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**BEGINNING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE**

**MONASTICISM: THE WAY OF PERFECTION**

February 20, 2006

*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

**The Strong Beginning:**

We shall speak about starting on the spiritual path. God says, “*I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown*.” [[1]](#footnote-2) These words were concerning the Israelites as they left Egypt for the wilderness of Sinai – a dry parched desert – facing the Red Sea and the danger of being trapped between Pharaoh’s army and the Red Sea. This is after slaying the Passover lamb by faith and placing its blood on the lintel and doorposts while the angel passed over the whole land of Egypt killing the firstborn – it was a powerful beginning. They left with the dough not yet leavened, to the extent that they put the dough in bed sheets. They ate the Passover lamb roasted by fire with their sandals on, loins girded, and belongings packed – a people ready for travel. They ate the Passover while prepared to depart. Even the yeast did not have time to ferment (that is why thereafter they ate unleavened bread). It was a tremendous scene: a people who had been living in this land for 430 years, and in one night millions of Israelites left. No movie producer could videotape this scene; if it was filmed, they would tape one or two thousand people, but to get 600,000 from the age of 20 – 60, men only. We also know that at a certain point during the days of Moses the Prophet the Israelite males were killed. Moses was 80 years old (he had been saved by an oversight); all males his age did not exist, but there were female counterparts, so that the number of women was greater than men for a certain period of time. So, this is about 600,000 males, their female counterparts, those above 60, and those below 20. The total could reach approximately three million people who are gathering their belongings and leaving all at once – a very mighty army; this is a night not to be forgotten for all ages. This is why He says, “*I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness*.”[[2]](#footnote-3) An exodus from a land they had lived in for a very long time; an exodus from an Egyptian society with its own habits and traditions; an exodus from an army equipped with Pharaoh’s chariots. They are exiting surrounded by many dangers; exiting to a wilderness where they do not know what they will eat or drink. They are simply leaving.

Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh: “*Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness*.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The amount of fervor these people had is what split the Red Sea before them. It is true that Moses’ rod is what split the sea, but the zeal and fervor that the congregation had is what split the water. Therefore, St. Paul says, “*All were baptized into Moses… in the Red Sea*.”[[4]](#footnote-5) We all know the relationship between baptism and faith. They crossed over, “*and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left*”[[5]](#footnote-6) – the water was just standing upright all around them. Who would endanger his or her life and enter with the water standing alongside like a wall? What is holding this water? There is no plastic or glass divider, or any buildings, simple upright water on both sides and they are walking in the middle! Whoever entered this path accepted death, saying: “I would rather die in this water than in slavery or by Pharaoh’s sword and army.” For this congregation to reach the land of Canaan, they had to exit with a strong beginning, because if the first exit of the spiritual life is not strong, how will you reach the end of the path?

**Initial Longings:**

One leaves the world, having many spiritual longings: longing for the life of spiritual perfection, longing to fully keep the commandments, a plethora of commandments the heart is longing to fulfill. One prays the great psalm in the Midnight Prayer saying: “*My soul breaks with longing for Your judgments at all times*,”[[6]](#footnote-7) and hears Him answer: “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*.”[[7]](#footnote-8) “*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time… and in the age to come eternal life*.”[[8]](#footnote-9) This means that the reward is not only in heaven. The Lord Christ said: “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me… He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me*.”[[9]](#footnote-10) You find that the commandments say: “*Give to him who asks you… And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two… Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you… Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also*.”[[10]](#footnote-11) You find yourself needing internal strength in order to fulfill the commandments. You read in the great psalm: “*Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart! They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways. You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes*!”[[11]](#footnote-12)

**The Hidden Treasure:**

The Lord Christ tells you: “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted… Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls… Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth… Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven… Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”*[[12]](#footnote-13) You feel yourself saying: “*I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad,”*[[13]](#footnote-14) and come to ask yourself: “When will I fulfill all these commandments? When will my longing be for You? When will the world not distract me from You? When will I possess true humility? When will I possess true meekness? When will I be free from the love of possessions? When will I find time for my tongue to praise You at all times? When will I reach the life of unceasing prayer? When will my heart be inflamed with Your love? When will my thoughts be continually preoccupied with You? When will You be the ‘*treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field*’?[[14]](#footnote-15) When will my life be full of prayers, praises, angels, saints, and the heavenlies? When will I forget everything in the world, so that I may remember You alone?”

You find yourself unable to realize all these longings while still in the world. You have a craving to sit with God, read His words, meditate on His commandments, and dwell on them night and day. You come to say in the psalm, “*My soul faints for Your salvation, but I hope in Your word. My eyes fail from searching Your word, saying, ‘When will You comfort me?’ … How many are the days of Your servant*?”[[15]](#footnote-16) Where is spiritual consolation? Where is continual reflection? Where is theoria?[[16]](#footnote-17) Where is meditation? Where is ecstasy? Where is the mind thinking of nothing but of the heavenly, as our teacher St. Paul says: “*If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God*”?[[17]](#footnote-18) You feel that in leaving the world and coming to the monastery, you are leaving Pharaoh’s enslavement to exit to the wilderness to worship God there: “*Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness*.” You feel that in the monastery you can walk in the way of perfection: “*Blessed are the undefiled in the way… How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word*.”[[18]](#footnote-19)

**Way of Spiritual Perfection:**

Beginning the spiritual way in the monastic life, the person seeks to reach spiritual perfection. You are seeking to reach purity of heart, purity of senses, purity of thought — you want the thoughts to be heavenly. You are seeking freedom from all lusts existing in the world. You are seeking to overcome demonic wars. You are seeking to acquire humility (because the saintly fathers say, “Obedience with lowliness gives men power over wild beasts”[[19]](#footnote-20)). You are seeking to apply Christ’s commandment, “*Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*.”[[20]](#footnote-21) You are seeking to overcome all the demonic wars by way of humility and lowliness of spirit, which is the safe way to the kingdom (“*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*”). You are seeking to be freed from the self–the self that is seeking praise, honor, and to establish its presence. You are seeking to embrace the cross and be a true disciple to the Lord (because He said, “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me*”[[21]](#footnote-22)). You would not care what people say about you, because had you desired glory from people, you would have remained in the world. You would not care how the monastics in the monastery look at you. You would want to hide your spiritual virtues (as the Beloved says of the Shulamite: “*A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed*”[[22]](#footnote-23)). And you would not care if anyone praises your work or spiritual experiences, but you truly would want to be freed from vain self-praise, vainglory, and people’s praise. Therefore, you would flee from judging others by considering everyone to be better than yourself — telling yourself, “I don’t deserve to live among such saints.” The fathers say, “The sage looks to the virtues of others in order to gain them, and the fool looks to another’s shortcomings in order to judge him about them.”[[23]](#footnote-24)

You left the world because “release from all is bondage to the One,”[[24]](#footnote-25) so what does news matter to you? If you are a person who died to the world, why would you seek news? You left the newspapers, magazines, and news media; will you create a local news network inside the monastery? What’s more, you are not satisfied seeking the latest news, but you propagate the news, becoming a local news channel! Where is monasticism then! A person wants to forget: forget all people, forget everything, and forget the world and all that is in it — the world outside the monastery and also the world inside the monastery.

**Goal of Your Spiritual Life:**

This is why the beginning of the spiritual path is very important. What will be your agenda in the monastic life? Will you live the life of being poor in spirit? Then, this will be the beginning of the way: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” — the first word in the Sermon on the Mount. Will you live the life of endurance, the life of patience? “*Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own… bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*.”[[25]](#footnote-26) You organize a spiritual agenda in order to acquire all the spiritual virtues.

No virtue can be built at the expense of another. You cannot say, “I want to acquire the virtue of unceasing prayer,” yet build it upon spiritual pride. And where does this pride come from? You say, “I want to reach unceasing prayer,” you enter the monastery and find one monastic speaking, and so you shush that monastic. In this way, you have sought unceasing prayer, but lost humility. The saints used to say, “Flee, my brothers,” when asked from what, they answered, “Flee that,”[[26]](#footnote-27) –from the tongue. Flee from excessive speech, but not by becoming arrogant with silence! Instead of shushing the monastic by saying, “Do not speak,” you should say, “We received a blessing. Remember me in your prayers,” and with humility withdraw in calmness — not by building one virtue at the cost of another virtue. Meanwhile, your conscience praises you: “I am applying the virtue of fleeing from wasting time.” Is that achieved through arrogance! It could be through humility. If one nun is talkative, and a beginner wants to walk on the path and not waste time, the beginner could say, “I took a great blessing in meeting you today, please remember me in your prayers, because I am very poor and in a confused state, please excuse me now because I am very confused and do not know how to pray”—withdrawing in a humble way, not in an arrogant way.

An elderly nun is walking, carrying a heavy load, so another nun passes her by as the priest and Levite passed by the injured man who was taken to the inn by the Samaritan, saying, “What do I care, let her carry.” In the monastic life, the virtues do not contradict each other; I mean the virtues of humility and love. So, if she finds a nun carrying a heavy load, she should say, “I’ll get that for you; I’ll take a blessing. Do I deserve it?” and brings the nun to her cell with the heavy load. If the nun says, “Oh wait so-and-so I want to talk with you,” she should answer, “Do I know anything, I’m very poor; please forgive me and remember me in your prayers, because I’m confused,” and not “Shush, no talking, keep moving!” What is this? Is this the spiritual way?

One comes to the monastery thinking she is going to teach the nuns the monastic life, while she herself has not even hatched yet. She has read two words in *The Paradise Of The Holy Fathers* and thinks that she has descended by parachute from the seventh heaven (if there is a seventh heaven; I only know of the third heaven and, thereafter, the kingdom).

**Christ is the Foundation:**

The beginning has to be on a right foundation. St. Paul spoke of how in spiritual construction the foundation laid down has to be the Lord Christ:

*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is*.[[27]](#footnote-28)

The Lord Christ is the foundation. He is the Rock of which He said, “*On this rock I will build My church*.”[[28]](#footnote-29) As He says in Isaiah, “*Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one*.”[[29]](#footnote-30) He says in the psalm, “*The Lord is my Rock*.”[[30]](#footnote-31) The foundation of our spiritual life has to be the Lord Christ.

**Harbor of Salvation:**

We said the beginning of our spiritual life has to be a very strong beginning; the person starting on the monastic path has to begin with full strength. This manifests itself when the family sometimes causes many problems and one is able to stand firm against them. Why? Because one is coming with fervent longings, feeling that the monastery is the safe haven, so one has a great capacity to resist. But, when one comes to monasticism and the family causes commotion and she returns with them, then she has begun to fail at the beginning of the spiritual path, and the test of her ability to endure in the monastic life. Also, the devil can come with doubts later; after the family leaves, the conscience bothers her saying, “And what will your mother do, and where will your father go?” These are all known wars a person must face in the beginning of the exit from the world. Therefore, the Lord said, “*No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God*.”[[31]](#footnote-32) The Bible says, “*Remember Lot’s wife*,”[[32]](#footnote-33) she looked back, and so turned into a pillar of salt.

**Death to the World:**

It is better for a person to die to the world than to die in the world. St. Paul speaks of “*the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*.”[[33]](#footnote-34) The world has been crucified to me means I consider the world to have been nailed and ineffective – it is nothing. I have been crucified to the worldmeans, “*Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*.”[[34]](#footnote-35) “I am willing to endure Christ’s Passion, the thorns of the way, and the struggle.” “*You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin*.”[[35]](#footnote-36) Resisting to bloodshed is what makes a person say, “I have been crucified to the world, and I am willing to endure any pains or hardships for the sake of persevering on the spiritual way.” Then the world comes to find no use for me (as far as it is concerned); I have been crucified to it. The world calls, “Hey, so-and-so!” and I reply, “So-and-so who? That person has died and has been crucified!” “*Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin... [means that a person] who has died has been freed from sin*.”[[36]](#footnote-37) One who is freed from sin is like a person who disowns sin. So, when the world calls to us, we answer that we have already died.

The problem, however, comes if the world tries to leap into the monastery — this would be a great catastrophe. You ask how? I was just giving you an example: we stopped watching the news channel and created a local news network inside the monastery: “Don’t you know what happened to so-and-so…” It is a life of exile; “We are strangers brethren, therefore let us be complete strangers.”[[37]](#footnote-38) The proper monastic says, “This is not my business, I keep to myself, and the Lord will aid all”—yet this does not come through arrogance and pride. This is a lowly person who says, “What do I know?” “Who am I? Who counts me as anything?”[[38]](#footnote-39) The fathers say that there is nothing better than to “always throw the blame on yourself”[[39]](#footnote-40) And, “If you say that you have said or done well, then you have neither said nor done well.”[[40]](#footnote-41)

**The *Self*, the Mortal Enemy:**

The person who wants to begin walking on the spiritual way rejoices at being disdained. You rejoice with disdain and not with praise, saying, “This *self* of mine needs to be crucified. It needs to be humbled; nothing will cure it except being humiliated and disdained.” The most dangerous thing devastating the spiritual path is the *self*. Instead of living in the glories of the spiritual life and hovering in the spiritual heavens, one lives in the “self-barbecuing grill.” You should enter your cell in order to become Jacob’s ladder — the one with the angels ascending and descending with the Lord standing in glory and the heavens open, saying, “What is this glory we are living in? I am not able to keep up with the heavenly blessings pouring down on us! I don’t deserve it, for, ‘*The Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!*’[[41]](#footnote-42)” The one, and the *self*; the devil is their third! To the one whose *self* is forgotten and abandoned, the Lord Christ says, “*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word… and I will love him and manifest Myself to him …and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him*.”[[42]](#footnote-43)

***Accept, I Pray, the Freewill Offerings of My Mouth, O Lord*:**

It is also important on the spiritual path for the person to remember the goal for which you exited, and remember the vows between yourself and God, saying, “*Accept, I pray, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O Lord*.”[[43]](#footnote-44) “Why did I leave the world?” I pity those who left the world, broke their parents’ hearts, and did not produce any fruits in the monastic way. Why all this torture! Only pain to their loved ones! You have to remember why you left the world –the goal; the goal has to be continually clear before your eyes. What is the goal? It is communion with God, spiritual perfection, fulfilling the commandments. Fulfilling the commandments needs living in fellowship with God and tasting the sweetness of being in His presence (this will release you from worldly desires), and so your heart’s continual desire will be Christ. You have to remember the purpose for which you left the world. Was the goal dressing in black? Anyone could dress in black at home. The fathers say, “How long will you console yourself with dressing in black?”[[44]](#footnote-45) Is monasticism wearing black? You have to remember the goal you pursued, and the vows between you and God, the official monastic vows (obedience, celibacy, and voluntary poverty), and your personal spiritual vows between you and God. Spiritual vows: wanting to please God with all your heart, wanting to love all people, wanting to fulfill all the commandments, and wanting to attain to purity of heart.

**Love is the Yardstick:**

The Bible says, “*He who hates his brother is a murderer and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. In this the children of God are manifest because we love the brethren*.”[[45]](#footnote-46) What a tragedy! We could not know ourselves, whether we are born of God or not, unless we love others! So, we cannot comfort ourselves with baptism, monasticism, or anything else. There is a standard which St. John sets in his epistle: “*In this the children of God are manifest because we love the brethren*.” Yes, without doubt baptism is birth from above, and monasticism is the way of spiritual perfection and death to the world, but he makes a point: “*In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest*.”[[46]](#footnote-47) This would be a tragedy: if we are not the children of God, then we will be counted as the children of the devil! The standard is: if *we love the brethren*; by this we will know that we are born of God: “*For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen*?”[[47]](#footnote-48)

**Customizing the Commandments:**

As the days accrue and the years go by, each person builds his or her own personality and a fortified high-rise with unscalable walls. That is it! You have designed for yourself a spiritual agenda and spiritual standards, and the commandments have become something you design and not something you seek to fulfill. You do not seek to understand the commandments, but you create the commandments, and submit them to serve your personal understanding, goals, and heart’s desires — a custom fitted commandment. When you try on a garment for which fitted measurements were not taken, you are not pleased and say, “No, I want them to take my measurements first before making this garment” — you want them to customize the commandments to a personalized fit, not according to God’s designs.

**The Psalms Academy:**

Although I am sure you have it memorized, I would like to remind you of some excerpts from the great psalm (Psalm 119) that parallel what we are now discussing:

* (v. 4-6) *You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes! Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments.* [And what is the condition of the person who does not keep the commandments?]
* (v. 7-8) *I will praise You with uprightness of heart, when I learn Your righteous judgments. I will keep Your statutes.* [As you pray the Midnight Prayer, ask God to give you understanding to keep the commandments.]
* (v. 10) *With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!* [Lest I have custom designed commandments for myself without realizing it!]
* (v. 11-16) *Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You! Blessed are You, O Lord! Teach me Your statutes… I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies… I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.*
* (v. 17) *Deal bountifully with Your servant, that I may live and keep Your word.* [So, the reward I want, Lord, is to live in the spiritual life. How? By keeping Your word.]
* (v. 18-19) *Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law. I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me.* [This is a big problem! Someone who lives on this earth and is lost! Let me ask you: “What troubles a stranger?” Losing the way. If one of you, who have never traveled to Alexandria, went down to Alexandria looking for a place, you would travel around for three or four hours and still not find the place you were seeking. Tell Him, “Lord I am a stranger, lost, so please do not hide Your commandments from me.” A know-it-all would say, “Oh, but I know.” Reexamine yourself as you pray the great psalm. Ask Him, “Lord, what if I am misunderstanding the commandments, applying them wrongly!” Oh, how many times did we hear of people who were on the spiritual path, and they had faith - faith that God will show so-and-so. Or a priest who turns over the patent saying, “I turned the patent on him”[[48]](#footnote-49) … Oh, how clever you are, and then what!!]
* (v. 20-21) *My soul breaks with longing for Your judgments at all times. You rebuke the proud -- the cursed, who stray from Your commandments.* [What a tragedy it is that we have come upon curses! The psalm means “save me Lord lest I fall under the curse if I do not fulfill your commandments.”]
* (v. 22, 24) *Remove from me reproach and contempt, for I have kept Your testimonies… Your testimonies also are my delight and my counselors.*
* (v. 25-32) *Teach me Your statutes. Make me understand the way of Your precepts; my soul melts from heaviness; strengthen me according to Your word. Remove from me the way of lying, and grant me Your law graciously. I have chosen the way of truth; Your judgments I have laid before me. I cling to Your testimonies; O Lord, do not put me to shame! I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart.* [Please enlarge my heart so I may know how to walk on the spiritual path.]
* (v. 33) *Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.* [I want You to give me spiritual guidelines to follow because I might be confusing everything.]
* (v. 34-35) *Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it.* [Oh, now I remember the day I left the world to fulfill Your commandments!]

That is enough. These are just to illustrate why the church placed this psalm to be prayed in length during the Midnight Prayer: for a person to be sobered up and remember that you left the world to pursue perfection by fulfilling the commandments – not the commandments you customize, design, and program, but the commandments according to God’s will.

**The More Love, the More Wisdom:**

Our Lord says, “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*.”[[49]](#footnote-50) Why does He say ask and it will be given to you? If we know everything, why would we pray? As St. Paul says, “*And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent* [*discern the things that differ*, according to the Arabic translation] *that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God*.”[[50]](#footnote-51) That is very strange! When our love for God increases, we will be able to discern things that contradict. What does increased love have to do with the virtues of differentiation and discernment? In the spiritual life, we abound in the love of God, and the more our love for Him grows, the more our knowledge of Him grows. Christ said, “*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word… and I will love him and manifest Myself to him*.”[[51]](#footnote-52) So, the more our love for Him increases, the more we keep the commandments; and when we keep the commandments, the more He reveals Himself to us. This is the relationship between increased love and increased knowledge. “*I will love him and manifest Myself to him*” – when He manifests Himself to us, we will increase in His knowledge, and when we increase in His knowledge… He is The Wisdom born of the Wise Father (that is His title)… So, the more we increase in knowing Christ, the more we increase in the knowledge of wisdom, and we increase in the virtue of discernment and differentiation. I am saying that on the spiritual path we have to grow—there has to be spiritual growth. When He said, “*ask, and it will be given to you*,” it means we have to grow more in the knowledge of God’s commandments, and more in the knowledge of perfection. He says, “*Accept, I pray, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O Lord, and teach me Your judgments. My life is continually in my hand, yet I do not forget Your law*.”[[52]](#footnote-53) My life is in Your hand; design it however You will, not how ever I and my ego will.

**Constantly Inflamed With Divine Love:**

Beginning the spiritual way is to begin the path of perfection, but what is the advantage to having a strong beginning that does not continue, but weakens as the days go by? How do we keep it from weakening? We know that all people who exited to monasticism had a strong zeal in their earlier days: “*I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness*.”[[53]](#footnote-54) We know this. How do we protect this spiritual zeal? We protect it by knowing the value of praying the psalms. If a monastic’s canon is the psalms, then when one prays the psalms, one must make them the ladder to heaven, Jacob’s ladder, the means of life’s continual growth in power. So, if you consider the psalms canon a burden, then every so often you will ask absolution for the previous period in which the canon was not finished, and open a new account. Are the canons a burden, or are they the spiritual life-vitamins, the springs of living water from which one drinks, the secret to the strength of one’s life on the spiritual path? One person has the psalms memorized, rushing through them without understanding anything, and not benefiting anything, but only satisfied to have finished the canon! But notice the one who humbly sits before God and pleads with Him. The psalms are the keys to heaven and to God’s heart — these prayers are inspired by God. He says, “I gave you these psalms to pray to Me with them because these are the prayers which, when said with understanding, feeling, and love, are the ones that will pour out My grace on you abundantly.” This is why my advice to the new novices in the monastery is not to look at their psalms canon as a burden, but as the means for them to maintain their spiritual zeal, by which they will grow more and more in love, knowledge, and understanding. In this way they can discern matters that differ.

**Keep the Psalms, and the Psalms Will Keep You:**

O how grand is the great psalm! I could suggest that monks and nuns write down the great psalm, each section in a separate frame, and hang it up all around the cell walls. I am serious! Try this and see the results. Twenty-two frames. Look in this direction saying, “*With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments*!”(v. 10) asking, “Have I really sought You with my whole heart?” Looking in the other direction one finds, “*Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You*” (v. 11). Looking in the third direction one finds, “*I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad*” (v. 96). His Holiness Pope Shenouda III always says, “Keep the psalms; the psalms will keep you.” It is very important to recite the psalms with emotion.

It is also very important to chant the Midnight Praises with understanding and emotion. This is why when I attend the Midnight Praises and find them chanting quickly, I wonder, “Lord, why do they bother? I do not understand; why are they troubling themselves? Is it a duty they are fulfilling, or is this spiritual food we are delighting in? I cannot understand!” Do we feel the sweetness of praising and singing to the Lord a new song? This charge is given even to the general laity: “*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him*.”[[54]](#footnote-55)

**Obedience to a Wise Guide:**

One of the important issues on the spiritual path is a person’s need for guidance because, “Those who live without guidance will fall off like the leaves of a tree.”[[55]](#footnote-56) In the monastic life, a person needs guidance–guidance from an experienced spiritual person, alongside the confession father (this does not prevent the presence of a spiritual guide). Spiritual guidance doubles a person’s experiences along the spiritual path. When you seek guidance, you add years to your spiritual age. This is why you often find that in *The Paradise Of The Holy Fathers,* it says, “A brother asked an elder…” The *Paradise* spoke also of the great grace accompanying a disciple who lives in obedience to a mentor. In the rites of monasticism, it says, “And till death obey him who guides you on God’s path.” The fathers say, “I do not know a fall for a monk, but for him to do according to his will. So, if you see a monk fall, know that he did according to his will.”[[56]](#footnote-57) Therefore, one of the most important principles in the spiritual path is cutting off the will and desire. And, of course, Christ offered us an example of the life of obedience in His prayers and in His behavior to demonstrate for us the way of salvation: “*Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered*.”[[57]](#footnote-58) The topic of spiritual guidance and obedience is very long; it needs its own session. I just wanted to clarify that one also needs guidance because, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*.”[[58]](#footnote-59) The Bible says, “*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive*,”[[59]](#footnote-60) and certainly the guide should guide the person “*in the Lord*,”[[60]](#footnote-61) according to the commandments, not contrary to the commandments. This is why the issue of the guide also needs wisdom. St. John Climacus says to examine your guide lest you mistake “the patient for the doctor.”[[61]](#footnote-62) Before one chooses a spiritual guide, one must truly feel that this is a spiritual doctor, not a patient who will burden your spiritual life.

*We pray for a blessed monastic life for the new novices,*

*and glory be to God forever. Amen.*

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1. (The New King James Version 1982), Jer 2:2. All Biblical References are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ex 7:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 1 Cor 10:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ex 14:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ps 119:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Mk 10:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. (Revised Standard Version of the Bible 1952), Mk 10:29-30. Revised Standard Version was used for accuracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Mt 16:24; 10:37. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Mt 5:39-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ps 119:1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Mt 23:12; 11:29; 5:5, 3, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ps 119:96. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Mt 13:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ps 119: 81-82, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Vision during prayer (not physical vision, but a state of being in oneness with God, where one's mouth stops speaking, and instead the heart listens). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Col 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ps 119: 1, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Saint Antony (Ward 1984), 8 {36}. *Lowliness* replaces *abstinence*, for consistency with the Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Mt 11:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Lk 9:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Son 4:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. St. John Climacus, cf. (Payne 1982), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. St. Isaac the Syrian (Miller 1984), 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. 1 Cor 13:4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Saint Macarius (Ward, Sayings 1984), 131 {16}. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. 1 Cor 3:5-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Mt 16:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Is 44:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Ps 18:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Lk 9:62. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Lk 17:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Gal 6:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Gal 5:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Heb 12:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Rom 6:11, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Saint Barsanuphius (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Saint Barsanuphius (Chryssavgis 2003), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Abba Isaiah (Chryssavgis and Penkett, Abba Isaiah 2002), 73; cf. (Chryssavgis, Barsanuphius and John: Letters from the Desert 2003), 28; (Ward, Sayings 1984), 2 {4}; (Budge, The Paradise of the Holy Fathers 2008), Vol II, 124 {461}. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Saint Barsanuphius, cf. (Chryssavgis 2003), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Gen 28:16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Jn 14:21, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Ps 119:108. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. The Spiritual Elder John Saba Cf. (Hansbury 2006), 76 {6}. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Cf. 1 Jn 2:11; 3:10-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. 1 Jn 3:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. 1 Jn 4:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. If the priest turns over the patent (El Senia): the priest is supposed to lift up the patent at the end of the liturgy to ask a blessing for a person, so, if it is turned over… [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Mt 7:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Phil 1:9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Jn 14:23, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Ps 119:108-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Jer 2:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Col 3:15-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Unknown Elder (Bishop Mettaous 2005), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Unknown Elder, cf. (Ward, Wisdom 1997), 34 {112}. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Heb 5:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Pro 14:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Heb 13:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. 1 Thes 5:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. St. John Climacus (Payne 1982), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)