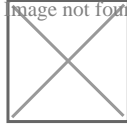


The Ancient Fathers of the Desert

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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- «When people honor you, humble yourself all the more at that moment, and say in your mind: 'If they truly knew who I were, they would show me no regard at all.' In this way, you will not cause injury to your soul,» a wise elder said.



In the era that asceticism flowered in Egypt, there lived an orphan girl named Taisia. When her kind parents died, they left as an inheritance, first, above all other things, their piety and love for the poor and strangers; and, after that, a large home and a great deal of money to manage.

The girl, out of great reverence for the hermits, made her home a guest-house, as a service to them, and, when they came down to the city to sell their handicrafts, she looked after them with all of her heart. Over the years, however, Taisia's money was used up and she, herself, began to be in want. Thereupon, she was

thrust in the midst of evil and corrupt people. They exploited her misfortune and, with their cunning, led her into depravity. The beautiful Taisia became a well-known prostitute.

When the Fathers of the desert learned of the downfall of the orphan girl, they decided to do all that was in their hands to save her.

«When she had the means, she showed us every possible consideration,» they said among themselves. «Now that her soul is in danger, it is we who must pay our debt to her.» So they entrusted this delicate and difficult task to Abba John the Short.

At first he hesitated. The task seemed infeasible. At last, however, so as not to be disobedient to the Fathers, he decided to go down to the city and present himself at the house of the sinful woman. He requested the doorkeeper to escort him to her mistress.

«Get out of here, old monk,» she angrily shouted at him. «First you eat up her fortune and then you still do not cease to pester her.»

The Father was not discouraged. He continued to ask to see Taisia; «for something very beneficial to her,» he said. In the face of his perseverance, the old woman gave in and went to inform her mistress.

«These monks are always fishing in the Red Sea and finding pearls,» Taisia said. «Bring him up.» She looked at herself in the mirror, straightened her hair and her clothes, splashed a little perfume on herself, and lay on her couch with the air of a fallen woman, to greet the hermit.

Abba John sorrowfully went to her room. He stood across from her. Standing and gazing at her with contempt for some time, he did not speak. Finally he said to her in a gentle voice: «In what way did our Christ offend you, Taisia, that you resist him so unmercifully?» He stopped. He could not continue. His sobs choked him. Burning tears ran from his sunken eyes. She felt ashamed.

Changing her unbecoming, lying position, she worriedly asked him: «Why are you crying, Father?» «How can I not cry, my daughter, when I see Satan playing in your face?»

The girl was shocked. A shiver passed through her entire body.

«Now that you have come, elder, it is too late. There remains nothing upright in me. I wallowed with it all in the mud,» she silently murmured, perturbed.

She wanted to say something else, too, but she stopped. The elder stood with his hands crossed on his chest. He was praying so strongly within himself for the salvation of the girl, that it was as if he were asking for the heavens to quake.

«Can it be that there is even salvation for me now, Abba?» she murmured doubtfully.

«O yes, there is, my daughter,» the elder cried with anguish.

«Repentance brings about salvation.»

The miracle, which he had for so much time sought with his prayer, took place at that moment. Taisia fell, broken, at his feet and, with tears in her eyes, begged: «Take me away from here, Father. Show me the way to salvation.»

«Follow me.»

With no more talking, the girl got up and followed the elder. He was amazed how she showed no concern for her home. They made off for the road to the desert. But they had a long way yet to go, when evening fell on them. They stopped. Abba John cut some bushes and fashioned a makeshift bed for the girl.

«Sleep until dawn,» he advised her. «We still have a long road ahead of us.»

He removed himself some distance away. Having said his prayers, he lay down on the ground to rest, taking a hard rock as his pillow. He slept a little and then woke up in the middle of the night to continue praying. Then there appeared before his eyes a grandiose sight. From the spot where he had left the girl to sleep, a lighted path began, reaching up to heaven. Swift winged angels were carrying up a soul, all white like a dove, to the throne of God. The Saint stood for a long time staring, overwhelmed by the vision. Afterwards, he started over to where Taisia was. He shouted, to wake her. She did not hear. So, he lightly moved her. She was dead.

Deeply moved, the hermit knelt at the side of the soulless body and gave himself over to fervent prayer. Then he perceived a sweet voice assuring his confused mind: «Even a short time of profound contrition is enough for the soul to find the way to salvation.»

«Thrice-blessed is the monk who endures labors and trials, being thankful to God,» Abba Koprís used to say. Once Abba Koprís himself became gravely ill and astounded the brothers with his admirable patience. Not one time did he ask that his slightest request be fulfilled, and prayer was not for one moment absent from his lips.»

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A certain brother was tormented for a full nine years by an evil thought. Each day he wept and said, in reproach of himself:

«I am to blame for this. I will lose my soul.»

He struggled arduously. In vain, however. It was impossible to get rid of his thought. In the end, his resistance yielded. He fell into desperation. «I have now lost my soul,» he thought. «Why should I stay in the desert for no reason? I will return to the world.»

So it was that he set on his way for the city. But as he was walking, heavy-hearted, he heard a voice behind him: «O un-fortunate man! Is this how you trample on the wreath of un-fading flowers which you have been weaving, with your patience, for nine years? Go back to finish it!»

The balm of consolation flowed over the brother's heart. With a steadfast pace he now set himself on the road back to the desert. And our good God made his thought vanish.

«If two brothers quarrel,» says Saint Ephraim the Syrian, «the one who first asks forgiveness will earn the crown of victory. And assent will be produced on the other's behalf, if he does not treat his brother with scorn, but is eager to make peace between them.»

«You cannot cast out malice with malice,» Saint Poimen says. «Thus, if your brother does you some wrong, try to repay him with good. Only goodness can conquer malice.»

«My brother, be always calm and look after yourself. Do not let your soul be influenced by any person's standing, whether he is of low social status, or of great status, or even of the ruling class. No one among men can ransom you from the inex-tinguishable fire of hell. Notice what the Holy Spirit of God says: 'Of what benefit is it to a man, if he gains the whole world, yet suffers the loss of his soul?'

«So, do not lose the glory of God by reason of the temporary glory and honor of men, through eating, drinking, or through any other material thing whatever. All of these things perish and are destroyed. Deeds, however, everyone of them, both good and evil, are recorded, and they remain everlasting.

«My brother, turn your mind toward heavenly things and reflect on them, and not on earthly goods, which are temporal, that you might attain all that the heavenly Father has promised to his children, and enjoy the glory which is enjoyed by all those who have pleased God, that is, the Saints» (Saint Ephraim).

«An irascible man, even if he is capable of raising the dead,» said Abba Agathon, «will not be received into the Kingdom of Heaven.»

«A complaining, vindictive monk, prone to anger, cannot ex-ist,» said Abba Poimen. «That is to say that, any who have such faults are not actually monks, even if they wear the schema.»

«When I was young,» Abba Isidoros relates, «I went down to the city to sell my baskets and, feeling anger seize me, I left my baskets and returned, running, to my cell.»

«Contemplate God's providence continually and insatiably in the books of the divine teachers, for in this way the mind will be given guidance in perceiving the marvelous order in God's crea-tion and in knowing His works. Thereby, the mind is strengthened and forms, through its profound study, sensations and thoughts which glitter with light; finally, the study of the books of the divine teachers helps

the mind advance with spiritual purity to the deepest knowledge of God's creation.

«When you study, take care to be calm in all things, free from excessive worldly concern and from commotion, which the various events of life create in the soul. Only then will you be able to enjoy the sweet taste of the understanding of these writings. The soul will feel their deepest sense and, being carelessly impressed by them, it will rejoice mystically.

«Reverence the books and teachings of genuine writers, and do not think of them as you would of works which have only ex-ternal worth and disregard divine words, so that you do not re-main blind to the end of your life and live in want of their pro-fit, so beloved by God.

«Devote yourself to the reading of divine writings, which reveal to man the way to the clearest vision of divine magnificence, even if, immediately, you do not taste the sweetness of these sensations, your mind not yet having been cleansed and not having been removed from the material.

«When you get up for meditation and your rule of prayer, in-stead of the worldly occupation of your mind with all that you see and hear, dwell on the deepest understanding of the sensa-tions about which you read in the divine writings, and forget concern over worldly things; thereby, your mind will begin to be cleansed. And this is the meaning of the saying: 'The soul is aid-ed by reading when it stands in prayer and, in turn, it is enlightened in reading by prayer.'

«Until a person receives the Comforter into his soul, he has need of the Divine Scriptures, in order to imprint on his heart the remembrance of all that is good, and, through continual reading, to renew within himself an impulse toward good. In this way, the soul will protect itself from the subtle paths of sin, it still not having acquired the power of the Holy Spirit to remove from the mind forgetfulness, which erases remem-brances beneficial to the soul and compels the mind to scatter itself and roam in fruitless things.

«For when, at last, this power of the Spirit seats itself in the faculty of the soul, which operates with the aid of this Spirit, then the commandments of the Spirit, instead of the law of the Scriptures, take root in the heart, and thus the person learns mystically by the Spirit, without having need of perceptible material in his task of spiritual building» (Abba Isaac).

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The youngest brothers of the skete surrounded Saint Makarios one day and asked

him to teach them how to pray.

«The greatest mistake we make in praying,» he replied, «is verbosity. It is sufficient for a man to learn to elevate his mind to the heavenly and to say with all of his soul, 'Lord, have mer-cy, as you know and as you will.' This is prayer.

«Again, when he feels the attack of the devil strongly upon him, or the rebellion of the lower passions, let him run with faith to the Heavenly Father and let him cry to Him, not with his mouth, but with his heart: 'Lord, help me.' He knows the way to help a soul which draws near to Him with trust.»

«If the desire of the Heavenly Kingdom burns in your soul like a lighted torch, be sure that your soul will quickly become its heir,» Abba Hyperechios tells us.

A very holy man of our own days, living in a place where the Holy Orthodox Church suffers the heaviest persecution, was pursued by the God-hating agents of the state. Having taken refuge in the forest, the pious faithful regularly took him and the Fathers with him food and supplies. Having done so once on a snowy day, the Fathers noticed that their benefactors had left a telltale path in the snow, on their way out of the forest. They realized that their refuge could easily be found simply by follow-ing this path. In desperation, they turned to their holy elder, who fervently prayed to the Blessed Theotokos for aid. So ac-ceptable was his holy prayer that, forthwith, a flock of birds descended and, pecking away at the path left by the faithful, obliterated any evidence of their visit.

It is said of a pious abbess, living in our times, that she was once returned to her convent by the authorities, after having been missing for some days. She had been found sitting in the gutters of the worst parts of the city, seemingly a derelict, suf-fering the abuse of passers-by. Her spiritual daughters, astonished by these circumstances, hastened to ask her for an explanation. She told them: «You, my children, have me to teach you obedience. But I have no one.»

And so, voluntarily suffering the abuse of others, the holy woman struggled to maintain her humility.

«I feel myself continually sunk up to my neck in the mud of sin,» Abba Paul said with humility, «and I weep, crying to Jesus with all of the strength of my heart: ‘Lord, have mercy on me.’ «

Abba Bissarion, those who had the fortune of knowing him say, passed his life without cares, as do the birds of the sky. Things of his own he did not have-not even the absolutely necessary; for example, a book or a second garment. The garment he wore was so old that not even the last beggar would have lowered himself to take it. He never acquired a hut, nor did he ever stay under a roof. He roamed the deserts, ravaged by the cold and the heat. If his course took him by some hermitage or monastery, he would sit at the gate and weep, as though he had been rescued from some shipwreck. «Why are you grieving like this, brother?» those not yet familiar with him would ask.

«Because of the wealth which I lost and my previous nobility and glory,» was his usual answer. It was impossible to convince him to enter, in order to offer him hospitality. The brothers would take him a little food there, outside, where he sat.

«Eat a little and have hope in God. He will give you back what you lost,» they would comfort him, believing that he was really the victim of a shipwreck.

«I am not worthy to receive it,» Abba Bissarion would sigh. «But as long as I live, I shall not cease seeking it.» Then they would understand that he was speaking of heavenly goods.

It is further said of him that he once stood upright for forty days and nights on a pile of wood, in order to conquer sleep. He had never lain down to sleep. It was sufficient for him to sleep a little while standing or sitting on a rock.

«If God, in his forbearance, tolerates us when we serve sin,» said a wise elder, «how much more will His mercy strengthen us, when we struggle for what is good.»

It is said of a brother that each time his thoughts seduced him and said, «let today slip by and repent tomorrow,» this wise brother would answer: «Today I shall show repentance with my deeds; as for tomorrow, let God’s will be done.»

From the book: Archimandrite Chrysostomos, *The ancient fathers of the desert*,

Brookline 1980, p. 56-64.