

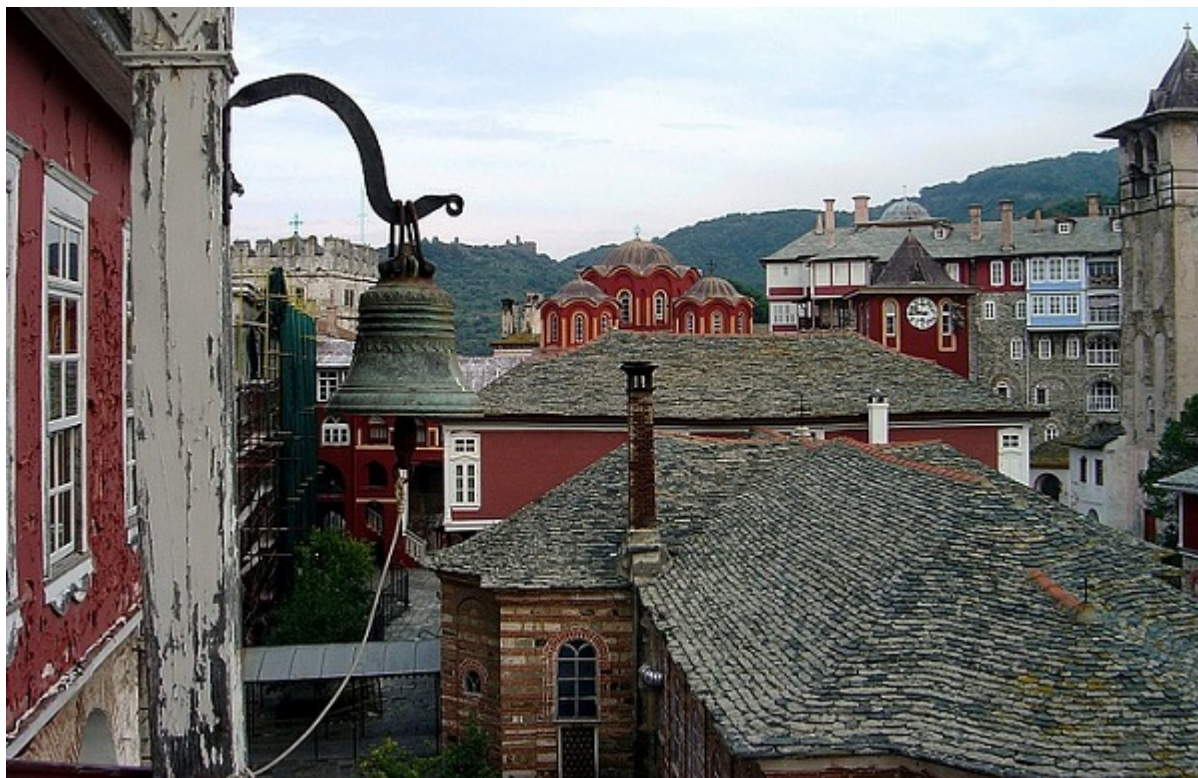
## Testimony from Mount Athos, On the state of grief (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



*“Grief in the Lord(or grief for the sake of the Lord- Πένθος κατά Θεόν ) is the state in which the soul feels gloomy; it is the disposition of the aching heart, which does not cease fervently seeking that for which it feels thirst. The longer it takes for it to attain to this goal, the harder the heart struggles chasing after it and runs after it with painful lament”.( Saint John of the Ladder, 7<sup>th</sup> Word on On the joy-producing grief”)*

Grief and what follows from it, are the most valuable tools and spoils of repentance. Without them our repentance is doubtful. What other means or tools could the penitent show when he is called upon to appear at the gate of the courts of repentance? What alternative posture is available to the convict and the condemned if not his sad, mournful and tearful attitude? That is the reason why grief not only is set as a prerequisite of repentance but is also blessed: *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”* ( Matthew 5,4)



The factors which make up the state of grief are well known and I do not think that there is any man on this earth who has never been acquainted with them. If by 'grief' we generally mean 'common grief', definitely most or rather all the descendents of the first man have experienced this pain because "*your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted*"( Isaiah, 1,5). We are endorsing grief in the Lord (κατά Θεόν πένθος) as the state of mind which every penitent must acquire if he is to succeed in his goal. Tears stemming from social grieving and the hardships of life are of no value. On the contrary, they corrupt their victims since "a crushed spirit dries up the bones" ( Proverbs 17,22). Tears in the Lord (or tears for the sake of the Lord- κατά Θεόν δάκρυα) freshen and comfort man like good envoys sent to our Lord and introduce us to His heaven, just as He promises: "*Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh*"( Luke 6,21).

The comprehensive love for hard work (φιλοπονία) is the main cause of grief. However, all the other tasks for which one is struggling also create this mournful state which conveys grief and lament. "*Thirst and lack of sleep coerce the heart. When the heart is pressurized tears sprout*"(Saint John of the Ladder, Word 6<sup>th</sup>, On the memory of death, paragraph 14). Every labor the body undertakes gives reason for grief and lament, if the penitent realizes that this hardship reflects his effort for repentance.

When we speak to the people today about grief, they think it is weird since they believe that crying is a shame. Of course it is not worth crying about transient

and vain things. This kind of grief is part of the social convention. Our spiritual grief ( πνευματικόν πένθος) has more to do with our relationship with God and is a product not so much of our choice but of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The heart is coerced and causes the mournful state of grief when we recognize our responsibility for our trespasses. However, the spiritual grief which caused the Lord's blessing is not the product of our invention but a gift from grace. God's love approaches the heart and this causes spiritual joy, which is derived from the experience of the rejuvenation of our transformation or rather of our resurrection.

When the penitent is found at the state of "becoming" (γίγνεσθαι), whereby he is trying to intensify his cry towards our Saviour, his tears become "his daily bread". Similarly, *"I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears"* ( Psalm 102,9). However, the divine power of the Father does not delay in sheltering and in advancing the mourner from the state of purification to that of illumination on which our entire hope rests. *"You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light..With your help I can run through a barricade"* (Psalm 101,10).

The humiliated heart, which has first been pierced by the arrows of the devil and then by the fatherly love of our Saviour after its repentance, has no other means of expressing itself than by tears. One is naive if one thinks that he can follow in the footsteps of Christ without shedding these double tiered (διπλά) tears. No matter how much the unfeeling heart has turned to stone by its demonic selfishness or by its monstrous self-love, the divine fire of Christ's fatherly love is capable of softening it and making it as tender as a child's. It is difficult for one to understand what we are talking about if one has never felt the flame of such love. But even at this latter stage, let one try to heed the first phrase of the gospel: *"repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* ( Matthew 4,17) and he will experience this warmth reviving him.

Grief, which we are describing as 'spiritual', has nothing to do with psychopathological phenomena. It is inexorably connected to the memory of God and thrives in the fire of divine love. Grief increases more and more when the fear and anxiety that it may retreat intensifies in the mind. This heavenly fire, while refreshing the heart, consumes passions and illuminates the mind; *"our God is a consuming fire"* ( Hebrews 12,29). When the mind perceives grace's alliance, it regains its strength but it specifically empowers the soul to defend itself and stand up and fight. The four forces of the soul: wisdom, prudence, bravery and justice ( φρόνησις, σωφροσύνη, ανδρεία και δικαιοσύνη), which had been enslaved by passions and darkness are hence being restored and the mind is able with their help to rout the strangers "as if they are one man". The deeper our cry of

repentance, the more decisively we are set free from the many, apparent needs. Hence frugality is advanced to actual indigence(ακτημοσύνην). The irrational fear for the need of self-preservation ceases while the second faith, that of contemplation becomes our property. Then, as our ever-memorable elder used to stress, man is able to breathe an air of freedom.

During this state there is nothing which resembles the elements of this world. The air we breathe, the light we see, the weight we feel, and generally speaking this body, are all transfigured to become heavenly and godly. More specifically, the light is the uncreated light which surrounds the “divine being” and pours out from none other than our God. It is the food of the immaterial angels, the joy and garment of the godly and our own expectation.

“I was trying to examine it”, our blessed elder was confiding “and it was becoming inconceivable. It was the purest white, immaterial. And funnily enough it seemed to be inside the body, outside and everywhere”. God “dwelling in the light”( A Timothy 6,16) wishes to approach the grieving soul with the fire of His love and abridge the length of our separation. For its part, the soul moved by the enormity of the award, expresses itself through whole-hearted tears, which are the measure of its own love, since it has nothing else to offer, because our Lord is in need of nothing (απροσδεής) and all-perfect (υπερτέλειος). “*What God is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles*”(Psalm 77,13-14).

The painful and bitter tears of repentance have been transformed into tears of love. This means that our prayer has been received by Christ, who has opened the inner sanctuary behind the curtain for us to enter, “*where he went before us, has entered on our behalf*”( Hebrews 6,20) through His tears at Gethsemani. “*For all of you who were baptised in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*”( Galatians 3,27)says the Church. And those of you who have been baptised in the divine and uncreated light, you have been clothed with it for ever. It is in this way that the God of all( ο επί πάντων Θεός), becomes everything to everyone in favor of the humiliated and grieving soul. “*And in my prosperity I said I shall never be moved. Lord by your favor you have made my mountain stand strong, but when you hid your face and I was dismayed*” ( Psalm 30,6-7). The more we take care to preserve this state of grief, the longer grace remains with us, since it is rather from grace that the total energy is derived. Several times however despite our vigilance, this blessing is interrupted and then the following verse of the psalm is applicable: “*You hid your face and I was dismayed*”. Such conditions are inevitable during our lives, but remain hidden from the masses. Our Fathers call these conditions “changes”, which always accompany man in his practical struggle until such time

as he transcends the second stage, i.e the illumination with the help of grace, and enters the deification or final stage, where total spiritual love reigns and the divine promises are absolutely accomplished.

Loving hard work willingly and continuously proves the practical presence of humility. Here God *"gives grace to the humble"*( James 4,6). And again: *"I humbled myself and the Lord did save me"*(Psalm 114,6?) When the energies of passions cease and divine grace assesses that the soul has made enough progress, it will certainly permit temptation to enter. Here again, changes will appear. If temptations present themselves before the cessation of passions, then this means that there was some carelessness which needs to be rectified and the spirit crashed so that *"the lame may not be disabled but rather healed"*( Hebrews 12,13). Natural temptations, through which all the devout have been tested, will show up only in their appropriate place, as we have said before, and all of them are invaluable. That is the reason why our Fathers stress: *"remove the temptations and no one will be saved"*. If according to the scriptures *"things that cause people to sin are bound to come"*( Luke 17,1) who can swim through these seas in calm waters? The saying: *"We went through fire and water but you brought us to a place of abundance"*(Psalm 66,12) will also be applicable on us, because it is only through this path that the countless martyrs and confessors and all those who loved God, have travelled.

We have spoken about changes which, after our fall, are the inseparable companions of our lives, just like parasites. They also show up together with the various temptations, and they will also have to be targetted during our continuous fight. Temptations, which test our faith in God, are not just external and neutral, but also internal, through the natural changes which have to do with our physical world. According to our fathers, the changes have four causes. They transform the body's constitution and convey either good or bad thoughts to the mind. These are: the angels, the demons, the environmental climate and diet. Because of such effects, the natural laws of our constitution change and convey the relevant thoughts to the mind. When the Lord wishes, the angels change man's thoughts and disposition through words; when the Lord permits either to educate or to test man, demons affect man by contact; while the environment and diet upset man's health and alter his disposition and intentions. There are also some acquired influences which come from memory or hearing or sight and are caused by bizarre, horrifying, distressing or pleasant events. This whole irregularity, which takes place unexpectedly, especially if there are some passionate inclinations of the soul which alter a man's state, is and is described as 'temptation'. These are more or less the temptations caused by the various changes. But the 'labyrinth' under

examination is immeasurable. David was justified when he was lamenting “*Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand*”( Psalm 139,18), And again this is what he was writing on the dire causes of temptations: “*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you*” (Psalm 91-7)

After the fall, since man lives in the valley of tears because he has shown preference for the passionate knowledge (or flawed knowledge-εμπαθή γνώση), ought from now on to engage in a constant fight against evil as if he is a prisoner on death row, in order to practically confess his opposition to evil and restore his obedience and his dependence on God, whose grace has been given as a present through his baptism.

The whole meaning of our life in this world is none other than to be constantly confessing since we have fallen because we have denied God’s wishes. The incarnate Word God, concerned about our salvation, has granted us the absolution of our guilt through the shedding of His blood. However, He has left it to us to choose the way with which we are to reverse our treason, so that we may replace the willing denial with the willing confession. He did not give an order for the way this was to be done, but gave a practical example of the perfect submission and obedience to the Father, by His presence, “nothing is similar to the greatness of the father”(μηδέν ὡν ἴσταν τῆς πατρικῆς μεγαλωσύνης). “*So that every mouth be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God*” ( Romans 3,19).

Since God created everything as “very good”, man could not render imperfect the creation through his own trespass. Therefore, the cause and the restoration of the trespass belongs to the very carrier of the disorder. In his incomparable love however, the Lord’s only begotten Son has set Himself as the model, becoming man, in order to reveal the fullness of His love to the creation and practically teach obedience as a cure for disobedience and rebellion.

**source:** *Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Γέροντος Ιωσήφ Βατοπαιδινού, Αθωνική Μαρτυρία, Ψυχοφελή Βατοπαιδινά 2, Έκδοσις β΄, Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, Άγιον Όρος 2008.*