



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

May 2025 On Joyful Mourning

*“Hold fast to the blessed and joyful sorrow of holy compunction
and do not cease laboring for it until it lifts you high above the things
of the world to present you, a cleansed offering, to Christ.”¹*

The Ladder of Divine Ascent - Step 7: On Mourning

My beloved brethren, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us saying, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,”² and St. Paul the Apostle explains this point through the following passage from the Holy Scriptures:

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. ***Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance.*** For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. ***For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted;*** but the sorrow of the world produces death. *For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication!... Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort.*³

Here we can clearly see how our mourning and sorrow can be turned into comfort and joy, not only for ourselves, but also for those who will rejoice at our repentance, as we see St. Paul rejoicing over the Corinthians.

St. John of the Ladder also shares the following thought which is directly connected to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: “As I ponder the true nature of compunction, *I find myself amazed by the way in which inward joy and gladness mingle with what we call mourning and grief*, like honey in a comb. There must be a lesson here, and it surely is

¹ 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), 137.

² The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 5:4.

³ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 2 Co 7:8–11, 13.

that compunction is properly a gift from God, so that there is a real pleasure in the soul, since ***God secretly brings consolation to those who in their heart of hearts are repentant.***⁴ He also explains how mourning leads the soul to desire repentance: “Mourning which is according to God is a melancholy of the soul, a disposition of an anguished heart that passionately seeks what it thirsts for, and when it fails to attain it, pursues it diligently and follows behind it lamenting bitterly.”⁵ Thus, we see that when our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Blessed are those who mourn”, He clearly meant those who mourn in the way that St. John presents to us, in a way that causes us to passionately and diligently seek what we thirst for, our salvation through our repentance!

St. John also shares with us a beautiful analogy that mourning is like a “golden spur within a soul that has been stripped of all bonds and ties, set by holy sorrow to keep watch over the heart.”⁶ A spur is a device used by those who ride horses to urge their horse to keep moving steadily forward, therefore, we too must use mourning as a spur to urge our soul to keep moving forward, repenting day after day, in order to attain salvation.

He also explains the importance of mourning with tears: “The tears that come after baptism are greater than baptism itself, though it may seem rash to say so. Baptism washes off those evils that were previously within us, whereas the sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. The baptism received by us as children we have all defiled, but we cleanse it anew with our tears. *If God in His love for the human race had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find.*”⁷ Yet, even though we mourn and shed tears, St John then says to us that, “The man who mourns constantly in a way that pleases God does not cease to celebrate daily.”⁸

There are also many sayings of the desert Fathers and Mothers regarding sorrow, mourning, and tears which we can meditate upon:

“Once when Abba Poemen was passing by in Egypt he saw a woman sitting in a sepulcher, weeping bitterly, and he said: “If all the delights of this world came [her way] they would not change her soul from sorrow. So too ought the monk to have sorrow in himself all the time.”⁹

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), 141.

⁵ Ibid, 136.

⁶ Ibid, 136.

⁷ Ibid, 137.

⁸ Ibid, 140.

⁹ 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), 231.

“And when Abba Poemen heard that he was dead, that is to say, that Abbâ Arsenius had gone to his rest, he said, “Blessed art thou, O Abbâ Arsenius, for thou didst weep over thyself in this world. For he who weepeth not for himself in this world must weep for ever in the next. He may weep here voluntarily, or there because of the punishments [which he will receive], but it is impossible for a man to escape weeping either here or there.”¹⁰

“And another brother also asked [Abba Poemen], saying, “Show me a word whereby I may live”; and the old man said unto him, “The first thing of all which the fathers have given us [to do] is to mourn.”¹¹

“A brother asked Abba Matoes: “Tell me a saying,” and he said to him: “Go and beseech God to give you sorrow in your heart and humility. Be always aware of your sins and do not judge others but be inferior to everybody.”¹²

“Amma Syncletica said, “There is a sorrow that is beneficial and a sorrow that is destructive. Useful sorrow is to groan for one’s own sins and for the ignorance of [one’s] neighbors; [it serves us] not to fall short of the intended goal, but to attain the ultimate goodness. But there is a sorrow that is of the enemy, a totally unreasonable sorrow that has been called accidie by many people. It is necessary to scare this spirit away, especially by prayer and psalm-singing.”¹³

Lastly, St. John of the Ladder tells us that, “When we die, we will not be criticized for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. ***But we will certainly have some explanation to offer to God for not having mourned unceasingly.***”¹⁴

May God grant that we “*hold fast to the blessed and joyful sorrow of holy compunction* and [that we may not] cease laboring for it until it lifts [us] high above the things of the world to present [us], a cleansed offering, to Christ.”¹⁵ Amen.

¹⁰ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 34.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 249.

¹² 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), 201–224.

¹³ *Ibid*, 308.

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), 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 137.