

St. Peter of Damaskos: The Second Stage of Contemplation: An Admission of Our Sinfulness and Corruption



St. Peter of Damaskos, a monastic father from the 11th or 12th century AD. He is known almost exclusively from his extensive, lucid, and very valuable writings in the Philokalia, where he provides a wealth of information on the spiritual life in a very readable style.

Icon of St. Peter of Damascus, author of theological texts in the Philokalia

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in

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The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, Vol. 3., Faber & Faber, Inc., Winchester, MA, 1984, pp. 112-114.

Woe is me, unhappy that I am! What shall I do? I have sinned greatly;

many blessings are bestowed on me; I am very weak. Many are the temptations; sloth overwhelms me, forgetfulness benights me and will not let me see myself and my many crimes. Ignorance is evil; conscious transgression is worse; virtue is difficult to achieve; the passions are many; the demons are crafty and subtle; sin is easy; death is near; the reckoning is bitter. Alas, what shall I do? Where shall I flee from myself? For I am the cause of my own destruction. I have been honoured with free will and no one can force me. I have sinned, I sin constantly, and am indifferent to any good thing, though no one constrains me. Whom can I blame? God, who is good and full of compassion, who always longs for us to turn to Him and repent? The angels, who love and protect me? Men, who also desire my progress? The demons? They cannot constrain anyone unless, because of negligence or despair, he chooses to destroy himself. Who is then to blame? Surely it is myself?

I begin to see that my soul is being destroyed, and yet I make no effort to embark on a godly life. Why, O my soul, are you so indifferent about yourself? Why, when you sin, are you not as ashamed before God and His angels as you are before men? Alas, alas, for I do not feel the shame before my Creator and Master that I feel before a man. Before a man I cannot sin, but do all I can to appear to be acting righteously; yet standing before God I think evil thoughts and often am not ashamed to speak of them. What madness! Though I sin, I have no fear of God who watches me, and yet I cannot tell to a single man what I have done so as to give him a chance to correct me. Alas, for I know the punishment and yet am unwilling to repent. I love the heavenly kingdom, and yet do not acquire virtue. I believe in God and constantly disobey His commandments. I hate the devil, and yet do not stop doing what he wants. If I pray, I lose interest and become unfeeling. If I fast, I become proud, and damn myself all the more. If I keep vigil, I think I have achieved something, and so I have no profit from it. If I read, I do one of two evil things in my obduracy: either I read for the sake of profane learning and self-esteem, and so am further benighted; or by reading, and not acting in the spirit of what I read, I simply increase my guilt. If by God's grace I happen to stop sinning in outward action, I do not stop sinning continually in what I say. And if God's grace should protect me also from this, I continue to provoke His wrath by my evil thoughts. Alas,

what can I do? Wherever I go, I find sin. Everywhere there are demons. Despair is the worst of all. I have provoked God, I have saddened His angels, I have frequently injured and offended men.

I would like, Lord, to erase the record of my sins by tears, and through repentance to live the rest of my life according to Thy will. But the enemy deceives me and battles with my soul. Lord, before I perish completely, save me.

I have sinned against Thee, Saviour, like the prodigal son; receive me, Father, in my repentance and have mercy on me, O God.

I cry to Thee, O Christ my Saviour, with the voice of the publican: be gracious to me, as to him, and have mercy upon me, O God.

What will happen in the last days? What is to come afterwards? How hapless I am! 'Who will give water to my head and a fountain of tears to my eyes?' (Jer. 9:1, LXX). Who can grieve for me as I deserve? I cannot do so. Come, mountains, cover me in my abjectness. What have I to say? O how many blessings has God bestowed on me, blessings that only He knows of, and how many terrible things in act, word and thought have I done in my ingratitude, always provoking by Benefactor. And the more long-suffering He is, the more I disdain Him, becoming harder in heart than lifeless stones. Yet I do no despair, but acknowledge Thy great compassion.

I have no repentance, no tears. Therefore I entreat Thee, Saviour, to make me turn back before I die and to grant me repentance, so that I may be spared punishment.

O Lord my God, do not abandon me, though I am nothing before Thee, though I am wholly a sinner. How shall I become aware of my many sins? For unless I become aware, severe is my condemnation. For me Thou hast created heaven and earth, the four elements and all that is formed from them, as St. Gregory the Theologian says. I shall keep silence as to the rest, for I am unworthy to say anything, because of my many crimes. Who, even if he had the intellect of an angel, could grasp all the countless blessing I have been

given? Yet because I do not change my ways I shall lose them all.

By meditating in this way, a man gradually advances to the third stage of contemplation.