

ST. EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN (4 c)

St. Ephraim the Syrian, Hymns of Paradise, SVS Press, 1990)

St Ephraim (306-373 AD) used poetry and hymnography (over 400 hymns) to weave profound theological reflections on biblical narratives. He wrote homilies, several prose works, biblical commentaries (On Genesis, Hymns of Paradise) and against heresie. St. Ephraim served as a deacon and catechetical teacher under a series of remarkable bishops (St. Jacob of 318 fathers at 1st Ec. Council in 325 AD) in the town of Nisibis (modern southeast Turkey).

“Among the saints their nakedness is clothed with glory, none is clad with leaves or stands ashamed, for they have found, through our Lord, the robe that belongs to Adam and Eve.”

“Greatly saddened was the Tree of Life when it beheld Adam stolen away from it; it sank down into the virgin ground and was hidden—to burst forth and reappear on Golgotha; humanity, like birds that are chased, took refuge in it so that it might return them to their proper home. The chaser was chased away, while the doves that had been chased now hop with joy in Paradise.”

“Now because God had given to Adam everything inside and outside Paradise through Grace... He nevertheless, out of Justice, held back one tree from him to whom He had given...For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him as immortal; this was so that Adam himself, either through keeping the commandment, or by transgressing it, might acquire from this one of the trees whichever outcome he wanted ... Even though God had given them everything else out of Grace, He wished to confer on them, out of Justice, the immortal life which is granted through eating of the Tree of Life. He therefore laid down this commandment. Not that it was a large commandment, commensurate with the superlative reward that was in preparation for them; no, He only withheld from them a single tree, just so that they might be subject to a commandment. But He gave them the whole of Paradise, so that they would not feel any compulsion to transgress the law.”

The Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim

O Lord and Master of my life do not give me the spirit of idleness, despondency, lust of power and idle talk.

But give me rather the spirit of whole mindedness, humility, patience, and love.

Yes, O Lord and King grant me to see my own sins and not judge my brothers and sisters; for You are blessed unto the ages of ages. Amen.

“Because it enumerates in a unique way all the negative and positive elements of repentance and constitutes, so to speak, a “check list” for our individual Lenten effort. This effort is aimed first at our liberation from some fundamental spiritual diseases which shape our life and make it virtually impossible for us even to start turning ourselves to God (Schmemmann).”

Prostrations: a distinctive characteristic of Lenten worship

The prayer is said at every Lenten Service (Sunday Eve-Friday Morning). After each petition of the prayer we make a prostration. “Christian asceticism (Spiritual Disciplines, fasting, prayer, almsgiving) is a fight, not *against* but *for* the body. For this reason, the whole man—soul and body—repents. The body participates in the prayer of the soul just as the soul prays through and in the body. Prostrations the ‘psycho-somatic’ sign of repentance and humility, of adoration and obedience, are thus the Lenten rite *par excellence*.” (Schmemmann)

OBSTACLES THAT PREVENT PROGRESS IN REPENTANCE

The first four conditions reveal a *progression* towards darkness – idleness *gives birth to* despondency, despondency *gives birth to* a lust for power over others, a lust of power *gives birth to* destructive talk.

Interdependence of Virtues and Vices

“The holy virtues are like Jacob’s ladder, and the unholy vices are like the chains that fell from the chief Apostle Peter. For the virtues leading from one to another, bear him who chooses them up to Heaven; but the vices by their nature beget and stifle one another. (St. John, The Ladder, step 9:1).”

John of the Ladder’s List of 14 Passions: 8 –anger; 9 – malice; 10 –slander; 11- talkativeness; 12 – lying; 13 –despondency; 14 – gluttony; 15 – lust; 16- avarice; 17 – Insensitivity; 18 – Insensibility/sleep; 20 – fear; 21- vainglory; 22- pride

Stages of temptation leading to Passion (The Ascent to Heaven by John Chryssavgis, 1989)

Assault (guiltless)– “Never let a thought that would bring the anger of God upon me to enter into my heart” (Abba Silvanos)

Converse – entertaining or flirting with a sinful thought – we are to cut such conversations short

Consent – giving approval (giving mental consent to a forbidden pleasure) and turning towards an evil thought, it initiates a sin

Captivity – consent leads to an impairment of free will and one is forced to consent involuntarily – the heart is carried away yet not irrevocably

Struggle – falling prey to the demons through free will - it can be the occasion for crowns or punishment

Passion – is a state resulting from many specific acts of consent and falls and demands repentance and brings “punishment/internal pain, conflict.” It is *sinful desire* given birth.

“Passions, for John, are urges which are misdirected...We should merely redirect our inclinations towards God or rather allow Him to enter within us and direct them as He wishes, allow Him to guide them as he guides our entire life.” (Chryssavgis).”

VIRTUES PRESENT AS THE FRUIT OF REPENTANCE

There are four *principle conditions which* lead to Life; they are *whole-mindedness, humility, patience and love.*

Whole-mindedness is achieved as the fruit of communion with God through prayer and fasting.

It is not about “trying harder” it about identifying and renouncing the obstacles of repentance from my life, once removed we are free to desire a life in God and cultivate His virtues in our lives – wholeness, humility, patience and love.

O Lord and Master of my life

Κύριε καὶ Δέσποτα τῆς ζωῆς μου... μὴ μοι δῶς.

Lord (Yahweh) – the name for God in Holy Scripture, God is the Lord

Master (Despota) as a Royal Ruler, One who have to obey, I am the servant of my Master

Of my Life - of everything that I am, I do, God is the Lord and Master – we belong to Him like bonded slaves, He owns us because He paid the price for our redemption on the Cross (Hopko)

The “seal” of the Gift of the Holy Spirit – our entire person is “branded” – God has ownership over our lives.

Do not give me... *μή μοι δῶς.*

Written in Syriac originally and translated into Greek. Aramaic way of praying, God is the Master of ALL, of demons as well as angels... If we have evil spirits in us, they are sent (allowed) by God. (Fr. Hopko)

“And all the demons besought Him, saying, “Send us to the swine, that we might enter into them.”[Mk. 5:13]

DO NOT GIVE TO ME MEANS - I DO NOT WANT THEM, DO NOT PERMIT THEM TO ENTER ME

THE PATHAWAY FROM GOD TOWARDS SPIRITUAL DEATH

Idleness/Sloth – (*ἀργίας lit. means “not-working, Unemployed”*) **the root of all sin is spiritual indifferent it poisons the soul.** The word *sloth, laziness, indolence* is being used in the sense that there is a neglect of caring for one’s spiritual life

“It is that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being which always pushes us ‘down’ rather than ‘up’ – which constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable. It is in fact a deeply seated cynicism which to every spiritual challenge responds, ‘What for?’ and makes our life one tremendous spiritual waste (Fr. Schmemmann, Great Lent).”

Spiritual indifference *gives birth to Despondency* – (*περιεργίας – a busy body, meddling, gossiping, going around in circles, wasting our time and doing nothing*).

This is a deliberate turning away from oneself and becoming obsessed with the problems of others.

“Despondence is the impossibility for man to see anything good or positive; it is the reduction of everything to negativism and pessimism . . . it is the suicide of the soul because when man is possessed by it he is absolutely unable to see the light and to desire it (Fr. Schmemmann, Great Lent).”

In psychological terms, a despondent soul has *barrier* issues because the painful consequence of neglecting the soul is artificially soothed by obsessing in the perceived problems of others.

Lust of Power – (*φιλαρχίας – love of ruling others*) ***Being a person of importance***

Once despondency has been created in the soul, the next consequence is to place oneself above everyone else

“The lust of power is thus a fundamental depravity in my relationship with other beings, a search for their subordination to me. . . It may result as well in indifference, contempt, lack of interest, and respect...If God is not the Lord and Master of my life, then I become my own lord and master – the absolute center of *my* own world, and I begin to evaluate everything in terms of *my* own needs, *my* ideas, *my* desires, and *my* judgments (Fr. Schmemmann, Great Lent).”

Idle Talk – *ἀργολογίας*

Idle talk does not refer to meaningless, unedifying talk, it is a power which seeks the destruction of others. To use speech as a weapon. Instead of the tongue being employed to praise God and build up one another, it utters malicious comments and slander

GIVE TO ME - THE PATHAWAY TOWARDS LIFE

Whole mindedness- Σωφροσύνη - soundness of mind, self-control, sobriety

Virtue has as its source God, we participate in virtue when we turn towards God in prayer and fasting.

“Christ restores wholeness in us and He does so by restoring in us the true scale of values by leading us back to God (Fr. Schmemmann, Great Lent).”

“Saint Gregory of Nyssa: “‘The kingdom of God is within you [Lk. 17:21].’ By this we should learn that if a man’s heart has been purified from every creature and all unruly affections, he will see the image of the divine nature in his own beauty...for God imprinted on our nature the likeness of the glories of His own nature.”

Humility (Ταπεινοφροσύνης, low or humble mindedness of oneself) – the first fruit of wholeness. Humility is learned from Christ Himself, Who Is Humility

“Take up My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble in heart; and you shall find rest to your souls. [Mt. 11:29]

Humility is a Divine Gift, the holy work of repentance – freely changing one’ inner heart

When Archimandrite Zachariah (Zacharou) was asked, “What is divine humility?” He answered, “To have the imprint of Christ in one’s heart and to see how far away one is from it.”

Holy humility had this to say, “The one who loves me will not condemn someone, or pass judgment on anyone, or lord it over someone else, or show off his wisdom until he has been united with me. A man truly **joined to me** is no longer in bondage to the Law” (note 1 Tim. 1:9.). (John of The Ladder, Step 25)

Patience (ὕπομονή, remaining under) – God is patient because he sees the depth of all that exists. There is a “self-forgetting” that happens when we love in Christ

“The closer we come to God, the more patient we grow and the more we reflect that infinite respect for all beings which is the proper quality of God (Fr. Schmemmann, Great Lent).”

This virtue only sees the good in others and with a discerning eye, understands others in light of having personally experienced God’s patience and His loving us unconditionally despite wrong decisions and sins.

This is expressed as *being present* when someone is talking to us. It is seen when our own of tasks that I would like to accomplish in a day are quickly abandoned when the needs of others demand our attention.

GIVE TO ME - THE PATHAWAY TOWARDS LIFE

Love (ἀγάπη, Agape is one of four words for love in Greek, it is used specifically as referring to a “Christ-like” love which is unconditional, the highest form of love is to empty oneself of self-love and to love the other.

The last line of the prayer reads: “Yes, O Lord and King grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brothers and sisters; for You are blessed unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

“... when we see our own errors and do not judge our brothers, when, in other terms, chastity, humility, patience, and love are but one in us, then and only then the ultimate enemy--pride--will be destroyed in us.” (Schmemmann)