

## ON THE JESUS PRAYER\*

by Tito Colliander

The saintly Abbot Isaiah, the Egyptian hermit, says of the Jesus Prayer that it is a mirror for the mind and a lantern for the conscience. Someone has also likened it to a constantly sounding, quiet voice in a house: all thieves that sneak in take hasty flight when they hear that someone is awake there. The house is the heart, the thieves, the evil impulses. Prayer is the voice of the one who keeps watch. But the one who keeps watch is no longer I, but Christ.

Spiritual activity embodies Christ in our soul. This involves continual remembrance of the Lord: you hide Him within, in your soul, your heart, your consciousness. *I sleep, but my heart waketh* (Song of Solomon 5:2): I myself sleep, withdraw, but the heart stays steadfast in prayer, that is, in eternal life, in the kingdom of Heaven, in Christ. The tree-roots of my being stand fast in their source.

The means of attaining this is the prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. Repeat it aloud, or only in thought, slowly, lingeringly, but with attention, and from a heart freed as much as possible from all that is inappropriate to it. Not only worldly interests are inappropriate, but also such things as every kind of expectation or thought of answer, or inner visions, testings, all kinds of romantic dreams, curious questions and imaginings. Simplicity is as inescapable a condition as humility, abstemiousness of body and soul, and in general everything that pertains to the invisible warfare.

Especially should the beginner beware of everything that has the slightest tendency to mysticism. The Jesus Prayer is an activity, a practical work and a means by which you enable yourself to receive and use the power called God's grace-constantly present, however hidden, within the baptized person-in order that it may bear fruit. Prayer fructifies this power in our soul; it has no other purpose. It is a hammer that crushes a shell: a hammer is hard and its stroke hurts. Abandon every thought of pleasantness, rapture, heavenly voices: there is only one way to the kingdom of God, and that is the way of the Cross. And to hang crucified on a tree is horrible torment. Expect nothing else.

You have crucified your body by nailing it fast with a simple and uniform manner of life under strict self-discipline. Your thought-life and imagination ought to be as strictly controlled. Nail them fast with the words of prayer and Holy Scripture, with the reading of Psalms and the works of the holy Fathers, where these things are commanded. Do not permit your imagination to fly about at will. What men call "the flight of thought" is usually an aimless fluttering in the world of illusions. As soon as your thoughts are not occupied in your work's behalf, let them turn again to Prayer.

See to it that both imagination and thought are as obedient to you as a well-trained dog. You do not allow it to run around and yap and rummage in garbage palls and bathe in

the gutter. Likewise you ought always to be able to call back your thoughts and imagination, and you must do so untold times every passing minute. If you do not do so, you are like a horse driven now by one rider and now by another, says St. Anthony, until, worn out and lathered, it collapses.

If you hammer a nutshell too hard, you may crush the kernel as well. Lay on with caution. Do not pass over suddenly to the Jesus Prayer. Hold back to begin with, and even afterward, use your other prayer practices as well. Do not be overanxious. And do not suppose that you can pay proper attention to a single *Lord, have mercy*. Your prayer is bound to be divided and scattered: you are, indeed, human. *Only in heaven the angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven* (Matthew 18:10): you, on the contrary, have an earthly body with its own cravings. Do not shriek to high heaven in amazement if at the beginning you completely forget your prayer practice for many hours at a time, perhaps for a whole day or longer. Take it naturally and simply: you are an inexperienced sailor who has been so anxiously occupied with other things that he forgot to keep watch on the breezes. Thus, expect nothing of yourself. But do not demand anything of others, either.

Concentration is one thing, distraction another. Prayer will make your thought vital and clear: then it is right. The praying person sees everything around him, notices and observes everything, but the right doing of this comes through prayer, which sheds on all things its piercingly clear light.

The spirit works in the realm of purity within us. As long as we keep extending this realm of independence of heart, our spiritual humanity will continue to grow.

Prayer will call forth an inner calm, a peaceful relaxation in grief, love, gratitude, humility. If you are, on the contrary, tense and stirred up, in high spirits or in deep despair, if you feel contrition or bitterness or an exaggerated will to action, if you are thrown into ecstatic experiences or a drunkenness of the senses, such as you enjoy when listening to music, if you feel a supreme enjoyment or satisfaction so that you are "content with yourself and the whole world," you are on the wrong road. You have built altogether too much on yourself. Sound your retreat and go back to that self-reproach that must always be the starting-point for every true prayer.

The angel of light always brings peace, the peace that the demons of the dark wish at all costs to disturb. By this, say the holy Fathers, one can recognize the evil powers and separate them from the good.

\* "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," to which the words "a sinner" are sometimes added, is a form of devotion of great antiquity in Eastern Christendom. The use of it is widespread among members of the Orthodox Church. More may be read about it in "La méthode de l'oraison h6sychaste" by J. Hausherr in *Orientalia Christiana* 9 (2), 1927. What the Jesus Prayer meant to a simple Russian pilgrim in the nineteenth century may be seen in much more popular form in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, translated by R. M. French (London: S.P.C.K., new edition illustrated, 1954).

Source: *The Way of the Ascetics* by Tito Colliander, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp 92-97