

‘Keep Thy Mind in Hell and in Me’ (Archimandrite Peter, Abbot of Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex UK)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Saint Symeon the New Theologian says that we do not benefit from the ‘glamorous’ way in which we celebrate a feast in the Church. Even if we bring down all the stars from heaven to adorn the church for the feast and sing all the special hymns, if we do so only to return to our previous state after the feast, we have received no benefit. The true benefit comes when, after the celebration of the memory of a Saint, we keep within us the spiritual light that God gives on that feast. Such a light is very great in the person of our Holy Father Silouan. His case is exceptional, for he received the grace of the perfect at the very outset of their spiritual life. Father Sophrony adds that even fewer are those that manage to keep this grace throughout the rest of their life. Very few are also those who can fulfil the word of Saint Silouan and keep this state of keeping the mind in hell without despairing. However, his word is relevant for us all. We all experience the presence of God in our life. When we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, we taste of His presence. Also, when we stand in the presence of God with unity of mind and heart, we again

experience the presence of Christ permeating all our being.



We read in Scripture that 'God is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:29). The consuming fire of God is the fire of His divine love, the judgment of God, about which Saint Peter speaks (1 Pet. 4:17). Christ manifested this judgment of God, which is God's love to the end, through His Passion. We also manifest our love for God and we are assimilated in His love through suffering, be it voluntary or involuntary. The great science of our Fathers Silouan and Sophrony is making the involuntary sufferings voluntary by keeping one's mind in hell without despairing. Father Sophrony assures us that we can conquer every earthly suffering by voluntarily immersing ourselves into greater suffering. This, he says, will lead us to the Kingdom which cannot be moved, and then we come to understand the true meaning of the words: 'Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him' (Rom. 6:9). In order to understand this great science, we need to examine in more depth the judgment of Christ and more specifically we must focus on the last part of His life, when He voluntarily surrendered His will to the will of the Father, sealing this sacrifice with His prayer at Gethsemane.

When He proceeded to the Passion, being lifted up on the Cross, He uttered those dreadful words: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46), which are in fact the perfect manifestation of the love of God: in order to heal us, Christ voluntarily took upon Him all human pain in our place, including abandonment. In our case, Godforsakenness may come because we may offend

God in such a way with our sins that He withdraws. However, Father Sophrony says that Godforsakenness also comes at the moment when the ascetic lives with extreme tension in his effort to keep the commandment of God spotless. Saint Silouan experienced this abandonment during the years when he lived with an extreme spiritual and even bodily tension to keep the covenant he had made with God when He appeared to him. He surrendered to this extreme tension, and yet God still withdrew. This kind of Godforsakenness is the judgment of Christ. When Christ says 'KEEP thy mind in hell,' it means that even when we have given all our strength in our effort to keep the commandment of God and yet we feel forsaken by Him, even then we should keep our mind in hell, because this is the path of Christ Himself. This reminds us of the greatest commandment of the Gospel: when we have given all our strength to fulfil all the commandments, we must still keep our mind in hell and consider ourselves 'unprofitable servants' (Luke 17:10).

However, the problem is that it is not a permanent state, because the attacks of the demons and our own passions come to interrupt the effort we make to stand in the presence of God. For this reason we fluctuate up and down, and although God is merciful, in fact every time we go down, we are never sure that there will be a return, because every time our will becomes weaker and weaker.

In the person of Saint Silouan we find a perfect theory and a perfect answer to this problem. He experienced the presence of God in a perfect way when he saw the living Christ in the very beginning of his monastic life. Father Sophrony says that this was what Saint Paul means when he said that he was taken up to the third heaven and heard unspeakable words (2 Cor. 12:2-4). After that a series of obstacles appeared in his life: Elder Anatoly praised him, and also he could not find a proper guide, a Staretz, who had the same experience as his. This is what made his struggle titanic, because he did not possess the science of the battle against the thoughts. He gave in to imagination, which led him to experience even demonic light appearing to him.

Every time we give in to a suggestion of the enemy, he claims more rights over our life. Saint Silouan was very strong and he came out victorious, becoming a unique spiritual guide for all the world, for all Christians. However, he had to fight for fifteen years to get to this stage.

One aspect that we should touch upon is the aspect of determination in our spiritual life. Saint Silouan surely knew that he had to blame himself as a monk in order to conquer the suggestions of the enemy. What he was lacking was the determination to do this to the end under the guidance of an experienced Staretz who could confirm him on this path. That is why Saint Silouan would have moments

of doubt, and the enemy would attack him and drive him to despair.

We can extract a whole teaching about every word of 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not.' The first part which says, 'Keep your mind in hell,' shows that we should not be passive in our spiritual life, but that we must give work to our mind, otherwise the enemy will give food to our mind. As we read in the Philokalia, the mind of man is like a windmill, it always keep turning and the outcome depends on what you feed it: if you give it wheat, you will obtain flour; if you give it impurity, you will only get an unclean fruit. If man opens his mind to the suggestions of the enemy, the mind becomes for him the gate of death. If he opens his mind to the thought of God, then he is filled with grace. The word 'keep' also involves time. Saint Silouan kept his mind in hell, standing at the brink of despair and allowing this fire of hell to burn every passion within him. He did so for fifteen more years after he received this word from God and only then did he reach passionlessness. Consequently, we should not become fainthearted: if this practice demanded time even for the Saint until he was ready to receive this word from God, then neither should we make haste in our life. Things we acquire after many years of effort are not easily lost.

The second part, 'despair not', which is in fact the part we should start with, is a revelation of Christ Himself, because hope is a Person for us, not just an idea. Hope is Christ. When He says, 'Fear not, little flock' (Luke 12:32), 'despair not', He does it to bring our mind to Him. So, another way we could express this injunction, could be 'Keep your mind in hell and in Me.' When He says 'despair not,' it is as if He is saying 'Remember Me,' or 'Know Me,' because if we know Christ how can we despair? This is the living memory of Christ. In Saint Silouan's writings we find, 'I keep my mind in hell and in my heart,' that is, in the presence of Christ. It is what Saint Paul says, 'Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead' (2 Tim. 2:8). The memory of God is the life of God. When we say, 'Remember, O Lord, Thy servant,' it means that God brings him into His memory, into His life. In order for us to know the power of keeping one's mind in hell without despairing, it may be more helpful if we begin with the second part, with keeping our mind in Christ. This can be a very powerful prayer, if during the hour of our presentation we scan our life remembering all the times God has visited us with His lovingkindness and offer profound gratitude for those visitations. If we continue in this practice and make it a programme of life, we will surely see that we are unable to thank Him as He deserves, and this will open our heart to the first part, which is truly to acknowledge that we are unworthy of such a God.

For Saint Silouan keeping his mind in hell became a mode of being, especially at

the end of his life. He would condemn himself to hell keeping his mind in the memory of God, Who first visited him. This is not a morbid condemnation of despair, but a prayerful self-condemnation, by keeping his mind in Christ Whom he knew. Father Sophrony notes that not all can bear this, that everyone should know his measure and not do it without discernment. For the Fathers who practiced it, we see that it became a prism through which they would measure all their life, entering the presence of Christ through condemning themselves to hell.

Why do the Saints have to go that far, someone may ask? Because the love of God is absolute and infinite, and Christ revealed to us the content of the love of God through His sufferings and His Passion, by going down even to the nethermost parts of the earth, even to hell. Therefore, in the lives of His Saints on earth, the love of God is also expressed in this absolute way.

Archimandrite Zacharias: The word 'keep' is really an evangelical attitude, because in the Gospel it is said that 'the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence in this world and violent people snatched it by force' (Matt. 11:12). It involves not only time, but also the monk's determination to the end. Even Saint Paul writes to Timothy, 'Snatch eternal life' (1 Tim. 6:12). If we simply wait until contrition comes, it may never even come, or it may come once in every blue moon. Father Sophrony said that we must keep exerting violence on ourselves. 'Keep your mind in hell' is the attitude we should have not only when we want to burn the passions within us, but also, to put it positively, because of our love for God, so as to receive the increase of God (Col. 2:19).

Question: It is difficult for man to understand that after he has invested all his strength and all his tension in keeping the commandment, the forsakenness of God still comes, and not His reward. Could that not bring one to despair?

Archimandrite Zacharias: Yes, it is difficult, but it is actually at that point that the last shackle breaks and man becomes like dust so that he can say to God, 'My soul cleaveth to the ground: vivify me, according to Thy word' (Ps. 119:25). That is the moment when he becomes a zero, a suitable material from which it is proper to our God to create us anew, as Father Sophrony says. Perfect obedience, really, aims to lead us to the realisation that we are a zero, so that God may begin to refashion us.

Archimandrite Peter: Saint Sophrony says that this is when we determine ourselves for ever and that such moments mark our relationship with God for all eternity.

Question: Saint Silouan says that the consequence of receiving this word was that he started seeking for the humility of Christ.

Archimandrite Peter: When Saint Silouan received this word, his eyes opened a little more to understand the mystery of the humility of Christ.

Archimandrite Zacharias: Those who put themselves in the dynamics of this 'Keep thy mind in hell and despair not,' receive a divine daring, if I may call it this way: they think nothing concerning themselves and they do not consider precious even their own life, because they are convinced and have accepted the word of Christ, Who says that even if they lose their life, they can regain it again in Him (Matt. 10:39). This is the daring of the Saints: they know that even if they lose their life – and lose it they must – they will possess it again. It is like the grain of wheat that must fall into the ground, rot, die, and then spring forth and bring fruit.

Question: When we are down and we do not know if we will ever come up, in such moments, a massive panic may paralyse us. Therefore, we do not have the strength and the humility to keep our mind in hell. How can we deal with this?

Archimandrite Peter: If, in general, we do not keep our mind in Christ day by day, at the moment of temptation we will not overcome it: 'I have prepared myself and therefore I was not troubled' in the moment of temptation, says the Psalm (Ps. 118:60 LXX). We must start from the second part and keep our mind in Christ, by invoking His Name, by reading His word and the word of our Fathers, and through the Liturgy. When we keep our mind in Christ, at the moment of temptation, we will keep the word of our Fathers, whereas if we have not built our heart in our everyday life by keeping our mind in Christ, we will not survive.

Archimandrite Zacharias: It is the same with the struggle of the thoughts: we must not wait until the thoughts come to start fighting against them; we must build a state within us so as to keep the sensation of the presence of God within us. Then, when the thoughts come, they bounce off because they meet this heat of the heart. It is in times of peace that we must build our strongholds and try to gather some traces of grace so that we may be protected in time of need.