

15 Φεβρουαρίου 2017

‘God-forsakenness’ according to Elder Sophrony (Archimandrite Ephraim, Abbot of the Vatopaidi Monastery)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



In our presentation we will touch upon an issue which may not be readily acknowledged by those who are not initiated in the existence of divine Grace. We

would actually say that it quite 'heavy going' as its title reveals: 'God-forsakenness'. However, it is a particularly important, "a crucial", element in spiritual life. When many people, perhaps most, will hear what we have to say they will respond: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"(John 6, 60) However, Elder Sophrony stressed that God wishes to see us become perfect just as He is perfect (See Elder Sophrony: We shall see Him as He is). The path to perfection necessarily passes through the Calvary of God-forsakenness.

During the crucial moment of his life when man will adopt a positive stance in the face of the Lord according to His providence, the Lord will reveal Himself in a way which is beyond nature. Having devoted his entire freewill in obedience to the divine commandments, man "walks in newness of life" (Romans 6, 4) and enters a special spiritual realm in which he meets with the Lord, communicates with His Grace and experiences conditions beyond "words and meanings" which he could not previously even imagine. It is at this moment that the Christian begins to experience the spiritual "new life", life in Christ.

In line with earlier Fathers of the Church, Elder Sophrony describes three stages in spiritual life. He writes: "The total regeneration of the fallen man into the "new" man is accomplished in three stages: The first, the initial, is the stage of the calling and inspiration towards the present battle. The second is the stage where the "perception" of Grace is withdrawn and man is experiencing God-forsakenness...And the third is where the perception of divine Grace revisits and man holds on to it" (Elder Sophrony: On prayer).

This last stage where divine Grace revisits the faithful is a period of spiritual delight, of perception of Christ's love and His proximity and of wonderful sentiments in the heart which are inexpressible with worldly, created words. Nevertheless, Elder Sophrony views this gift which was given according to the Lord's pleasure as the "mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16, 9) (Arch Sophrony: We Shall see Him as He is). The faithful is not able to assimilate divine Grace during this period so that his nature is united with it unto eternity. The faithful must enter into the second stage which is a protracted period of God-forsakenness. (Above: "We shall see Him as He is). The stronger the experience of the first visitation by divine Grace, the more powerful becomes the experience of its desertion. Even the spiritually perfect experience God-forsakenness in a perfect degree, but they recognize and accept the discipline by the Lord and do not grow weary.

In Patristic writings and especially in treatises written by Saints Ammonas, Macarius of Egypt, Diadochos Fotikis, Isaac the Syrian, Maximus the Confessor, John

of Karpathos and Simon the New Theologian we encounter the corresponding terms “desertion by Grace”, “loss of Grace”, “diminishing or withdrawal of Grace” or “spiritual change” as indicative of this second stage. It is a rare occasion when the Fathers use this single, strong term: “God-forsakenness”. The first to use this term was Abba Kassianos in the beginning of the 5th Century in his work “Conversations with the Fathers of the desert”. The second one, as far as we know, is Elder Sophrony sixteen centuries later; we believe that he did this in order to stress the painfulness of this condition. In his writings Elder Sophrony also uses the corresponding terms ‘departure’ or ‘loss’ of Grace. We are not able to find any systematic teachings about this stage of “the departure” of Grace in patristic writings. Elder Joseph the Hesychast, St Silouan the Athonite and then Elder Sophrony were the first to extensively describe it.

How one does experience this phase? The Elder writes that the Lord, Who has initially wounded the heart with His love, recedes afterwards. A long stage of struggle opens up in front of one, which lasts for years, even decades (Above: We shall see Him as He is”). He says: “After the first visitation by Grace, battles and wars begin. A long time needs to pass before one assimilates the experience of the first visitation by Grace. The assimilation is accomplished through fortitude and determination during the times when divine Grace departs”. Grace revisits for a while, reinforces faith, regenerates the inspiration to continue the struggle and departs again” (See Elder Sophrony above). The times when divine Grace departs are moments of self-emptying, of spiritual indigence and of experiencing the anguish of being God-forsaken which lead us to some kind of despair. We feel as though we have fallen under some terrible spell. It is possible that our entire being is in anguish; our mind, our heart, our soul and our body. While in the beginning all the prayers offered and all requests made were immediately and miraculously fulfilled by the Lord, now everything has changed; the heavens seem to have closed off and every supplication falls in the Lord’s deaf ears.

The blessed Elder gives a significant description of this period of spiritual trials, which is a time for bearing one’s cross in all aspects of a Christian’s life, both internally and externally. “To the zealous Christian everything in his life becomes difficult. Other peoples’ behavior deteriorates; people stop appreciating him; what is tolerated in others becomes reprehensible for him; he gets paid almost always less than others; his body is easily afflicted by illnesses. Nature, various circumstances, people, everything turns against him. He cannot find favorable conditions to utilize his natural qualities even though they are not inferior to others. In addition, he suffers plenty of assaults by demonic powers and lastly he has to endure the unbearable pain of being forsaken by the Lord. Then his torment is

amplified, since his entire being is afflicted in every way. The soul descends to Hades” (Arch. Sophrony: St Silouan the Athonite).

The Elder confesses that God forsakenness creates the impression of a paradox. When the Lord abandons us we feel a void in our entire existence. The soul is distressed since it does not know whether and when “the departed” Christ will return. The soul perceives this horrid void as death (Arch. Sophrony: On prayer). It is possible that the Lord will appear merciless to the soul. Not being able to find the Lord’s mercy despite the effort and strive which is beyond his power and which he undertakes unto the end, man suffers so profusely that if he could, he would have denied his existence” (Arch. Sophrony: St Silouan the Athonite). This experience is so horrid and occasionally so ferocious that this great and experienced ascetic reveals that “the soul is afflicted by such thoughts and feelings that it is best to keep silent about” (See St Silouan above).

What is really happening though? Does the Lord truly abandon the faithful? Does the Lord withdraw his Grace from one’s soul and leave him completely alone? St Diadochos Fotikis says that the devil is precisely counting on this; namely to convince one believing that God’s Grace no longer resides in his heart and not take up the arms against him with the memory of God (Diadochos Fotikis: Thirty Three chapters). Therefore, what is truly happening? The Elder stresses that the Lord withdraws “the perception of Grace” but His ontological communion with man is not severed. It is not a matter of an objective, total withdrawal of Grace, but the soul subjectively experiences its shrinkage and withdrawal as God-forsakenness (Above: On Prayer). During this period, the energy of Grace remains secretly with the faithful and not perceptively. Thus, God-forsakenness is noticeable. “Those belonging to Christ experience God-forsakenness through their spiritual perception and not their faith. The spiritual perception, which during the initial visitations by Grace has been developed to offer the faithful experiences of Paradise, now becomes the carrier of conditions from Hell”.

The Elder stresses: “The stronger the joy experienced from his union with the Lord, the more painful is the suffering from the separation from Him” (Above: “We shall see Him as He is”). The faith in the Lord’s providence, namely the faith of contemplation, cannot vanish. This does not mean that the experience of God-forsakenness is not real; but in spite of this, the Christian has faith that God is with him and hopes that he will experience the perception of His Grace once more. This is the meaning of the words uttered by Christ to St Silouan: “keep your thoughts in Hades but do not despair” (Above: St Silouan the Athonite). The faithful spiritually experiences and shows fortitude in the face of the horrid Hades of God-

forsakenness, but does not despair because he is being supported by the faith of contemplation. St Paul refers to this kind of faith when he writes: “We walk by faith not by sight (i.e. not by our feelings) (B Corinthians 5, 7). “Elder Sophrony believes that the stations of God-forsakenness are necessary for ascetic progress; in reality they are paradoxical expressions of divine love. “The experience of God-forsakenness contains the life-giving power of the Lord” (Fr Nicholas Zakharov: I love therefore I am).

Immersed in great sorrow, the struggler tries with all his might to discover the reasons for the withdrawal and loss of Grace and looks for ways to enable it to return and be recaptured. Some possible reasons for the withdrawal are some slack in the spiritual effort, negligence and even acquiescence to an evil thought” (See above: St Silouan).

Elder Sophrony does not particularly refer to these causes nor does he talk about the kinds of God-forsakenness. However he concentrates on pride, as the root of all evil and the main cause for the loss of divine Grace. He stresses that “when we succumb to the spirit of pride or self-satisfaction—we fall pray to God-forsakenness. According to his spiritual father, St Silouan, this imperceptible passion of pride “drains the soul from Grace”.

Nevertheless, Elder Sophrony insists that when we undergo the withdrawal or reduction of Grace after its first visitation, this is in accordance with the providence of the Lord; God-forsakenness is inevitable even for the most disciplined ascetics. “God-forsakenness is not just one way to perceive the presence of the Lord but also a gift from God”. “It is a gift of God’s love” (See N. Sakharov: I love therefore I am). The main reason why God-forsakenness takes place has nothing to do with man, but occurs in accordance with God’s wisdom and his disciplinary providence. It is what Elder Joseph the Hesychast was describing as “the law of the Lord”. Elder Sophrony says: “Initially one receives the Lord’s Grace, then Grace recedes and man goes through the Lord’s discipline. Everyone must go through this discipline. Otherwise if he receives Grace without the necessary discipline, he may be harmed and may be eternally condemned. One must go by humility”.

Elder Sophrony compares the stage of God-forsakenness with the biblical times when the Jews had to wander in the desert before they were given the Promised Land. This course is painful but also astonishing. Its deeper meaning will be revealed to the one who will endure unto the end. Elder Sophrony goes on: "The essence of God-forsakenness is to prove that we are still immature; that we have not yet reached the end of the road; that we must drink from the cup He has drunk unto the end" (See above: We shall see Him as He is).

"The Lord abandons us so that our free will is expressed". At this stage "man is given the opportunity to exercise his free will and his faith in the Lord". Through our self-emptying and our self-degradation to nothing, "we are cleansed from the cursed 'inheritance' of pride". Through the tribulations during this stage, the Lord wishes "to establish the ascetic as His image- as lord and king- and convey to him sanctification and the fullness of divine existence" (Above: St Silouan the Athonite).

The reason for the protracted God-forsakenness is for the faithful to receive the genuine wealth of Grace as his indefeasible and eternal possession at the end of hard and long trials. Namely, to unify Grace with man's created nature so that they become one; to deify man and convey to him the divine, uncreated form of existence (Arch. Sophrony: On prayer).

Elder Sophrony establishes God-forsakenness theologically in the face of Christ. "Jesus Christ as man" lived through the absolute God-forsakenness at Gethsemane but mostly on the cross when "Jesus cried with a loud voice ... my God why have you forsaken me?"(Matthew 27, 46) The faithful must taste this same kind of God-forsakenness to some degree, as the image of Christ, in order to receive his deliverance (See above: We shall see Him as He is).

Usually after long periods of God-forsakenness, the Lord abundantly consoles man, as in the case of St Silouan, when he had been overcome by the dark spirit of despair. Indeed, having accepted the thought that it is "impossible to plead fervently with the Lord" he saw Man-God Christ alive. For this reason Elder Joseph, the Hesychast, stressed that "the Lord's Grace reveals itself perceptively to man at the end of exhausting fortitude".

During the times of God-forsakenness the afflictions injure the heart with a kind of metaphysical pain, which according to Elder Sophrony, was "the refrain of his life in Christ"(Above: We shall see Him as He is). Through the experience of such personal afflictions man is able to comprehend the suffering of the entire human race and feel the misery of every single person. "Through such afflictions man's

existence expands” and thus he is able to pray for the entire human race. Also with this kind of prayer which is beyond nature and takes place face to face with the Lord, the hypostatic principle is revealed. The purpose of the life of the orthodox Christian is to acquire the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Man assimilates divine Grace after many years of ascetic struggles, having experienced her presence and withdrawal many times. This kind of assimilation takes the form of spiritual comprehension, which the elder calls ‘dogmatic conscience’ (Above: St Silouan the Athonite). Therefore, the authentic authority of the orthodox dogma does not hail from academic circles but from such places where empirical theology is cultivated and developed, in accordance with Patristic Tradition. Monasteries are mostly such places.

The person who experiences God-forsakenness must be aware of this route- i.e. God’s discipline-and not give up, hesitate or retreat. The Elder stresses that many people had experienced the first visitation by Grace, but because they were not aware of the path to spiritual growth, they stopped striving and fell from the eyes of the Lord, when Grace withdrew. They also regarded the first visitation by Grace as “a temporary spiritual excitement” and not as an ontological experience (Above: We shall see Him as He is).

If the faithful is to win over this stage of God-forsakenness he must practice self-condemnation; he must ask for Lord’s mercy with genuine heartache and a humiliated heart and realize with all his might that the Lord’s words: “‘Without Me you can do nothing’ are true”. Self-condemnation leads to self-perception and to the recognition that we have an internal ailing condition which is the abode we have personally prepared for eternity. It also leads us to experience the personal torment which is taking place in the realm of the inner places of our heart. Thus, finally we acquire an internal hatred for ourselves- ‘the self-hatred’ as the Elder used to say- which abolishes all passions”.

He, who is being tested during God-forsakenness, must not deviate from his commitment to the commandments and to obedience; he must have the faith of contemplation, not subdue his conscience and show endless fortitude. He, who shows absolute obedience to his spiritual father, walks along the path of God-forsakenness with fewer hardships and more protection. The Elder underlines that eventually despair does not prevail over the ascetic. Even though the soul is hanging over the abyss of Hades and shudders, “nevertheless hope nests deeply inside. The cloud of God-forsakenness clears and the sun rises again” (Above: On prayer).

According to the Elder, the faithful must behave as though Grace is still with him

during the times of God-forsakenness, even if he fills empty inside. “He must do whatever Grace had taught him whenever it had visited him” (Above: We shall see Him as He is). That is, the Elder assimilates the teachings by St Macarius the Egyptian, who prompts whoever experiences such conditions “to force himself to do good even when his heart is objecting, forever expecting the Lord’s mercy without any doubt” (St Macarius the Egyptian: Homilies). “It is natural and pleasant to love God when Grace dwells perceptively inside someone. However, if one is entrusting himself to the same kind of love when he is being crucified during the second stage of God-forsakenness, means that his love approaches the fullness of perfection and becomes stronger than the death he experiences by the withdrawal of Grace and by his self-emptying”(Arch. Zachary: A reference to Elder Sophrony’s Theology).

Those who experience Christianity as a moral or intellectual philosophical or theological system do not experience God-forsakenness. Such people have no empirical communion with the Lord. They are ignorant of the existence of and the participation in divine Grace, its advent and its departure. They may believe in the existence of God but they do not possess the living faith, the faith of contemplation. Such faith is missing from the moralists and the intellectuals. This is what the Elder means when he writes that “those who do not believe in God have not been acquainted with God-forsakenness” (Above: We shall see Him as He is).

I humbly pray that we all manage to keep our good and steadfast confession towards Christ when we arrive in the desert of God-forsakenness, so that we will finally reach the Promised Land, the final stage. This is the stage where as blessed Elder Sophrony says, the depressing exchange of conditions will cease and Grace will love us and will not desert us anymore.

source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Αρχιμ. Εφραίμ Βατοπαιδινού Καθηγουμένου Ι. Μ. Μ. Βατοπαιδίου, Αθωνικός Λόγος, Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, Άγιον Όρος 2010.