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Testimony from Mount Athos, The significance of pain (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



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ὅς ἄν ὁπτο
λογηται ὅτι
ἰησους ἐστίν
ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ
ὁ θεὸς ἐν αὐ
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αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ
θεῷ



"Let's us reject both pleasure and pain in this life with all our might in order to be freed from any schemes drawn by passions and from any demonic wickedness. For, we love passions for their hedonistic pleasure and because of pain we avoid virtue".

(Saint Maximus the Confessor, Seven Hundred Chapters on Theology, Third Hundred, paragraph 52) What describes a man's life without God is how fiercely futility clashes with irrationality with tragic consequences. The wretched man is the victim of this tragedy. He is being dragged without mercy from the instigators of pain and fear to his death, which he alone has shaped when he severed himself from God, from eternal life and happiness. Had the Merciful Lord not put an end to death and the derived sin, there would have never been a more pitiful being than man. The joyful message that *"The Word became flesh"* (John 1, 14) ended this calamity and transfigured the tools of death into the beneficial sources of life and happiness. *"The All Merciful God became flesh in order to draw human nature unto Himself and prevent it from behaving horribly to itself or rather, from rebelling against itself, having being severed in many pieces and being unable to rest anywhere because of the unbalanced movement of its intentions on everything"*(As above, paragraph 47).

Here the all-wise Father, as an excellent anatomist, refers to the unbalanced nature of our being and the revolt which takes place against it and for its sake. No one who has the appropriate experience disputes this fact. Where do the reasons, the rules and the ways of this abnormality originate from? The problem started at the very moment man tragically fell. Everything had been originally created as "very good" and all natural and spiritual faculties were in order. It is the delusion of "autonomy" which has guided all the natural motions to the opposite direction, creating thus unnatural operations which are none other than the revolt against oneself and against one's environment. When man used to perform and move naturally as a proper psychosomatic being, he was also promoting the equilibrium in life and was causing a mutual enjoyment. The fall reversed all these and corruption followed. It was inevitable then, that since man had severed himself from life, from God, to come under the authority of death and ruin and the tools of death to be set in motion. *"With pain you will give birth to your children...by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken..."* (See Genesis 3, 16-29). The penance of disobedience has been fully employed after man severed himself from life and God, and the tools of ruin and death took over. In the place of full godlike joy and pleasure in everything, came pain and sorrow. In the place of life came death.

Was it justified however, to have ruin and death reign over mortal creatures and especially over man who had been created in the 'image and likeness' of God? We will attempt to offer an answer to this by borrowing from the god-inspired wisdom of our Fathers, to whom the Holy Spirit has revealed the deep mysteries by which It governs creation.

The absolute All-Love, God, in his Godlike perfection and All-Wisdom, has freely created nature from nothing, as well as the world, the universe. This term "from nothing" is very crucial. It means that they have been created by another cause, "by God" and therefore they are fully dependent on Him. They are neither able to exist by themselves nor are they autonomous. Nevertheless, they have been created as "very good", balancing in accordance with the precepts and the laws of their creator. However, as we have already mentioned, the tragic fall of man has caused reversal and deformity. The fall, having a moral implication, describes sin as the cause of the revolt and an insult to divine justice. By 'divine justice' we mean the perfection of the creation because of God's love and his All-Wisdom. The creation, being intrinsically good, caused everything to be orderly and harmonious. We correctly describe this state as 'the justice of creation'. Consequently there is a similarity and a correlation between the divine justice and the justice of creation. Man's rebellion and insult towards God, did not manage to interfere with the divine justice, since the latter is infinite and unalterable. But it infringed on the justice of the creation because it is homogeneous. Thus it reversed its original harmonious precepts and conditions which governed its performance. Man's revolt and insult against the conditions and rules of his personality, which God has created as "very good", has caused a worldwide damage and misery. This transgression deserves a penance which the All-Good philanthropy of God has turned into a blessing. The 'penance' imposed on this transgression and insult was not derived from divine justice, because the latter was not trampled upon. But it was imposed by the justice of creation, whose equilibrium man disturbed because he did not safeguard that which God gave him which was "very good". Since the laws of nature now act in an unbalanced and corrupted way, because they have been tampered with, they have also dragged man into this irregularity. Thus, they cause all the perils and hardships to man and to the whole creation. The punishment which the affected justice of creation imposes is none other than death with all its instruments. These perils would have been eternal had divine philanthropy not intervened to reform them and alter the poison into medicine. This is what Saint Maximus says on this issue: *"Since we have been initially deceived by hedonistic pleasure and preferred death from true life, let us persevere in the face of the hardships befalling our bodies with delight, in order to destroy hedonistic pleasure. When, therefore, the death of hedonistic pleasure destroys the death from pleasure, let us regain through small physical hardships, life, which we have lost because of hedonistic*

pleasure". Therefore, according to our Fathers the penance which was imposed on us was not a punishment but the appropriate therapy for the injury, which was devised by our Lord's philanthropy and providence. The same is professed by the other great pillar of our Church, Saint Nicolaos Kavalas, who writes: *"Therefore, after the fall, God has permitted (συνεχώρησεν) death and pain, because he did not want to punish the sinner but rather to offer a medicine to the sick"*. In the face of such divine philanthropy what more can one say other than Saint Paul's exclamation? *"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!"*(Romans 11, 33).The final natural result of Adam's fall and his greatest punishment was obviously death. As soon as death entered human history, God took the initiative and changed the nature of death in one single move totally and permanently.

Since man's biological constitution was dressed in the law of corruption, death reigned upon it as a censure. Thus, God in His All-Wisdom turned death, which is the fruit of sin, against biological life. From then on death destroys not only man but also the corruption with which he has clothed himself.

"God Word, who has created human nature, neither created the experience of hedonism nor of pain. But he only planted in human nature a kind of spiritual propensity towards pleasure, so that man could derive joy in an inexpressible way. This force, which is the natural desire of the intellect for God, was given to the senses by the first man. Thus he experienced his first sentiment of pleasure, which acted unnaturally through his senses. Then God, who is providing for our salvation, placed next to pleasure pain as a punishing force. Hence, the law of death wisely took residence inside the body to prevent the desires of the irrational mind from moving unnaturally towards created things"

God in order to punish as well as cure our readiness for pleasure, established pain and death into human nature, to follow it everywhere and appear unwillingly. Because human nature prefers irrational pleasure, the equivalent pain, with all its innumerable hardships which cause death, has been invented in order to completely destroy pleasure. Here we must pay attention to one factor according to our Fathers' thinking. The aforementioned fight which pain and all its constituents launch against pleasure does not destroy its essence neither does it uproot it. But it only destroys its sensual form, which is performed by the outer sensuous organs of man. Its spiritual essence is not invalidated because man is still able to enjoy the pleasure of the divine gifts and eventually the divine Eros. The invention of the willing, or of the reluctant hardships, which constitute the meaning of the cross, takes away pleasure and abolishes its active movement. According to

the spiritual law, human debts incurred in this life are being paid off with the onslaught of willing or reluctant hardships.

The result of all human activity has two elements: pleasure and pain. Pleasure always comes first since the ailing intention prefers it or rather actively looks for it. Every transgression or wrongful deed, which in essence is sin, occurs for the sake of some kind of satisfaction, which in essence is pleasure. In order to abolish pleasure, or rather to pay for it, one must undergo hardships and sorrow caused either willingly by repentance or by any other painful way allowed by God's providence.

Saint Maximus says: "When an unexpected temptation occurs to you, do not accuse the person who caused it, but examine why it has occurred and you will be able to correct yourself. Since either from this one or from someone else, you had to drink from the bitter glass of God's judgment" (Saint Maximus the Confessor, Hundred Chapters on Love, Second Hundred, paragraph 42). Whenever our blessed Elder Joseph was giving a detailed explanation of the workings of the spiritual law through which our All-Wise and All-Good Lord governs His creation, he seemed to rise to a higher spiritual state, which we can only describe as beyond nature. His words were not the usual but would become predictions and prophecies and would attest that he practically lived inside the divine wishes and designs and was experiencing them, since they were irrefutable and true.

Generally speaking, temptations according to our Fathers are the bearers of every agitation and pain which occur in our lives. Sometimes they provoke sorrow, sometimes anxiety, at other times physical pain. As a doctor, God orders the appropriate medicine according to the source of the passion which has overcome the soul. *"Where I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sand"* (Psalm 139, 18). To some people God permits the onslaught of temptations to abolish sins which have already been committed; to others to prevent them from committing the sins which they were about to commit. Certainly there are also testing temptations. These occur to reveal the strength of the virtue and the holiness of the great athletes, like Job, in order to strengthen the Church. Unless there is a cause which will become a motive, the most evil demons cannot start a fight, from which the onslaught of the spiritual war is launched.

One basic source from which they usually direct the attack is the passions which reside in a man's soul. These passions are the wicked habits, which he has created out of negligence or self-love. The evil demons are watching these passions and their demands which want satisfaction, and bring to the mind wicked thoughts and force man to agree to them. When they achieve this, they continue pressing the

enslaved man to proceed with committing the deed which he almost cannot resist.

Now, what is a passion? Passion is an irrational motion of the soul; a movement out of its natural environment, especially towards perceived things. Wickedness is the wrong judgment of thoughts, which is followed by the mistreatment of things, whence abuse and self-love originates. Some people believe that evil would not exist in the world if there was no other force and motive to attract us to it. However, our Fathers tell us that evil is none other than the negligent performance by the natural faculties of the mind. The only way one may be rescued from this adventure is to keep his mind vigilant and control his sinful thoughts, so that he is not dragged into practical sin. In other words, if our natural rational faculties submit to divine commandments and our irrational tendencies come under control, then neither evil will exist in the world, nor the force which attracts us to it will be found.

The Scriptures indicate that man's first transgression shows that he has preferred sensual satisfaction rather than his spiritual attraction and perception of God and divine things. This preference has created the sensual pleasure whence death and pain originated. God's philanthropy has given us a remedy so that evil does not become eternal: the love for struggle (φιλοπονία), as a necessary penance to human life, from which there are no exceptions. Where is wisdom in this sense? It is to carry our cross eagerly, whence two benefits are derived: One is to freely submit to the love for struggle, which is also described as our 'cross' and through which we confess our Christian identity as we have promised during our baptism. The entire essence of our faith and our baptism is *"the message of the cross and death"*. The second benefit is that we come to acquire a payment method with which we are writing off our known and unknown debts. Saint Maximus says: *"Since we must necessarily suffer because through our forefathers hedonism has entered our human nature, then let us accept the temporary hardships bravely and patiently. These not only soften the foundations of hedonism inside us, but also they set us free from eternal condemnation, which is in store for us because of it"*.

As Saint Paul says, all the saints have been disciplined. Therefore let us also thank God when we are being disciplined along with them, so that we are also made worthy to participate in their glory. *"The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in"* (Proverbs 3, 12).

The Lord has shown us another kind of philanthropy: He has condescended to also submit to the love for struggle in order to provide a consolation to us, since He was not obliged to surrender either to pain or to natural death. Unlike us, he had not participated in hedonism and passion during his physical birth. Since we now have

the prototype of our salvation participating in our own hardships through His passion on the cross, we modify our natural love for struggle to become a struggle with a keen sense of honor (filotimo) because we imitate our Savior who has suffered and was crucified for us. Thus our insult becomes worthy of repayment.

A sensible way to succeed in our struggle is this one: When one desires the true life, he recognizes that any kind of hardship either willing or unexpected destroys the mother of all evil, hedonism, and thus he gladly accepts all the hard consequences of the unwilling hardships. With perseverance, he comes to transform hardship into easy and smooth paths which lead towards life without any doubt.

When during my life next to our ever-memorable elder, I would make a mistake out of ignorance, he would impose a penance with which I would have to take a difficult walk. When I had asked him why, he sadly told me this: "Along with repentance we need to perform a practical deed of hardship to extinguish the guilt, otherwise divine providence will impose some reluctant penalty, which might be more painful and hard to bear. That's why we avert it with our willing double repentance to restore the equilibrium". He would always teach us the meaning of the spiritual law in detail as well as the sense of that which the fathers' call "conventional assaults", by which God enforces His justice according to His vast philanthropy. All these convince us that nothing is happening in our lives without a reason. Therefore, the everyday temptations are part of the dispensation of divine providence in order to provoke the love for struggle, which is the most practical indication of our repentance. As we have already mentioned, temptations are generally regarded by our Fathers as the fruits of our own past, present or future transgressions which God, by His prognostic philanthropy, obstructs in order to secure our salvation. Those who also live a pious life meet with temptations. This is certified by the Scriptures which say: "*a righteous man may have many troubles*" (Psalms 34, 19) and "*Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted*" (B Timothy 3, 12). This is the meaning of the cross which our Lord is instructing us to carry always, along with all the saints.

If man perseveres in the face of all hardships without complaint, he will remain in the remembrance of God. Patient perseverance in this task will stimulate the remembrance of God and thus man will enter the state where he will adhere to Saint Paul's command "*pray continually*" (1 Thessalonians 5, 17). Remembrance of God is the espousal of the love for struggle, which is being created so that one is able to obey the divine commandments. Whoever abandons the remembrance of God, turns towards hedonism and tries to find solace through external effusions. He

who is ignorant of the divine grace tries to soothe himself by sensual pleasures and comforts. His preference for these causes the direct result which is the love for struggle and hardships. On the contrary, whoever loves God and readily submits to His wishes will receive the visitation of divine grace, which will be the wages for those who love struggle and will replenish any deficiency and answer any query. Grace becomes “all things to all men”; to the thirsty it becomes water; to the hungry food; to the naked garments, to the ignorant knowledge and to passion-slaves freedom and resurrection.

There is something weird about human life. We are forever hearing about bitterness, disillusionments, hardships, pain and the rest of it and we are wondering: Who is preventing man’s salvation since solace is clear? The presence of Word God has solved every problem and has granted in abundance everything we need. *“Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11, 22)

An indication that one has acquired spiritual wisdom is the fact that he perseveres in the coming hardships without blaming anyone for them, despite knowing those who have caused them. Then he imitates our Savior Christ, who was praying for those who crucified Him. *“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23, 34). How many of us view the commandments as oppression against our freedom and blame God for making demands on us? Where are now these demands? He who controls himself avoids the lack of restraint; He who has no property abstains from greed; the quiet from trouble; the pure from hedonism; the modest from fornication; the self-sufficient from the love for money; the gentle from fury; the humble from selfishness; the obedient from quarrel; the audacious from hypocrisy; the confessor from denial and the martyr from idolatry. There it is then. Every virtue which is performed unto death is nothing but the annulment of the corresponding vice and sin. Therefore, this becomes an obligation for our rational existence. Where are then, the so-called imposition and the harness to our freedom? This obligation is not even an exchange for the kingdom of heaven, since obeying the commandments constitutes a natural duty and therefore the kingdom of heaven is given for free.

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