

# Stories From the Desert Fathers

by Desert Fathers

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*The sermon explores the teachings of the Desert Fathers, emphasizing the importance of prayer, community, and humility in spiritual life.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 17:28, 1 Corinthians 9:27, Philipians 4:6, Colossians 3:13, James 1:19

**Topics:** "Spiritual Disciplines", "Inner Peace"

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## Description

The Desert Fathers, including Abba Agathon, Abba Anthony the Great, Abba Evagrius Ponticus, Abba Isaiah, Abba Sylvanus, Abba Poemen, and Theophilus the Archbishop, share profound wisdom on spiritual disciplines, humility, prayer, and the importance of self-control and forgiveness. They emphasize the significance of maintaining inner peace, avoiding distractions, and the power of prayer in overcoming spiritual battles. These teachings highlight the virtues of silence, forgiveness, and the need for self-discipline in the pursuit of a deeper relationship with God.

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## Transcript

Abba Agathon

Abba Peter, the disciple of Abba Lot, said, One day when I was in Abba Agathon's cell a brother came in and said to him, "I want to live with the brethren; tell me how to dwell with them." The old man answered him, "All the days of your life keep the frame of mind of the stranger which you have on the first day you join them, so as not to become too familiar with them." The Abba Macarius asked, "And what does this familiarity produce?" the old man replied, "It is like a strong, burning wind, each time it arises everything flies swept before it, and it destroys the fruit of the trees." So Abba Macarius said, "Is speaking too freely really as bad as all that?" Abba Agathon said, "No passion is as worse than an uncontrolled tongue, because it is the mother of all the passions." Accordingly the good workman should not use it, even as he is living as a solitary in the cell. I know a brother who spent a long time in his cell using a small bed who said, "I should have left my cell without making use of that small bed if no one had told me it was there." It is the hard-working Monk who is a warrior.

The brethren also asked Abba Agathon "Amongst all good works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort?" He answered "Forgive me, but I think there is no labour greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him. For they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. What ever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.

The same Abba said "a man who is angry, even if he were to raise the dead, is not acceptable to God"

Abba Anthony the Great

The Abba and the Bowman

A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it."

So he did. The old man then said, "Shoot another," and he did so.

Then the old man said, "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied, "If I bend my bow so much I will break it."

Then the old man said to him, "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs."

When he heard these words the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened.

The Fish

He said also "Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells or pass their time with men of the world lose the intensity of inner peace. So like a fish going towards the sea, we must hurry to reach our cell, for fear that if we delay outside we will lose our interior watchfulness."

The Brother

A brother came to Abba Anthony and said "Pray for me". The old man said to him "I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God."

Abba Evagrius Ponticus

Abba Evagrius said "Restrain yourself from affection towards many people, for fear lest your spirit be distracted, so that your interior peace may not be disturbed".

He also said "take away temptations and no-one will be saved."

Evagrius wrote "A man who is tied up cannot run. Nor can the intellect that is a slave to passion perceive the realm of spiritual prayer. For it is dragged about by impassioned thoughts and cannot stay still."

Learn from the man who owed ten thousand talents that, if you do not forgive your debtor, you yourself will not be forgiven. For it is said "He delivered him to the tormentors"

-Both these excerpts are from his treatise "On Prayer".

Evagrius Ponticus is best known for being the first to formulate what would become known as the Seven Deadly Sins.

Abba Isaiah

Abba Isaiah said "Nothing is so useful to the beginner as insults. The beginner who bears insults is like a tree that is watered every day."

He also said to those who were making a good beginning by putting themselves under the direction of the Holy Fathers, "as with purple dye, the first colouring is never lost." And, "just as young shoots are easily trained back and bent, so it is with beginners who live in submission."

He also said "A beginner who goes from one monastery to another is like an animal that jumps this way and that, for fear of the halter."

#### The Fishing Net

Three old men, of whom one had a bad reputation, came one day to Abba Achilles.

The first asked him,

"Father, make me a fishing-net."

"I will not make you one," he replied.

Then the second said,

"Of your charity make one, so that we may have a souvenir of you in the monastery."

But he said,

"I do not have time."

Then the third one, who had a bad reputation, said,

"Make me a fishing-net, so that I may have something from your hands, Father."

Abba Achilles answered him at once,

"For you, I will make one."

Then the two other old men asked him privately,

"Why did you not want to do what we asked you, but you promised to do what he asked?"

The old man gave them this answer,

"I told you I would not make one, and you were not disappointed, since you thought that I had no time. But if I had not made one for him, he would have said, 'The old man has heard about my sin, and that is why he does not want to make me anything,' and so our relationship would have broken down. But now I have cheered his soul, so that he will not be overcome with grief."

#### Abba Sylvanus

A brother once came to Abba Sylvanus, and when he saw the brothers working, he said "Do not work for perishable bread" (John 6:27); "Mary has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42). The superior told them to give him a book and to bring him to an empty cell. When the ninth hour came, that brother watched the

door for someone to summon him to dinner. Finally, he went to the elder and asked him: "Have the brothers eaten today?" The elder answered: "Of course." "Why have you not fetched me?" The elder responded: "since you are a spiritual man, you don't need this food. We carnal fellows must still eat, and so we work. You have chosen the better part, in that you read all day and do not wish to eat physical food." When the brother heard this, he fell at his feet and said: "Forgive me, Father". The old man said to him "Mary needs Martha. It is really thanks to Martha that Mary is praised."

Abba Moses asked Abba Sylvanus "Can a man lay a new foundation every day?" The old man said "If we work hard, we can lay a new foundation every moment."

### The Sleeping Brother

Some old men went to Abba Poemen and asked, "If we see brothers sleeping during the common prayer, should we wake them?"

Abba Poemen answered, "If I see my brother sleeping, I put his head on my knees and let him rest."

Then one old man spoke up, "And how do you explain yourself before God?"

Abba Poemen replied, "I say to God: You have said, 'First take the beam out of your own eye and then you will be able to remove the splinter from the eye of your brother.'"

### The Young Emperor

There was a young emperor who went to the desert to visit an old monk.

The Emperor ordered his retinue to wait at a distance, and he approached the monk's cell alone. He removed the crown from his head and hid it and then knocked on the door to the monk's cell. The monk, upon opening the door, immediately knew that it was the Emperor standing before him, but he pretended not to recognize him, and he welcomed him as a fellow monk. They prayed and sat down together. Then the Emperor began to question the monk saying,

"How are all the fathers in the desert?"

The monk replied,

"They all pray for your health."

Then the Emperor looked around the cell and saw nothing except a small basket containing bread, and the monk said to him,

"Eat."

Then the monk dipped the bread in water, poured oil on it and salt, and gave it to the Emperor, who ate it. And the monk gave him some water, and he drank. Then the Emperor asked,

"Do you know who I am?"

The monk replied, "God knows who you are."

The Emperor then identified himself, and the monk bowed at the waist in homage. The Emperor said to him,

"You are truly blessed because you do not have the cares of this world. I was born to kingship, and the affairs of my empire are a constant concern to me. Each day I dine on the richest meats and cakes and the finest wines are poured into my goblet. And yet, today mere bread and water have satisfied me as no sumptuous feast ever has." And the young emperor marveled and went his way.

Theophilus the Archbishop

Abba Theophilus, the Archbishop, came to sketis one day. The brethren who were assembled there said to Abba Pambo "Say something to the Archbishop, so that he may be edified." The old man said to them "if he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech."

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