

An Introduction to The Desert Fathers

My intention here is to introduce you to some men who lived in the third and fourth centuries in a very different culture, but who loved and served with extraordinary zeal the same Lord we follow. We have much to gain from reading about these men who became known as the “Desert Fathers.” Being only an introduction, I will not be able to treat them thoroughly. My hope is that I can let them inspire you and that you will read them more fully for yourself.

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*¹ give us a glimpse into the asceticism, the practical theology, and the heart of what the monastic life was all about, at least in these early years. *The Sayings* were passed down orally among the monks until such a time as it was thought necessary to write them down. Much has been written to show the excesses of the monastic tradition - the overzealous use of discipline, self-denial, and obedience to the common rule, competition (which community or individual had the most rugged practice), and dualism (that our flesh is evil). *The Sayings* is a collection of pithy statements and short stories which capture the heart and soul of the monastic life in the communities of the Egyptian and Palestinian deserts. The focus is to illustrate both the lives and the teachings of the teachers (referred to as abbot, old man, or pastor). There are short Books (chapters) which focus on various aspects of discipline; “Quiet and Solitude,” “Self-restraint,” “Fornication,” one against material possessions, one on patience, humility, discretion, and other topics. The stories illustrate the virtues of different brothers and the lack thereof. Some of the stories show great insight, others are obtuse and hard to figure out. Some of the stories make the desert life seem very real, others are so legendary and ridiculous that one wonders why they were passed down at all. But that is really the point – these sayings are filled with enigma. It is very difficult to make generalizations; one story might affirm some abject discipline while the next shows the lack of virtue in the misapplication of the very same discipline. Like the scriptures, *The Sayings* is a very honest presentation of these interesting men, showing us the positives as well as the negatives.

¹ Waddell, Helen, *The Desert Fathers*, London Constable & Co., 1936. All citations come from the Waddell translation and point to the critical text chapter/verse notation. There are several versions of the *Sayings*, even different authors (for example Rufinus has a work called *Sayings of the Fathers* and John Cassian recorded some sayings in *Institutes*). Benedicta Ward has offered a modern translation recently which, though different from that of Waddell, is valuable.

A note concerning women. The earliest “communities” we find in church history are those for virgins and widows. This was a highly esteemed group in the early church – they cared for the needy and were known as the prayer warriors in the church. *The Sayings* are sprinkled with stories of women living the disciplined life in the desert. Many of the stories with women indicate that women oftentimes attempted to hide their gender in order to remain in the disciplined life. It is interesting and curious to me that the author of the *Sayings* would show respect for these women even while reporting in the text that the women were hiding their identity.

It is not difficult to find examples of severe discipline. These monks were greatly concerned that their flesh not get in the way of their spiritual progress. To this end it became important to “buffet the flesh” (1 Cor 9.27) in order that it not become their master. It would be enough to cite the simple fact that some of these men lived for years alone in desert caves, but the discipline went much further. A few examples will suffice to show how severe this discipline could be. First, the issue of water and food:

They told of the abbot Macarius that if he were making holiday with the brethren, and wine was brought, and he drank for the brethren's sake, he set this bond upon himself that for one cup of wine, he would drink no water for a whole day. And the brethren, eager to give him pleasure, would bring him wine. And the old man would take it joyously, to torment himself thereafter. But his disciple, knowing the reason, said to the brethren, "For God's sake do not give it to him, for he brings under his body with torments thereafter in his cell." And the brethren when they knew it gave him wine no more. IV.26

It should be noted that though this story seems to be an affirmation of great discipline and piety, Macarius' disciple was not happy that there would follow such torment and the other brethren seemed against it as well. Thus, even in an example of severe self-discipline we have some tension within the text itself as to the virtue of such practice.

Macarius was one of the most extreme of these Fathers. I find very little attraction to him, but his ability to discipline his body certainly challenges our modern softness. This next story, though legendary in nature, is the most absurd story I

have found about Macarius.² I include it to show how self-discipline was often taken too far – I also find this story rather humorous.

Macarius is said to have been bothered by his lack of self-restraint when he took vengeance on a mosquito which had bit him. In order to show his remorse and to learn more self-restraint, he went to a nearby swamp, stripped himself naked, and gave himself to the mosquitoes for a period of six weeks. When he returned it is said that he was so swollen from being bitten that he was only recognized by his voice.

Another somewhat ridiculous story - this one comes from the chapter on “Not making a show,”

There was a certain one that abstained from food and ate no bread: he came to one of the Fathers. By chance there came also other pilgrims, and the old man made them a little broth. And when they sat down to eat, the abstemious brother set down for himself a pea that he had steeped, and chewed it. And when they got up from table, the old man took him aside and said to him, "Brother, if thou comest to any one, do not show off to him thy way of life: if thou dost wish to keep to thine own way, abide in thy cell and go nowhere out from it." VIII.22

This abstemious brother is being rebuked for the pride in his self-discipline. If one were only to read the examples given above it would be easy to view these men as psychological misfits rather than true believers, but there is another side to *The Sayings* which must be taken into account.

It is not difficult to find examples of great insight, stories which show these monks to be aware of a deeper wisdom, not just fixated on pushing for more and more rugged self-denial. Waddell comments, “Their every action showed a standard of values that turns the world upside down. It was their humility, their gentleness, their heartbreaking courtesy that was the seal of their sanctity to their contemporaries, far beyond abstinence or miracle or sign.”³

Once a brother in Scete was found guilty, and the older brethren came in assembly and sent to the abbot Moses, asking him to come: but he would not. Then the priest sent to him, saying: "Come: for the assembly of brethren awaits thee." And he rose up and came. But taking with him a

² It should be noted that there were several such men named Marcarius, thus it is not easy to know if these particular stories were, in fact, about the same person.

³ Waddell, p.22.

very old basket, he filled it with sand and carried it behind him. And they went out to meet him, asking, "Father, what is this?" And the old man said to them, "My sins are running behind me and I do not see them, and I am come today to judge the sins of another man." And they heard him, and said naught to the brother, but forgave him. IX.4

At one time the abbot John was climbing up from Scete with other brethren: and he who was by way of guiding them mistook the way: for it was night. And the brethren said to the abbot John, "What shall we do, Father, for the brother has missed the way, and we may lose ourselves and die?" And the old man said, "If we say aught to him, he will be cast down. But I shall make a show of being worn out and say that I cannot walk, but must lie here till morning." And he did so. And the others said, "Neither shall we go on, but shall sit down beside thee." And they sat down until morning, so as not to discountenance their brother. XVII.7

There is a story in Book V, "On Fornication" (or lust) where two brothers go into town together to sell their woven baskets. They separate in the town in order to sell their baskets more quickly and when they reunite one of the brothers says that he will not go back to the community and his cell. When questioned he informs the other brother that while separated he had "sinned in the flesh." The second brother, "anxious to help him," lies by saying, "But it so happened with me: when I was separated from thee, I too ran into fornication. But let us go, and do penance together with all our might: and God will forgive us that are sinful men." They returned and confessed to the old men and did their penance together, the innocent one doing his, "not for himself but for his brother, as if he himself had sinned." The account concludes, "And God, seeing his love and his labour, after a few days revealed to one of the old men that for the great love of this brother who had not sinned, He had forgiven the brother who had. And verily this is to lay down one's soul for one's brother." (V.27)

From Book XV, "On Humility:"

A story of a monk who fasted 70 weeks only eating once a day. He wanted God to reveal something to him about a biblical text. When he had no answer he was frustrated and decided to go ask another brother for help. Then an angel came to him and said that because he had the humility to ask a brother for insight, God would now reveal some insight to him. XV.72

The abbot Mathois said, "The nearer a man approaches to God, the greater sinner he sees himself to be." XV.28

From Book XI, "On Sober Living" we get this example of a brother who had bothered John the Short several times for counsel in one day (remember that solitude was a prized discipline). A few days later he told the abbot that he had refrained to come again lest he bother him,

The abbot John said: "Go, light the lamp." And he lit it. And he said, "Bring other lamps, and light them from this one." And he did so. And abbot John said to the old man, "is the lamp injured in aught, that thou hast lit the others from it?" And he said, "Nay." "So neither is John injured, if all Scete should come to me, nor am I hindered from the love of God: come therefore when thou wilt, hesitating not at all." XI.15

Many other examples can be given to show the balance understood by these men in their spiritual disciplines. In Book VIII, "That nothing ought to be done for show," are a couple examples of abstemiousness being rebuked; in Book XIII, "On Hospitality," that it is necessary to lay aside one's fasting and other disciplines in order to show proper hospitality; in Book XIV, "Of Obedience," a story showing how one brother's willingness to leave his solitude to serve his abbot is a greater virtue than staying in solitude; and in Book XVII, "Of Charity," the story of one monk who fasts for six days while another cares for the sick; an old monk is asked which brother does better,

"If that brother who carries his fast for six days were to hang himself up by the nostrils, he could not equal the other, who does service to the sick." XVII.18

These various examples show that there was more to these men than simply following a regimen of rules and disciplines. These examples seem to illustrate the quest which captured all of these men, and which St. Antony summed up very succinctly, "I do not now fear God, but I love Him." (XVII.1).

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers is a unique collection which indeed made its mark, not only on the development of monasticism, but on Christianity as a whole. Again Waddell, "the Desert, though it praised austerity, reckoned it among the rudiments of holy living, and not as an end in itself: asceticism had not travelled far from the ascesis, the training of the athlete, and the Fathers themselves to their contemporary biographers are the *athletae Dei*, the athletes of God." (p.10) Waddell goes on to comment how seldom it is that men criticize those who make similar

sacrifices for science or for sport and says this, “The only field of research in which a man may make no sacrifices, under pain of being called a fanatic, is God.” (p.20) To such minds as live in the 21st century, these men were a bit extreme. Their extremes, however, must not be marginalized as nothing more than misguided zeal. These men loved God and were trying their best to express that love.

I am challenged by the stories of these men in three ways: to embrace more time alone in quiet, peaceful communion with God; to pray more; and to fast more. I encourage you to find a copy of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* for your own reading. It is a very short collection and reads very much like the Proverbs. Helen Waddell’s English translation is the one I used and is very good. I have listed two other books below on this subject which I have found inspirational in my communion with the Lord over the years.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Waddell, Helen, *The Desert Fathers*, London Constable & Co., 1936.

Nouwen, Henri, *The Way of the Heart*.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

R.A. Baker

Ph.D. Ecclesiastical History

© 2000, 2010

www.churchhistory101.com