



## TEARS: THE HEALING OF THE PERSON

*By Archimandrite Zacharias of Essex*

One of the most secure paths to the realization of personhood is the path of tears. Through tears, all the faculties of the soul are united so that we can rise to the level of loving God and neighbor as is required by the commandments of the Lord. There is a certain wholeness in the person who weeps before God as the heart and mind are unified. Through the energy of grace, the mind is crucified and descends into the heart. The mind is crucified in the effort to live by the evangelical precepts.

Every time we weep before God it is as if He is holding a brush and makes an anointing on the soul so that after a certain time, through this continuous anointing, the image of Christ is depicted on the heart. Just as we are born again by the waters of Baptism, so we are regenerated through the flow of tears in spiritual mourning. Similarly, as we receive the seal of the Holy Spirit through the holy oil of Chrismation, so through the anointing of tears we receive the grace of illumination.

At the Annunciation, the Lord Jesus Christ was conceived in human form through the Holy Spirit by the Virgin Mary. He became man to show us God in the flesh. Likewise through tears we gradually conceive divine life within us to manifest that which God set out for us primordially, that is, to become the perfect image and likeness of His Son. The Holy Spirit conceives this image in us, through weeping its seal and be recognizable by the angels who will gather us all into His Kingdom on the last day<sup>1</sup>

The Lord Jesus Christ is named Emmanuel 'God with Us'. When the Word took on flesh, He became tangible, though He was a pure Spirit, for our sakes. Saint Gregory the Theologian says, 'Ο Λόγος παχύνεται'<sup>2</sup> which literally means 'the Word of God is fattened'. The Word of God 'became fat' so that we might be able to touch Him, see Him and hear Him. He was 'fattened' in a physical way so that He might become tangible for us. We, also, by persevering in the work of tears, of spiritual mourning, become fattened but in our souls. That is to say, we



start to receive traces of grace so that our soul becomes fattened, it becomes rich, it acquires a fulness and it becomes visible to God and to His holy angels. Saint Symeon the New Theologian says that ‘as food and drink are necessary for the body, so are the tears for the soul.’ If we do not weep often, he says, we starve our soul and cause it to perish from hunger.’<sup>3</sup>

This is essentially the work of repentance: that each man should continuously fatten his soul with contrition, with tears, so as to gather the traces of the presence of God in his heart. With time, these traces will grow into a fulness of new life in him, that is a light to his mind and a strength to his heart, so that he may rise on high and rival the angels. In this state, he becomes a true hypostasis; he receives the state of God. He is anointed by the Holy Spirit and he has acquired the same good pleasure in his heart as God has: that all should be saved. Then begins ‘the true work’ of the true man who goes out to his work until the evening,<sup>4</sup> which is to bring every creature to God in his prayer of intercession. The crown of repentance is this perfection of hypostatic prayer, to arrive at such a state that when we stand before God, He may see in us not a simple name, but the whole world in our heart presented to Him.

Fattening means fulness. The hypostasis has a fulness which encompasses all that is divine and all that is human. The Hypostasis of Christ contains the fulness of both human and divine nature and the hypostasis of man, when it is perfected, also has a fulness of divinity by grace. Through his union with the Divine Energies, man’s heart is enlarged to embrace all humanity and to bring it before God. Grace has a fulness in the perfected human hypostasis and through that grace such a man becomes a mediator for all the world.

Those who have been anointed by this grace of prayer for the world have an anointing which is not seen by people, but is discerned by the angels. God knows His own and His angels likewise are able to discern the traces of the image of Christ on the face and in the heart of the faithful. Even in this life this phenomenon is not completely imperceptible to us; we may be able to apprehend a certain transparency in people who weep, which is sometimes manifested in their face. When a person cries in prayer, his skin may become smooth and glistening, so the touch of the anointing is felt in the skin; mainly on



the forehead but it may also spread over the entire body of man. Elder Sophrony said that he felt this anointing all over his body and that he also felt that it would burn away anything foreign to God.

One image of Saint Paul contains all the power of this mystery of the anointing, when he says that ‘we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven; not to be found naked ... that mortality might be swallowed up of life.’<sup>5</sup> Repentance really means to have this earnest desire and to groan continually to receive the increase of God, which is a heavenly tabernacle, so that, little by little, mortality may be swallowed up by immortality. Then we may be given a premonition of our body of incorruption, a token of the future resurrection, as was the case in the life of the Prophet Job, when he prophesied ‘though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.’<sup>6</sup> If we experience the incorruptible consolation of tears, and through them receive assurance of our immortality, then we will be able to see all our fellows as destined to immortality also and thereby love even our enemies. Then we will be able to speak to the Lord in His language, the language of tears, for us and for all people, through which He bends Himself down to us, and heals us.

Elder Sophrony recommended tears to his monks from the first week that they came to the monastery. He would say to them, ‘If you want to uproot the passions of the soul, learn to weep.’ In order to reinforce his teaching, he always recommended the catechism of Saint Symeon the New Theologian. Saint Symeon’s mystical theology has a strong charismatic element as he puts all of his trust in the Almighty Jesus. He trusts in whatever words He will put in his mouth. He has such confidence that the Lord will open his mouth with the desire to repent. In this he is like Saint Paul, who says, “we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”<sup>8</sup> Saint Symeon has the same apostolic confidence, that He who began a good work in us, will remain faithful to bring it to perfection. This is why in the thirtieth catechism he suggests a specific prayer before weeping and then adds, ‘and any other words that God will put in your mouth at that moment’<sup>8</sup> In other words, he leaves space for the Spirit, encouraging free prayer from the heart.



The language of tears is the language of the Holy Spirit in each person. This language speaks in our hearts differently at different times. We read the same passages from Holy Scripture many times and yet a day comes when a word resounds in us as it did the first time in the heart of him that pronounced it, opening to us a totally new content. I remember the day when I came across this word of Job, to which this book is dedicated:

“What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? and that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him? And that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment? ...Why hast thou set me as a target?”

I opened the Bible at random and found this verse which seemed to contain within it all of the theology of Elder Sophrony. It uses an unusual word *κατεντευκτης*, unknown in modern Greek, which can be rendered as target or accuser. In the Greek of the Septuaginta, it means someone who starts an argument not for selfish reasons but in order to understand the divine mystery. Whoever attains to the state of being a *κατεντευκτης* becomes also the target of secret and divine visitations, which are the source of all tears.

Saint James says that we must ‘receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save our souls’.<sup>9</sup> This engrafted word is the innate word, that primordial gift which God gave to man in order to create him in His image and likeness, to enable him to receive His revelation. The same principle is expressed in the Epistle to the Colossians as a ‘circumcision made without hands’.<sup>10</sup> Here Saint Paul says allegorically that we are circumcised, which means that the heart is wounded, not in a material or physical way, but by the circumcision of Christ, that is, by His word, by the precepts of the Gospel. When the heart is wounded by the precepts of the Gospel, and is circumcised by it, it becomes contrite and always mindful of Him, Who wounded it. This is repentance - to be always bearing this circumcision of Christ.

We need to bear this wound in the heart which is made known to us through tears. Without it we shall be cold and easily conformed to the patterns of this world, so that we will even come to such a state as to want to make compatible the love of this world with the love of God. We need the consolation of God to be stronger in us than the power of this world. We need a stronger fire to quench



the fire of the passions. So we need to bear this wound which always reminds us of something far beyond, perfect and holy. if we have this reminder within us, we will be able to discern 'that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God'.<sup>11</sup> It is of utmost importance for us to recognize and follow the traces of the will of God, because then we find life: 'In thy will there is life.'<sup>12</sup>

Tears start to flow when we surrender ourselves to the will of God and start to comprehend His providence. When we rely entirely on God and put all our confidence in Him then all the powers of our soul are unified and we are able to turn ourselves wholly to the Face of Christ. The great benefit of tears is that they allow us to present ourselves to God with our whole being. They are the mark, the anointing, that makes us acceptable before Him.

In the early stages of our learning to weep, our tears are bitter to us because of our wretched state. Through these burning tears, we begin to hate everything in us that resists the grace of God and prevents the Holy Spirit from coming to dwell in us. The humility of weeping in prayer washes our spiritual sight and our inner eye is opened to perceive the spiritual world. The scales which have covered over our sight are dissolved.

Over time, tears become more joyful, full of thirst to have a more perfect union with the God of our salvation. The greater the abundance of tears, the greater the action of grace that accompanies it and the easier the surrendering to the work of repentance. It is painful at first but, as with all prayer, we keep trying until inspiration is given to us and once it is given to us we do not want to abandon it. In the end our tears are full of gratitude for the innumerable and indescribable benefits of God's goodness to us, which previously we were not able to see.

Just as the strong cry and voluntary tears of Christ in Gethsemane worked out our salvation, so the way that we make this salvation our own is to follow the same path. If we are really disciples of the Cross, we will be workers of tears as well, because the Lord said, 'Blessed are those that mourn.' Spiritual mourning is a life-giving activity of the spirit of man. As long as we bear in our heart the dying of the Lord Jesus, then the life of Christ also will abound in us.<sup>14</sup> The Prophet Joel laments that 'the sons of men put joy to shame'<sup>15</sup> We need to repent because we have preferred false joy to spiritual joy. Instead of genuine gladness, we have



sought after the transitory delights of this world. Spiritual mourning separates us from the corruptible pleasures that put to shame the true joy of God. ‘Blessed are those that weep, for they shall laugh’;<sup>16</sup> this spiritual laughter is triumphant laughter, a sign that grace is beginning to overcome death in us.

The blessed joy brought about by tears of contrition is rendered in Greek by the word *κατάνυξις*, usually translated into English as compunction. Elder Sophrony translated this term as *amour triste*, ‘sad love’. The Church Fathers call it *χαρμολύπη*— joy and sadness experienced at the same time. Saint Paul says that he was at all times ‘weeping with those that wept and rejoicing with those that rejoiced’.<sup>17</sup> He was able to do both simultaneously because as a disciple of the Cross, he was also a disciple of the blessedness of His Risen Life. There is a strong element of joy in repentance because of the presence of the Holy Spirit which consoles the soul: ‘Through the Cross is joy come into all the world.’<sup>18</sup>

In the wonderful Psalm 119, which describes the longing of the soul to be released from this life so it may be with God for ever, it is written: ‘Rivers of waters run down mine eyes.’<sup>19</sup> Not just a tear but rivers of tears! We can never have enough contrition; we can never have enough tears; even that sort of weeping that comes from the very bottom of our heart and shakes our whole being to the core. Such weeping makes a change in our life and such moments become the foundation of our existence. In the long run, when we turn back to these moments they prove to be our support, as we know that, ‘Weeping shall tarry for the night but joy shall be in the morning.’<sup>20</sup>

In the New Testament, Saint Peter is the best teacher of tears. He committed the greatest sin of all: having been the foremost disciple of the Lord, he denied Him thrice, that is to say, he lost every grace of Baptism. However, the Lord had foreseen that he would be tempted and prayed for him. When Peter understood the depth of his fall, he went out and wept bitterly.<sup>21</sup> On Holy Friday, we hear these verses which express his cry to the Lord: “Hold not thy peace at my tears, for I am a stranger with thee, a sojourner as all my fathers were.”<sup>22</sup> Through his bitter tears, Peter was healed from his sin, and restored within days to the leadership of the Apostles. We can see this from the words of the angel to the



myrrh-bearers, “Go and tell the disciples and Peter, that the Lord goeth before you into Galilee.”<sup>23</sup>

The woman of the city who anointed the Lord with myrrh has an eternal remembrance before God because of her tears and her great love. Tears are a sign of love; we cannot weep without having true desire and true love. We can only weep if we have one thing in our mind and in our heart. If we are double minded we cannot weep. Weeping comes with the thought of our utter unworthiness and spiritual poverty. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’ is immediately followed by ‘Blessed are those who mourn.’<sup>24</sup> We need to always remember that we are poor and a complete nullity, so that we may be constantly ready to blame ourselves, to condemn ourselves and to reproach ourselves. Saint Gregory Palamas says that this self-accusation is the true wine that makes the soul rejoice, as contrition yields hot tears.<sup>25</sup> It brings light to the soul and cuts out the will of the enemy, predisposing us to follow only the will of God. Thus, contrition is necessary for us, for it is contrition which cheers up the soul with the true wine that strengthens the spirit.

When Abraham saw God, He said: ‘I am earth and dust!’<sup>26</sup> We have to sustain day by day this contrition which is a light to our soul, which is the beginning of true love. One way of understanding this great science is through the words that the Lord gave to our holy Father Silouan, ‘Keep thy mind in hell and despair not.’ Our life is full of hell; we are not continually abiding in the presence of God; we are not all the time led by His Spirit; we are not constantly illumined in our mind and transformed in our heart; most of the time we are wrestling against sin; we are wrestling against our obliviousness to God, against despondency. When God is in reality absent from our life, then we are in hell. Hell is the place of the absence of God. One way of applying the words of the Lord to Saint Silouan is to say, ‘Yes, Lord, I deserve this desolation, I deserve to be so far from Thy salvation, I deserve that all the house of my soul be hell. But Thou art good, save me, freely, without cause, the unworthy one.’

Elder Sophrony used to say that anyone who lives in this way, with contrition and tears, does not have the boldness even to look at a child’s face.<sup>27</sup> This is the ethos, the manner of those who are fed with the fatness of God. Alas unto us if



we make our righteousness stand before God, trusting in our external works or natural gifts. Divine love is found where ever there is contrition for sins and thanksgiving before God. We need to keep this spirit of contrition, so that the Holy Spirit may descend into the soul, and make an earthquake, shaking off the scales of despondency that we have accumulated, and renewing us as the Apostles were renewed at Pentecost. Those who receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit through contrition and tears begin to love God in a very fierce way, so much so that they see themselves as not having started yet on the path of divine love. That is why they are able to say as Saint Paul that 'Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.'<sup>28</sup>

In Paradise, when Adam was still abiding in the presence of God, he would look at Eve and see her as flesh from his own flesh and as bone from his own bones - as his own life. However, when he betrayed the will of God and the Lord sought him, he said, 'The woman which Thou hast given me has tempted me and destroyed me.' He treated Eve as a stranger to himself, as an alien. If we betray our original purpose as did Adam, we will no longer be able to render brotherly love to our fellows. We will see them as strangers, as a threat to our life and judge them. From the time of the Fall of our ancestors onwards, the only attitude acceptable to God is to consider ourselves as unworthy of God and unworthy of our fellows. If we keep this disposition, then no judgment, no criticism, no negative word will rise upon our lips against our fellows, because the energy brought about by the anointing of God through contrition and tears will cut its head in our throat before it rises to our tongue.

This is what we are called to as followers of Christ. In fact, each time the Lord gives us to weep over our sins a touch of eternity comes over us, a touch of grace that anoints us and makes us behave differently with our fellows. Unless we weep day by day and unless we make it our chief purpose, we will not see our brother as our life,<sup>29</sup> as we are exhorted to by Saint Silouan, and we shall continue biting one another until we will be 'consumed one of another'.<sup>30</sup>

Self-accusation and taking upon ourselves the fault, the shame of our sin, is the sign that the love of God is at work in us. This love becomes a light to the soul so that a man no longer compares himself with other mortals, but with divine





measures, that is to say, with the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then he is able to perceive that the greatest commandment of the New Testament is when the Lord says, 'So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done only that which was our duty to do.'<sup>31</sup>

Of all the Prophets of the Old Testament, the greatest teacher of tears is the Prophet Job, as he himself says 'My harp is turned to mourning, and my organ to the voice of them that weep.'<sup>32</sup> When his children are killed, his property is destroyed and he is plagued by illnesses, his wife says to him: 'Curse God, and die.'<sup>33</sup> She tempts him, knowing that if he blasphemes God then all his plagues will finish. Job, however, knows that if he curses God, there will be no hope for him in eternity. He remains surrendered to the will of God, even while in agony of tears, saying:

"I was at ease, but he hath broken me asunder: he hath also taken me by my neck, and shaken me to pieces, and set me up for his mark ... My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death ... O that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleadeth for his neighbour!"<sup>34</sup>

Job does not realize that he himself is acting in a way that prefigures Christ, the very advocate for mankind that he seeks. In his testing of God, he manifests one of the main characteristics of personhood, acting as an arbitrator for all mankind before God and pleading that human suffering might be justified. In his book *On Prayer*, Elder Sophrony includes a lamentation from Job as if it were his own prayer. In it Job curses himself and with him ail men, so that his cry becomes like that of Adam cast out from Paradise:

"Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived ... Let the darkness and the shadow of death stain it... let the blackness of the day terrify it ... Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein. Let them curse it that curse the day ... Let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day; Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes. Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? ... For now should I have lain still and been quiet (in the vast quiet of



nonbeing) ... Why is light given to a man whose way (to “knowledge of God) is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?”<sup>35</sup>

After Job pleads with God, presenting the human condition as hopeless, then he receives a response: he is raised up, as if from Hades, and granted to see the Lord face to Face. Having accused God, out of the devastation which he experienced, he was corrected by the mouth of God:

“The Lord answered ... out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who hath laid the measures thereof? ... Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it... Then Job answered the Lord, and said, | know that thou canst do everything ... (Heretofore) I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent (of my foolishness) in dust and ashes.”<sup>36</sup>

In all of his temptation Job knew that there was a deeper reason behind his torment and he wrestled continuously to understand the judgment of God. In the end, when God visited him so that he might see Him with his own eyes, he lamented over himself and regretted that he had not suffered even more, Only when he had endured to the end was he granted a perfect encounter with the personal God so that his hypostatic principle might be fulfilled. The temptation of Job reveals the hypostasis of man (love unto self-hatred), just as the reality of the Cross and all the suffering that Christ undergoes, reveals the Person of Christ (love unto the end). This is the judgment of the world. As Christ says, ‘Now is the judgment of the world.’<sup>37</sup>

Saint Silouan writes that the Prophet Job, through all the humiliation he endured, became like unto Christ :

“When the peace of Christ enters the soul, then is she glad to sit like Job among the ashes and behold others in glory; then does the soul rejoice that she is worse than everyone else. This mystery of Christ-like humility is a great mystery,



impossible to unfold. From love the soul wishes every human being more good than she wishes for herself, and delights when she sees others happier, and grieves to see them suffering.”<sup>38</sup>

Job attained to Christ-like love, like Saint Silouan, through a direct vision of the Face of God. He became like unto Christ through following His path; by first descending into hell and then ascending to the heavens. Job knew the power of tears. In such suffering, how else could he have survived? Elder Sophrony’s brother, Nicholas, who stayed in the forced labour camps of Siberia for many years, was once asked by his son: ‘Did you pray there in the camps?’ He smiled and said, ‘It would have been impossible to survive without prayer.’

Following the path of Job and maintaining constant converse with God, even in the absence of any consolation, leads to the renewal of grace and a rich entrance into His Kingdom. After his visitation by the Lord, Job is restored and finds himself to be, as he says, once again as he was in his youth ‘when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle; When the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were about me; When I washed my steps with butter, and the rock poured me out rivers of oil.’<sup>39</sup> This is the richness of God’s mercy to His saints, which the saints are then able to convey to others through their words and their presence.

In the Psalms, tears are called the ‘bread of God’<sup>40</sup> that strengthens the heart to stand in the Presence of God. Through the gift of tears, the heart is made bold to follow the way of Christ and fulfil all the commandments. This is the boldness of the Cross, if we are disciples of the Cross. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son.’ Through His Cross, He revealed to us the wondrous way which leads to heaven. However, since, like Peter, we are not always able to bear this Cross, we have no other means to follow this way except to pray with tears. There is not another way to be healed except through tears. The nature of weeping is such that it unifies all the powers of the soul and only then, in his healed state, is man enabled to fulfil with his whole heart the commandments of love.



*Endnotes:*

1. Rev. 9:4.
2. PG 36, 313B.
3. Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C.J. de Catanzaro, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 314.
4. See Ps. 104:23.
5. Cf. 2 Cor. 5:2-4,
6. Job 19:26.
7. Rom. 8:26.
8. Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, p. 322.
9. Jas. 1:21.
10. Col. 2:41.
11. Rom. 12:2.
12. Ps. 29:6 (LXX).
13. Matt. 5:4.
- 14, 2 Cor. 4:9-10.
15. Joel 1:12 (LXX)
16. Luke 6:21
17. Cf. Rom. 12:15
18. From the hymn of the Resurrection after the Gospel during Matins
19. Ps. 119:136
20. Ps. 30:5 (LXX).
21. Luke 22:62.
22. Ps. 39:12.
23. Cf. Mark 16:7.
- 24, Matt. 5:3.
25. Saint Gregory Palamas, 'To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia' in *The Philokalia*, vol. IV, p. 314.
26. Gen. 18:27.
27. See also Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, pp. 151 and 254.
28. 1 Tim. 1:15
29. Saint Silouan, p. 371.
30. Gal. 5:15.
31. Cf. Luke 17:10.
32. Job 30:31.
33. Job 2:9.
34. Job 16:12, 16, 21.
35. Cf. Job 3. The comments in brackets were made by Elder Sophrony. This is an edited version of the passage which is quoted at full length in *On Prayer*, pp. 126-127 and in *His Life Is Mine*, pp. 46-47.



36. See Job 38-42. This passage is quoted in full in *We Shall See Him*, pp. 151-152. The words in brackets are again his addition.

37. John 12:31.

38. Saint Silouan, 305.

39. Job 29:5-6.

40. Ps. 80:5.