VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS

An Anthology of PATRISTIC PRAYERS

edited and translated from the Greek by

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SAINT EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN
(305 - 373 AD)

He is the greatest Syrian theologian. Born in Mesopotamia, he spent part of his life as an ascetic and part as a teacher of theology. Most of his life was quite turbulent due to the Persian wars in Mesopotamia and Syria at that time.

He is honored by the Church as a saint and a strict monastic. It is said that he ate only dry bread and vegetables. Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks very highly about his exegetical works on the Holy Scriptures. Unfortunately, almost all his commentaries are lost. All his treatises and homilies have a rhythm and look like poems. The most famous are: "On the Vanity of the World," "On the Second Coming of Christ," "On the Monks," "On the Theotokos" etc.

Although the basic trend of his writings is not doctrinal, he displays a high level of dogmatic sensitivity.

His memory is celebrated by the Church on January the 28th.

A VERY COMPUNCTIONATE PRAYER
TO OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

Now, once again today, ashamed and with eyes cast down
I dare to speak to you, the Master and creator of all:
I am but dust and ashes, a reproach of men,
truly a worm and not a man, completely condemned and in deep sorrow.
How can I look upon you, O Master?
With what heart?
With what conscience?
With what tongue shall I speak to you?
How can I begin my confession?
Of which sins shall I, the miserable one, first ask remission?
For those I have committed knowingly and have no excuse or for those by which I have violated your holy commandments?
Or should I begin, rather, with my evil thoughts that have been recorded and must be accounted for?
I know, O Lord, that because of my many and evil sins, I am not worthy to call upon your fearful and holy name nor to stand in prayer nor to look up and see the height of heaven, for I have transgressed more than any man;
I have violated the law more than Manasseh; I have lived more prodigally than the prodigal son; the enemy has taxed me more than the publican; I, who love prostitution, have prostituted myself more than the harlot; I have transgressed more than Nineveh, but unrepentantly; my iniquities have risen higher than my head, and as a heavy burden have pressed heavily upon me, and thus, having become wretched, I am utterly bowed down. I have enraged your holy name; I have distressed your Holy Spirit; I have despised your commandments; I have in various ways stained my soul, created in your image; I have wasted in sins the time that you gave me for repentance; I have shamed my face; I have totally blinded my eyes; I have defiled my lips with lies; and all the parts and the portions of my soul and body have been instruments of sin. My mind has been mingled with demonic thoughts and I find that with every work and thought embitter your goodness while serving my enemy, even though he fights against me.

Therefore, I am self-condemned and, before my forthcoming judgment, I have my evil life to indict me and the foul smell of my passions to put me to shame. From the years of my childhood I am always stained by filthy thoughts. I have been an instrument of destructive sin and now, although I hear every day about judgment and retribution, I cannot resist sin, but I, the wretched one, am always captured by it. Alas! O Lord, for I have badly wasted your longsuffering. Alas! for the time of my life has passed by in vanity. Alas! How shall I lament the blindness of my soul? How shall I mourn my passionate and thoughtless will? But, O Master, look mercifully from your holy high place, behold my incorrigible soul and with the means and ways you know correct me by your mercy. As if standing before you, O Christ King, as if touching your immaculate feet, so I implore you with a broken heart. Have mercy on me, O merciful one. Do not wait for my corrupt will, for I have no eagerness to correct myself. For many times, I have been ready to repent, yet I, the most miserable one,
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have become a liar
with respect to my decision to be with you.
O Master,
many times you have had mercy on me,
but I have neglected you;
you have raised me up many times,
but I have again fallen down;
you have endured me,
but I have again enraged you.
How many times my humble soul
has been filled with your grace, O Lord!
How many times
has it illumined my dark mind!
How many times
has it comforted my poverty
and expelled my despair!
How many times
has it collected my mind together
from the delusion of the imagination!
Yet I, the unfortunate one,
always reject your grace, O compassionate one.
Now,
thinking and reflecting upon these things,
I am completely amazed
and tremble
as I am plunged into the depths of wonder;
for I, the miserable one,
have nothing good to use as an apology.
O lover of mankind,
how can I proclaim your blessings to me,
which I, the impious one, reject?
Thus,
I am worthy of a myriad of punishments,
for you have filled me, the ungrateful one,
with a myriad of gifts.
Even so, O Master,

having an ocean of long-suffering
and boundless compassion inherent to your nature,
do not allow me, the ungrateful one,
to be cut off as the fruitless fig tree,
neither seize me unprepared,
nor present my soul
as pitifully condemned
before your dreadful
and impartial seat of judgment.
But as a good God, who loves mankind,
have mercy on me,
the ungrateful one,
the hardened one,
the one with no excuse,
the condemned,
the one who is worthy of every hell
and punishment.
How can I call upon you, O Master of all,
without having kept your commandments?
For after I received
the knowledge of your truth,
I became irritable, merciless,
and especially a captive to evil thoughts;
I also became captive to gluttony,
greed, pride, slander
and hypocrisy.
While I myself lie, I grieve for the liers;
I, who am full of transgressions,
judge those who transgress.
If insulted, I defend myself.
If I am not honored, I feel abhorred
and I consider as enemies
those who tell me the truth.
If I am not flattered,
I feel disgusted.
Being unworthy,
I expect honors. 
If someone does not serve me, 
I defame him as arrogant. 
I ignore the brother who is sick, 
but when I am sick, 
I want to be loved and cared for. 
I despise the superiors  
and overlook the inferiors. 
If I keep myself even for a little bit  
from unreasonable desires, 
I become vainglorious. 
If I attain some degree of vigilance, 
I am entrapped by its opposite. 
If I restrain myself from foods, 
I am thrown down because of my pride. 
If I make some progress in virtue, 
I boast before my brothers. 
Externally I appear humble, 
but in my soul I am presumptuous. 
I am not going to mention  
the vain thoughts I have in church  
and the wanderings of my mind during prayer. 
I leave aside the hypocritical meetings, 
the greed in the give and take of business, 
the publication of the mistakes of others  
and the disastrous slanders. 
This is my accursed life. 
Among a myriad of such evils, 
I struggle for my salvation, 
but my arrogance and pride  
do not allow me to understand them. 
And yet, 
what apology have I before you, my God, 
if I claim that the evil one  
has suggested these to me? 
Not even Adam was helped when he apologized in this manner. 
Who will not mourn my loss? 
Who will not sigh for my blindness? 
Who will not lament my insensitivity? 
O Lord, grant me repentance  
for the sake of your infinite compassion. 
O all Saints, 
intercede for me, the sinner, 
pouring out your supplication  
to the compassionate God  
that he may recall my soul  
which has been attached to hades  
through disgraceful passions. 
O Saints, intercede for me,  
so that through your holy prayers  
I may become worthy of repentance. 
For it is your work, O holy ones,  
to intercede for sinners,  
and it is God’s work to be merciful  
upon those who are in despair. 
O blessed and righteous ones,  
who have carried out well the fight,  
come, gather for me, the wretched,  
and either lament over me  
as one does for the dead  
or have pity on me  
as one does for one half-dead. 
I have no boldness before God  
because of my many sins. 
Pour out your mercy on me, O saints,  
as you would to a hostage and an injured one. 
For I know that if you entreat God,  
all my transgressions will be forgiven by him  
because of his ineffable mercy,  
for as he is loving to mankind so are you. 
Only do not overlook me.
Receive, O Lord,
this humble supplication of mine
and have mercy on me
through the intercessions
of your immaculate Mother
and of all your Saints,
so that I too,
together with all the saved,
through your ineffable mercy,
may worship you, God the Logos,
who is glorified in the Father and the Spirit.
Amen.

A PRAYER
BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP

O Lord Jesus Christ, our God,
you who have manifested your Mother
more honorable than all the heavenly hosts,
you, O all-good One,
through her intercessions and those of all your Saints,
be merciful and forgive me, your unworthy servant,
if somehow I have sinned this day as a human,
or rather as an inhuman.
Forgive my voluntary and involuntary transgressions,
the ones I have committed in knowledge or in ignorance,
the ones that have been done
out of evil influence and carelessness
and my great indolence and negligence.
Forgive me, O Lord,
if I have taken an oath by your holy name
or if I have violated my oath;
if I have sworn in my mind
or if I have somehow irritated you;
if I have stolen
or if I have lied;
if a friend came to me and I ignored him
or if I have distressed and embittered my brother;
if while standing in prayer and chanting,
my evil mind wandered off to evil and worldly things;
if I have delighted more than I should
or if I have said jokes,
and have laughed too much
or if I was vainglorious or proud;
if I looked upon vain beauty
and my mind was attracted by it;
if I was overly talkative about improper things
or if I examined curiously the faults of my brother
and condemned him
while overlooking my own innumerable faults;
if I have neglected my prayer
or if I have brought to mind any other evil thing.
Forgive me, O God,
your useless servant,
all these and whatever other things
I have done and do not remember.
Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for you are good and you love mankind,
so that I, the prodigal one,
may go to bed and fall asleep
glorifying you,
the Father
and your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit,
now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Lord and Master of my life,
give me not a spirit of sloth,
vain curiosity, lust for power and idle talk.

But give to me, your servant,
a spirit of sobriety,
humility, patience and love.

Yea, O Lord and King,
grant me to see my own faults,
and not to condemn my brother;
for blessed are you to the ages of ages.
Amen.
Dismissal Hymn.

Having in your soul as an immaterial stream the wealth of life-flowing fear (of God), you have proved to be a crater of compassion. Therefore, through your holy teachings, tune us for the perfection of manners. O righteous Ephraim, pray to Christ God that he may grant to us his great mercy.
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To the little angels who suffer
and
to all those who serve and succour them

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