

HEROES OF THE DESERT

A Garden in the Wilderness

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

- Types of Ascetical Literature
 - *Vita*—Lives
 - formal biographies of a particular subject
 - often include discourse(s) given by the subject
 - heavily influenced by the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius
 - Travel Journals/Histories
 - writers visited “second-generation” monks and monasteries
 - recorded their experiences in the form of collections of anecdotes
 - Rules
 - more or less formal rules of life for monasteries
 - heavily laden with Scriptural references
 - Ascetical Theology
 - reflections and compilations based on the teachings of the Fathers
 - most famous, *The Institutes* and *The Conferences* of St John Cassian become standard texts for monks for many centuries
 - *Apophthegmata*
 - from the Greek *phthegma*, “voice”
 - means “an utterance”, as opposed to a formal discourse
 - usually referred to as the “Sayings” of the fathers
 - given in response to specific requests: “Father, give me a word.”
 - required meditation and “ruminantion” to be understood
 - usually pertained to a certain need or situation; different words applied to different monks
 - occur in various editions, in Greek, Latin and Syriac; often translated
 - oldest Greek collections take several forms:
 - the *Alphabetikon*: connected to specifically-named persons
 - 131 monks (128 men, 3 women)
 - only 21 of these have more than 10 sayings; many only have one or two
 - over half of the sayings are attributed to only 10 abbats
 - the *Systematikon*
 - anonymous sayings in most cases
 - arranged systematically according to theme

Selected Sayings

From Abba Arsenius the Great

- One day Abba Arsenius came to a place where there were reeds blowing in the wind. The old man said to the brothers, “What is this movement?” They said, “Some reeds.” Then the old man said to them, “When one who is living in silent prayer hears the song of a little sparrow, his heart no longer experiences the same peace. How much worse it is when you hear the movement of those reeds.”
- While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words: “Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.” And a voice came to him saying: “Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.” Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him: “Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.”
- It was said of him that, just as none in the palace had worn more splendid garments than he when he lived there, so no one in the Church wore such poor clothing.
- He said to Abba Mark, “God knows that I love you, but I cannot live with God and with men. The thousands and ten thousands of the heavenly hosts have but one will, while men have many. So I cannot leave God to be with men.”

From Abba Macarius the Great

- Abba Pambo said to him, “Father, say a word to the brethren.” He said, “I have not yet become a monk, but I have seen monks.”
- Abba Macarius while he was in Egypt discovered a man who owned a beast of burden engaged in plundering Macarius’ goods. So he came up to the thief as if he were a stranger and he helped him to load the animal. He saw him off in great peace of soul, saying, “We have brought nothing into this world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (1 Tim 6:7).
- When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The demon struck at him in vain, and said, “What is your power, Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too. You fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all. In one thing only do you beat me.” Abba Macarius asked what that was. He said, “Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you.”
- Abba Macarius was asked, “How should one pray?” The old man said, “There is no need at all to make long discourses: it is enough to stretch out one’s hands and say, ‘Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.’ And if the conflict grows fiercer, say, ‘Lord, help!’ He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.”

From Abba John the Short

- It was said of Abba John that he withdrew and lived in the desert at Scetis with an old man. His abba, taking a piece of dry wood, planted it and said to him, “Water it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit.” Then the old man took some of the fruit and carried it to the church, saying to the brethren, “Take and eat the fruit of obedience.”
- Abba John said, “I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great number. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me. I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy.”
- Abba Poemen said of Abba John that he had prayed God to take his passions away from him that he might be free from care. He went and told an old man this: “I find myself in peace, without an enemy.” The old man said to him, “Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.” So he besought God, and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, “Lord, give me strength for the fight.”
- Abba John said, “A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top. The foundation is our neighbor, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one.”

From Abba Poemen the Great

- A brother said to Abba Poemen, “Give me a word” The old man said to him, “As long as the pot is on the fire, no fly nor any other animal can get near it, but as soon as it is cold, these creatures get inside. So it is for the monk: as long as he lives in spiritual activities, the enemy cannot find a means of overthrowing him.”
- Abba Poemen said, “These three things are the most helpful of all: fear of the Lord, prayer, and doing good to one’s neighbor.” He also said, “Poverty, hardship, austerity and fasting, such are the instruments of the solitary life.”
- A brother came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, “Abba, I have many thoughts and they put me in danger.” The old man led him outside and said to him, “Expand your chest and do not breathe in.” He said, “I cannot do that.” Then the old man said to him, “If you cannot do that, no more can you prevent thoughts from arising, but you can resist them.”
- A brother said to Abba Poemen, “I have committed a great sin and I want to do penance for three years.” The old man said to him, “That is a lot.” The brother said to him, “For one year?” The old man said again, “That is a lot.” Those who were present said, “For forty days?” The old man said again, “That is a lot.” He added, “I myself say that if a

man repents with his whole heart and does not intend to commit the sin any more, God will accept him after only three days.”

- A brother asked Abba Poemen, “If a brother is involved in a sin and is converted, will God forgive him?” The old man said to him, “Will not God, who has commanded men to act thus, do as much himself and even more? “For God commanded Peter to forgive till seventy times seven.”
- A brother asked Abba Poemen, “How should I behave in the place where I live?” The old man said, “Have the mentality of an exile in the place where you live, do not desire to be listened to and you will have peace.” He also said, “This voice cries out to a man to his last breath: ‘Be converted today.’”

English editions of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*:

The Alphabetical Sayings:

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward. Cistercian Publications, 1975. ISBN: 0-87907-959-2.

The Systematic Sayings:

The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward. SLG Press, 1986. ISBN: 0-7283-0109-1.

The World of the Desert Fathers, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward. Cistercian Publications, 1986. ISBN: 0-87907-977-0.

The Verba Seniorum:

The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward. Penguin Books, 2003. ISBN: 0-140-44731-8.