

2024 Daily Lenten and Paschal Reader:

Our Lenten Reader:

The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Introduction

Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross
Medford, NJ



Gaza may be the saddest and most forlorn place in the world, perhaps even in world history.

Located along the Mediterranean Sea, north of Egypt, and to the left side of Israel (as in the map above) it is about 25 miles long and from 3 1/2 to 7 1/2 miles wide.

Throughout history, as part of the area considered “Palestine,” it has been ruled by the Egyptians, the Israelites, Alexander the Great and his successors, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs (since 637), Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks, the British Empire and since 1948 in conflict with Israel as the smaller of two Palestinian territories (the other being the West Bank, near Jerusalem).

About two million people live there and it is considered one of the most densely populated places in the world. The area and its people are struggling for their existence - caught in the midst of the conflict between Israel and Arab political forces, which has been particularly violent since the October 7, 2023 attacks on Israel by Hamas, and the Israeli retaliation.

Following the Muslim takeover in 637, the Christian presence has been marginalized and currently barely exists: there are only a thousand or so Christians and 3 functioning churches (one Orthodox - the Church of St. Porphyrius).

But there is more to the story. For several hundred years - particularly through the 5th to the mid 7th centuries - given its location and the impact of significant Christian influences, especially from Egypt - it became a profound spiritual center and that impact still remains through the writings of those Christian witnesses.

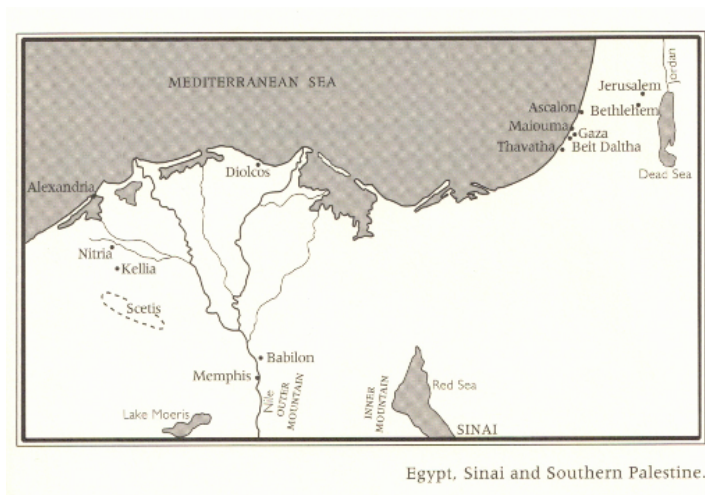
This description by **John Chryssavgis** tells more of this story:

In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Gaza region proved to be historically, geographically, theologically, and spiritually a bridge between the Egypt of the fourth century (or earlier) and the Byzantium of the seventh

century (or later). Located at 31° 31' (N. Lat.) and 34° 28' (E. Long.), the southwest Palestinian city of Gaza was uniquely situated to provide communication between East and West, as well as between North and South. It was surrounded by numerous small streams, rather than by one main channel. It was accessible to the Mediterranean, and yet also sheltered from the sea by sand dunes. It was established on very fertile soil and stood at the hub of an extensive road network and thereby proved an important trading center.

For the adherents of the Christian Scriptures, the Apostle Philip evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch on the way to Gaza (Acts 8:36). The Ethiopian was not the only person to be touched, even converted, by the region. The Gaza region proved a remarkable place of welcome and continuity for Christian monasticism toward the end of the fourth century. Its accessibility by sea and road, its proximity to Egypt and Syria as well as to the Holy Land itself, rendered Gaza a critical haven for particular expressions that offered fresh perspectives in the spiritual and intellectual tradition of the monastic phenomenon.

Initially, the travelers journeyed from Palestine to Egypt to visit the elders (like **Anthony**) of the Egyptian desert. But by the end of the fourth century, another movement began in the opposite direction, namely from Egypt to Palestine.



Egypt, Sinai and Southern Palestine.

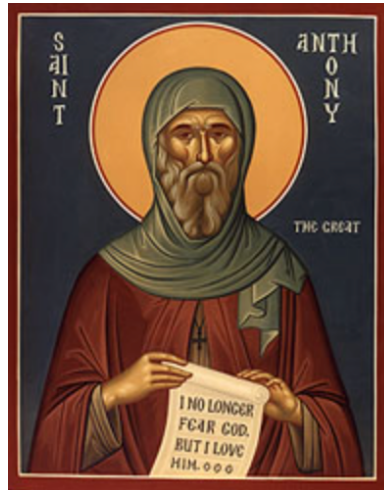
Palestine was divided into two distinct monastic regions. The first was centered around the Holy City of Jerusalem and as far as the Dead Sea; the second was in the southern region around Gaza.

The monks in the surrounding areas of Gaza were abundantly familiar with earlier ascetic figures, with monastic developments and particular lifestyles that had preceded them, especially admitting their indebtedness to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt.

The history of the region is rich in monastic figures and founders, **Hilarion (291-371)** lived for almost twenty of his earlier years in this region.

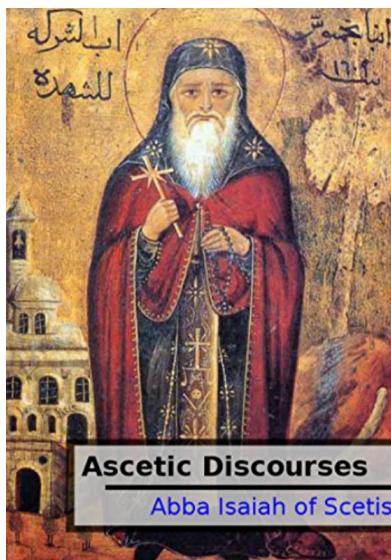


Born in **Thavatha**, some five miles south of Gaza, he was schooled in Alexandria. During his time there, he also met **Anthony the Great**, the **Father of Monasticism**. Upon returning to his native Palestine, Hilarion assumed a small cell near the port of **Maiouma**, where he also received numerous visitors for counsel.



St. Anthony the Great (251-356 / Feast - January 17)

Another well-known monk and monastic author in this region was **Abba Isaiah of Scetis (d. 489)**



A later emigrant from Egypt, Isaiah had spent many years in a monastery as well as in the desert of Scetis. He moved to Palestine, fleeing fame, between 431-451. He first settled near Eleftheropolis, moving finally to **Beit Daltha** near Gaza, only some four miles from **Thavatha**, which was already known as the birthplace of Hilarion and which later was to become familiar as the sit of the monastery of **Abba Seridos**. Indeed, Gaza and its environs will be indelibly marked by the presence of the two remarkable elders of the next century, **Barsanuphius and John**.



SS. Barsanuphius - “the Old Man”(d. 543) and John - “the Other Old Man” (d. 543) - Feast Feb. 6

We do not know exactly when **Barsanuphius** (“the Old Man”, himself an Egyptian monk, entered the hilly region of Thavatha and chose to lead the enclosed life of a recluse in a nearby cell. From this position, he offered counsel to a number of ascetics who were gradually attracted around the “Old Man” as he developed a reputation for discernment and compassion.

One of these monks, **Abba Seridos**, who also attended to Barsanuphius, was presumably appointed Abbot of a monastic community created precisely in order to organize the increasing number of monks that gradually gathered around Barsanuphius. This Seridos was the only person permitted to communicate with Barsanuphius, acting as a mediator for those who wished to submit questions in writing and who expected to receive a similar response through the same avenue.

Some time between 525-527, another hermit, named **John** (known as “the **Other Old Man**”) came to live beside Barsanuphius, who surrounded his own cell to him, while he moved to a nearby new cell. The two shared the same way of life and supported one another’s ministry.

John assumed another monk – **Dorotheus of Gaza (506-570) / Feast - June 5** - as a disciple, attendant and mouthpiece, for at least part of the near eighteen year that John the colleague of Barsanuphius.



Dorotheus was intimately associated with all three key figures of the community in Thavatha: **Barsanuphius, John, and Seridos**. An aristocrat, intelligent, and well-educated - trained as a lawyer – Dorotheus was assigned as the director of the monastery infirmary and he is characterized by a sensitivity to his brothers.

At some point in time, between 543-544, the monastery underwent several significant changes: Abbot Seridos died, and the Other Old Man, John, followed suit very soon after; Barsanuphius entered a life of complete seclusion, therefore practicing total silence in a sealed cell; and Dorotheus decided to leave that community.

Our **Daily Lenten Reader** – starting on **Monday, March 18** – will feature passages from the Letters and Writings of **Abba Isaiah of Scetis, Baranuphius, John, and Dorotheus**.

These letters abound in subtle insights about the human heart, offering timeless teachings on the inner warfare against resentment and temptation, vacillation and frustration, as well as depression and tension. They explain why prayers may not be heard; they explore the nature of virtue and vice; and they expose the hypocrisy of false humility. In general, they examine human foibles arising from personal relationships. Compassion and discernment combine with authenticity and insight.

Their words illumine and inform the intricate and complicated relationship between the heart and the world outside. The elders and their letters are an incarnation and extension of the golden precept of monastics called to be “apart-from-all and yet a-part of all.”

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2024 Daily Lenten Reader:

The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza:

Throughout Great Lent we will be hearing from the Letters and Writings from the Spiritual Fathers of Gaza:

- **Isaiah of Scetis (d. 491)**
- **Barsanuphius and John (d. 543) and**
- **Dorotheus (d. 570).**

They all saw themselves as descendants of a rich spiritual tradition – rooted in the Old and New Testaments and the spiritual experiences of those who lived before them, especially the monastics in Egypt. Given Gaza's unique geographical position along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea it served as the path through which travelers headed south initially to learn from the elders in Egypt and then later as the way the elders moved north to live and work in Palestine.



For the first few weeks, we will be hearing from the conversations expressed in letters between **SS Barsanuphius (the “Great Old Man”)** and his friend, **John (the “Other Old Man”)** and those who presented written questions to them through their assistant **Abbot Seridos**.

There are 848 letters in the collection and they often present an extended exchange with a single person or particular groups on many subjects.

Though we will hear only a few letters from the collection a general subdivision would look something like this:

1-54	Correspondence with John of Beersheba
55-71	Letters to elders and hermits
72-123	Questions from Andrew, one of the elders, who is very ill
124-131	Letters to the monk Theodore
132-251	Questions from brothers and priests
252-338	Correspondence with Dorotheus
339-398	Letters from various monks, including Dorotheus
399-570	Questions from various brothers and lay persons
571-599	Letters to Aelianos, about to succeed Seridos
600-607	Questions about Origenism
608-787	Correspondence with laymen of various professions
788-848	Letters to bishops and others, mostly inhabitants of Gaza

Monday, March 18, Reading #1:

Letter 10 (from Barsanuphius, the Great Old Man to John of Beersheba) - *“Rejoice in the Lord”*

Rejoice in the Lord; rejoice in the Lord; rejoice in the Lord. May the Lord guard your soul and body and spirit from every evil, as well as from every opposition of the devil and every troubling imagination. The Lord will be your light, your protection, your way, your strength, “your crown of gladness” (Sirach 1:11), and your eternal help.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, March 19, 2024, Reading #2: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza – *The Importance of Consistently Doing “A Little”*

Our spiritual fathers of Gaza – SS Isaiah of Scetis, Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheus were formed by their experiences of hearing the Scriptures and learning from those who came up from Egypt about the elders who lived there. We’ll keep including at the end of each day’s readings the Scriptures that were important to them.

Today’s passage comes from a series of letters directed to Barsanuphius and John from one of the members of their community, Andrew, who has been sick. He asks the “Great Old Man” (Barsanuphius):

“Father, when I am relieved of illness, how should I spend each day?”

The response comes from the “Other Old Man”, John, but perhaps he is thinking of this story from the life of St. Anthony of Egypt (this is the first of the “Sayings” attributed to Anthony).

When the holy Abba (“Father”) Anthony was living in the desert, he was in a state of melancholy (accidie) and his mind was darkened by a multitude of imagined things (logismon), and he said to God, “Lord, I want to be saved, but these thoughts will not leave me alone. What shall I do in my trouble? How will I be saved?” A little later, when he went outside, Anthony saw someone like himself, sitting and working, then rising from work and praying, and again sitting and plaiting a rope, then again rising for prayer. It was an angel of the Lord, sent for the correction and insurance against stumbling of Anthony. And he heard the angel saying, Do this, and you will be saved. And when he heard this, he had great joy and courage, and did this, and was saved.

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LETTER 85

Question from Andrew to the Great Old Man: "Father, when I am relieved of illness, how should I spend each day?"

Response by John.

"Rejoice in the Lord; again, I say rejoice." You have now gladdened me with your question; or rather, you have gladdened God and his angels... You ought to recite the Psalms a little, to repeat [the verses of the Psalms] by heart a little, to examine and watch your thoughts a little (see the Saying of St Anthony 1, above)... Therefore, in regard to psalmody and repeating [verses] by heart, do not bind yourself with strict rules, but do whatever the Lord gives you the strength to do. And do not neglect your reading and prayer; little by little, you will gradually spend the day pleasing God. For our perfect fathers were not limited by any particular rule. Indeed, their daily rule included singing Psalms a little, repeating [verses] by heart a little, examining their

thoughts a little, taking a little break for food, and [all] this with fear of God. For it is said: "Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). May the Lord Jesus guard us from all evil. Amen (107-108).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, March 20, 2024, Reading #3: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza – “On the Warmth, Coldness, and Hardness of Heart”

Letter 18

Response from Barsanuphius/the Great Old Man to John of Beersheba, when the latter asked whence the warmth, coldness, and hardness of heart come about, as well as about bodily warfare.

On warmth and coldness, it is clear that the Lord has been called "fire," warming and burning "hearts and minds. If it is so, then the devil is cold, and all coldness comes from him. For if it were not so, how then is it said that "then the love of many will grow cold"? (Mt 24:12) What else does the word "then" signify, but "the times of the adversary"? Therefore, if we feel coldness, let us call upon God, and he will come and warm our heart in his perfect love, not only toward him but also toward our neighbor. And the face of his warmth will banish the coldness of that hater of good.

Now if [the devil] has dried up the fountain of your heart's tears, and has moistened your underbelly, nevertheless continue to feast the Lord "in your house" (Luke 19:5) and [the Lord] will dry up the latter, purifying the fountain of your tears for the flowing of spiritual water. One who wishes to attain the fear of God does so through patience. For it is said: "I waited patiently for the Lord, and he gave heed to me and heard my prayer" And what else? "He drew me up from the desolate pit, and out of the miry bog" (Ps 39:1-2). It is from such a pit that hardness of heart is also thought to come. If you so desire, obtain this, and you will be saved, in Christ Jesus our Lord. (pp. 38-39).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, March 21, 2024, Reading #4: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza – On Prayer #1

In today's letter the Great Old Man (Barsanuphius) is asked by a monk about how should he pray. He mentions the example from the life of St. Macarius:

Abba Macarius was asked, "How should I 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.

Letter 140

Question to the Great Old Man: "Father, how should I pray? In the way shown by the Lord, namely, with the 'Our Father'? Or in the way suggested by Abba Macarius of Scetis: 'Lord, as you wish, have mercy on me'; and if the warfare grows more fierce: 'Lord, as you please, help me'?"

Could it be that the 'Our Father,' including what follows, was only given for the perfect to say?"
Response by Barsanuphius.

The "Our Father" was prescribed both for the perfect and for sinners; for the first, in order that being perfect they might know whose sons they have become and therefore strive not to fall from him; and for sinners in order that, being ashamed to address him as Father, when they so frequently insult him, they might also be embarrassed and turn to repentance. As I consider it further, however, this prayer is more appropriate for sinners. For to say: "Forgive us our debts" belongs to sinners. What debts do the perfect have, when they

have become sons of the heavenly Father? And to say: "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" is equivalent to the words of Abba Macarius, who said: "Have mercy on me and help me."

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, March 22, 2024, Reading #5: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza – On Prayer #2: Humility

Letter 150

Question from the same person to the same Great Old Man: "Father, I entreat you to tell me how one acquires perfect humility and prayer. How does a person appear not to be distracted? Response by Barsanuphius.

Brother, the Lord taught us how to acquire perfect humility, when he said: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29). Therefore, if you wish to acquire perfect humility, learn what he endured and endure it. For he said: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Jn 6:38). This is perfect humility: to endure insults, rebukes, and everything else that our teacher Jesus suffered.

Perfect prayer is speaking with God without distraction by gathering up all one's thoughts with the senses... Such a person needs to say no more to God in prayer than this: "Deliver me from the evil one" (Jn 6:13) and "Your will be done in me" (Mt 6:10)... One is then evidently praying when one is delivered from distraction and sees that the intellect rejoices in being illumined by the Lord. The sign that one has reached this point is that one is no longer troubled, even if the whole world should bring temptation... Those who perform their task carefully for God's sake are not distracted but continue striving for God.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday-Sunday, March 23-24, 2024, Reading #6: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza – "The Royal Way"

Keep the **royal way**, namely, the faith of the 318 Fathers into which you were baptized. For it contains everything with precision for those who understand its completeness (Note: The 318 Fathers are those who participated in the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea which confirmed the divinity of Jesus and formulated the first part of the Creed).

(Letter 58 from St. Barsanuphius)

This image of "The Royal Way, the King's Highway" came to our Gaza Fathers - once again - through the stories of the Egyptian monastics. The Royal Way, while not denying the experience and reality of truthfulness, seeks to avoid the extremes of rigidity and laxity - it finds a balance "in the middle."

References to its Biblical foundations appear in several passages from Deuteronomy:

- So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left (Deut 5:32)
- According to the instructions which they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the verdict which they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left - (Deut 17:11).

St. John Cassian (360-435) discussed the gift of discernment with the Monk Moses who told him how as a young boy he was present during a conversation between Egyptian monks and Abba. Anthony (251-356) on the theme of perfection.

This is from Cassian's "**Conference Two - on Discernment.**"

"Finally, the blessed Anthony spoke. 'All the things that you have spoken about are necessary and helpful to those thirsting for God and longing to reach him. But the countless disasters and experiences of many people do not permit that any one of these virtues should be said to be the prime influence for good. For very often we have seen people who have been most zealous in their fasts and vigils, who have lived wondrously solitary lives, who have endured such total privation of everything that they would not allow themselves to hold on to even a day's food or even a single coin of the lowest value, who have hastened to do all that is required in charity and who have suddenly fallen prey to illusion with the result that not only could they not give a fitting end to the work they had undertaken but they brought to an abominable conclusion that high zeal of theirs and that praiseworthy mode of life.

Hence if we probe the exact reason for their delusion and fall we will be able to recognize what it is that, above all else, leads us to God. The virtuous activities, of which you were talking, flourished among them. But the lack of discernment prevented them from reaching the end. No other cause can be found for their downfall. Lacking the training provided by older men they could in no way acquire this virtue of discernment which, avoiding extremes, teaches the monk **to walk always on the royal way**. It keeps him from veering to the right, that is, it keeps him from going with stupid presumption and excessive fervor beyond the boundary of reasonable restraint. It keeps him from going to the left to carelessness and sin, to sluggishness of spirit, and all this on the pretext of actually keeping the body under control."

Here is **Abba Poemen** (340-450):

Abba Joseph asked Abba Poemen, "How should one fast?" Abba Poemen said to him, "For my part, I think it better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied." Abba Joseph said to him, "When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, abba?" The old man said: "Yes, even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount.

They have left us this royal way, which is light." (Saying 31).

Finally, as part of this tradition of experience, here is **St. Dorotheus of Gaza** (505-565).

Therefore, we say that virtue stands in the middle: and so courage stands in the middle between cowardice and foolhardiness; humility in the middle between arrogance and obsequiousness (a willingness to be helpful). Modesty is a mean between bashfulness and boldness and so on with the other virtues. If then a man is found to possess these virtues, such a man is esteemed by God, and even if he was always seen to eat, drink and sleep like other men, he would still be esteemed for the virtues he has. But unless a man is watchful and keeps a guard on himself he easily deviates from the road either to the left or to the right, that is by excess or neglect, and so he brings upon himself that sickness which is wickedness.

This then is the royal way by which all the saints travelled; the different states of the soul are the milestones a man has to pass, always looking to see where he is, how many miles he has covered and what a state he is in. So suppose we are all on the road, each one has a special objective there in the Holy City. And having left our own city some of us have covered five miles and turned back; some have gone ten, some have got half way there. Others perhaps have not even started on the journey, but have left the city and remain outside the gates on the evil-smelling rubbish dump.

There are other travellers who, when they have gone a couple of miles, lose their way and retrace their steps; others travel two miles forward, then five miles backward. Some go back as far as the city itself and hang around outside it without going in. This is how it is with us, for there are some among us who have left the world and come to the monastery with the intention of acquiring the virtues. Some keep straight on for a little, but do not persevere. Others make some progress, others have got half way and then stand still. Others made no progress at all, and although they reckoned they had left the world, they remained attached to it and its evil odors.

Others started right and did a little good but soon undid the good they had done. And if some lost more ground than they had gained, others made great progress in virtue, but became proud and despised their neighbors. So they remained outside the Holy City and did not enter in and so they did not attain their end. And so even if they were at the very gates, but remained outside, they too fell away from their own ideals.

Let each one of us then take the trouble to find out where we are: whether we have left our own city but remain outside its gates by the rubbish heap, or whether we have gone forward a little or much, or whether we are half way our journey, or whether we have advanced two miles, then come back two miles, or perhaps even five miles, or whether we have journeyed as far as the Holy City and entered into Jerusalem, or whether we remain outside and are unable to enter it (**Spiritual Discourse, 10 “On Traveling the Way of God with Vigilance and Sobriety.”**)

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, March 25, 2024, Reading #7: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: “O Lord and Master of my life...”

Over the next several weeks we’ll hear passages from the Fathers of Gaza that reflect on the petitions from the **Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem.**

Here’s the entire Prayer:

O Lord and Master of my life,
take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.
But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Your Spirit.
Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother, for blessed are You, unto ages of ages. Amen.

Today in considering the expression, “**O Lord and Master of my life,**” we hear the response of **Barsanuphius** to the request to know more about the salvation of one’s soul.

The Old Man replied: “**Become a genuine servant of one [master]; otherwise, you will be enslaved to many.**”

Bob Dylan wrote a song entitled, “**Gotta Serve Somebody**” – Here’s the refrain:

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

LETTER 49

John of Beersheba begged the Old Man (Barsanuphius) to write to him often about the salvation of his soul.

Response.

Brother John, I have written to you from A to Z, from the beginner's stage to that of perfection, from the outset of the way to its very end, from the "putting away of the old self with earthly desires"(to the "putting on of the new self created according to God," from becoming estranged from the sensory world to becoming a citizen of heaven and an inheritor of the spiritual land of promises. Ruminates on my letters, and you will be saved. In these, you have the Old and the New [Testaments] , if only you are able to understand.

And if you understand them, you will have no need of any other book. Shake off forgetfulness, and move away from darkness, so that your heart may be at peace with your senses, and all this will come to you. Let the smoke of the idol sacrifices from your spiritual Nineveh disappear, and the fragrance from the incense of your spiritual repentance will spread throughout its streets, preventing the wrath that was threatening destruction.

Why do you sleep? Why are you tossing these responses regarding your salvation as if they were pillows, when they are for the salvation of those who study them with faith? Stop dreaming; wake up from your deep sleep. Quicken your pace. Take over Zoar, so that the destruction of the five cities may not overtake you. Do not turn backward, in order not to become a pillar of salt. Become "wise as the serpents," so that your enemies may not lead you astray; but be "innocent as the doves," so that requital may not war against you. **Become a genuine servant of one; otherwise, you will be enslaved to many.** Do not separate yourself from him. For the unfaithful servant received condemnation for this... Give heed to yourself, and watch where you are and what you want, and God will assist you in everything, my brother. ..Wake up to yourself; for you are still heavy-hearted. The Lord will forgive you. (64-65).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, March 26, 2024, Reading #8: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Do not give me - the spirit of sloth...(the mother of all evils).

Fr. Thomas Hopko in his reflection on "**The Prayer of St. Ephrem**" points out that the opening lines in English say, "O Lord and Master of My life, **take from me the spirit of...**" whereas in Greek and even Church Slavonic the text reads: "**Do not give me the spirit of...**"

Fr. Hopko continues:

"Now that's a very Semitic way of praying, because in the Semitic mentality—the Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac mentality, Egyptian mentality—God the Lord is the master of everything. He's the master of demons as well as angels, of darkness as well as light. And if we have evil spirits in us, they are sent to us from God. We can't even get the evil spirits by ourselves. God is the master of them. And we find that in the Bible all the time. God sent an evil spirit upon Saul. God gave them a spirit of delusion. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. This does not mean that God tempts anybody or gives them evil for the sake of being evil, but it does mean that even the demons—the demons that we want, the demons that we ask for—are still given to us by God's permission, by God's mission, by God sending them to us. God does not tempt anybody.

But even in the Lord's Prayer, we do not say in English, "Do not allow me to fall when I am tempted"; we say, "Do not lead us into temptation; lead us not into temptation." It's almost as if God were leading us, but that's an idiom; that's a Hebraic, Semitic idiom, which means if we are tempted, we are tempted by the evil spirits and our own passions and our own mind, but even God is behind that; even God has his hands in that, because God is the master of all. As the Protestant hymn says, "We hymn him God of all."

And here we would not agree, as some modern writers actually write, that God is the God of the good side of life, but God is not the God of the bad side of life; that God is the God of light but not of darkness, of angels but not demons. That's just not true. God is the God of all. **So when we pray to our Master and Lord, we say, "Do not send to me, do not give to me these spirits. I don't want them. Don't give them to me."**

Here are the first of four things that we ask not to be given in the prayer:

- **the spirit of sloth**, sometimes also translated as **indolence, laziness, lethargy, being idle, incapable of action.**

Letter 745

The Old Man (Barsanuphius) received a question of how to remind a normally considerate man about something he had been asked to do.

Barsanuphius explained how to express again this request and:

The man fulfilled it this time and “Behold, then, the matter was arranged, and his soul was corrected from **the mother of evils, namely, indolence/sloth.**”

This expression is common within in the Greek philosophical tradition:

“**Laziness is the mother of all evils**” (Solon - founder of Athenian democracy - 638-558 BC / Sophocles -497-406 BC.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, March 27, 2024, Reading #9: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: “Do not give me - the spirit of “running around in crazed busyness.”

Though our OCA translation identifies the second feature of St. Ephrem’s prayer as “despair” (at least based on the Slavonic text), the Greek word actually means, according to Fr. Hopko,

- The spirit of wandering around,
- chatting,
- hanging out,
- gossiping, and just wasting our time in doing nothing –
- even in meddling in other people’s business,
- being curious about what’s going on,
- wasting out time, wasting our energy,
- doing nothing that amounts to anything.

Letter 314

The Old Man (Barsanuphius) is asked: “My thought tells me that silence is more necessary and more beneficial to me than anything else. Is this correct?” The Other Old Man, John, responds:

In John’s response - we are reminded again of the “middle way”:

Silence is nothing else than restraining one’s heart from giving and taking, from people-pleasing and other such actions. When the Lord rebuked the scribe by telling him about the man who fell among thieves, asking him who was his neighbor, the scribe replied: "The one who showed mercy on him."

Again, he said: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Therefore, if you have heard once that mercy is greater than sacrifice, incline your heart toward mercy. For the excuse of silence brings one to arrogance before one even gains oneself, namely, before one has become blameless. Indeed, that is when one reaches still-ness, when one bears the cross. Therefore, if you are compassionate toward someone, you will find assistance; if you restrain yourself, supposedly to transcend such limits, then you should know that you will lose even what you have. So do not move to either one or the other extreme; but journey in the middle way, knowing what is the will of God "because the days are evil.

Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, March 28, 2024, Reading #10: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Do not give me - the spirit of "love or the lust of power."

Fr. Hopko identified this as the lust for "vain ambition, wanting to be a power person, to have power, to love power and to rule over people, to be someone of importance, and so on. We pray to be delivered from that."

Letter 227

The Great Old Man (Barsanuphius) was asked: Father, what does it mean not to reckon oneself as anything?

Response: Brother, not reckoning oneself as anything means not equating oneself with anyone and not saying anything with regard to any good deed that you may have achieved.

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He is of course hardly innovating here; in fact, he attributes the concept to the desert father of Egypt:

Letter 604

We are called to strive for these things, for which our Fathers also strove in the past, especially those around Abba Poemen and the others with him who struggled in this way. This struggle includes not reckoning oneself as anything, not assessing oneself as something special, and simply regarding oneself as earth and ashes (Genesis 18:27).

By contrast, the struggle of those living in the world involves regarding oneself as knowing everything, causing oneself to puff up in arrogance, reckoning oneself and assessing oneself in everyone, and ultimately avoiding humility.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, March 29, 2024, Reading #11: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Do not give me - the spirit of "idle talk" and building a "house of stillness."

This fourth thing, according to Fr. Thomas Hopko, is "very simple and translated - 'idle talk,' vain speaking, vain babbling, idle chatter, chit chat. And here we remember how Jesus said in the Gospel that we will be judged by our words."

The opposite of "idle talk" would be the acquisition of "stillness." Barsanuphius said that God gives this gift "in [its] proper time" and compared this to the building of a house in which the "Son of God ...will come with the blessed Father and the Holy Spirit, and will make a home with you, (Jn 14:23) teaching you what stillness is and enlightening your heart with ineffable joy."

Letter 208

Therefore, if you wish to construct your home, first prepare the material and all other necessary things. And then, it is up to the professional builder to come and build the house. The necessary building materials for such a construction include **firm faith** for the building of walls, **luminous wooden windows that allow in the light of the sun** to brighten the house, so that there may be no darkness inside. These wooden windows are the five senses, affirmed in the precious cross of Christ, which allow in the light of the spiritual Sun of righteousness, (Mal 4:2) and do not permit any darkness to appear inside the house; and I am referring to the darkness of the enemy, the one who hates good. Furthermore, you need the house to be covered by a roof, "so that the sun does not strike you by day, nor the moon by night" (Ps 102:6). The roof is symbolical of **love for God, "which never ends,"**(1 Cor 13:8) which covers the house and does not allow the sun to set upon our anger, (Eph 4:26) so that we may not find the sun accusing us on the day of judgment, consuming us in the fire of Gehen-na, nor again the moon bearing witness to our slackness and laziness by night, consuming us in eternal hell. Furthermore, the house needs a door, which allows the person dwelling there to enter inside and to be protected. When

I speak of a **door**, brother, you should understand the **spiritual door, namely, the Son of God**, who says: "**I am the door**" (Jn 10:9).

Now, if you prepare your house in this way, so that you do not have any of those things which are hated by the Son of God, he will come with the blessed Father and the Holy Spirit, and will make a home with you, (Jn 14:23) teaching you what stillness is and enlightening your heart with ineffable joy.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday-Sunday, March 30-31, 2024, Reading #12: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Give rather, the spirit of chastity...wholeness, light, and the acquisition of spiritual fire"

Letter 277, from John, the Other Old Man to Dorotheus

"If you want to be rid of forgetfulness and captivity, there is no other way to do this except by acquiring for yourself the spiritual fire. For those things are consumed by its warmth. And one acquires this fire through desire for God. Unless your heart labors in everything in search for the Lord, you cannot progress. If you spend time on these matters, then you will acquire them. For it is said, "Be still" (Ps 45:11)."

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This weekend we are considering from the experiences of our Gazan Fathers and St. Gregory Palamas the expression from the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem - "Give rather the spirit of **chastity**..." The word, "**chastity**," implies more than just sexual purity. As explained by Donald Sheehan the Greek original, "**sophrosyne**" means - "**integrated wholeness and unified singleness**."

This sense of wholeness and singleness results in a certain kind of vision "when one's eye sees every other person not as the receiver of one's hungers and desires - but instead, sees everyone in the world as a child of God, completely integrated and entirely beautiful and wholly illumined."

Fr. Thomas Hopko in a talk about St. Gregory Palamas said that when he was around 20 he and his brothers went to Mt. Athos, and they lived there for 20 years. His continuous brief prayer that he constantly recited – in addition to the psalms and the prayers of the Church - was: "**O Lord, O God, enlighten my darkness!**"

"**Enlighten my darkness**": he wanted to see; he wanted to be illumined. We might even say that he wanted his baptism to work; he wanted his baptism to take, because baptism, which is death and resurrection in Christ and sealing with the Holy Spirit, is a holy illumination.

It's where we are illumined to see things clearly, to see even the activities and the energies of God in all things and to see God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ, his Son, and to know God as Father and to see the face of God, and the invisible Father through the visible face of his Son, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, and to be illumined by the Holy Spirit, to see things clearly. In biblical language, not to be a fool, not to be stupid, not to be in darkness. And Gregory had that zeal, that desire, for the divine light."

https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/st_gregory_palamas_2nd_sunday_of_lent

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, April 1, 2024, Reading #13: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Give rather, the spirit of humility"

**St. Dorotheus of Gaza
"On Humility (Discourse 2)"**

One of the Fathers used to say, '**Before anything else we need humility**: a being ready to listen whenever a word is spoken to us, and to say, "I submit,, because through humility every device of the enemy, every kind of obstacle, is destroyed."

Letter 21 (Response from the Old Man/St. Barsanuphius)

And learn this, too, my brother: every thought that does not previously possess **the calmness of humility** is not according to God but is clearly a form of righteousness coming from the left hand. For our Lord comes with calmness, whereas all that comes from the adversary occurs with turmoil and the commotion of wrath; indeed, if they seem to put on "sheep's clothing," you should know that "inwardly, they are ravenous wolves." So they are manifested by their turmoil. For it is said: "You shall know them by their fruits."

Letter 119 (Response from the Old Man on abstaining from food and the spiritual life)

It is not because I wish to abolish abstinence and the monastic discipline that I am always telling your love to perform the needs of your body as necessary—far be it from me! Rather, I am saying that, **if the inner work does not come to our assistance after God, then one is laboring in vain on the outward self.**" For that is why the Lord said: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Indeed, **inner work with labor of heart** brings purity, and purity brings true stillness of heart, and **such stillness brings humility, and humility renders a person the dwelling place of God**, and from this dwelling-place the evil demons are banished, together with the devil, who is their captain, as well as their shameful passions. Then that person is found to be a temple of God, sanctified, illumined, purified, endowed with grace-filled with every fragrance and goodness and gladness; and that person is found to be a God-bearer."

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, April 2, 2024, Reading #14: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Give rather, the spirit of patience..."

Our Gazan Fathers frequently encouraged those who wrote to them to seek **"patience and thanksgiving."**

- Luke 21:19 - "By your patience possess your souls."

LETTER 76 (Response by John)

The Lord said: "By your patience, you shall gain your souls" (Lk 21:19). And the Apostle follows suit, saying: "For you need patience" (Her 10:36). And the prophet: "I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined to me and heard me" (Ps 39:1). And again, God our sweet Master said: "Whoever endures to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22). Both of you should live in patience, giving thanks and looking to the holy power of God that comes to you from on high. For the purpose of all these things is to test you. Be vigilant in our words: "Prove me, Lord, and test me" (Ps 25:2). Pray for me, I entreat you, for the sake of the love that is according to God.

LETTER 114 (Response from Barsanuphius to Brother Andrew)

Brother Andrew, our Master Christ said to Martha: "If you believe, you shall see the glory of God" (Jn 11:40). You, too, then, should believe, and you shall see Lazarus rising from the dead and dining with Jesus (Jn 12:2). You will see Mary sitting at his holy feet, released from Martha's distraction. And believe that everything that God is requested through my unworthy self to provide to your love will come to you. **Therefore, God requires nothing else from you but patience and thanksgiving;** and he shall open for you the treasures of his wisdom and prudence. I embrace you in the Lord, in whom you may enjoy health of soul and body. Pray for me.

LETTER 120 (from Barsanuphius to Brother Andrew)

A response to the question: "Master, since you know that I am weak in soul and body, I implore you to entreat God, that he might grant me power and assistance for patience in order that I might thankfully endure whatever comes upon me." Response by Barsanuphius.

Brother Andrew, I want your love to learn that all the gifts of grace are given through the advent of the Holy Spirit, and they are given "in many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1) For sometimes God gave the Spirit to the apostles to cast out demons, while at other times to perform healings; sometimes to foresee and at other times to raise the dead. The perfect gift, however, was to forgive sins and to set souls free from darkness and bring them to the light. Behold, then, I pray to God that, after the liberation of your soul, **he may grant you the Holy Spirit for patience and thanksgiving,** "that our opponent will be put to shame, having nothing" as a case against us (Titus 1:8). You, then, should also cooperate a little in your struggle to obtain this, and "God, who is rich in mercy," (Ephesians 2:4) will give it. Pray for me, brother.

Letter 123 (Response from John)

As he has often heard, **God does not require anything from the ill person except thanksgiving and patience.** For these intercede for one's powerlessness before God.'

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, April 3, 2024, Reading #15: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Give rather, the spirit of love..."

St. Dorotheus of Gaza (*Maxim on the Spiritual Life*, #5)

Do not ask for love from your neighbor, for if you ask and he does not respond you will be troubled. Instead, **show your love for your neighbor and you will be at rest,** and so you will bring your neighbor to love.

St. Dorotheus of Gaza (from Discourse 4: *On the Fear of God*)

Some time ago while I was a disciple of Abba Seridos, the minister of old Abba John, (the Other Old Man) a disciple of Abba Barsanuphius, fell sick and my Abba ordered me to serve the old man (John). I used to reverence the door of his cell with as much devotion as one would pay the Cross of Christ. How much more reverently would I serve him? Who would not desire to be worthy to serve such a holy man? He has a wonderful way of speaking and each time I had completed my serve, I bowed to him and asked for a word of advice before going away, and he always spoke to me.

The old man had four words (lessons) of advice, and, as I said, each time I was about to leave he used to say one or other of these four lessons, beginning the same way: "Once for all, brother, may God preserve you in love."

Here is the fourth lesson: **"Once for all, brother, may God preserve you in love. The Fathers used to say, 'Bear one another's burdens and so full the Law of Christ'"** (Gal 6:2).

Letter 111 [from Barsanuphius)

Become a desirer and preserver of good things, a pleasing servant for your Master, a humble disciple of the one who humbled Himself for you, obedient to the obedient one, forbearing before the forbearing one, long-suffering for the long-suffering one, merciful as the merciful one, bearing the burdens of your neighbor, just as He bore your own burdens, **loving all people sincerely in the manner that He loved us**, following Him in everything until He receives you in His great rest, where "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9) To Him be the glory to the ages. Amen. Pray for me.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, April 4, 2024, Reading #16: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza and the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem: "Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother (and sister) / St. Dorotheus of Gaza's Wheel and "On Refusal to Judge Our Neighbor"

St. Ephrem of Syria died in 373 – our Gazan Fathers lived in the 500s. I am not sure if they were aware of his Prayer, yet they certainly understood each of its sections as clearly being important elements of the Christian spiritual journey.

St. Dorotheus of Gaza has a Discourse entitled, **"On Refusal to Judge our Neighbor."** The key for him will be the sincere acquisition of love for and the transformation of our relationship with our neighbor. Back in January we began hearing about his example of a wheel or circle with its spokes as the image of the spiritual life: as each of us moves either towards or away from God's presence in the center, we also find ourselves moving closer or farther away from one another. He presents this example at the end of the Discourse as the context for the reorientation of the relationship with our neighbor.

An edited version of the Discourse is attached, but here are some of its main points:

- 1) Bad habits are formed by not taking small, spiritual struggles seriously.
- 2) Nothing is more serious, nothing more difficult to deal with, than judging and despising our neighbor.
- 3) The result is that the mind begins to forget about its own sins and to talk idly about his neighbor, speaking evil against him, despising him, and from this he falls into the very thing that he condemns.
- 4) Why are we so ready to judge our neighbor? Why are we so concerned about the burden of others? We have plenty to be concerned about, each one has his own debt and his own sins. It is for God alone to judge, to justify or to condemn.

5) Those who want to be saved scrutinize not the short-comings of their neighbor, but always their own, and they set about eliminating them.

6) If we have true love with sympathy and patient labor, we shall not go about scrutinizing our neighbor's shortcomings.

7) We can learn this by considering the image of a circle - with the presence of God in the center, and each of us moving with one another either towards the center or farther away from God and one another. For St. Dorotheus – this is the very nature of love.

And now I give you an example from the Fathers. Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. Now concentrate your minds on what is to be said! Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of men. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God. Now consider in the same context the question of separation; for when they stand away from God and turn to external things, it is clear that the more they recede and become distant from God, the more they become distant from one another.

See! This is the very nature of love. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbor. If we were to love God more, we should be closer to God, and through love of him we should be more united in love to our neighbor; and the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, April 5, 2024, Reading #17: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus – “On Conscience” - *the hot and bright spark added to reason, which lit up the mind and shows us the difference between right and wrong*”

St. Dorotheus of Gaza’s Discourse #3, “On Conscience,” is presented below and is attached in an edited form. Here are some of its main points:

1. When God created man, he breathed into him something divine, as it were a hot and bright spark added to reason, which lit up the mind and showed him the difference between right and wrong. This is called the conscience, which is the law of his nature.
2. When our conscience says to us, “do this!” and we despise it and it speaks again and we do not do it but continue to despise it, at last we bury it and it is no longer able to speak clearly to us from the depths where we have laid it.
3. No one is without a conscience, since it is something divinely implanted in us, as we have already said, and it can never be destroyed. It always patiently reminds us of our duties, but sometimes we do not perceive that we are despising it and treading it underfoot.
4. See to it that we do not neglect little things; see to it that we do not despise them as of no account. There are no “little things”—for when it is a question of bad habits, it is a question of a malignant ulcer. Let us live circumspectly, let us give heed to trivial matters when they are trivial, lest they become grave. Doing what is right and what is wrong: both begin from small things and advance to what is great, either good or evil.

5. In attending to our conscience, we need to consider many different factors. A man needs to satisfy his conscience towards God, towards his neighbor, and towards material things.

6. The Fathers tell us that we ought not to give his conscience occasion to reproach him about anything at all.

Dorotheus of Gaza

Discourse #3: *On Conscience*

When God created man, he breathed into him something divine, as it were a hot and bright spark added to reason, which lit up the mind and showed him the difference between right and wrong. This is called the conscience, which is the law of his nature. This is compared to the well which Jacob dug, as the Fathers say, and which the Philistines filled up (Gen 26:15). That is, to this law of conscience adhered the patriarchs and all the holy men of old before the written law, and they were pleasing to God. But when this law was buried and trodden underfoot by men through the onset of sin, we needed a written law, we needed the holy prophets, we needed the instruction of our Master, Jesus Christ, to reveal it and raise it up and bring to life through the observance of the Commandments that buried spark. It is in our power either to bury it again or, if we obey it, to allow it to shine and illuminate us. When our conscience says to us, “do this!” and we despise it and it speaks again and we do not do it but continue to despise it, at last we bury it and it is no longer able to speak clearly to us from the depths where we have laid it. But like a lamp shining on a damaged mirror, it reflects things dimly and darkly, just as you cannot see the reflection of your face in muddy water. We are found unable to perceive what our conscience says to us so that we think we have hardly any conscience.

No one is without a conscience, since it is something divinely implanted in us, as we have already said, and it can never be destroyed. It always patiently reminds us of our duties, but sometimes we do not perceive that we are despising it and treading it underfoot. This is why the prophet bewails Ephraim and says, “Ephraim prevails against his adversary and treads down judgment” (His 10:11). The adversary here is “conscience.” Here the Gospel says, “Come to an agreement with your adversary while you are on the way with him, lest he deliver you to the judge and the judge to the warders and they put you in chains. Amen, I say to you, you shall not leave the place until you have paid the last farthing” (Mt 5:25-26). Why does he call conscience the adversary? It is called the adversary because it always opposes our evil desires and tells what we ought to do and we do not, or what we ought not to do and we do; and it accuses us, and so conscience is called our adversary, and Our Lord admonishes, “Come to an agreement with your adversary while you are on the way;” for the “way” as St Basil says, is this world.

Let us be zealous, brothers, to guard our conscience for as long as we are in this world and not to neglect its promptings in anything. And let us not tread it under foot even in the least thing, for you can see that from the smallest things, which of their nature are worth little, we come to despise the great things. When we begin to say, “What is it if I say just these few words? What does it matter if I eat this morsel? What difference if I poke my nose in here or there? From this way of saying, ‘What does this or that matter?’” a man takes evil and bitter nourishment and begins presently to despise greater and more serious things and even to tread down his own conscience and so, at last destroying it, bit by bit, he falls into danger and finally becomes completely impervious to the light of conscience.

Therefore, brothers, see to it that we do not neglect little things; see to it that we do not despise them as of no account. There are no “little things”—for when it is a question of bad habits, it is a question of a malignant ulcer. Let us live circumspectly, let us give heed to trivial matters when they are trivial, lest they become grave.

Doing what is right and what is wrong: both begin from small things and advance to what is great, either good or evil. Therefore Our Lord warns us to take account of our conscience as one giving evidence of his own experience and saying “Be careful, simpleton, see what you are doing, come to an agreement with your adversary while yet on the road” and he shows the danger to be feared: “Lest he deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the executioner and he throw you into prison.” And what else? “Amen, I tell you, he shall not go from there until he has paid the last farthing” (Mt 5:26). Conscience then warns us, as I said, about what is good or what is bad and shows us what to do and what not to do, and in the world to come it will accuse us. Therefore it says, “Lest he deliver you to the judge...” etc.

In attending to our conscience, we need to consider many different factors. A man needs to satisfy his conscience towards God, towards his neighbor, and towards material things. As regards God: he must not despise God's precepts, even those concerning things which are not seen by men or those things for which one is not accountable to men. A man should obey his conscience in relation to God; for example, did he neglect his prayer? If an evil thought came into his heart, was he vigilant and did he keep control of himself or did he entertain it? He sees his neighbor saying something or doing something; does he suspect it's evil and condemn him? To put it simply, all the hidden things that happen inside us, things which no one sees except God and our conscience, we need to take account of. This is what I mean by our conscience towards God.

To respect our conscience towards our neighbor means not to do anything that we think may trouble or harm our neighbor in deed, or word, or gesture, or look. For there are gestures, as I very often tell you, which hurt our neighbors and there are looks capable of wounding him and, to speak plainly, whatever a man does readily, knowing it gives his neighbor a bad thought stains his own conscience because it means that he is ready to harm or trouble his neighbor—and this is the sort of thing I mean by keeping a good conscience towards our neighbor.

As regards keeping a good conscience in respect of material things: not to use things badly, not to render things useless, not to leave things about, and when we find things left about not to leave them even if they are of small value, but to pick them up and put them in their proper place....

The Fathers tell us that a monk ought not to give his conscience occasion to reproach him about anything at all. It is necessary, therefore, brothers, to keep watch over ourselves always and to keep ourselves away from all these things lest we fall into danger. For Our Lord also will bring an indictment against us, as we have said above. May God grant we listen and be attentive to these things, lest the sayings of our Fathers turn out to be for us words of condemnation.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday-Sunday, April 6-7, 2024, Reading #18: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – “Discourse 13 - On Ascending the Cross of Jesus” - Part 1

Abba Isaiah of Scetis (d. 489), originally from Egypt, had spent many years in a desert monastery of Scetis. He moved to Palestine, fleeing fame, between 431-

1. He first settled near Eleftheropolis, moving finally to **Beit Daltha** near Gaza, only some four miles from **Thavatha**, which was already known as the birthplace of St Hilarion and which later was to become familiar as the site of the monastery of **Abba Seridos**, where SS Barsanuphius and John would later live.

Throughout this week of the Cross we'll hear his **Discourse 13** where he develops his most favorite expression of “**ascending the cross of Jesus.**”

Discourse 13

On Those Who have Struggled and Reached Perfection

These are the signs which our Lord Jesus performed before ascending the cross, for he says, “Go and tell John what you have heard and seen. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them, and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Mt 11:4-6; Lk 7:22-23). Since John baptized the Lord Jesus, this word assumes a symbolical meaning, because the one who is baptized must confess the significance of his action. The signs performed by the Lord Jesus were many (Jn 20:30). However, the phrase “the blind receive their sight” refers to the blindness of someone who attends to the hope of this world. If this person renounces it and beholds the expected hope <of the future world>, then he receives his sight. Similarly, the phrase “the lame walk” signifies that someone desiring God but loving the fleshly cares of the heart is, in fact, lame. If this person renounces these and loves God with all his heart, he is able to walk. Likewise, the phrase “the deaf hear” refers to the person who is distracted <by worldly cares>, who is deaf on account of captivity <to such thoughts> and forgetfulness.

If he acquires stillness in knowledge, he is able to hear. Again, the phrase “the lepers are cleansed” has the following meaning. Since it is written in the law of Moses that “an unclean person will not enter the house of the Lord” (Lv 15:31; Nm 5:3), this includes whoever holds enmity, or hatred, or envy, or slander against his neighbor, but if this person renounces these, he is cleaned. Therefore, if the blind person see the lame walks, <the deaf hears,> and the leper is cleansed, anyone who dies spiritually on account of these, at a time of negligence may be raised from the dead and renewed, proclaiming the good news to his senses which have been impoverished through a lack of holy virtues, and declaring that this person is now able to see, and walk, and be cleansed. This is the confession that you have offered to the one who baptized you.

By baptism I mean humble endurance of suffering, and silence for it is written about John that, “He wore clothing of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,” and lived in the desert (Mt 3:4). This is the sign of endurance: first it cleanses a person, and, if he labors, then he acquires it. When one acquires it within, he is able to ascend the cross in stillness.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, April 8, 2024, Reading #19: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – “Discourse 13 - On Ascending the Cross of Jesus” - Part 2

Jesus prayed, “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me at this time” (Mt 26:39). These words refer to us. If the intellect desires to **ascend the cross**, then it requires much prayer and many tears in order to be subjected before God at all times, and it must request assistance from His goodness in order to be strengthened and preserved, until He raises it in holy and invincible newness of life. The time of the cross is one of great danger. In prayer, it needs the presence of Peter, John, and James, namely of a healthy faith, a courageous heart of hope, and a love for God.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, April 9, 2024, Reading #20: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – “Discourse 13 - On Ascending the Cross of Jesus” - Part 3

Reading #20 - Part 3

So this is what happened for our sake to our master himself, to our good Lord and God Jesus, who became an example for us in everything, as the apostle said, “So that <we may> know Him, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow <we> may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10-11). The bile that God tasted for us concerns us; we may lose every evil desire that is within us by shutting our mouths and not allowing it to come outside and become enacted. The vinegar that he tasted" for us again concerns us; we may extinguish every willfulness and every vain disturbance. The fact that they spat on him for our sake concerns us; we may extinguish our need for popularity and all worldly glory The crown of thorns which was woven and placed on his head is symbolical for us; we may bear our blame at all times, calmly enduring insolence. The staff with which his head was beaten for our sake is symbolical for us; always having humility as our helmet, we may extinguish every pride of the enemy. That “Jesus was handed over to be flogged before being crucified” is symbolical for us; we may despise all human rebuke and ridicule. That “they divided his clothes among them, casting lots” is symbolical for us; just as he remained calm throughout, we, too, must overlook everything in this world before ascending the cross. According to the words of the apostle, “You cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting in heaven” (Heb 10:34). These are the things that we do in order **to ascend the cross with Him**. If you do not do as he did, in accordance with your human ability, you will not be able to ascend and mount the cross.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, April 10, 2024, Reading #21: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – “Discourse 13 - On Ascending the Cross of Jesus” - Part 4

Reading #21 - Part 4

The fact that “**it was the sixth hour**” (Mk 15:33) when He was crucified for our salvation by harshness of heart is symbolical for us; we may be strengthened against all despair and faintheartedness. For it written, “Through the cross he has put to death the hostility in us” (Eph 2:16).

When it says, “**It was the ninth hour, and Jesus cried out with a loud voice: Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani**” (Mk 15:34) it is symbolical for us; after enduring distress until the passions have been extinguished, we may then in all humility feel bold and cry out to God.

The phrase “**at the setting of the sun Jesus breathed his last**” (Mk 15:33, 37) is symbolical for us; when the intellect is liberated from all visible and worldly hope signifies that sin has died within you. The phrase “**the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom**” (Mk 15:38) is symbolical for us; when the intellect is freed, the barrier that separates it from God is lifted. The phrase “**the rocks were split and the tombs were opened**” (Mt 27:51-52) is symbolical for us; when this death comes upon us, all heaviness, blindness, and things closed in the soul are broken, while the senses that kill and give rise to death are made whole and arise invincible (Rom 7:5).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, April 11, 2024, Reading #22: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – “Discourse 13 - On Ascending the Cross of Jesus” - Part 5

Reading #22 - Part 5 (Final)

The fact that He was wrapped in a clean linen cloth and covered with fragrances is symbolical for us; after this death we are wrapped in holiness and given the rest of immortality. The phrase **“they placed him in a new tomb in which no one had been buried”** (Jn 19:14) and **“rolled a great stone to the door”** (Mt 27:60) is symbolical for us; when the intellect is liberated from all these things and reaches the sabbath day of rest, it is in another, new age and considers new things, attending to matters not corruptible but incorruptible.

Thus, **“wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather”** (Mt 24:28) and the fact that **“He was resurrected in the glory of his Father, and ascended to heaven, and sat at the right hand of the majesty on high”** (Heb 1:3) is symbolical for us; according to the words of the apostle, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died” (Col 3:1-3).

His honorable name is powerful and merciful, being a model in things for the saints, taking care of our weakness so that we may in our poverty renounce our sinfulness and find mercy with his saints.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, April 12, 2024, Reading #23: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis and the “Stages” of the Cross

Abba Isaiah of Scetis and The "Stages" of the Cross

Over this past week – the mid-point of Great Lent – we have been guided by Abba Isaiah of Scetis in considering the importance of the Cross both in Christ’s life-giving death, but, as a result, for each one of us.

Abba Isaiah of Scetis was himself guided by St. Paul’s words:

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

An important theme that we heard in his Ascetic Discourse (A.D.) 13 is that we must likewise **“ascend the cross of Jesus.”**

Here are some other expressions that are important to Abba Isaiah. We must –

- **“behold the cross”** (cf. A.D. 25),
- **“bear the cross”** (A.D. 21), and simply **“be on the cross.”**
- **“accompany the Lord to the Cross”** (A.D. 16)
- **“render thanks to the Lord for enabling us to endure the cross”** (A.D. 17)
- Blessed therefore is the person who is crucified, dead, buried, and risen in newness, when he sees himself in the natural condition of Jesus, following His holy footsteps which were made when He was incarnated for the

sake of His holy saints. Thus it is to Him that belong [the virtues of] humility...poverty, detachment, forgiveness, peace, enduring reproach, not fearing the conspiracies of evil people, and ...and treating people with kindness.

So one who has reached these and eliminated the condition that is contrary to nature, shows that he is truly from Christ, and is the Son of God and brother of Jesus" (A.D. 18).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday-Sunday, April 13-14, 2024, Reading #24: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Healing

St. Dorotheus joined the community of Abba Seridos and lived under the spiritual guidance of SS Barsanuphius and John. He eventually was also the builder and administrator of the monastery's infirmary. As noted by Kyle Schenkewitz, St. Dorotheus's **Discourses** "related a spiritual healing that was deeply connected to his interaction with physical healing. The particularity of his work with the sick in the infirmary informed his comprehensive monastic vision. The role of Christ as Physician became a central trope through which Dorotheus was able to characterize the monastic life as a life of healing for soul and body."

This week – given the theme of Christ's healing of those who came to Him before He ascended the cross (as noted by Abba Isaiah) and our own Healing Service this weekend - we will explore the reflections of **St. Dorotheus on Healing**.

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Christ is the Physician of souls, and He knows everything and applies the right remedy for every sickness. (Discourse, 11).

Everything was a slave to sin, everything was under the control of sin...Then at last the good, man-loving God sent His Only Begotten Son. It was for God alone to heal and prevail against such miseries.

Our Lord did come, by being made man for our sakes, so that, as the Scripture says, like should be healed by like, soul by soul, flesh by flesh, for He became completely man – without sin. He took our very substance and took His origin from our race and he became a New Adam, like the Adam He himself had formed. For He reviewed man in his nature, restored the depraved senses and sensibility of human nature to what it had been in the beginning. Having become man, he lifted fallen man up again. He freed him from slavery to sin which had mastered him by force (Discourse, 1).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, April 15, 2024, Reading #25: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Healing and Baptism

Everything was a slave to sin, everything was under the control of sin...Having become man, for our sakes, God freed man from the Enemy's tyranny. He took away his power, broke his strength, took us out of his hand, and freed us from slavery to him – unless we spontaneously choose to obey him by sinning. For the Lord gave us power, as He told us, to trample on serpents and scorpions and all the power of the enemy (Lk 10:19), since **He cleansed us of all sin by Baptism. For Holy Baptism purges us of iniquity and washes away all stains.**

Therefore again, recognizing our weakness and knowing for certain that even after Baptism we would fall again – as it is written, “For the heart of man is prone to evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21) – God from His goodness gave us holy precepts which purify us, so that, if we really want to, through the keeping of these commandments we can be purified not only from our sins but from those innate tendencies which lead us to evil.

I repeat that the aim of Christ, our Master, is precisely to teach us how we come to commit all our sins; how we fall into all our evil. **First He sets us free through Holy Baptism**, as I have already said giving us the forgiveness of our sins, and He has given us the power to do good if we desire to and no longer to be drafted down into sin, so to speak, by force.

He teaches us by His holy precepts how to be cleansed from our own passions so that we do not fall again into those same sins. Finally, He shows us how we come to despise and disobey the commandments of God and adds the medicine that all may be able to obey and be saved.

What then is the medicine and what the cause of our contempt? Listen to what the Lord Himself tells us: “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). There you have it in a nutshell: He has taught us the root and cause of all evils and also the remedy for it, leading to all good. He shows us that pretensions to pride cast us down and that it is impossible to obtain mercy except for the contrary, that is to say, by humility....And I call that real humility which is not humble in word and outward appearance but is deeply planted in the very heart; for this is what He meant when He said that, “I am meek and humble in heart” (**Discourse 1**).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, April 16, 2024, Reading #26: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Healing and How We Can Help One Another

In doing good we have to pass through three different states:

- 1) Either we do good because we are afraid of punishment, and we are in the state of servility;
- 2) or to earn a reward, then we are in the state of hirelings;
- 3) or for the sake of the good itself, then we are in the state of sonship.

A son does not do his father's will out of fear, or because he wants to earn a reward, but because he wants to be of service, to honor his father and to make him happy. And, therefore, we ought to give alms in this way because it is a noble thing to do, having compassion on one another as if caring for our own affairs; and so treating another as we are treated by Him; giving to others as we receive. This is to give alms with knowledge and in this way we are found to be in the state of sonship, as we said.

No one can say, “I am poor and hence I have no means of giving alms.” For even if you cannot give as the rich gave their gifts into the temple treasury, give two farthings as the poor widow did, and from you God will consider it a greater gift than the gifts of the rich. And if you do not have as much as two farthings? You still have power to give alms, you can take pity on the sick and give alms by ministering to them. And if you cannot do even this? You can comfort your brother by your words. Express your pity for him in words and take heed of the one who said, “A good word is better than the best of gifts.” Suppose you cannot even help him by words; you can still, even when he is incensed against you, take pity on him and bear with him in the time of his fury, seeing that he is being dealt with spitefully by the common enemy and, instead of making a sharp

remark and adding to his fury, keep silent and so have pity on him and his soul, thus dragging him away from the enemy. Even if he offends against you, you can have mercy on him and forgive his offense against you, so that you may receive forgiveness from God. For it says, "Forgive and it shall be forgiven you." And you shall be found to have mercy on your brother's soul by pardoning him his offense against you. God made us a gift of the power, if we wish to use it, of forgiving one another the sins committed against us, so that if we do not have the means of coming to the aid of their bodies, we may come to the aid of their souls.

And what act of mercy is as great as having mercy on a soul? As the soul is more honorable than the body, so doing a work of mercy for the soul is greater than a corporal work of mercy. So, you see, no one can say he does not have the power to do works of mercy. Everyone according to his ability and the condition of his soul has the power to be merciful; he must only take great care to do whatever good he does with knowledge, as we have said, for each of the virtues. For we say that a man acting with knowledge, is capable of building his own house safely. About this the Gospel says, "A wise man builds his house on a rock," and nothing can overturn it. May God, who is a lover of men, grant you may hear, and what you hear do, that these words do not become your condemnation on the day of judgment, so that to him be glory for all ages. Amen.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, April 17, 2024, Reading #27: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Healing - Doing Things "Bit by Bit" with God's Help

In his advice to others St. Dorotheus often repeats that it is **bit by bit** (*mikron mikron* - Discourse 1), with God's help, that a person progresses in goodness. Generally speaking, he does not demand a great deal – just a little. So only a

little effort is needed, a little bit of self-restraint, (Discourse 17)
a little self-humiliation, (Discourse 2)
a little bit of struggle, (Discourse 10)
doing a little bit of good, (Discourse 14)
to take a little of each virtue, (Discourse 14)
to allow ourselves a little less than what is necessary,

in order to make progress in the Christian life.

Dorotheus does not exalt heroism but praises bravery in little things, because "virtue and sin begin in little things, but lead on to great things, whether good or ill" (Discourse 3).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, April 18, 2024, Reading #28: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Healing, Medicine, and God

Dorotheus was put in charge of the monastery's infirmary. He wrote to the Great Old Man (Barsanuphius) about his concerns over this responsibility saying: "What, then, should I do? For my heart trembles before this ministry, fearing that I might make mistakes in it."

The Great Old Man's response:

Letter 327

“It is beneficial for us to dwell on medical matters...we should not, however, place all our hope in these, but only in the God who grants death and life, who says, “I shall wound, and I shall heal” (Dt 32:39). When you read these books (medical) and ask others about these matters, do not forget that without God there can be no healing. One who applies oneself to medicine should do so in the name of God, and God will come to one’s assistance. The art of medicine does not prevent one from practicing piety; you should regard the practice of medicine in the same manner as the brothers’ manual labor. Do whatever you do with fear of God, and you will be protected through the prayers of the saints. Amen.

Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, April 19, 2024, Reading #29: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: St. Dorotheus of Gaza on Humility, Healing, and God’s Mercy

Our Lord himself says, “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.” 21 He does not say, “Practice fasting as your heavenly Father fasts,” nor does he say, “Be without possessions as your heavenly Father is without possessions.” What does he say? “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (**Discourse 14**).

When the Lord rebuked the scribe by telling him about the man who fell among thieves, asking him who was his neighbor, the scribe replied: “The one who showed mercy on him.” Again, he said: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” Therefore, if you have heard once that mercy is greater than sacrifice, incline your heart toward mercy (**Letter from the Other Old Man, John, to Dorotheus**).

Even if we cannot, feeble as we are, accomplish demanding works, let us try to humble ourselves. And I have trust in the mercy of God, that the little which we will humbly have been able to achieve will qualify us to be, us too, among the saints who made great efforts in God’s service (**Discourse 2**).

Humility attracts the grace of God (**Discourse 2**).

By doing repeatedly what is evil we acquire a habit which is foreign to us, something unnatural. We put ourselves, as it were, into a permanent state of destructive sickness, so that we can no longer be healed without many prayers and tears which are capable of arousing Christ’s mercy towards us” (**Discourse 11**).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday, April 20–Sunday, April 21, Reading #30: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: The Experience of Active Love

Though SS Barsanuphius and John lived in isolation and responded hundreds of times to questions only in written form through their secretaries, their responses were directed to monastics and lay people who were living in community.

One of the most profound reflections on the interconnection between faith, love, and community were presented in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, “**The Brothers Karamazov**.” In this first passage a woman complains to the elder, Zossima, that she cannot understand how faith can be proved.

Fr. Zossima replied: “One cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced.”

“How? By what?”

“**By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbor actively and tirelessly.** The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach

complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.”

But how does one care for another person over a long period of time and what about gratitude or ingratitude? The woman states, “I work for pay and demand my pay at once, that is, praise and a return of love for my love. Otherwise, I am unable to love anyone.”

Fr. Zossima answers: “I heard exactly the same thing, a long time ago to be sure, from a doctor. He was then an old man, and unquestionably intelligent. He spoke just as frankly as you, humorously, but with a sorrowful humor. **‘I love mankind,’ he said, ‘but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is individually, as separate persons.** In my dreams,’ he said, ‘I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind, and, it may be, would really have gone to the cross for people if it were somehow necessary, and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days, this I know from experience. As soon as someone is there, close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I can begin to hate even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose. I become the enemy of people the moment they touch me,’ he said. ‘On the other hand it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.’”

“But what is to be done, then?” she asked.

“Do what you can, and it will be reckoned to you.”

During this final week of Great Lent (which ends next Friday) we’ll hear how the Gazan Fathers directed others in loving and caring for one another.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, April 22, Reading #31: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: “Give Me a Word, Abba”

Letter 351

A brother who was progressing in godly virtue announced to the Great Old Man (Barsanuphius): **“Give me a word, abba, for I am afflicted.”** (Note: This is frequently the opening sentence addressed by a visitor in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.)

Response by Barsanuphius:

A brother who was progressing in godly virtue announced to the Great Old Man (Barsanuphius): **“Give me a word, abba, for I am afflicted.”** (Note: This is frequently the opening sentence addressed by a visitor in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.)

Response by Barsanuphius:

The holy Apostle Paul understood **the power of patience** and wrote: “Indeed, you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Heb. 10:36). Therefore, anyone who wishes to ascend the with Christ on the cross must become a partaker of His sufferings in over always to

have peace. I, too, say to you: **“Struggle to acquire thanksgiving in all circumstances”** (1 Thess 5:18), and “the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35), and then you will find rest (Ps 68:3).

Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, April 23, Reading #32: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: “On Praying for Others”

Letter 387

A question to the Old Man (Barsanuphius): “Is the faith of one person able to benefit another who does not have faith, just as the paralytic was helped by the faith of those who bore him?” (Mk 2:3-5)

Response: If the paralytic was not also faithful, then he would not have been allowed to bear him and let him down; so it is the faith of both that in fact saved him. Therefore, unless a person places his faith in God, he receives no benefit. Do not, then, pretend that you can do nothing and cast your entire burden onto others (Luke 11:46). For even though Jeremiah believed that God would be merciful to the people, yet he still prayed for them. Because, however, the people did not also contribute their faith to his, this is why he was not heard (Jer 11:14). Where, too, was the faith of the prophet? Did he not have the same faith as those who carried the paralytic? Surely, the fault lay with the people. The same applies to other similar cases. For it is not without reason that it is said: “The prayer of the righteous is very powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, April 24, Reading #33: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: “On Caring for Those with Physical and Spiritual Illnesses”

Letter 35

The Great Old Man (Barsanuphius) was asked about caring for those with physical and spiritual illnesses.

The response is one – do not force the will, but only sow “in hope” (1 Cor 9:10). For our Lord, too, did not force anyone, but only preached the Gospel, and whoever wanted, listened...For when we pray also – and God is long-suffering in responding – He does this for the best, in order that we may learn long-suffering and not grow faint, claiming that we prayed but were not heard. For God knows what is best for us. Rejoice in the Lord, my brother, and be free from all cares, and pray for me, my beloved soul-mate.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, April 25, Reading #34: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: The Last Letter and What It Means to ‘Rejoice Always; Pray Without Ceasing’; Give Thanks in All Circumstances”

[Note: SS Barsanuphius and John wrote 848 letters – here is the last one!"]

Letter 848

Question: “What does this sentence mean: ‘Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances?’”

Response:

These three things in fact contain our entire salvation.

- The way of righteousness is the preservation of rejoicing always, for no one can truly rejoice unless one’s life appears righteous.
- Praying without ceasing is the aversion of every evil, for this allows no room for the devil to act against us.
- Finally, giving thanks in all circumstances is clear proof of our love for Christ. If our life is properly regulated by the first two, then we shall give thanks to the Lord.”

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, April 26, Reading #35: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Great Lent as a “Tithe” of the Year and on Completing “the Forty Days that Profit our Souls.”

On Forgiveness Sunday we heard the expression of **St. Dorotheus of Gaza** that we should think of the forty days of Great Lent as a time “to deliver up a tithe of the very days of our lives – a tithe of the year – as if to consecrate them to God.”

These forty days, this approximate tithe will end this evening – Holy Week represents another level of time. So, thinking back now on the words of St. Dorotheus, tonight we’ll hear during the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts:

We have completed the forty days that profit our souls.

Now let us beg the Lover of man:
enable us to see the Holy Week of Your Passion,
that we may glorify Your mighty work,
Your wonderful plan for our salvation,
as we sing with one heart and voice://
“O Lord, glory to You!”

Here again are the words of **St. Dorotheus of Gaza**:

In the Law, God laid down that the sons of Israel should each year give tithes of all they possessed, and if they did so they were blessed in all their works (Numbers 18). The holy apostles, knowing this to be for the help and advancement of our souls, resolved to fulfill it in a better and higher way, namely, for us to deliver up a tithe of

the very days of our lives as if to consecrate them to God, so that we may be blessed in all our works, and each year to be unburdened of the whole year's sins.

Whoever, therefore, keeps careful guard over himself, as is fitting during these holy days, will be rewarded with blessings, even if it happens that, being human, he has sinned either through weakness or carelessness. You see, God gave us these holy days so that by diligence in abstinence, in the spirit of humility and repentance, a person may be cleansed of the sins of the whole year and the soul relieved of its burden. Purified he goes forward to the holy day of the Resurrection, and being made a new person through the change of heart induced by the fast, he can take his part in the Holy Mysteries and remain in spiritual joy and happiness, feasting with God throughout the 50 days to Pentecost ("**On the Holy Lenten Fast**").

May indeed this tithing of our lives have in some way profited our souls!

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Saturday-Sunday, April 27-28, Reading #36: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: On Palm Sunday by St. Dorotheus of Gaza



In coming to the holy day of the Resurrection, we first go out to meet Our Lord and receive Him on the colt and come with him into the Holy City. What does this mean: sitting on a colt? He is seated on a colt that He may convert the soul (which, as the prophet says - Psalm 49:20), has become irrational and is compared to senseless beasts) into an image of God, and subject it to His own divinity.

What does it mean: going to meet Him with palms and olive branches? When someone marches out to war against an adversary and returns victorious, all his own people go before Him with palm branches to mark his victory.

The olive branch is the symbol of mercy. Therefore, we go out to meet our Master Christ, with palms because He is victorious – for He conquered our enemy – and with olive branches – we are asking for His mercy.

May we, by asking, conquer through Him and be found carrying the emblems of His victory, not only the victory by which He won for us, but also the victory which we also won through Him by the prayers of the saints (From: **On the Holy Lenten Fast**)

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Monday, April 29, Reading #37: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba John – On the Cross - #1

Letter 499

A letter to the Other Old Man (John): “Abba, for the Lord’s sake, forgive my rashness and foolishness, and help me on account of the multitude of my sins. For if someone who commits a single sin before God requires much repentance, then what can I do when I have been raised on sin and have not ceased doing whatever I can to anger God? I need your prayers in order that sin may be taken away from me.

The Response by John:

Brother, since you have come to the one who was crucified for us, you, too should take up your cross and follow Him (Mt 16:24), casting your every concern on him who works” abundantly [far] more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20). For He is the one who cares about us. Therefore, do not be troubled, and Christ will assist you. Only, my child, keep in your intellect the word from holy Scripture and the readiness of which it speaks: “My son, when you come to serve God, prepare your soul for testing” (Sirach 2:1), and also: “the untempted is also untested.” And again: “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation, for such a one has stood the test” (James 1:12), and so on. I am not saying all this is in order to frighten you, but in order to strengthen your heart in the way of God. For this is how all of the saints progressed, namely, through temptations and afflictions; and so they became pleasing to God, with the assistance also of His grace. Do not be afraid; and do not be discouraged. For we believe that God is the one who plants you and irrigates you, making you grow (1 Cor. 3:6) through the prayers of the saints. Amen.

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Tuesday, April 30, Reading #38: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba John – On Ascending the Cross with Him

Letter 567

Request to the Old Man (John): “Father, I entreat you to pray for me for the Lord’s sake. Indeed, I am in great danger on account of both my laziness and the disturbance of the enemy.”

Response by John:

Remember that wherever there is testing through temptation, there is also the crown of victory; and wherever there is love of God, there again [one is ready] to ascend the cross with him in order to suffer with Him and to be glorified with Him (Rom 8:17), to die with Him and to live with Him (Gal 2:19-21). Therefore, one who ascends the cross is lifted from the earth. Such a person has died to the world (Col 2:20). So one would think of heavenly things, where Christ is at the right hand of the Father (Col 3:1-2).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Wednesday, May 1, Reading #39: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba Isaiah of Scetis – The Lord’s Supper and the Cross

Good morning:

I have already sent you in preparation for tonight’s Bridegroom Matins the Gospel lesson from St Luke which presents us with the essential language for understanding the “**Lord’s Supper,**” what one of the liturgical hymns calls – the “**Master’s hospitality, the banquet of immortality.**”

In today’s passage, **Abba Isaiah of Scetis** reminds us how one “**who wishes to eat and drink at His table, will journey with Him to the cross.**”

Abba Isaiah of Scetis
from: *Discourse 16*

Jesus said to His disciples, “In the world you face persecutions, but take courage; I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33); and, encouraging them not to lose heart in the face of persecutions, He spoke to them, granting joy in their hearts, “**You are those who have stood by me in my trials, and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table**” (Luke 22:28-30).

He told them these things as He was on His way to the cross. **The one, therefore, who wishes to eat and drink at His table, will journey with Him to the cross,** for the cross of Jesus is abstinence from every passion, until it is cut off. The beloved disciple cut them away and dared to say, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:19-20).

Exhorting his children, the apostle said, “those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). Further writing to his child, Timothy, he said: “If we have died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim 2:11-13).

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Our Daily Lenten Reader: Thursday, May 2, Reading #40: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba John – On Preparing for the Reception of Holy Communion

Letter 170

Abba John was asked about experiencing temptations during the night before receiving Holy Communion – “What should I do?”

Response: Let us approach with all our wounds and without any contempt, as people who are needful of a doctor; then, He who healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mt 9:22) will also heal us. Let us love much, that He may also say to us: “Your many sins have been forgiven; for you have shown great love” (Lk 7:47).

When you are about to take Communion, say: “Master, do not allow these holy things to be unto my condemnation, but unto purification of soul and body and spirit.” Then, you may approach with fear, and our Master, who is kind and loving, will work His mercy with us. Amen.

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**Our Daily Lenten Reader: Friday, May 3, Reading #41: The Spiritual Witness of the Saints of Gaza: Abba
Isaiah of Scetis – Without the Cross there is No Love**

**Abba Isaiah of Scetis
Discourse 21**

“Let us work with a whole heart while we are still in our bodies because our life span is brief. If we struggle, we will inherit eternal and ineffable joy, but if we turn back, we will become like the young man who asked the Lord Jesus how he could be saved. He replied, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor (Mt 19:21). Take your cross and follow me (Mt 16:24). He pointed out to him that the inclination to lament is to be saved. Hearing these things, he became exceedingly sad and went away. He learned that work is not to give his things to the poor, but to carry the cross. To distribute to the poor is not the only virtue; **a person accomplishes it by carrying the cross. He engenders love and without the cross there is not love.**

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Favorite Scriptural Passages from the Spiritual Fathers of Gaza

- Numbers 20:17 - “Now let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, neither will we drink water from a well; we will go along the King’s Highway, we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed through your territory.”
- Deut 5:32 - “So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left.”
- Deut 17:11 - “According to the instructions which they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the verdict which they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.”
- Deut 31:6 - “Be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be in dread of them: for it is the Lord your God who goes with you; He will not fail you or forsake you.”
- Proverbs 4:27 - “Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”
- Mt 10: 22 - “He who endures to the end will be saved.”
- Luke 21:19 - “By your patience possess your souls.”
- 1 Cor. 10:31 - “Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God”
- 1 Thess 5: 16-18 - “Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”
- Philippians 4:4 - “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”
- Gal 6:2 - “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”
- 1 Peter 5:7 - “Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you.”

