

## The Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers

When the holy Abba Anthony lived in the desert he was beset by *accidie*, and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved, but these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Anthony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, 'Do this and you will be saved.' At these words, Anthony was filled with courage. He did this, and he was saved.

While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, 'Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.' And a voice came saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.' Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.'

Abba Moses said to Abba Macarius at Scetis, 'I should like to live in quiet prayer and the brethren do not let me.' Abba Macarius said to him, 'I see that you are a sensitive man and incapable of sending a brother away. Well, if you want to live in peace, go to the interior desert, to Petra, and there you will be at peace.' And so he found peace.

One day Abba Arsenius came to a place where there were reeds blowing in the wind. The old man said to the brothers, 'What is this movement?' They said, 'Some reeds.' Then the old man said to them, 'When one who is living in silent prayer hears the song of a little sparrow, his heart no longer experiences the same peace. How much worse is it when you hear the movement of those reeds.'

Abba Nilus also said, 'Go, sell all that belongs to you and give it to the poor and taking up your cross, deny yourself; in this way you will be able to pray without distraction.'

For four months Abba Macarius visited a brother every day, and he did not once find him distracted from prayer. Filled with wonder, he said, 'He is an angel on earth.'

As he was dying, Abba Benjamin said to his sons, 'If you observe the following, you can be saved. "Be joyful at all times, pray without ceasing, and give thanks for all things."'

The blessed Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, was told this by the abbot of a monastery which he had in Palestine, 'By your prayers we do not neglect the appointed round of psalmody, but we are very careful to recite Terce, Sext, and None.' Then Epiphanius corrected them with the following comment, 'It is clear that you do not trouble about the other hours of the day, if you cease from prayer. The true monk should have prayer and psalmody continuously in his heart.'

Abba Zeno said, 'If a man wants God to hear his prayer quickly, then before he prays for anything else, even his own soul, when he stands and stretches out his hands towards God, he must pray with all his heart for his enemies. Through this action God will hear everything that he asks.'

[Abba Moses said], ‘If the monk does not think in his heart that he is a sinner, God will not hear him.’ The brother said, ‘What does this mean, to think in his heart that he is a sinner?’ Then the old man [Abba Moses] said, ‘When someone is occupied with his own faults, he does not see those of his neighbor.’

Amma Sarah said, ‘If I prayed God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each one, but I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all.’

The brethren also asked [Agathon], ‘Amongst all good works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort?’ He answered, ‘Forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.’

A brother said to Abba Anthony, ‘Pray for me.’ [He] said to him, ‘I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God.’

Abba John said, ‘I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great numbers. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me; I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy.’

It was said of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of fornication. She never prayed that the warfare should cease, but she said, ‘O God, give me strength.’ Once the same spirit of fornication attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and to asceticism and went onto her little terrace to pray. Then the spirit of fornication appeared corporeally to her and said, ‘Sarah, you have overcome me.’ But she said, ‘It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ.’

Amma Syncletica said, ‘Just as the most bitter medicine drives out poisonous creatures, so prayer joined with fasting drives evil thoughts away.’

She also said, ‘There is grief that is useful, and there is grief that is destructive. The first sort consists of weeping over one’s own faults and weeping over the weakness of one’s neighbors, in order not to destroy one’s purpose, and attach oneself to the perfect good. But there is also grief that comes from the enemy, full of mockery, which some call *accidie*. This spirit must be cast out, mainly by prayer and psalmody.’

Abba Macarius was asked, ‘How should one pray?’ The old man said, ‘There is no need at all to make long discourses, it is enough to stretch out one’s hands and say, “Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.” And if the conflict grows fiercer, say, “Lord, help!” He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.’