

THE BATTLE WITHOUT AND WITHIN: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SIN AND SALVATION IN THE DESERT FATHERS AND MOTHERS



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Abstract: Some 1600 years separate our world from the world of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, a world that might seem strange to us. There is much in it that does in fact seem disturbing and bizarre, especially the strict asceticism that drove these unusual saints into the wilderness. Their worldview becomes more accessible and relevant, however, if we grasp the underlying psychology of the movement, especially as it was explored and explained by one of the great theologians of the movement, Evagrius Ponticus. His description of the human soul and the eight deadly “thoughts” manifest a psychology that shows why the Desert Fathers and Mothers withdrew into the desert to fight the devil, seek for God, and practice the ascetic disciplines with such ferocity. The “Sayings” of the tradition show how it is possible to overcome these deadly thoughts. It is obvious that grace is needed, an appropriate setting (which does not necessarily require a literal desert), and spiritual discipline, which includes asceticism, to be sure, but also a calm attentiveness to God and genuine love.

Thomas Merton, a convert to Catholicism, Trappist monk, and devoted student of the desert fathers and mothers, observed that modern people seem to be in constant need of activity and success. This frenzied pace of life poses a threat to our spiritual health. Many people fail to make progress in the spiritual life, he said, because “they are attached to activities and enterprises that seem to be important.” Thus, “blinded by their desire for ceaseless motion, for a constant sense of achievement, famished with a crude hunger for results, for visible and tangible success, they work themselves into a state in which they cannot believe that they are pleasing God unless they are busy with a dozen jobs at the same time.”¹ Merton believed that we must die to this frantic kind of life, to our craving for success, and

¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 206.

to our idolatry if we ever hope to discover our need for God and come to know God.

Merton's life story explains why he was so aware of this deleterious problem. Living for years as a Bohemian intellectual in New York City, Merton was converted to the Roman Catholic faith in his early adult years. But he did more than convert; he also became a monk, joining perhaps the strictest order of his day, the Trappists. A few years after his conversion Merton received permission from his superiors to write an autobiography chronicling his journey from city to monastery, from bohemian to monk, from socialite to hermit, which he published under the title *The Seven Story Mountain*. It became a sensational best-seller in the late 40s, and it continues to sell at a steady pace to this day.

Merton learned along the way that Christian spirituality requires more than mere practice, as if it could be reduced to a set of concrete exercises. If anything, it thrusts us into a darkness that exposes our weakness and helplessness. We must enter this darkness before we can ever come to the light, which will cause us to look outside ourselves for the help we need, help which only God can give. Merton writes,

It is in this darkness, when there is nothing left in us that can please or comfort our own minds, when we seem to be useless and worthy of all contempt, when we seem to have failed, when we seem to be destroyed and devoured, it is then that the deep and secret selfishness that is too close for us to identify is stripped away from our souls. It is in this darkness that we find true liberty. It is in this abandonment that we are made strong. This is the night which empties us and makes us pure.²

Merton embraced a tradition—the asceticism of the desert fathers and mothers—that would seem strange to most American Christians today if they knew anything about it (which very few do), strange because of the severity of the ascetic disciplines that they practiced.³ So peculiar was their behavior that it is hard to view them as anything other than mere historical curiosities—if, that is, we take their asceticism at face value. But if we evaluate their asceticism in light of the complex and sophisticated psychology of sin and salvation reflected in their writings, we will discover not only how accessible they are but also how cogent and relevant, too. The desert fathers and mothers understood life to be a lifelong struggle against the

² Merton, *New Seeds*, 258.

³ I am treating the movement as a whole, there was a certain degree of variation, both regionally (for example, Egypt vs. Syria) and generationally. Regardless of these variations, the movement did exhibit some features that make it possible to treat it as a whole. For example, all the desert fathers and mothers withdrew from society to live in seclusion, all of them practiced the ascetic disciplines, and all of them aimed to become masters of the spiritual life, especially through self-sacrifice and contemplative prayer.

world, the flesh, and the devil. The struggle is fierce because sin runs deep in human nature, which makes us vulnerable to temptations of every kind, not only to those that affect outward conduct but also to those that affect inward disposition. Victory in this struggle requires the practice of ascetic discipline, to be sure, as the desert fathers and mothers demonstrated. Yet while asceticism is essential to victory, it is not sufficient in itself. The power of grace and the proper setting are also necessary if lasting victory is to be achieved. However far removed from our experience, this tradition has tremendous value, especially today, because it exposes the bankruptcy of our consumer culture and confronts the modern quest for pleasure and prosperity, which constitutes what many people would consider the essence of “the good life.”

THE LIFE OF STRUGGLE

The desert fathers and mothers believed that the rigor of asceticism is essential because the Christian faith demands struggle. The fallenness of the world imposes it (e.g., physical sickness, mental anguish, death of a loved one), the perversity of human nature mandates it, and discipleship requires it (e.g., self-sacrifice). We therefore cannot escape struggle, nor should we try. Rather, we should embrace it as one aspect of our calling to discipleship, for the goal of life in this world is not ease, prosperity, and success but intimacy with God, maturity of character, and service to others. Struggle proves that we are taking the Christian faith seriously. After all, Jesus himself taught that we must die to ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, that mosaic of teaching from the great spiritual masters, addresses this theme of struggle often.⁴ A battle against fallen human nature, worldliness, selfishness, distraction, and dullness of mind and heart is being waged to reclaim what belongs rightfully to God. This world is the battlefield; salvation is the prize. We live in a fallen world, and we are fallen people. Though we can and should enjoy the vic-

⁴ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* have come to us in two forms: sayings arranged according to topic, as we find in Chadwick’s book, and sayings arranged according to the original source, namely, the Abba to whom the saying is attributed. For examples of the former, see Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*; Benedicta Ward, ed., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (New York: Penguin, 2003); and Thomas Merton, ed., *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960). For examples of the latter, see Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Press, 1975) and Laura Swan, ed., *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001). For a general introduction to the literatures, see William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

tory that is ours in Christ, we should also expect to face temptation and struggle for the rest of our earthly lives. “This is the great task of man,” Abba Antony, the most famous of the desert fathers, said to his disciples, “that he should hold his sin before the face of God, and count upon temptation until his last breath. . . Take away the temptation,” he continued, “and no one will find salvation.”⁵ A young monk who had been living in the desert for eight years admitted discouragement to his spiritual mentor or advisor, Abba Theodore of Pherme, to which Theodore responded, “Believe me, I have been a monk for seventy years, and I have not been able to get a single days peace. And so you want to have peace after eight years?”⁶ One master put it succinctly, “We cannot make temptations vanish, but we can struggle against them.”⁷

Struggle can actually serve a useful purpose. The *Sayings* include countless examples of this conviction. For example, a novice in the community confessed that he battled constantly against the temptation of lust. An old master asked him, “Do you want me to ask the Lord to release you from your trouble,” to which the young man replied, “Abba, I see that although it is a painful struggle, I am profiting from having to carry the burden.” Then he added, “But ask God in your prayers, that he will give me long-suffering, to enable me to endure.” The master was humbled by his appren-

⁵ Quoted in Anselm Greun, *Heaven Begins Within You: Wisdom from the Desert Fathers* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 38. Antony was the most famous of the desert fathers. The famous and tenacious bishop of Alexandria from 328–373, Athanasius, wrote his biography, which exercised formative influence in the Middle Ages. See Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 32. For other collections of biographies of the Desert fathers and mothers, see Tim Vivian, ed., *Journeying into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Robert T. Meyer, trans., *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965); *The Lives of the Saints of the Holy Land and the Sinai Desert* (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 1988); Norman Russell, trans., *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980); Tim Vivian, trans., *Paphnutius: Histories of the Monks of Upper Egypt* and *The Life of Onnephrius* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Press, 1993); R.M. Price, trans., *Theodoret of Cyrillus: A History of the Monks of Syria* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985); R.M. Price, trans., *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991); Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001). John Eviratus (John Moschos) collected similar stories from the 6th and 7th centuries after traveling in an arc from Asia Minor to Egypt. See John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992). In the 1990s a travel writer retraced John’s steps to provide an account of what the geographical and spiritual landscape of the desert tradition looks like today. See William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997) for this fascinating account.

⁶ Owen Chadwick, ed., *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 83.

⁷ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 64.

tice's wisdom and courage. "Now I know that you are far advanced, my son, and beyond me."⁸ Abba Poemen once told Abba John the Short that he had asked God to take away his passions. His prayer had been answered, and his heart had become tranquil. So he said to himself, "I find that I am at rest, with no war of flesh and spirit." But Abba John warned him, "Go, ask the Lord to stir a new war in you. Fighting is good for the soul."⁹ On another occasion Poemen said, "If temptations come in, and you deal with them there, they will prove you."¹⁰ Or again, "Just as you cannot stop air coming into your breast, you cannot stop [evil] thoughts coming into your mind. Your part is to resist them."¹¹ In the end, struggle implies that we are engaged with rather than surrendered to the enemy. When Abba Cyrun of Alexandria was asked about the temptation of lust, he replied, "If you are not tempted, you have no hope; if you are not tempted, it is because you are used to sinning."¹²

DISCIPLINE TO THE EXTREME

The desert fathers and mothers¹³ practiced the ascetic disciplines (fasting, vigils, poverty, solitude, and celibacy) to win this struggle for the soul. Every passing day led them one step closer to the hour of death and judgment when they would be called to account for their earthly lives. The anticipation of that day demanded preparation, attention, and devotion. Abba Evagrius, one of the notable theologians of the movement, said, "While you sit in your cell draw in your mind, and remember the day of your death. And then you will see your body mortifying. Think on the loss, feel the pain. Shrink from the vanity of the world outside. Be retiring, and careful to keep your vow of quiet, and you will not weaken."¹⁴ When Theophilus, the archbishop of Alexandria, was dying he said to his famous mentor, "Abba Arsenius, you are a man blessed of God because you have always kept this moment before your eyes."¹⁵ One Abba actually used a corpse as a pillow for a short time as a macabre reminder of his own mortality.

Desert ascetics suppressed the desire for sleep, food, and possessions, believing that without vigilance and strict discipline such natural needs and

⁸ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 65.

⁹ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 84–85.

¹⁰ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 111.

¹¹ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 117.

¹² Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 62.

¹³ There were desert "mothers," too, though not nearly as many as fathers because the social roles of women demanded that they pursue the domestic life. See, for example, Laura Swan's book for notable examples.

¹⁴ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 44.

¹⁵ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 44.

desires would lure them into worldliness and complacency.¹⁶ Abba Dioscorus made a resolution each year: “. . . not to meet anyone for a year, or not to speak, or not to taste cooked food, or not to eat any fruit, or not to eat vegetables. This was his system in everything. He made himself master of one thing, and then started on another, and so on each year.”¹⁷ It was not unusual for the masters to pray nearly all night long. Abba Arsenius said, “An hour’s sleep is enough for a monk; that is, if he is a fighter.”¹⁸ Abba Poemen added, “All rest of the body is an abomination to the Lord.”¹⁹ Words were suspect, too. Abba Theon was said to have been silent for thirty years,²⁰ and Abba John stood under a rock for three years in uninterrupted prayer, “not sitting at all or lying down to sleep, but simply snatching some sleep while standing.”²¹

Fasting was considered the most effective antidote to gluttony and lust. When a brother asked an old master how he combated lust, he was told, “It is because, ever since I became a monk, I have never taken my fill of bread, or water, or sleep; and because I am tormented by desire for food, I cannot feel the pricks of lust.”²² They believed fasting weaned them from attachment to this world. Abba John the Short said, “If a man is earnest in fasting and hunger, the enemies which trouble his soul will grow weak.”²³ “When the monk’s body is dried up with fasting,” said Abba Hyperichius, “it lifts his soul from the depths. Fasting dries up the channels down which worldly pleasures flow.”²⁴ As one old man taught, “If I do not taste what I long for and can see, my devotion will be greater and I shall be granted a greater reward by the Lord.”²⁵

Poverty was an essential discipline in the pursuit of the spiritual life. In this respect also some behavior bordered on the quizzical and extreme. After his cell had been ransacked and stripped of its few possessions by robbers, one Abba spotted a small bag in the corner of his cell that the thieves had overlooked. He ran after them, yelling, “My sons, you missed this—take it!”²⁶ Abba Evagrius told the story of a brother who had no possessions but

¹⁶ For the practice of asceticism in the desert fathers and mothers, see Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), Aileen M. Hartney, *Gruesome Deaths and Celibate Lives: Christian Martyrs and Ascetics* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2005), and Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰ *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 68.

²¹ *Lives*, 93

²² Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

a Gospel, which he sold to feed the poor, exclaiming, "I have even sold the word which commands me to sell all and give it to the poor."²⁷ Palladius, the author of one of the first books about the movement, told the story of Dorotheus, who gave up everything and lived in a cave for sixty years. Calling his way of life "squalid and harsh," he said that Dorotheus collected stones all day long in the unremitting heat to help his brothers build their little cells, ate virtually nothing, sat up all night to weave rope to earn money so that he could buy a little food and then give the rest away. He rejected anything that would lead to excessive attachment to the world.²⁸

Sex, of course, was an ever present temptation. So intent were they on combating this temptation that a few, forced to marry at a young age, practiced "virginal marriage," which meant that they committed themselves to celibacy after they were legally married. A wealthy uncle forced Amoun, another great master of the movement, to marry against his will at the age of twenty-two. In the bridal chamber he persuaded his new wife to preserve their virginity in secret. He lived with her in that state for eighteen years until they achieved "complete insensibility to lust." She finally released him from his obligation and encouraged him to withdraw into the desert to complete his spiritual training. "Since you are a man practicing righteousness, just as I am eagerly following in your path, let us live separately. It is unspeakable that you hide such virtue as yours living together with me in virginity." He spent the last years of his life in the desert, though he visited his wife twice a year.²⁹

Lust dogged the ascetics like a bad dream, and they fought it by all possible means. Tempted by a harlot who asked for shelter in order to seduce him, a famous hermit realized that he had to do something to control his sexual desire. While she slept in his cell, he kept burning his fingers, one after the other, to mitigate his lust, saying to himself, "People who do things like this [commit fornication] go into torment. Test yourself, and see whether you can bear a fire which is everlasting." Showing his hands the next morning to the very men who had urged the harlot on, he said, "Look what that child of the devil has done to me. She has cost me every finger I possess." Then he discovered that the harlot had died during the night. But the hermit, filled with compassion, prayed that she might come back to life. Once she did, she repented of her sins and committed herself to live a chaste life.³⁰

THE PROBLEM OF EXCESS

This kind of behavior is so alien to the modern quest for success, prosperity, and comfort that we as Christians living in the West hardly know

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁸ *The Lausiac History*, 32–33.

²⁹ *The Lausiac History*, 41–43.

³⁰ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 72.

how to respond to the movement, except of course to ignore it or to dismiss it as too odd to be taken seriously. It is simply too easy to stumble over the excesses of the movement and thus excuse ourselves from sifting the wheat from the chaff and learn what we can from it. That it was sometimes extreme, at least from our point of view, goes without saying. The story of Macarius of Alexandria is a case in point. A gnat stung him on the foot and, feeling pain, he killed it. Afterwards he realized he had killed the insect out of revenge and felt sorry. So to do penance he sentenced himself to sitting naked every day in a marsh, where the mosquitoes feasted on him so ravenously that his body swelled up as if he had elephantiasis, making him virtually unrecognizable to his friends.³¹

But that is not all there was to it. Some of the most widely respected leaders of the movement were surprisingly critical of the fanaticism and tried to mitigate it. They encouraged restraint and moderation, at least to some degree, arguing that ascetic discipline should not be overdone. Abba Antony once likened spiritual discipline to a bow. He kept asking a hunter to pull back his bow string a little farther until the hunter warned that, if he continued, the bow itself would break. "So it is with God's work," Antony explained. "If we go to excess, the brothers quickly become exhausted. It is sometimes best not to be rigid."³² On another occasion he said, "Some wear down their bodies by fasting. But because they have no discretion, it puts them farther from God."³³ Addressing a man who had worn himself out with ascetic discipline in order to conquer the sin of lust, a master advised him to stop being so extreme, eat food at the proper time, worship God, and turn all thoughts to God. "The human body is like a coat. If you treat it carefully, it will last a long time. If you neglect it, it will fall into tatters."³⁴ Abba Apollo leveled severe criticism against those who made their ascetic practices "conspicuous" and encouraged his disciples to be joyful rather than despondent and gloomy. Leaders like Apollo criticized asceticism if it was practiced for its own sake rather than as a means to the end of cultivating virtue.³⁵

Saint Syncletice suggested that too much fasting could actually be the work of the devil. How could they tell the difference? "Clearly by its moderation," she said. Fasting ran the risk of sapping spiritual strength and tempting monks to gorge themselves on food once the fast was broken, like starving beasts. "Everything which is extreme is destructive," she concluded.³⁶ The goal was balance. Abba Joseph once asked Abba Poemen, "How should we fast?" Abba Poemen answered, "I would have everyone eat a little less than he wants, every day." Surprised by the answer, Abba

³¹ *The Lausiac History*, 58–59.

³² Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 106.

³³ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

³⁵ *Lives*, 78–79.

³⁶ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 120–121.

Joseph reminded Poemen that he used to fast for days on end, to which Poemen replied, “The great elders have tested these things, and they found that it is good to eat something every day, but on some days a little less. And they have shown that this is the king’s highway, for it is easy and light.”³⁷

To emphasize the point, masters of the movement sometimes resorted to making fun of overly zealous monks. Some of the old men were fond of saying, “If you see a young man climbing up to heaven by his own will, catch him by the foot and pull him down to earth: it is not good for him.”³⁸ In one of many humorous stories found in the *Sayings*, a young man approached Abba Silvanus on Mount Sinai to express concern about brothers who were wasting time doing something as undignified, unnecessary, and unspiritual as common labor. The young man quoted several Scriptures to prove that true disciples should pray, not waste time doing ordinary chores, for “Mary has chosen the good portion.”³⁹ Abba Silvanus summoned an assistant, saying to him, “Put this brother in a cell where there is nothing.” The day passed without incident. But by late afternoon the young disciple was hungry, and he wondered why no one had brought him anything to eat. So he found Abba Silvanus and asked if the brothers had eaten yet. “Yes, they have eaten already,” replied Silvanus. “Why did you not call me?” the young man asked. Silvanus replied, “You are a spiritual person and do not need food. We are earthly, and since we want to eat, we work with our hands.” Then, to drive the point home, he quoted, not without sarcasm, we may suspect, the very text the young brother had used to prove his superiority. “But you have chosen the good part, reading all day, and not wanting to take earthly food.” The apprentice was pierced to the heart, bowed before Silvanus, and repented. Silvanus commented, “I think Mary always needs Martha, and by Martha’s help Mary is praised.”⁴⁰

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, PSYCHOLOGIST OF THE DESERT

The aim of asceticism was to wean monks from excessive attachment to the world, which drove them into the desert. But the intent of this escape into the wilderness was to engage the enemy, not retreat from the enemy. If anything, it thrust them into the thick of battle. Stripped of creature comforts and deprived of worldly distraction, they joined in what they considered the most important battle Christians have to face, the battle of the heart, penetrating innermost thoughts, not simply outward behavior. The asceticism they practiced in the bleak conditions of the desert provided a

³⁷ Ibid., 115.

³⁸ Ibid., 130.

³⁹ Luke 10:38–42.

⁴⁰ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 119–120.

good setting—the best setting, as they believed—to fight the real enemy, the darkness within, epitomized by the egoism that runs rampant in every human heart. Only by squaring off against this inward darkness would they find true life and freedom. Severe discipline exposed the more serious problem of the corruption of the human heart, as if, neglecting to treat symptoms, they were confronted with the drastic consequences of the real disease. Abba Antony said, “The man who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles—those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then he will have but one battle to fight—the battle of the heart.”⁴¹ Abba Evagrius added, “Cut out of your heart the desire for many things, and so prevent the mind being disturbed, and the quiet wasted.”⁴² This required time spent in solitude, which allowed them to peer into the depths of their own souls. When a brother asked Abba Moses for a good word, Moses did not offer any wisdom but only declared, “Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”⁴³

One desert father explored this idea with unusual insight. Over time he emerged as a formidable theologian of the desert who left in his wake a corpus of writing that exercised significant influence in the theology of the medieval church, especially in Eastern Orthodoxy. Precocious and confident, Evagrius Ponticus made his way to Constantinople as a young man. There he met the most famous political and ecclesiastical leaders of his day, including Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, the latter of whom actually ordained him a deacon and drew him into the intellectual and spiritual affairs of that great city. But his rapid rise to power had a negative impact on his spiritual life. An early biographer commented that he was “great in pomp, made a great deal of caring for his body and had himself ministered to by slaves.” He eventually fell in love with the wife of a prominent member of high society. Horrified by his carelessness and vulnerability, he fled the city and traveled to the Holy Land, where he met a famous abbess, Melania the Elder, who invited him to join a monastery and develop discipline in his life. But once again he became complacent. “Satan made the heart of Evagrius as hard as the heart of Pharaoh.” This time a serious illness broke him of his pride. After his recovery, Melania, who realized Evagrius was more inclined to escape rather than address his deepest problems, suggested that he journey to the Egyptian desert to practice “the discipline” and to face himself. He spent the last 16 years of his life there, and he became a renowned holy man, miracle worker, writer, and teacher. He died in 399.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., 40.

⁴² Ibid., 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁴ For a brief biography of Evagrius, see John Bamberger, OCSO, ed., *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970). Modern scholars began to study Evagrius Ponticus in earnest about a half century ago, after many of his lost writings were rediscovered. Since then he has

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUL

Evagrius and his many followers described a landscape of the soul that shaped the psychology of the Eastern Orthodox spirituality in the Middle Ages. The soul consists of three faculties, each of which requires discipline so that it can become subject to the rule of God. The *incensive* faculty of the soul consists of the inclination to react strongly to something, to express vehement feelings, and it is best put to discipline by directing its energy against the power of evil, the source of all temptation. “When you are tempted do not fall immediately to prayer. First utter some angry words against the one who affects you.”⁴⁵ The *appetitive* faculty of the soul expresses itself through the dominance of the passions, which are best subdued by focusing them exclusively on God, who, as the supreme good, deserves our primary focus of attention. “Whatever a man loves he will desire with all his might. What he desires he strives to lay hold. Now desire precedes every pleasure, and it is feeling which gives birth to desire. For that which is not subject to feeling is also free of passion.”⁴⁶ Once these faculties

gone through a significant rehabilitation because scholars are evaluating his spiritual theology in light of the whole corpus of his writing and his use of Scripture. See, for example, David Brakke, “Making Public the Monastic Life: Reading the Self in Evagrius Ponticus’ *Talking Back*,” in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Michael L. Satlow, and Steven Weitzman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 2005), 222–233; Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., “Apatheia and Purity of Heart in Evagrius Ponticus,” in *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature*, ed. Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 141–159; Diogenes Allen, “Ascetic Theology and the Eight Deadly Thoughts,” *Evangelical Journal* 13 (1995), 15–21, and “Ascetic Theology and Psychology,” in *Limning the Psyche*, ed. Robert C. Roberts and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 297–316; Columba Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9:2 (2001), 173–204; David E. Linge, “Leading the Life of Angels: Ascetic Practice and Reflection in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:3 (2000), 537–568; Mette Sophia Boeher Rasmussen, “Like Rock or like God? The Concept of *apatheia* in the Monastic Theology of Evagrius of Pontus,” *Studia Theologica* 59 (2005), 147–162; William Harmless, S.J., and Raymond R. Fitzgerald, S.J., “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001), 498–529; Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love As God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Books, 1987). For older treatments of Evagrius that are more critical, see Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), 75–77, and Gannon and Traub, *The Desert and the City*, chapter 1. The idiosyncratic and insightful Hans Urs von Balthasar charged that the mystical teaching of Evagrius “stands closer to Buddhism than to Christianity.” For a review essay on the scholarly literature on Evagrius, see Augustine Casiday, “Gabriel Bunge and the Study of Evagrius Ponticus,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 48:2 (2004), 249–97.

⁴⁵ Evagrius, 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

are put to discipline, the *intellectual* faculty (mind or *nous*) is able to direct its attention entirely on the immaterial God. Thus the ultimate battle is for the control of the intellect. St. Mark the Ascetic, one of Evagrius' disciples, put it this way: "The intellect does many good and bad things without the body, whereas the body can do neither good or evil without the intellect. This is because the law of freedom applies to what happens before we act."⁴⁷ Or again, "When you sin, blame your thought, not your action. For had your intellect not run ahead, your body would not have followed."⁴⁸

If not disciplined properly, the mind becomes vulnerable to temptation and develops harmful habits, which inevitably lead to sinful and destructive behavior. How does this process occur? It begins with *provocation*, which is not in itself a sin. It comes from outside the self and appeals to fallen human nature. "A provocation is an image-free stimulation in the heart," St. Mark stated, "like a mountain-pass, the experienced take control of it ahead of the enemy."⁴⁹ Image-free simply means that it is merely an idea or suggestion that lacks concreteness, the mind not having embraced it yet, like an odor that has not yet evoked in the mind a concrete source. Thus we can never blame temptation for our sinful actions. We are not victims of sin; we are never caught by complete surprise, unless, of course, we have let down our guard and become careless. If temptation succeeds, it is because we have failed to be watchful, attentive, and diligent. "If, as Scripture teaches, everything involuntary has its cause in what is voluntary, man has no greater enemy than himself."⁵⁰

Provocation usually causes a *disturbance*, which occurs when the soul considers the temptation and, for a brief moment, stands suspended between two alternatives. Will the soul turn away from the provocation, pursue God, and obey his commands? Or will the soul seek immediate gratification and yield to temptation? If the latter occurs, the mind begins to flirt with sin. Evagrius used the word "thoughts" or *logismoi* (in Greek) to describe the mind's active engagement with sin and vulnerability to demons. The line of danger is crossed when the mind forms mental images of sin and creates an alternative world of fantasy, a world over which it assumes—wrongly—it has complete control. Evagrius states: "The demons wage a veritable war against our concupiscible appetite. They employ for this combat phantasms (and we run to see them) which show conversations with our friends, banquets with our relatives, whole choruses of women and all kinds of other things calculated to produce delight. Under the influence of

⁴⁷ St. Mark the Ascetic, "On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Work: Two Hundred and Twenty-Six Texts," *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. I, compiled by St. Nikodimos and St. Makarios (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 126.

⁴⁸ St. Mark, "Righteous," *Philokalia*, 118.

⁴⁹ St. Mark, 119.

⁵⁰ St. Mark, 133.

this part of our soul we then grow unhealthy while our passions undergo a full-bodied development.”⁵¹

These thoughts are dangerous for two reasons. First, we can delude ourselves into thinking that our fantasies can be contained in the mind alone, which makes them appear inconsequential and relatively innocent. Second, the mind imagines something that is not real, at least as God defines reality, which consists of life lived exclusively for him. In short, sinful thoughts allow us to imagine a reality in which we can always have our way, design life as we wish, and thus play God, which of course is the opposite of true reality.

THE EIGHT DEADLY *LOGISMOI*

Evagrius classified eight deadly *logismoi*, which correspond roughly to the Seven Deadly Sins that became popular during the Middle Ages. “There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony, then impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and last of all, pride.” Evagrius did not define these sins exclusively in terms of behavior; he identified them as thoughts formed in the mind through images. In essence, he described the problem of the darkness within, the tendency of all human beings, regardless of background and personality, to be egoistic. “It is not in our power,” he wrote, “to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.”⁵²

Evagrius explained the meaning of these eight “thoughts” to the monks under his charge, using illustrations that would make sense in their world. But his insights apply to us and our world as well.

1. For example, he said that the thought of *gluttony* consists of obsession with food, whether or not we actually eat too much of it, and it provides many seemingly rational reasons—concern about health, for example—to justify why it is right and permissible to indulge ourselves. “The thought of gluttony suggests to the monk that he give up his ascetic efforts in short order. It brings to his mind concern for his stomach, for his liver and spleen, the thought of a long illness, scarcity of the commodities of life and finally of his edematous body and the lack of care by the physicians. These things are depicted vividly before his eyes.”⁵³

2. *Impurity* awakens the appetite for sex and makes us feel that we gain nothing by trying to remain chaste, and it provokes the idea that purity of heart only puts off the inevitable, considering how powerful and unrelent-

⁵¹ Evagrius, 31.

⁵² Ibid, 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

ing the temptation of lust is. “The demon of impurity impels one to lust after bodies. It attacks more strenuously those who practice continence, in the hope that they will give up their practice of this virtue, feeling that they gain nothing by it.”⁵⁴

3. *Avarice* plays on our natural insecurities and desire for control. It makes us think that it is perfectly justifiable to go to any length to attend to the needs we will someday have, assuming that the worst is bound to happen. After all, we can never be too careful about the threat of misfortune that looms in the future. “Avarice suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor, famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty.”

4. *Sadness* reminds us of the good life we left behind and long for, or the good life we would like to have but will probably never attain. It most closely resembles the modern notion of self-pity, for it involves the feeling of loss that comes when we are deprived of what we consider a legitimate longing, such as home, family, and friends, the memory of which awakens sad thoughts of the good life left behind or lost. In the Middle Ages this deadly thought was changed to envy, for people feeling sadness often compare themselves and their circumstances to others, who seem to have it so much better. This in turn causes them to wish secretly that these fortunate people, as lucky and undeserving as they are, suffer a similar or—even better—a worse misery.

5. *Anger* is “a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury—or is thought to have done so. It constantly irritates the soul and above all at the time of prayer it seizes the mind and flashes the picture of the offensive person before one’s eyes.” As Evagrius noted, anger worms its way into the soul until, haunting us even at night, it keeps us awake as we plot revenge on our beds. “Then there comes a time when it persists longer, is transformed into indignation, stirs up alarming experiences by night.”⁵⁵

6. Known as the “noonday demon” because it tended to afflict monks during the middle of the day, *acedia* cannot be translated easily, which is why the English translation of Evagrius uses the Greek. It is best understood as a feeling of restlessness, boredom, impatience with routine, or sorrow over a spiritual good that requires a great deal of effort to achieve (or better, receive). It most often affects people, such as musicians, athletes, and scholars, who are required to work at something over a long period of time. *Acedia* is a far richer term than what “sloth” connotes, the English word we often use for this deadly sin. The demon “makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour. . . . Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18.

for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor.” Evagrius observed that this kind of restlessness often leads monks to define the problem as “out there” somewhere, not “in here,” in the human heart, which explains our tendency to blame spouses, bosses, coaches, teachers, and circumstances for our problems, thus giving us an excuse to complain, make excuses, and quit. “This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself.”⁵⁶

7. *Vainglory* tempts us to angle for attention and honor, regardless of how it is attained. Consumed by visions of grandeur, we imagine ourselves being lauded by others for our great feats and accomplishments. It is especially dangerous to those who do in fact achieve some degree of success because it causes them to wonder why everyone else has not taken sufficient notice. “The spirit of vainglory is most subtle and it readily grows up in the souls of those who practice virtue. It leads them to desire to make their struggles known publicly, to hunt after the praise of men. This in turn leads to their illusory healing of women, or to their hearing fancied sounds as the cries of the demons—crowds of people who touch their clothes. This demon predicts besides that they will attain to the priesthood. It has men knocking at the door, seeking audience with them.”⁵⁷ The problem with vainglory is compounded, of course, because any success we enjoy in overcoming it increases the likelihood of committing it. “It is only with considerable difficulty that one can escape the thought of vainglory. For what you do to destroy it becomes the principle of some other form of vainglory.”⁵⁸

8. Not surprisingly, *pride* is damnable because it claims credit for virtues and successes that are due to the goodness of others and ultimately to the goodness of God. Thus the proud person “gets a big head in regard to the brethren, considering them stupid because they do not all have this same opinion of him.”⁵⁹

These *logismoi* eventually give birth to sinful action. But by then we are so bound to the sin that we find it almost impossible to stop, even when the consequences become unbearably destructive. What no one can see, of course, is that the mind has been indulging in the sin for months, if not for years. It was *thinking* the sin long before it gave birth to actual sin. Eventually the thought leads to action—gluttony to obesity, lust to adultery, anger to revenge, envy to betrayal. “Everything that happens,” wrote St. Mark, “has a small beginning, and grows the more it is nourished.”⁶⁰ St. Hesychios the Priest believed that, once entertaining a provocation, “its thoughts become entwined in the fantasy provoked by the devil. . . . Then, seeking to contrive some means through which it can actually attain what

⁵⁶ Ibid., 18–19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 16–20.

⁶⁰ St. Mark, 122.

attracts it, the soul assents to the provocation and, to its own condemnation, turns this unlawful mental fantasy into a concrete action by means of the body.”⁶¹

Evagrius encouraged the monks under his supervision to become astute observers of their own nature so that they could develop awareness of their own particular vulnerabilities. That we all face temptations goes without saying; how we face temptation and yield to it depends upon the unique disposition of each of us and the unique circumstances we face in life. So he advised each monk to keep watch over his thoughts. “Let him observe their intensity, their periods of decline and follow them as they rise and fall. Let him note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them, with the order of their succession and the nature of their associations. Then let him ask from Christ the explanations of these data he has observed.”⁶²

THE WAY TO VICTORY

I. The Power of Grace

At this point we cannot know how the monks of Evagrius’ day responded to his teaching, though we can follow his trail of influence as it winds its way through the entire Middle Ages. We can only guess that they responded both with a sense of profound relief and with a feeling of utter discouragement—relief because they learned through his teaching what the real problem is, and discouragement because the problem seems so overwhelming and unconquerable. What can we do to reverse what appears to be a hopeless situation? How can we overcome the downward spiral into sin that seems to be the lot of humanity? At this point the desert tradition outlines a three-step process. We need power, which comes through God’s grace; we need the right setting, which, as it turns out, can be the city as well as the desert; and we need discipline, not simply *ascesis* but also *apatheia* and *agape*. So we return once again to the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers to follow the pathway they prescribed.

God’s grace is necessary because human effort is simply not enough to overcome the power of sin (grace in this sense meaning help from God to do his will, which departs sharply from the Reformation understanding of grace). This is especially clear in the disciples who developed the Evagrian system of thought. They understood their own limitations, even as they became masters of the ascetic disciplines. St. Theodoros the Great Ascetic, one of several ascetics whose writings appear in the *Philokalia*, makes exactly that point. “Vainly, therefore, do conceited people wander about claiming

⁶¹ St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” *Philokalia*, 170.

⁶² Evagrius, 30.

that they have abolished sin through their ascetic accomplishments and their free will. Sin is abolished only through the grace of God, for it was made dead through the mystery of the Cross.”⁶³ They exalted the grace of Jesus Christ above their spiritual achievement. It was grace that would break them of sin and grace that would give them victory. “To him who hungers after Christ,” St. Mark adds, “grace is food; to him who is thirsty, a reviving drink; to him who is cold, a garment; to him who is weary, rest; to him who prays, assurance; to him who mourns, consolation.”⁶⁴

The ascetic masters were surprisingly gentle, gracious, and compassionate, especially with their young apprentices, because they understood the weakness of human nature. In one famous story a young man, “exceedingly careful about seeking goodness,” approached an old man to confess to him that he was having difficulty overcoming the demon of lust. The old man shamed him so much that the young man fell into despair and decided to leave the desert and return to his former life in the city. He encountered Abba Apollos on his journey. Apollos observed that he was troubled and so asked what ailed him. At first the young man refused to speak, but after patient prodding he told Apollos the whole story. Apollos responded, “Do not be cast down, son, nor despair of yourself. Even at my age and experience of the spiritual life, I am still sorely troubled by thoughts like yours. Do not fail at this point, because this trouble cannot be cured by our efforts, but only by God’s mercy. Grant me what I ask, just today, and go back to your cell.” So the young man returned to his cell.

Meanwhile, Apollos realized that the harsh old man needed to learn a lesson for giving such bad advice. Standing outside the old man’s cell, Apollos prayed that he would be tormented with the same temptation that had afflicted the young man. “Lord, who allowest men to be tempted for their good, transfer the war which that brother is suffering to this old man: let him learn by experience in his old age what many years have not taught him, and so let him find out how to sympathize with people undergoing this kind of temptation.” The old man was immediately stricken with temptation and, failing almost immediately, decided to return to the world. Apollos met him on the way and told him how foolish and arrogant he was to treat his young apprentice with such contempt and how presumptuous he was to think he was stronger, for he had been unable to struggle against the same temptation even for one day. In fact, he said, “*struggle* is not the right word, when you could not stand up to his attack for one day. This has happened to you because of the young man. He came to you because he was being attacked by the common enemy of us all. You ought to have given him words of consolation to help him against the devil’s attack. But instead you drove him to despair.”

⁶³ St. Theodoros the Great Ascetic, “A Century of Spiritual Texts,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, Vol. II, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 28.

⁶⁴ St. Mark, 134.

Apollos concluded by acknowledging humanity's desperate need for grace. "Not a single person could endure the enemy's clever attack, nor quench, nor control the leaping fire natural to the body, unless God's grace preserved us in our weakness. In all our prayers we should pray for his grace to save us, so that he may turn aside the scourge aimed even at you." We receive this grace not only in the form of forgiveness and consolation but also in the form of suffering and discipline. God gives both kinds to help us to grow in maturity. "For he makes a man to grieve, and then lifts him up to salvation; he strikes, and his hand heals; he humbles and exalts, mortifies and enlivens; leads to hell and brings from hell."⁶⁵

2. *The Proper Setting*

The wilderness provided a useful setting to fight the war within as well as the war without. It stripped monks of the cultural props that make life comfortable, secure, and convenient, deluding them into thinking they could live life on our terms, turning to God only when in some kind of crisis, if even then. But they recognized at the same time that the desert offered no guarantees. It was their attitude about the desert that mattered more than the actual experience of it. Said the abbess Matrona, "Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time be longing for company."⁶⁶ God could and did use the desert as one setting in which to do his work. But God could use other settings as well, including the city. The *Sayings* contain several stories indicating that the desert is not the only place, nor even the best place, to train oneself in the faith, and that the practice of rigorous discipline is not the only way, nor even the best way, to become a mature disciple. God can use virtually *any* setting to do his deeper work in us. The true test of discipleship involves how believers live for God *right where we are*. That there was at least some openness to a setting situated in the world demonstrates that the desert could not in and of itself engender genuine discipleship. Though the preferable setting (for the reasons already stated), God could use—and often did use—a worldly setting to accomplish his deeper work. Besides, not everyone could withdraw into the desert. Thus there had to be a way for ordinary people to make progress in the spiritual life, too.

A well known story about Macarius illustrates the importance of this point and reveals the ambiguous attitude monks had about life in the world. One story tells how Abba Macarius heard a voice telling him that he had not yet attained the standard of maturity of two women who lived in a nearby city. That they were women, living in the city, would have awakened

⁶⁵ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 60–62

⁶⁶ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 43.

his curiosity and alarm! This was something he could not have imagined. He immediately went to the city and found the two women. He asked them, "Tell me how you live a religious life." Surprised by his question, they told Macarius that they had been married for fifteen years; in fact, they had had sexual relations with their husbands the night before. Asking their husbands if they could live the celibate life, they had been denied. So they purposed to live faithfully for God as wives, choosing to show kindness and speak graciously to everyone they knew, especially to each other. Macarius then said, "Truly, it is not whether you are virgin or a married woman, a monk or a man in the world: God gives his Holy Spirit to everyone, according to their earnestness of purpose."⁶⁷

Another famous story underscores the same point, showing that, though the ascetic life is necessary, it does not diminish the value of what people living in the world can accomplish. Even the masters of the movement had something to learn from the unlikeliest of people. The famous ascetic Paphnutius, for example, once asked God in a moment of conceit to tell him which of the saints his life most closely resembled. An angel then appeared to him and told him he was like a flute player who performed in a circus in a nearby city. After finding the flute player Paphnutius was mortified to discover that the man was a brigand, drunkard, and fornicator. But, however sinful, he had nevertheless shown mercy to two needy women. Ashamed of himself, Paphnutius responded by redoubling his ascetic efforts. A while later he asked God a second time which saint he resembled. This time the angel informed him that he was like the leader of a village who provided hospitality to the needy, executed his duties with justice, and lived a virtuous life. Again, Paphnutius devoted himself to even greater ascetic rigor before asking the same question of God yet a third time. The angel told him that he was like a merchant who had given away his vast wealth to the poor. In each case the three characters to which Paphnutius was compared, all people living in the world, eventually left behind secular affairs and withdrew into the wilderness to complete their training in discipleship, and there they died. It is clear that people who live in the city need time in the desert. But Paphnutius learned that he needed to develop humility and charity, too. As he said to the flute player, "I am not aware myself of having accomplished anything equal to [your charity]. But as regards *ascesis*, you have no doubt heard that I am famous. For I have not spent my life in ease and self-indulgence. Now God has revealed to me concerning you that as regards virtuous achievement you do not lag behind me at all."⁶⁸

3. *The Commitment to Daily Discipline*

Still, rigorous discipline does play a role, provided that it include more than mere asceticism. Here Evagrius outlined three disciplines to help

⁶⁷ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 188.

⁶⁸ *Lives*, 95.

monks overcome the vicious cycle of destruction he described in such devastating detail. He called them *ascesis*, *apatheia*, and *agape*. As he stated, “*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*. *Apatheia* is the very flower of *ascesis*. *Ascesis* consists in keeping the commandments.”⁶⁹

The first discipline, *ascesis*, would help the monks to discipline the appetites, as we have already learned. Evagrius assigned different ascetic exercises that would serve as the appropriate means to bring the various faculties of the soul under control. “Reading, vigils and prayer—these are the things that lend stability to the wandering mind. Hunger, toil and solitude are the means of extinguishing the flames of desire. Turbid anger is calmed by the singing of Psalms, by patience and almsgiving.”⁷⁰ Evagrius believed that these disciplines require vigilance, courage, and determination. “The time of temptation is not the time to leave one’s cell, devising plausible pretexts. Rather, stand there firmly and be patient. Bravely take all that the demon brings upon you.”⁷¹ But he also argued that moderation is essential, too. “Our holy and most ascetic master [Macarius the Great] stated that the monk should always live as if he were to die on the morrow but at the same time that he should treat his body as if he were to live on with it for many years to come.”⁷²

Over time the practice of discipline would begin to engender a spirit of *apatheia*, purity of heart, or “imperturbable calm,” as Evagrius called it, which would enable the mind to gain freedom from the interference of passions, to settle into a spirit of contemplation and prayer, and to achieve clarity of mind and love for God. “The spirit that is engaged in the war against the passions does not see clearly the basic meaning of the war for it is something like a man fighting in the darkness of night. Once it has attained to purity of heart though, it distinctly makes out the designs of the enemy.”⁷³ Evagrius believed that ascetic practice alone would never be enough to transform the soul. Contemplation was also necessary. “The effects of keeping the commandments do not suffice to heal the powers of the soul completely. They must be complemented by a contemplative activity appropriate to these faculties and this activity must penetrate the spirit.”⁷⁴

The proper goal of *apatheia* is attentiveness to God, which would protect the mind from sinful images. St. Hesychios wrote, “Just as close attentiveness brilliantly illumines the mind, so the lapse from watchfulness and from the sweet invocation of Jesus will darken it completely. All this happens naturally, not in any other way; and you will experience it if you test it out in practice. For there is no virtue—least of all this blessed light-generating activity—which cannot be learnt from experience.”⁷⁵ He believed that

⁶⁹ Evagrius, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁵ St. Hesychios, “Watchfulness,” *Philokalia*, 178.

two disciplines would engender this kind of attentiveness. The first was meditation on sacred texts. “A traveler setting out on a long, difficult and arduous journey and foreseeing that he may lose his way when he comes back, will put up signs and guideposts along his path in order to make his return simpler. The watchful man, foreseeing this same thing, will use sacred texts to guide him.”⁷⁶ The second was invocation of the name of Jesus, which became the basis for the Jesus Prayer. “Just as it is impossible to cross the sea without a boat, so it is impossible to repulse the provocation of an evil thought without invoking Jesus Christ.”⁷⁷

Finally, *apatheia* would engender *agape*—love for God and love for neighbor, which is, once again, why *ascesis*, however important, could and often did miss the point. In another story from the desert tradition, three zealous disciples visited an old man in Scetis. The first bragged that he could recite the entire Bible, to which the old man said, “You have filled the air with words.” The second claimed that he had copied the whole Bible with his own hand, but the old man retorted that he had only produced more books to line a shelf. The third said that his chimney had grass growing in it, thus proving that he refused to heat his little hermitage even in the winter. “You have driven away hospitality,” the old man replied.⁷⁸ No movement in the history of Christianity has ever exceeded the desert tradition in asceticism; yet the masters in the movement acknowledged the dangers of excess (i.e., achieving great feats rather than great virtue) and reminded the community to keep the proper goal in mind.

They realized that the purpose of discipline is not the ascetic practice itself, which can easily lead to competition and pride, but the cultivation of virtue, especially humility and charity. The goal is inner transformation. “How do I find God?” a young disciple asked a master. Fasts? Labor? Vigils? Yes, the old man replied, many practice these disciplines, but do not profit because they lack discretion. “Even if our mouths stink with fasting, and we have learned all the Scriptures, and memorized the whole Psalter, we still lack what God wants—humility and charity.”⁷⁹

Humility was necessary because it kept the desert fathers and mothers from becoming proud of their spiritual feats and from assuming that they were more worthy of God’s favor than ordinary Christians. A devil once appeared to a disciple as an angel of light, announcing that he was the angel Gabriel. But the disciple said, “See whether you were not sent to someone else. I am not worthy that an angel should be sent to me.”⁸⁰ On one occasion Macarius was accused of seducing a young woman, which ruined both her and his reputation. Though the accusation was false, Macarius refused to defend himself. Instead, he provided for her needs, which gave the im-

⁷⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 186.

⁷⁸ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 126.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 171.

pression that he was in fact guilty. Some time later the truth came out, thus vindicating Macarius. But Macarius fled in order to avoid the praise he was about to receive.⁸¹

Charity was the ultimate goal, and sacrificial service its primary manifestation. A young disciple once asked an Abba which of two men was more acceptable to God—the man who fasted six days at a time or the man who cared for the sick. The old man replied, “If the brother, who fasts six days, even hung himself up by his nostrils, he could never be the equal of him who ministers to the sick.”⁸² Hospitality was considered of special value because it provided a concrete way of showing charity. Accused of breaking his fast during Lent, one old man said, “Fasting is ever with me. I cannot keep you here forever. Fasting is useful and necessary, but we can choose to fast or not fast. God’s law demands from us perfect charity. In you I receive Christ: and so I must do all I can to show you the offices of charity.”⁸³

These various expressions of *agape* did not stay confined to the desert. Surprisingly, the desert fathers and mothers exercised considerable influence over the wider population, which proves, once again, that physical isolation did not always lead to ostracism or irrelevance. People became fascinated by these strange men and women who left behind everything to seek God in the wilderness. Some joined the movement, so many in fact that contemporary observers commented that the desert became as populated as the city. Others demanded that the most famous desert fathers serve as leaders of the church, which is how Athanasius and Chrysostom were drafted into service.⁸⁴ Still others sought their advice, believing that, as detached as they were from the world, they would serve as trustworthy advisers. Thus even the great Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a Roman pillar for some thirty years, became counselor and mentor to the wealthy and powerful. From time to time the desert fathers and mothers even traveled to cities to serve the needy, protest injustice, battle heretics, and witness against the compromised state of the church. Remaining on the margins of society, they nevertheless challenged, comforted, and served the mainstream.⁸⁵

The real power of their lives, then as now, was not ascetic discipline alone but victory over temptation and sin, humility of spirit, and purity of

⁸¹ Ibid., 162.

⁸² Ibid., 185.

⁸³ Chadwick, *Asceticism*, 144–45.

⁸⁴ For an excellent study of these great bishops, see Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Sterk devotes individual chapters to a number of late 4th-century bishops, including Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom.

⁸⁵ Peter Brown makes the point that in Syria the Desert fathers and mothers, known as “Holy Men,” became the principal advisors and mediators in society because people trusted them as impartial and fair-minded. See Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* LXI (1971), 80–101.

heart. They were willing to square off against the world, the flesh, and the devil, to confront their egoism, and to surrender their wills to God. Not that they were perfect. Far from it. Sometimes they turned asceticism into a form of competition as we do with wealth, status, and power. In the end they might be as wrong as we are, only in the opposite way. Their rejection of the world was as extreme as is our attraction to it. Thus they bear witness to a way of life that has been lost but can still be recovered, though in a more moderate form. They remind us that life is more than food, the body more than clothing. The end of life, according to the desert fathers and mothers, is to die to self and to live to God, whom they believed is life indeed.

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