

Is It Better to Be Behind on the Path? Experiencing the Path of Christian Spirituality in Different Millennia

**Part IV
Evagrius**

By Rev. Joel Kletzing

Since there was not in Evagrius' writings a careful parsing of the doctrines of justification and sanctification, it is difficult at times to tell if he does require preparation before approaching Christ. There is much in his writings about necessary steps to take to free oneself from earthly encumbrances. He does make occasional references to grace in the works sampled for this essay, but there is not the constant return to the double theme of helplessness to sanctify oneself and requisite dependence on Christ's power in order to be changed as is found in Brooks. While Brooks' works surveyed above spoke much of assurance and what it means to be a true believer, having the ability to articulate theology in terms developed in the Reformation was not an evidence that he cited as a sign of genuine faith. Philip Schaff wrote that a baby recognizes its mother when he is hungry even if he cannot explain the process by which the food is produced. Evagrius was no spiritual infant, but in the overall life of the church, there were some aspects of doctrine such as that of covenant theology which had not yet been developed to give precision to thinking about the believer's union with Christ.

Evagrius¹ the Solitary, also known as Evagrius Pontikos, was born 345 or 346, probably at Iborra in Pontus. He was a student of the Cappadocian Fathers, being ordained a reader by Basil the Great and a deacon by Gregory of Nazianzos with whom he attended the Council of Constantinople in 381. He was never ordained a priest and spent time in Egypt where he was influenced by the Desert Fathers.²

Whereas Brooks focused on the content of the Word of God lived out in the context of everyday life, Evagrius saw great value in retreating from basic

¹ Also spelled Evagrius.

² "Evagrius the Solitary: Introductory Note," *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1979), p. 29.

elements of life such as marriage in order to be fully devoted to God. He taught that “the practice of stillness is full of joy and beauty.”³

While Evagrius moved away from the material toward the spiritual, one cannot conclude from his writings that he considered the material to be evil. He encouraged a monk to live as if he was going to die tomorrow, but to treat his body as if he would need it for many years, thus demonstrating diligence and self-control. There was no evidence of hatred for the body.⁴ The goal Evagrius set for himself and others was to free self from attachment to material things and from being ruled by passions and desires. This meant, among other things, keeping to a bland diet. Here Luke 10:41-42 is cited to use Martha as an example who was rebuked by Jesus for failing to resemble her sister more who was not busy cooking for a crowd but listening to the teaching of the Messiah. Both Brooks and Evagrius were on guard against Satan’s desire to steal away the focus of the heart. Evagrius believed Satan could incite a person to fantasize about fancy cuisine under the guise of wanting to show hospitality. He warned against wanting wealth in order to give to the poor as a means for Satan to enter the soul and enflame greedy passions.⁵

Whereas Brooks elevated holiness as a cherished goal, for Evagrius it was stillness. The two were not unrelated. Evagrius gave counsel to steer clear of materialistically-minded persons. He recommended withdrawing to live alone or in a community of like-minded brothers. One should even be cautious of spending too much time with family or relatives who can deprive one of stillness. Matthew 8:22 instructed followers of Jesus to “let the dead bury their dead, but come, follow Me.”⁶ Many of the restrictions he instituted were done as safeguards against falling prey to sin. One must know his weaknesses and deal hard with them. But were these safeguards replacements for relying on Christ or means of showing love and sacrificial devotion to Jesus? The context in which Evagrius learned to battle against sin was amid very devoted monastics and ascetics, a lifestyle which included numerous rules whose scope went beyond those instituted by Scripture, but instituted with a desire to know God.

Evagrius was masterful at prescribing behavior to counteract the direction Satan would prefer God’s people turn. For instance, to defeat the demon of listlessness and drive away the desires of the enemy, Evagrius directed a regimen of working diligently with one’s hands to overcome idleness. Proverbs 13:4 says, “Every idle man is full of desires.” To confront greed, be sure to lose a little both in buying

³ “Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life,” *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1979), p. 31.

⁴ “Extracts from the Texts on Watchfulness,” *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1979), p. 53.

⁵ “Outline Teaching on Asceticism”, p. 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

and selling. Similar to Brooks, he advocated focusing on the day of death so to be empowered against temptation. Evagrius actually recommended imagining the event and considering what is happening presently in hell – the suffering, moaning, fear, agony, dread, pain and weeping. Then picture also the resurrection and appearing before God to be judged. Entertain thoughts about the glory that awaits the righteous, including intimate communion with God the Father and Son, with angels and with saints. As Brooks recommended, filling one's mind and fixing one's affections on spiritual glory will leave less room for devotion to earthly pleasures that distract.⁷ When one reads the later Brooks, one finds a much stronger emphasis on relying on Christ's power to accomplish victory within. That does not mean such a faith in Christ is absent Evagrius, for he advises that when one is disheartened he must pray and appeal to God for help.⁸

Brooks often said that a lack of assurance did not indicate necessarily a lack of grace. Likewise a lack of developed thinking concerning how Christ sanctifies does not mean that sanctification is not a reality in a person's life. Brooks frequently counseled that a believer meditate on Christ and rely on Him for power. He did not conclude that those who focus so heavily as Evagrius did on a plan for improving the soul are not believers. However, Brooks was clear that the path to happiness and holiness is to cast themselves wholly on Christ. One cannot help but wonder if he would have commended Evagrius for such serious devotion but encouraged him by spotlighting how fully Christ has obtained victory for all of His own. The present-day theologian can benefit from combining the psychological insights of Evagrius with the more fully developed doctrines concerning union with Christ pertaining to justification and sanctification, faith and repentance, in Brooks.

At times it seems that Brooks and Evagrius are saying nearly the same thing, even though they are using different terminology and defining the same terms differently. They are both motivated by a desire to see God, are both committed to holiness and prayer and resisting the devil, killing vices and developing virtue, glorifying Christ and calling on the same Lord. Evagrius acknowledges that human spiritual nature was dead through wickedness. It is raised by Christ through contemplation of creation and through spiritual knowledge He gives of Himself to the believer. In this way the Father raises the soul who has died the death of Christ (2 Timothy 2:11).

He presents an organic union with Christ where forensic justification by faith is at best far in the background. That is a doctrine which is dear to the Puritans. By forensic justification is meant that the grounds for freedom from guilt and the curse of sin is Christ's obedience, righteousness and satisfaction alone which is

⁷ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

imputed to those who have faith in Christ alone.⁹ Embracing forensic justification lays the expectation for what one will be provided in Christ and fuels faith to lay hold of all Christ has purchased. Without forensic justification, it seems one would have to grow into Christ instead of growing in Christ. This undermines any sense of assurance, for without an emphasis on justification by faith, how can one know he is adopted and that Christ's work on the cross guarantees that God's power will perfect the struggling sinner? As John Owen said, neither faith itself, nor repentance, a program of self-improvement and religious habits, nor any type of good works can procure for anyone acceptance by God.¹⁰ Far from promoting a system of faith-without-works salvation which opens the door to antinomianism, understanding the significance of Christ's sacrifice and of His love for those for whom He died who could not help themselves, the normal response would be to burrow more deeply into the safety of Christ, desiring to put on all that He is. Anselm is quoted as saying,

Dost thou believe that thou canst not be saved but by the death of Christ? The sick man answers, Yes; then let it be said unto him, Go to, then, and whilst thy soul abideth in thee, put all thy confidence in this death alone, place thy trust in no other thing; commit thyself wholly to this death, cover thyself wholly with this alone, cast thyself wholly on this death; wrap thyself wholly in this death.¹¹

Instead of developing a lifestyle of attempting to establish her own righteousness, a believer instead learns to practice a habit of submission to the righteousness of God.¹²

Owen is helpful in clarifying the relationship between justification and sanctification. The doctrine of sanctification is that which describes the nature of those justified. The believer's heart is renovated by God's gracious working as He washes, purifies and endows His people with obedience. He taught that justification must precede the inherent righteousness of sanctification.¹³ Living rightly is the unfolding of the benefits of being found to have a new standing before God.¹⁴ John Calvin wrote against the idea of preparatory fear that initiates the Christian life. He said that the fruit of repentance cannot develop until one has faith in the Father's mercy and confidence of being fully accepted in Christ.¹⁵

⁹ John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013 [originally published 1677]), pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Ibid., p. 36.

¹³ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁵ Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 142, note 48.

The eastern church promotes free will and therefore there exists a degree of self-authorship in salvation. Puritans who embrace election find security in Christ who purchased for His people a right to eternal life including effectual calling, regeneration, sanctification, preservation and glorification. This causes Brooks constantly to point to promises from God and not psychology for spiritual growth as Evagrius did. Justification destroys the power of sin to condemn, while sanctification destroys the dominion of sin. It's not that a Reformed theologian would condemn Evagrius' devotion as wrong. However, it is not wise to proceed without the foundation of justification by faith alone occupying a more central and prominent place in the foundation of the armaments one constructs in the war with sin. Thomas Watson said that repentance washes away the filth of sin, but Christ's blood washes away the guilt. "Do not rest upon this, that your heart has been wounded for sin, but rather that your Savior has been wounded for sin." "When you have wept, say with him: Lord Jesus, wash my tears in thy blood."¹⁶

Puritans taught that justification, regeneration, adoption, sanctification, etc., all were the results of union with Christ. Thomas Goodwin claimed that "all acts of God's justifying us depend upon union with Christ, we having him, and being in him first, and then thereby having right to his righteousness." He viewed Christ's work as very personal, saying "Christ takes me, and then gives me his Spirit, faith, holiness...."¹⁷ In his work on the book of Hebrews Owen said that union with Christ is the "principle and measure of all spiritual enjoyments and expectations."¹⁸ He agrees with Goodwin that union with Christ is first before all other graces effected in a believer, including justification.¹⁹

Evagrius says that when the intellect is relieved of its fallen state and enters a state of grace, in prayer it will comprehend its own nature as sapphire, the color of heaven.²⁰ This is tantamount to Brooks' desire to gain assurance of salvation. True prayer is the time when man is fully himself – the created image of God connecting with the uncreated Reality.²¹

Evagrius promotes fasting as a means of holding demons at bay and purging sins. However, if for reasons of weakness or sickness one must eat two or three meals a day, then one should do so with thanksgiving for God's provision.²²

¹⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009, reprint [originally published 1668]), p. 97.

¹⁷ Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 484.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

²⁰ "Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts," *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1979), p. 39.

²¹ Bunge, Gabriel, *Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread: The Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus on Anger and Meekness* trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), p. 64.

²² "Outline Teaching on Asceticism, p. 36.

Believing that the ascetic way was the way of knowing God, Evagrius believed there are three types of demons which oppose the ascetic life. There are those who tempt to gluttony, those who promote avarice or greed, and those who would entice believers to seek esteem from others.²³ Other demons follow after these three. For example, the demon of gluttony opens the door for that of unchastity. Pride follows avarice since it is poverty which makes a man humble.

Attempting to explain the psychology of sin, he said that thoughts inspired by demons produce conceptions in the intellect of sensory objects. All thoughts that are contrary to nature or that produce anger are caused by demons whose goal is to create mental adultery, ruining one's ability to receive the "vision of God." Evagrius had as his goal the experience of divine splendor which could be revealed during prayer, but the prayer has to be of such a quality that it is purged of all sensory objects. Much ascetic rigor is necessary in order to be eligible to receive the desired vision. Excessive desire can be combatted with fasting, vigils and sleeping on the ground. Incensive power can be subdued by practicing long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness and acts of compassion along with reciting psalms. But here Evagrius says that it is Christ who actually is the power correcting incensive power as the subject engages the prescribed acts of compassion, fasting and prayer. The result is that as such practices become routine the new Adam is formed, remade into the image of the Creator.²⁴

One can renounce unhealthy self-esteem by choosing to live in rags. Just as a runner is weighed down by clothing, so the intellect is encumbered if filled with anxious thoughts about belongings. Having less possessions can improve relations with others because one who is humble and surrendered has less reason to attack others in order to defend property. One must rely on the Holy Spirit to monitor and then to condemn or condone one's thoughts. On one's own there is opportunity to study carefully the time, place and other circumstances when sin occurred, so that one can be on guard against a repeat of such a demonic trap. As one learns his own weak spots, he may recognize concealed demonic activity. Once exposed, it cannot flourish. "Hatred against the demons contributes greatly to our salvation and helps our growth in holiness."²⁵ Similar to Brooks' teaching, Evagrius said that Christ teaches us proper hatred for sin by abandoning us for a time to suffering. When Evagrius struggled to be free of passion (dispassion), what he really desired was to be free of unholy passion, believing that passion can be pressed into the service of holiness.

Every demon teaches the soul to love pleasure except the demon of dejection which cuts off every pleasure of the soul and encourages the soul to give up.²⁶ This sounds different than Brooks who would have more plainly taught that

²³ "Texts on Discrimination," p. 38.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 41-44.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

pleasure must be found in God. In reality, Evagrius, too, sought pleasure in experiencing God's presence, so not all pleasure was evil.

The demon of self-esteem is particularly tricky since it can railroad victories of dispassion into a path of self-praise and thus turn success into sin. Asceticism not rooted in love is actually vice and not the virtue it may appear.²⁷ An encounter with the demon of unchastity can bring about humility and a realization that one is spiritually ill. When it is detected, it must be fought by engaging in intense prayer, a frugal diet, vigils, and cultivating a spirit of contemplation. Incensive power must be trained to attack this vicious demon that would conjure sensual images of shameful acts in one's mind. The demon of anger also conjures mental images, but not of a sensual nature. Instead they are images perhaps of those we love being insulted which justify a fantasy wherein a violent response is played out. When images such as these fill the mind, prayer is seriously disrupted.²⁸

In "On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-three Texts" the framework logic of Evagrius' spirituality becomes clearer. The practice of virtue precedes the desire stage of contemplation. The soul must first be purified by obedience to the commandments which will then make the intellect fit for prayer. "Prayer is communion of the intellect with God."²⁹

Since God is in essence beyond the grasp of our senses or human ability to conceptualize, the intellect must be freed of all "impassioned thought" when entering prayer. One can begin by asking for the gift of tears so that savage impulses in the soul can be tamed. Confession of sin will be answered with forgiveness from God. If you are given tears, that is evidence that God has helped you to practice repentance. Persevering in prayer is the "remedy for gloom and despondency."³⁰ Effectiveness is developed in prayers as one sells possessions and gives to the poor so as to be free of distraction, as one is reconciled to others, as one works to truly engage the intellect and cultivate reverence and awe rather than simply going through mechanical motions.³¹ Asking must not just be calling out a wish list but must be done according to God's will, as best one understands the Father's will. One should often include the petition "Thy will be done." Evagrius viewed prayer as "the ascent of the intellect to God," not as a mystical escape from the intellect. Appropriate requests which reflect God's will are the following: for purity in passions; for freedom from ignorance; for deliverance from temptation. In his urgings, Evagrius makes frequent reference to Scripture. He likewise makes frequent reference to the

²⁷ Bunge, p. 135.

²⁸ "Texts on Discrimination," p. 47-48.

²⁹ "On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts," *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1979), pp. 55-57.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

presence of demons whose goal is to distract the one praying. What is absent is Scriptures that give evidence of such prolific demonic presence deployed to destroy prayers. The reason, he explains, that demons are so desperate to disrupt prayers is that by prayer the believer is linked to salvation and peace. In fact, Evagrius suggests that temptations by demons to gluttony, unchastity, avarice, rancor and other passions are created so as to turn the intellect into a coarse state in which it is unable to engage in prayer.³²

Conversely, the practice of virtue paves the way for contemplating the inner essences of creation and then of the Logos, the Creator, who makes Himself known to the one praying. True prayer is dependent on God who gives prayer to him who prays.³³ The Holy Spirit has compassion on human weakness, and when He approaches a believer in an impure state truly praying, He comes to purify and to grant proper longings. Prayer is the intellect's highest activity. It is the prelude to obtaining the immaterial knowledge of God.³⁴ Instead of the channel of union and communion being forged from God to man by means of forensic justification, Evagrius promotes man forging sanctification by the channel of prayer.

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³² Ibid., pp. 60-61.

³³ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 63, 65.