

The Letter of the Month

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Obstacles to Repentance and Being with David in his Repentance

OBSTACLES TO REPENTANCE

Great Lent, called the School of Repentance, is a time of strong and deep spirituality that helps man to repent. In general, repentance is very important to all, as Jesus our Good Lord taught us, saying, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3,5).

Our holy fathers understood this command. About this topic, St. Isaac said, "It is certainly true that no virtue is more pre-eminent than repentance. For a man can never complete the work of repentance. It is always suitable for every sinner and righteous man who wishes to gain salvation. There is no limit to perfection, for even the perfection of the perfect is truly without completion. And for this very reason repentance is bounded neither by periods of time nor by works until a man's death" (St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 32). Repentance is also the trampling of the soul before Paradise's gates. It is good for all: good for the sinner who did not start the true life, whose soul has not yet awakened, and also good for the one who is walking in the true spiritual path. Repentance starts with an insurrection against the tomb of sin and darkness, and continues as an ongoing way of life, so that we have to always carry in our hearts a state of continuous repentance. It should not only arise during the sacrament of confession, but it should be a continuous condition in our hearts. It is an inner state in front of the creature and God. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you" (Luke 15:18).

The impediments to repentance are plenty; they impede the soul from starting a relationship with God. Some of these obstacles affect the beginning of repentance, while other obstacles affect the life or state of our repentance. Therefore, it is important to search our hearts to find these obstacles and prune our lives to remove them.

I. Obstacles to Starting Repentance

These obstacles prevent the soul from waking up and coming back to itself. St. Antony the Great advised us saying, "Before anything, my brethren, go back to yourselves and then they [souls] will go back to God." Some of these obstacles are:

1. Misunderstanding the relationship between man and God

We make a mistake when we understand our relationship with God as trying to repay a debt and when we think we should change our lives and purify them in order to have a relationship with God. Instead, our relationship with God should be based on the work of Jesus in us, by us, and on our behalf. "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This was explained to us by Pope Athanasius the Apostolic, who said, "So here, once more, what possible course was God to take? To demand repentance of men for their transgression? For this one might pronounce worthy of God; as though, just as from transgression men have become set towards corruption, so from repentance they may once more be set in the way of incorruption. But repentance would, firstly, fail to guard the just claim of God. For He would still be none the more true, if men did not remain in the grasp of death; nor, secondly, does repentance call men back from what is their nature... For Him it was once more both to bring the corruptible to incorruption, and to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all" (*On the Incarnation*). St. Athanasius asks by what other means God may have effected salvation. One recourse is to demand repentance, but our own repentance can never renew our nature nor does it reconcile our relationship to God the Father.

Repentance in its Christian meaning is practiced on the basis on the Incarnation of Christ and His crucifixion, and the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It was important for the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Father's promise (the Holy Spirit) who will act for the human's repentance, change of heart, and perfection. Therefore, we should not practice repentance according to the wrong meaning, which is based on man's righteousness and his ego. We should rejoice with Jesus' work on our behalf and enter with God into a covenant of love by repentance that is

according to His will (2 Corinthians 7:9-11).

2. Procrastination and Wasting of Time

"But rescue us, protect us, preserve us and raise us from boredom, anger, languishing, and laziness. Do not let the enemy—the devil—overwhelm us with excessive hope, but alert our minds and awaken our hearts from the sleep of inattention and wasting our lifetime in vain."

This is an important petition that priests ask for their people because procrastination is one of the biggest impediments to repentance. Jesus knocks on the doors of our hearts and the Holy Spirit urges us and makes the path of light and truth clear in front of us, so that man will not fall into a web of procrastination that can lead to wasting our lives in vain. St. Paul the Apostle spoke in front of Felix the governor about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, and Felix trembled. However, this trembling did not lead him to riot against himself and accept God's invitation for eternal life; he fell into the trap of procrastination, and he told the Apostle, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you" (Acts 24:25). Procrastination has tremendous drawbacks. It increases the hardness of the heart and causes the conscience to decrease its sensitivity and increase the captivity of men in slavery. Lastly, "If this life was everlasting and this world eternal, O my soul, you would have a valid excuse." Therefore, we should hasten to practice repentance with determination in every good deed. "In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

3. Deception of the pleasures of sin

The liar and the deceptive devil is trying to make us fall into a big deception: that we are able, without God and away from God, to achieve our well-being, our joy, and our welfare. He makes the Prodigal Son fall into such a trap (Luke 15). He convinced him that far away from his father's house and separated from him, he would find freedom and happiness and prove himself. But did he really gain anything, or rather did he gain the opposite? He fell into slavery, pain, misery, and sadness. He went down to the level of animals, but he could not find anything to eat. The devil deceived a lot of people with this deception, but joyful truth resides with Jesus and in Him the soul receives its perfection, joy, fullness, and well-being. Holy life has its joy and true happiness. This happiness makes many saints cry out to God that He should stop giving them the overflowing gift of happiness because they became inundated by the richness that was coming down from the Father of light who gives all good gifts (James 1:17). Please God, send Your light and Your truth so they can help us rise into Your holy mountain so we can see the truth and the light and rejoice in You. Some other impediments include being soft and being compassionate on oneself, not being able to sense the condition of one's case, al-

ways being too busy to think about salvation, dividing one's heart in order to serve both God and the world, enslaving oneself to bad habits and addictions, and so on.

II. The Impediments to the State or Life of Repentance

One may start repentance and continue for a while in fellowship with God, but after a while have a cool and hard heart. He may lose the fervor of his heart, fall into weakness and sin again, or he might feel weary of the long way of repentance. This is how he will stop moving forward.

1. Despairing from Jesus' way and not trusting in His grace

Due to falling in sin, a person despairs of spiritual life and ceases to believe his ability to continue his fellowship with God, mistrusting our Lord's rich grace that is able to complete his salvation. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). Now Jesus knows our nature and its weakness, what He expects from us, and our failures. But with His grace and with knowledge of living hope, which is a steady and honest harbor for the soul, we are able to walk steadily on the way. We must always carry hope in our hearts: hope in the ability to come back quickly to Jesus and never to despair, but strongly trust in His rich grace and its efficacy. This forced St. Augustine to cry out once in true hope saying, "If he and she are able [able to reach the life of holiness and fellowship with God], why can't I?" Truly, we are able by our God's rich grace. This is the hope of our church, and with it we live hoping to reach the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore St. John Climacus said, "Do not be afraid even if you fall everyday, as long as you don't depart from God's way. Stand up with a strong heart and you guardian angel will appreciate your patience."

2. Being Scared of the Narrow Road

At some point, the person who is going in God's way will be affected with fear of the difficulty of the way and the narrowness of the door. Truly, the way is hard and the door is narrow, but when we know that the door is Jesus and the way is also Jesus, and that He is the one who invited us, then we will live in hope of His companionship along the way. In Him we are protected. This is why St. Paul the Apostle prayed, emphasizing the following to us in his epistle to the Romans: "And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (Romans 16:20). St. Jude also emphasized this and prayed for us saying, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25). May God raise our souls and free them from all impediments so they will return and repent to live in holiness and communion with our Holy God. AMEN.

BEING WITH DAVID IN HIS REPENTANCE

We learn repentance and the path of repentance from teachers of repentance. Those who repented took this path and knew how to repent and go back to God with all their hearts, having very deep repentance. Let us draw near to them and enter their inner cells so we can hear their hearts groaning with repentance. Seeing their plenteous tears and the humility that appears on their faces tells us how much their hearts ache and call God continuously with worshipping and metanoias (prostrations). Let us draw near to David the Prophet to see how he repented and to learn from him (2 Samuel 11:1-12:15; Psalms 6, 32, 38, 50, 102, 130, 143).

David the Prophet sinned, and this sin led him to other sins. He entered a state of sinning that made him blind and numbed his conscience, so that he became lost and lived in darkness. He stayed in this spiritual blindness for more than seven months, not aware that his life was at stake and that he was in a state of destruction, death, and separation from God. He forgot about himself, his salvation, his purity, and his holiness. But God, who does not wish the death of the sinner but repentance and life, sent him Nathan the prophet to make him aware of the situation and make him return to his sanity. David lived away from himself all this time, alien to his true inner self and living in sin. The job of the prophet was to help him return to himself. David, after hearing the story of the poor man's ewe, recognized his sin and laziness in a time when he had responsibilities. He remembered his adultery, his murder of Uriah the Hittite, and the subsequent concealment, but when he came back to himself, he was not merciful to himself. He passed harsh judgment on himself and said, "I have sinned against God." The judgment was so severe that he said, "Nor is there any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; Like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil in my heart" (Psalm 38:4-8). He cried to God to have mercy on him: "Lord, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You. My heart pants, my strength fails me; As for the light of my eyes, it also has gone from me...Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, be not far from me, O Lord, my salvation" (Psalm 38:9-10, 21-22). "Have mercy on me according to Your loving kindness, according to the multitude of your tender mercies. Blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1).

Although David saw his many sins and the evil in his heart, and the blood that his hand was responsible for, he did not lose hope, but in the midst of his guilt, he held fast to God's mercy and to the hope of his acceptance. "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my

trouble; Incline your ear to me; In the day that I call, answer me speedily" (Psalm 102:1-2). "Have mercy on me according to Your loving kindness, according to the multitude of your tender mercies. Blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1). "Depart from me, all the workers of iniquity, for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; The Lord will receive my prayer. Let all my enemies be ashamed and greatly troubled; Let them turn back and be ashamed suddenly" (Psalm 6:8-10). "Revive me, O Lord, for Your name's sake! For your righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble. In your mercy cut off my enemies" (Psalm 143:12).

In his sadness and grief, David said, "I am weary with my groaning; All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with tears. My eye wastes away because of grief" (Psalm 6:6). "For my days are consumed...And my bones are burned like a hearth. My heart is stricken and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning my bones cling to my skin. I am like a pelican in the wilderness; I am like an owl of desert" (Psalm 102:3-6). In the midst of this sadness and grief, he asked for the joy of salvation and God's consolation: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12), "Incline your ear to me; In the day that I call, answer me speedily" (Psalm 102:2).

"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Sadness that is according to God's will develops repentance for salvation without grief, and in the midst of the sadness and weeping, God gives comfort and the joy of salvation. Our hearts are humble and broken because of sin, but they also have joy in God's mercy and comfort in God's acceptance. We see that David did not give in to sadness but experienced the joy of salvation and the comfort of returning to the Father's embrace. In the mixture of sadness and happiness, grief and comfort, David did not forget his sins, but set them before him all the time so he would never forget them again: "My sins are ever before me" (Psalm 51:3), "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 32:5), "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities" (Psalm 51:11). David remembered his sins for the rest of his life and continuously wept. He had a contrite heart, asking for God's mercy and protection. The Lord will heed such a heart, as he says, "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2).

Despite his continuous, deep, and humble prayers, his deep repentance, and his remembrance of his sins, he knew that the basis of repentance is the action of the Holy Spirit in his life to create in him a new heart, to cleanse him thoroughly from his iniquities, and to purify him from his sins. All he offered was not good enough to keep him from going back to sin, for his evil nature would return to the sin that it desired. However,

when his heart was renewed and the life was cleaned and purified from all sins and iniquities, he did not return to sin; he did not even permit himself to return to sin. He cried to the Lord saying, "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a new and loyal spirit me. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:10, 7).

Because he experienced falling, sadness, misery, spiritual blindness, and a troubled spirit, and afterward was separated from God and suffered death, he commiserated with others' faults and knew what they went through and how their hearts were filled with misery and sin. He started to pray for his brethren, saying, "Do good in You good pleasure to Zion, build the walls of Jerusalem" (Psalm 51:19). He prayed for the people so that everyone who went astray could come back and experience God's mercy and tenderness and be transferred from the authority of darkness to that of light. They could gain joy of heart, comfort of God, and peace, so that everyone who comes back to God would not rest until they see the sinners come back to God, so there would be joy in heaven over one sinner who returned to his Father's house.

Even though he rejoiced with the joy of salvation and the comfort of God in him, he had a ready heart to accept and bear the consequences of his sin. "For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). David lived about seventeen years after his repentance, and he suffered many tribulations, hunger, cursing, rebellions, and exile. All these exterior pains did not affect his heart, because his heart was already back to his God.

Therefore the path of salvation as we learn it from David can be summarized as follows:

1. Go back to yourself
2. Search and judge yourself
3. Hold on to God's mercy in the midst of repentance and sadness
4. Ask for the joy of salvation
5. Always remember your sins
6. Ask for the change of the inner heart
7. Pray for estranged people
8. Be ready to carry the consequences of sins

May God our Lord help us repent and accept us to Him through the prayers of this repentant prophet.

Pray for us. God Bless you.
Fr. Athanasius K. Farag

SOME SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

"Let us apply to ourselves the saving remedy of repentance; let us accept from God the repentance that heals us. For it is not we who offer it to Him, but He who bestows it upon us."

St. John Chrysostom, On Repentance 7-3

"This life has been given you for repentance. Do not waste it on other things."

St. Isaac the Syrian

"Repentance is a great understanding."

The Shepherd of Hermas

"Asked what he is doing in the desert, Abba Milesius replies, 'I came here to weep for my sins.'"

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

"And this repentance is not just a preliminary stage but lifelong. As Abba Sisoës lies on his deathbed, surrounded by his disciples, he is seen to be talking with someone. 'Who are you talking to, father?' the disciples ask. 'See,' he replies, 'the angels have come to take me and I am asking for a little more time—more time to repent.' 'You have no need to repent,' say the disciples. 'Truly,' the old man replies, 'I am not sure whether I have begun to repent.'"

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

"Our Lord Jesus Christ,' states Abba Isaias of Scetis, 'commanded us to go on repenting until our last breath. For if there were no repentance, nobody would be saved.'"

Homily 16

"And St. Isaac the Syrian teaches: 'During every moment of the four and twenty hours of the day we stand in need of repentance.'"

Homily 70

"Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair."

St. John Climacus, Ladder 5

As the Desert Fathers observe, "The closer we come to God, the more we see that we are sinners."

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers



St. Antonious and St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church

147 Park Avenue, PO Box 66
East Rutherford, NJ 07073
Telephone: 201.933.2226

Christian Education Center
220 Montross Avenue
Rutherford, NJ 07070

