



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

January 2025 On Remembrance of Death

“In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin.”¹
The Book of Sirach - Ecclesiasticus 7:36.

My beloved brethren, as we begin this new year, let us meditate upon the words of our holy Father, Saint Anthony the Great:

“Indeed, if we, too, live as if we were to die each new day, we shall not sin. As to the quotation given, its meaning is this: when we awaken each day, we should think that we shall not live till evening; and again, when about to go to sleep we should think that we shall not awaken. Our life is by nature uncertain and is measured out to us daily by Providence. If we are so disposed and live our daily life accordingly, we shall not commit sin, nor lust after anything, nor bear a grudge against anyone, nor lay up treasures on earth; but as men who each day expect to die, we shall be poor and we shall forgive everything to all men.”²

Do you see how spiritually beneficial the thought of death can be? If you think of death constantly you shall not sin, therefore the realization that death can approach us at any moment will lead us to repentance. His Holiness, the Thrice Blessed, Pope Shenouda III, of blessed memory, teaches us saying, “True repentance is the discarding of sin practically, mentally, and from the heart, *which springs out of love for God*, His commandments, and His kingdom, *and the care of the repentant person for his or her lot in eternity. True repentance is forsaking sin without return.*”³

Saint John Climacus tells us that, “Just as bread is the most necessary of all foods, so the thought of death is the most essential of all works.”⁴ He goes on to explain why by saying the following:

¹ Sirach 7:36 (NRSV)

² St. Athanasius, St. Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Robert T. Meyer, vol. 10, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1978), 36.

³ Pope Shenouda III: The Life of Repentance and Purity (Sydney, Australia: C.O.P.T.), 15.

⁴ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 132.

“The remembrance of death brings labors and meditations, or rather, the sweetness of dishonor to those living in community, whereas for those living away from turbulence, *it produces freedom from daily worries and breeds constant prayer and guarding of the mind, virtues that are the cause and the effect of the thought of death.*”⁵

St. John the Short gives us the following practical advice to follow as we think about death daily:

“So when you arise at dawn each day, make a fresh start in every virtue and commandment of God with greatest patience, with fear and long-suffering, in the love of God, with all spiritual and physical zeal and much humiliation; enduring affliction and constriction of the heart, with much prayer and intercession, with groans, in purity of the tongue and restriction of the eyes, being reviled and not getting angry, living peaceably and not giving back evil for evil; not noticing the faults of others; not measuring oneself (being beneath the whole of creation), having renounced material goods and the things that pertain to the flesh; on a cross, in combat, in poverty of spirit, in determination and spiritual asceticism; in fasting, in repentance, in weeping, in the strife of battle, in discretion, in purity of the soul, in generous sharing, [doing] your handiwork in hesychia, in nightly vigils, in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in toils, *closing your tomb as though you were already dead, so that all the time you are thinking your death is at hand.*”⁶

It was said that “When Abba Theophilus, the archbishop, was at the point of death, he said: “Blessed are you, Abba Arsenius, for you were ever mindful of this hour.”⁷ It is important to note that St. Arsenius the Great was the disciple of St. John the Short and it is clear that he learned this concept from him and we can see how great of an impact it had, not only on him but also on Abba Theophilus, the Archbishop of Alexandria.

Let us read together some sayings of the early desert Father and Mothers on death:

An old man used to say “I await death evening, and morning, and every day.”⁸

⁵ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 132.

⁶ John Behr, ed., Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 139.

⁷ John Behr, ed., Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 128.

⁸ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 76.

St. Ephrem the Syrian says to us, “Blessed is he who keeps the day of his departure ever before his eyes, and has learned to hate arrogance before our inherent worthlessness is to be revealed by putrefaction in the grave.”⁹

Amma Sarah said: “When I put my foot on the ladder to go up, I also set death in front of my eyes before I go up there.”¹⁰

Abba Evagrius said: “While you are staying in your cell, focus your logismos and call to mind the day of [your] death.”¹¹

An old man used to say, “Whensoever I bring down the bar of the loom, and before I raise it up again, I always set my death before mine eyes.”¹²

Another old man used to say, “When I am plaiting (or sewing) a basket, with every stitch which I put into it I set my death before my eyes before I take another stitch.”¹³

As we read these blessed sayings we learn that there is tremendous benefit to constantly thinking about death, because in thinking about death, we are actually thinking about true life, our eternal life. If we are focused on our eternal life, then we will be very careful to root out things that separate us from Him whom we love with all our hearts, and for whom we left the world behind. The thought of death should provoke in us the desire to repent and to change, that is why it is so powerful and can only lead us toward God.

“The man who lives daily with the thought of death is to be admired, and the man who gives himself to it by the hour is surely a saint.”¹⁴

May God grant us that we think of death and eternal life constantly, as men who await their master, as our Lord said to us, “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching.”¹⁵ Amen.

⁹ Ephrem the Syrian, *A Spiritual Psalter or Reflections on God*, trans. Isaac E. Lambertsen and Antonina Janda (Liberty, TN: The St. John of Kronstadt Press, 2004), 110.

¹⁰ John Behr, ed., *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 301.

¹¹ John Behr, ed., *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 103.

¹² Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 85.

¹³ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 192.

¹⁴ John Climacus, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 132–133.

¹⁵ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 12:37.