
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. VI

Sunday of Gregory Palamas



“Pray without ceasing, give thanks at all times; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

(1 Thess.5:17-18)

Continuing the Journey to Pascha

The second Sunday in Lent is dedicated to **St. Gregory Palamas**, a 14th century monk of Mount Athos and later archbishop of Thessalonica. He is remembered during Lent because of his defence of a central part of Orthodox spirituality: contemplative prayer (or *hesychasm*). Some Greek monks living in Italy began putting extreme emphasis on the ‘unknowability’ of God, saying that the monks of Mt. Athos were wasting their time trying to get to know God in prayer and should instead be studying: the Bible, Greek philosophy, logic and so on.

St. Gregory argued that the experience of the prophets and the Apostles produced the deepest knowledge of God. Moreover, he stressed that all Christians can, and should, come to know God as directly as Abraham, Moses, and Christ’s disciples. The Bible is a *description* of divine revelation through history. We can *know* about God’s relationship with man by reading it, but we are called to *have* a relationship with God too. The experience of Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) and the Apostles on Mount Tabor (Lk 9:28-36) is not just a one-off event to ‘inspire’ us: it is a

deep relationship with God that is open to us all. How? For St Gregory and the monks of Mt Athos, such revelation from God is achieved by **unceasing prayer**.

‘Pray without ceasing’ | Making the impossible, possible

Saint Paul’s injunction to ‘pray without ceasing’ preoccupied Christians long before St Gregory. Many thought this was impossible, except maybe for monks, but this is to misunderstand prayer. St Gregory clearly said: *“Let no one think...it is the duty only of priests and monks to pray without ceasing... no – it is the duty of all of us Christians to remain always in prayer.”*

Prayer is a ‘state’ of being we are called to be ‘in’ at all times, regardless of what we are physically doing or where we are. This takes practice. It is done through the practice of **hesychasm**.

Hesychasm comes from the Greek word meaning ‘stillness, rest, silence’. It is based on Christ’s commandment: *‘when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray.’* (Matt 6:6). Christians understood this as an ‘internal’ shutting of the door to external thoughts and cares in order to enter into conversation with God without distraction. There are various ways that such ‘stillness’ can be achieved; one suitable method for Christians living in the world would be:

1. **Put aside time** – find time every day to practice silence. This is separate time from that used for daily prayers, though it can come immediately after (or before). When starting out, it doesn’t need to be long – perhaps 10 minutes; this can be extended with practice.
2. **Put aside space** – the silence of hesychasm should not be understood only literally, but when practicing stillness a suitably quiet place is still invaluable. Even Jesus retreated into the wilderness to pray on a regular basis. Our own ‘wilderness’ could be a spot in the country, the garden, tool-shed or spare room. The most important thing is that there are few distractions and that our wilderness can be returned to again and again.
3. **Put aside distractions** – the space we use should be as free of distractions as possible. Nighttime or early morning often have less audible & visual distractions. A darkened room with just a candle in front of an icon or completely closing the eyes can help too.
4. **Put aside thoughts** – with external silence and stillness achieved, see now how noisy our minds are! Thoughts, worries and memories will rise up quickly. Ignoring them is what brings true *hesychasm*. This seems impossible unless we have something to replace them.

The **Jesus Prayer** – “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*” (or similar) is the one ‘thought’ we can use to drive away all others.

Repeating the Jesus Prayer, verbally or silently, calls upon our Saviour to help us in our own feeble efforts. And it **is** a prayer – not a mantra – so we must pay attention to the words we are saying. We are **calling out to Jesus Christ**; we are **confessing Him to be our Lord and the Son of God**; we are **asking for mercy** and we are **admitting our faults** (‘me a sinner’). To pay attention our posture can help: standing, kneeling, sitting up straight (not slouching or with feet up). Instead of planning to say the prayer a set number of times, say the prayer for a set number of minutes (use an alarm) so that we can say the prayer unhurriedly; not worrying about when to stop. Initially the Jesus Prayer will be a mental exercise. But if we combine our prayer with our breathing (inhaling: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*; exhaling: *have mercy on me, a sinner*) then it starts to become a habit as natural as our breathing – a prayer of the heart. **Then**, with patience and God’s help, we will be able to take the Jesus Prayer with us and internally pray in all places, in all our activities and **at all times**. “*And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*” (Matt 6:6)

The Eight Deadly Passions – **Despondency (or Sloth)**



When Gregory the Great ‘translated’ the eight deadly passions into Latin from the original Greek, the passion of despondency became the sin of **sloth**. It may seem that sloth is a similar ‘pleasure-loving’ sin like gluttony and lust that affects the body. Yet despondency is not merely an unhealthy love of sleep – it is a **sickness of the soul** rather than the body. This ‘slumbering of the soul’ (Ps 118:28 LXX) manifests as a general ‘giving up’ – of prayer, on God, and of our spiritual life. Because of this, despondency can lead to restlessness as well as laziness. Greek-speaking saints of the desert, who experienced it first-hand, called it **‘acedia’**, which literally means *‘without care’*. Herein is the real danger of despondency – even with knowledge of this passion we don’t care about being healed. We should though: at its worst, despondency is impossible to tell apart from clinical depression. In the West today, we’re susceptible to despondency. This is because we live a life of relative luxury compared to the

‘third-world’ and even our own ancestors. Material comfort often leads to a forgetfulness of God (*‘we don’t need Him’*) and from this comes insensibility, hard-heartedness and listlessness. We subsequently cut down on, or cut out, our spiritual activities. But material things by themselves don’t satisfy us, so we start to despair: ‘is this it?’, ‘what am I doing with my life?’ Who can deny these feelings of restlessness don’t plague all parts of society, and even us from time to time?

Signs of despondency: lack of enthusiasm for prayer (at church or at home), ceasing to read the Bible, procrastination, chattiness. **Do not ignore restlessness and boredom** as signs of acedia. **Leads to:** forgetting sins, hard-heartedness, lack of empathy and hopelessness. St. John Cassian saw despondency lead to one of two outcomes: *giving up* on spiritual life (depression), or coming to hate the community we live in as ‘not good enough’ and *fleeing elsewhere* – whether it be to another monastery, another parish, or community, or even another religion.

How to combat despondency: John Climacus noticed that acedia affected solitaries more than monks who lived in a community. He reasoned that living with others caused monks to force themselves to pray, sing and attend church ‘for appearances’ sake’. This isn’t the ‘holiest’ of motivations (St John described it as *“the demon of vainglory defeating the demon of acedia”*), yet it’s better to cut off despondency early before it develops into hopelessness; fighting pride can wait for another day. For us who don’t live in monasteries, then, it is crucial to not neglect going to church. Even if we feel bored by it, or feel nothing at all, just ‘go through the motions’, be in church, and let the hymns, prayers and noise of it all lacerate you. If you’re going to be late, go anyway and slip in quietly. God sees our efforts, even if they’re feeble. The prayers will act like water on stone, and like a stone our heart may not **feel** anything, but it’s still slowly being softened. If we’re blessed enough to have Christians in our family then don’t miss the chance to **pray together at home**, at least sometimes. This way, if one is feeling despondent, the other will raise them up in prayer. Ultimately, we can all combat despondency, in others and ourselves, **by being there for each other**, without judgment, and in love.

“As we start upon the third week of the Fast, let us glorify the Holy Trinity, and joyfully pass through the time that remains. Causing passions of the flesh to wither from our souls, let us gather divine flowers, weaving garlands for the queen of days, that with crowns upon our heads we may sing in praise of Christ the Victor” (from Sunday vespers)