older, we recommend spending a full 12-week term studying Themistocles with the edited (for length and content) study guide from Ambleside here:

<https://amblesideonline.org/plutarch-themistocles>

You can also purchase the guide by Anne White on Amazon. (This is in place of *The Children's Plutarch*, not in addition to.)

Plutarch

The Savior of Athens

The Children's Plutarch: Tales of the Greeks, by F. J. Gould

"LOOK, my son," said an old Greek, as he and his boy walked along the sea shore, "you see those old galleys? Once they were strong ships that carried fighting-men across the ocean, and now they are worn out; they lie half covered with sand in this lonely place; no one cares anything about them. And so it is with men who serve Athens. After they have done their best, and become old in the service of the city, they are laid aside and thought no more of."

The boy, whose name was Themistocles (Them-is-to-cleez), gazed earnestly at the old ships. But he made up his mind, all the same, that if he ever could serve Athens, he would.

And he did. In the year 481 B.C. the King of Persia brought his vast army against the Greeks. So many were his soldiers that two rivers (so it is said) were drunk dry by the army. More than fifty different nations took part in the invasion. From one country came warriors who wore trousers, and tunics covered with iron scales, and carried spears, bows, and daggers; from another country, warriors with helmets and iron-headed clubs; from another country, warriors clad in cotton coats; from another country, warriors clad in the skins of lions and leopards, their bodies being painted half-red; from another country, warriors in fox-skins; and from another, warriors in jackets of leather.

The Persian army drew nigh to the city of Athens, and the people were in great fear. They sent to ask the god Apollo what they had better do; and the priestess who spoke the message of the god replied:

"Trust in your wooden walls."

"What can Apollo mean by the wooden walls?" the people asked one of the other.

"I can tell you," cried Themistocles, who was master of the Athenian fleet. "It means our wooden ships. Let us leave the city, send the women and children across the bay to a friendly city, and there let them stay till we have driven the Persians from Greek waters and Greek coasts. And let all the young men go on board the galleys of war and fight for Athens."

This was done in haste, for in the distance could be seen the blaze of burning villages which had fallen into the power of the foe. Women and children hurriedly scrambled into vessels, and were rowed across the broad bay which stretched before the city of Athens. It is told of a faithful dog that he would not be left behind, and when he saw his master departing he leaped into the waves and swam beside the ship until he reached the coast of the island of Salamis. And there he died, and his master buried him and wept for sorrow; and for hundreds of years afterward the spot on the beach was called "The Dog's Grave."

The sea-captains held a council to decide on the exact place where they should meet the enemy's fleet. One of them was angry because his plan was not agreed to, and he raised his stick to hit the Athenian leader. Themistocles looked at him steadily, and said:

"Strike, if you please; but hear me."

The angry man did not strike after all. The calm answer had turned away his wrath. It was arranged to await the Persian forces in the strait or narrow passage between the island of Salamis and the mainland. The city of Athens was in flames, and its walls thrown down; and a huge fleet of Persian ships, with lofty decks, was forming a terrible half-circle around the Greeks. The Greek vessels were flat-bottomed, and much lower in build than those of the enemy. Each ship was manned by rowers, perhaps fifty; and each carried eighteen warriors on the top deck, four being archers and the others spearmen.

One morning, in the year 480 B.C., the fleets were fronting each other, and the sun shone upon the thousands of flapping sails and on the bright weapons of the Greeks and Persians. Upon a tall cliff that overlooked the sea sat the King of Persia on a throne of gold. About him stood his princes, and men with pen and ink were at hand ready to write down the brave deeds of the Persians in the naval battle which was just opening. The Persian admiral's vessel was very high, and from this floating castle he flung darts and arrows at the Athenians. Many were the Persian ships, and they often jostled one another in the narrow channel. All day long the fight continued. One by one, amid the cheers of the Greeks, the ships of the foreigner were broken, captured, or sunk; and the Greeks fancied they saw lights on the land and heard voices in the air that assured them of the favor of the gods. At sunset the battle of Salamis was ended, and the Persian King and his secretaries with their ink-pots and all his proud princes fled from the shore, leaving the throne of gold behind in their haste. Not long afterward the king was hurrying with part of his army across the bridge of boats that joined the shore of Europe to the shore of Asia Minor. The Persians who remained in Greece were beaten in the battle of Plataea. The walls of Athens were rebuilt. Thus was Themistocles the savior of the famous city.

You will remember the old galleys which lay on the shore. The time came when the people of Athens turned their hearts against Themistocles, and drove him into exile. Some say he made plots against the very city which he had saved by his skill at the battle of Salamis. It is very hard to find out the truth from the ancient books of history, and so we must leave the question alone. Anyhow, we hear that the famous captain wandered from place to place until at last he went over to Asia. This was a daring thing to do. He was in the empire of his old enemies the Persians. At one town, where he was visiting a Persian friend, it became known that he was within the walls. A noise was made, and angry men were searching for him. His friend thrust him hastily into a carriage such as was used by ladies. This carriage was like the sedan-chairs of which you may have seen pictures. Bearers carried the chair by means of poles, and the windows were closed up tight. If anybody asked the question, "Whom have you there?" the bearers would say, "We are carrying a Greek lady to the royal court."

Well, Themistocles really did go to the court of the King of Persia.

He had first found out that the king was willing to receive him in a friendly manner. In fact, the king hoped to make use of the celebrated general and persuade him to fight against his own countrymen. So glad was the lord of Persia that he called out in his sleep three times over, "I have got Themistocles the Athenian!"

Next morning the Athenian arrived at the palace gates, and the soldiers on guard, hearing who he was, looked upon him with evil eyes, and an officer whispered as he passed:

"Ah, you Grecian snake, it is a fortunate thing for Persia that you have arrived!"

However, the king was much more polite to the visitor than the soldiers were, and talked to him about another war with Greece.

"What plan do you propose for invading Greece?" he asked.

Themistocles looked very thoughtful, and said:

"Sir, a piece of tapestry such as you have on the wall of your chamber has many pictures on it, and these can be seen plainly enough when the cloth is spread open. When the tapestry is folded up the pictures are hid. Now, sir, I have many pictures and ideas in my mind, but I do not want to spread them out yet. Please give me time to think."

"Very well," said the king; "fold up your tapestry for a year."

During this time the Athenian was generously dealt with. The citizens of one city sent him his daily bread; of another, his wine; and of a third, his meat. Often he kept company with the king in the hunting of deer, wild boars, or lions. No doubt his thoughts many a time stole back to the dear city of Athens, and he longed to be among his fellow-countrymen once more. When walking through a certain city in Asia he saw a brass statue, the figure of a woman bearing a pot of water on her head. This very figure had been made and set up by his own orders in a public place of Athens. His eyes lit up at the sight of it, and he begged the governor of the city to let him have the statue to send back to Greece. The governor refused.

Yes, I feel sure that the heart of the brave victor of Salamis still beat warmly for his native land. The Persians had assembled a mighty army, and they had gathered a fleet in order to descend upon the coasts of Greece. Then the king sent word to Themistocles that all was prepared, and he would expect him to lead the mighty force from Asia to Europe.

This was his temptation. If he led the Persians and gained a victory, he would receive great reward. But he would never feel happy after he had brought fire and death upon the people of his own land. He spoke to a few friends, and with a sigh he told them that he dared not raise his hand against Athens. And then he slew himself, sooner than do a deed of dishonor.

The news caused deep sorrow in the city of Athens, and the King of Persia also felt sad, for though Themistocles had refused to aid the Persians, he did so for a most honorable reason.

He was a witty man, and I think I must tell you one last brief story. Two citizens of Athens asked Themistocles if they might marry his daughter, one being a rich man who had a poor character, and the other had no wealth, but was an honest and just person. Themistocles showed favor to the poor man, saying:

"I would rather my daughter should have a man without money than have money without a man."

And if any young ladies read this story I hope they will think about it.