

Step 13 on Despondency.

by St. John Climacus

Despondency is a vice that opposes monastic life, and can be overcome through remembrance of sins, manual labour, and thinking of future blessings.

Scripture: Psalm 34:17, Philippians 4:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Hebrews 12:12, James 4:7

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Discipleship"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the dangers of despondency, describing it as a weakening of the mind, neglect of asceticism, and a hindrance to spiritual growth. He emphasizes that despondency accuses God of being merciless and leads to a lack of fervor in prayer and obedience. St. John Climacus highlights that community life can help combat despondency, while it often plagues hermits. He encourages believers to resist despondency through prayer, manual labor, and remembrance of future blessings, as it is a significant obstacle to spiritual progress.

Transcript

1. As we have already frequently said, this--we mean despondency--is very often one of the branches of talkativeness, and its first child. And so we have given it its appropriate place in this chain of vices.
2. Despondency is a slackness of soul, a weakening of the mind, neglect of asceticism, hatred of the vow made. It is the blessing of worldlings. It accuses God of being merciless and without love for men. It is being languid in singing psalms, weak in prayer, stubbornly bent on service, resolute in manual labour, indifferent in obedience.
3. A person under obedience does not know despondency, having achieved spiritual things by means of sensory things.
4. Community life is opposed to despondency. But she is a constant companion of the hermit.² She will never leave him till his death, and wrestles with him daily till his end. Seeing an anchorite's cell, she smiles, and creeps up and camps near by.
5. A doctor visits the sick in the morning, but despondency visits ascetics about noonday.³
6. Despondency is a pretext for hospitality. She insists that by means of manual labour, alms could be

given; and she urges us eagerly to visit the sick, recalling Him who said, I was sick and you visited Me.⁴ She puts it into our heads to go out visiting the dejected and faint-hearted, and sets one faintheart to comfort another.

7. She reminds those standing at prayer of necessary duties. And, brutish as she is, she leaves no stone unturned to find some plausible pretext to drag us from prayer as with a kind of halter.

8. At the third hour the demon of despondency produces shivering, headache, and even colic. At the ninth hour the sick man gathers his strength. And when the table is laid he jumps out of bed. But the hour of prayer has come; again the body is weighed down. He had begun to pray, but it steeps him in sleep, and tears his response to shreds with untimely yawns.⁵

9. Each of the other passions is destroyed by some particular virtue. But despondency for the monk is a general death.

10. A courageous soul resurrects his dying mind, but despondency and sloth squander all his riches.

11. Since despondency is one of the eight capital vices, and moreover the gravest, let us deal with it just as we have dealt with the others; but let us only add this. When there is no psalmody, then despondency does not make its appearance. And as soon as the appointed Office is finished, the eyes open.

1 More exactly, 'On accidie'. It means 'languor', 'torpor', 'tedium', 'spiritual gloom', 'low spirits', 'indifference to the work of salvation', 'distaste for spiritual things', 'spiritual sloth'.

2 Or, 'hesychast'.

3 Cf. Psalm xc, 6, 'the noonday devil'.

4 St. Matthew xxv, 36.

5 Lit. 'snatches the verse from his mouth with untimely yawns'.

12. Spiritual heroes¹ come to light at the time of despondency, for nothing procures so many crowns for a monk as the battle with despondency.

13. Observe, and you will find that if you stand on your feet despondency will battle with you. If you sit, it will suggest that it is better for you to lean back; and it urges you to lean against the wall of the cell; then it persuades you to peep out of the window, by producing noises and footsteps.

14. He who mourns over himself does not know despondency.

15. Let this tyrant be bound by the remembrance of your sins. Let us buffet him by manual labour. He should be brought into court by the thought of blessings to come. And when brought as before a tribunal let him be duly questioned:

16. 'Tell me, you nerveless, shuffling fellow, who viciously spawned you? Who are your offspring? Who are your foes? Who is your destroyer?' And despondency, under compulsion, may be thought to reply: 'Among those who are truly obedient I have nowhere to lay my head; but with those amongst whom I have a place for myself, I live quietly. I have many mothers: sometimes insensibility of soul, sometimes forgetfulness of the things above, sometimes excessive troubles. My offspring who abide with me are:

changing from place to place, disobedience to one's spiritual father, forgetfulness of the judgement, and sometimes breach of the vow. And my opponents, by whom I am now bound, are psalmody and manual labour. My enemy is the thought of death. What completely mortifies me is prayer with firm hope of future blessings. And who gave birth to prayer? Ask her.'

This is the thirteenth victory. He who has really gained it has become experienced in all good.

1 Lit. 'the violent'. St. Matthew xi, 12.

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