

Repentance according to Saint Gregory Palamas - Part II (Archimandrite Ephraim, Abbot of the Vatopaidi Monastery)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



According to Saint Gregory, mourning is the most natural and spontaneous expression of the soul wounded by sin and coming to repentance. The saint uses a wonderful simile to prove that it is people's wounds that cause the pain, not the fact of repentance itself, which brings only joy and comfort to the soul. Just as, if someone's tongue has suffered damage, honey might seem tart to them and they need to be cured in order to taste the sweetness, the same is true of the fear of God: in souls where it is engendered, on hearing the message of the Gospels, it causes sorrow, since these souls are still surrounded by the wounds of their sins; but as soon as they cast these off, through repentance, they feel the joy of the good news (Homily 29 *PG* 151, 396B). This is, in any case, why Godly sadness is also called "joyous".



Investing the Lord's second beatitude, which refers to mourning, Palamas justifies Christ's placing of it immediately after the beatitude about spiritual poverty by the fact that mourning co-exists with spiritual poverty.

A typical attribute of those who mourn in a Godly way is the refusal to transfer or pass off the responsibility for their sins onto other people. It is a basic principle which Palamas sets out, in discussing Godly remorse, that we should flay ourselves for our sins and avoid transferring the responsibility for them onto others (Homily 29, *PG* 151 369C). In any case, it was Adam and Eve's transfer of the responsibility for ignoring God's commandment that deprived them of the salvation of penitential mourning (*Gen.* 3, 12-13). Because, since God gave Adam and Eve self-determination and they received, according to Palamas, "the imperial office over the passions within the realm of their souls" and "there was nothing withheld from or imposed upon them" (Homily 29, *PG*, 151, 369C), then through self-censure and Godly sorrow they would have been able to regain what they had lost by their refusal to accept responsibility for their sin. This is why Saint Gregory, in an effort to give a definition of mourning says: "for this is Godly sadness for our salvation, to find the reason in ourselves and not in any of the things which other people have done inadequately. And we should be sad ourselves and, through the confession of our sins and sorrowful contrition over them conciliate God" (Homily 29, *PG*, 151, 369C).

Self-censure is an integral state for the soul where there is humility. Initially, it

leads to fear of Hell. It brings to mind the dreadful punishments, as described by the Lord in the Gospel, which become even more terrifying by the eternal dimension they acquire. So people who mourn their sins here and censure themselves because of them, avoid the useless, comfortless and endless mourning engendered in those who come to recognition of their sins through punishment. There, with no hope of redemption or salvation, the pain of mourning is increased by the unwanted reprimands of the conscience. And this permanent and abiding mourning, since it has no end, causes more mourning and dreadful darkness and searing heat, with no respite, and this leads to the inexpressible depth of dejection (To Xeni, *PG*, 150, 1076D-1077A). In contrast to Adam and Eve, Palamas refers to Lamech as an example of someone who came to self-censure and contrition for his sins (Homily 29, *PG*151, 369D).

It should be especially emphasized that, within Orthodox Christian tradition, asceticism is completely interwoven with grief. The pain of the fall and the joy of the resurrection are experienced by monks with joyful mourning. With bodily poverty and humility, which is hunger, thirst, hardship and affliction of the body, means by which the sensations of the body are brought under rational control, not only is mourning engendered, but also tears begin to flow. Saint Gregory gives a clear explanation for this spiritual state in his letter to the nun Xeni. He says that, just as bodily ease, relaxation and pleasure cause callousness, insensitivity and a hard heart, so plain, meagre fare, eaten with restraint brings a broken and contrite heart. Through these, the activities of evil are thwarted, and inexpressible and sweetest joy are given to the soul. Without a contrite heart, no-one can be liberated from the passions. And the heart comes to contrition only through restraint as regards sleep, food and bodily comforts. When the soul is liberated from the passions and the bitterness of sin through contrition, it then receives spiritual delight (To Xeni *PG* 150, 1076 BC). This is the comfort which the Lord says will be the portion of those who mourn. Only in this way can we explain how the alteration of sorrow into joy, about which the Lord spoke to His disciples, becomes an experience with which the monk is acquainted on a daily basis. Mourning becomes joyful and blessed because it brings to fruition in people the pledge of eternal joy.

Self-censure and the sense of sinfulness are the conditions which prepare the soul for mourning. For a long time, says Saint Gregory, like an intelligible weight on the scrutinizing part of the soul they press down and crush in such a way that the saving wine “that gladdens people’s hearts” is distilled. This wine is contrition, which, thanks to mourning and the active part of the soul also crushes the passionate aspect. And once it liberates it from the dark weight of the passions, it

fills the soul with blessed joy (To Xeni PG 150, 1077 B).

However painful this mourning may be in the initial stages, because it exists alongside the fear of God, so much greater, with the passage of time and as the soul prospers spiritually, so does it become joyful, because people really do see blessed, sweet fruits. The longer mourning lingers in the soul, the more the love of God increases and, in a manner beyond conceiving, is united to it. When the soul experiences mourning profoundly, it tastes the consolation of the benevolence of the Comforter. For the soul, this is such a sacred, sweet and mystical experience that those who have no personal taste of it cannot even suspect its existence (To Xeni PG 150, 1077 B).

A fundamental view in the theology of mourning is that it is not only the soul that participates but also the body. And the “consolation” which the Lord said would be a blessing for those who mourn is a fruit which not only the soul, but as Saint Gregory says “the body also receives in a variety of ways” (On the Hesychasts (1, 3, 33). The clearest proof of this reality, he says, is “the sad tears with which they mourn their sins” (Ibid).

Another fruit of Godly remorse is that people become steadfast in virtue, since, as the Apostle Paul says: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (II Cor. 7, 10). Because, according to Palamas, people can become poor in a Godly manner and be humbled, but unless they also acquire remorse, their disposition alters easily- they may well return to the inappropriate and sinful actions they have abandoned and, once more, transgress against God’s commandments, given that a desire and appetite for a sinful life will again arise within them. But if they remain in the poverty that the Lord declared blessed, and cultivate spiritual mourning within themselves, then they become steadfast and secure in the spiritual life, thus expelling the danger of returning to the point where they began. (To Xeni PG 150, 1085C).

So this Godly mourning does not merely draw down consolation and God’s forgiveness, offering the pledge of eternal rejoicing, but, at the same time, guards the virtues the soul has, since, according to Saint Gregory, the soul that has learned to mourn is much less likely to be moved to evil (To Xeni PG 150, 1085D).

Finally, the Athonite hesychast and Archbishop of Thessaloniki, in his essay on the passions and the virtues, which, to a great extent, is dedicated to mourning, uses a most expressive example to demonstrate the path people follow towards remorse. He compares the beginning of mourning with the return of the Prodigal Son, which is why the remorseful person is cheerless and is brought to repeating the words:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight”. And then again, he pictures its end with the imperative and wide-open embrace of God the Father “in which by the richness of the incomparable poverty he had suffered, and having acquired great joy and frankness through it, kissed and was kissed and, on entering, sat down to eat with the Father, both enjoying heavenly bliss”. (To Xeni PG 150, 1085C). This is why the term “bright sorrow” which is commonly used by ascetics to describe the experience of eschatological transcendence of pain, is perhaps the most expressive symbol of the whole of their ascetic life, a life mostly of tears and mourning (See G. Mandzaridis, «Η περί θεώσεως διδασκαλία» in *Παλαμικά* 1973, p. 215).

In this brief and, one might say, rough presentation of the positions of Palamas on repentance, we see that Saint Gregory, as the outstanding person of the inner life, was interested not only in us correcting our external shortcomings, but in our inner repentance, with mourning and tears. Saint Gregory was himself a man of repentance and also a true preacher of it.

Now that the period of Great Lent is approaching we humbly pray that, in what is, according to Saint Gregory the principal period of repentance, we may “fall down and weep before our God” so that we may taste the blessedness of His kingdom. Let us not forget that correction of ourselves, and, indeed, of society as a whole, begins and is founded upon the personal repentance of each of us. In any case, “enduring repentance” is, as Saint Gregory emphasizes, the spirit of Athonite monasticism. Amen.