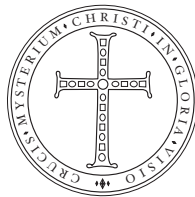


Archimandrite Zacharias

# REMEMBER THY FIRST LOVE

*(Revelation 2:4-5)*

*The Three Stages of the Spiritual Life  
in the Theology of Elder Sophrony*



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REMEMBER THY FIRST LOVE (REVELATION 2:4-5)

THE THREE STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE THEOLOGY OF ELDER SOPHRONY

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*This Day Have I Begotten Thee*

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## LONGING TO SEE THE LORD

*My soul yearns after the Lord and I seek Him in tears. How could I do other than seek Thee? Thou first didst seek and find me and gavest me to delight in Thy Holy Spirit and my soul fell to loving Thee.<sup>1</sup>*

OUR ENTIRE STRUGGLE in this life is aimed at discovering our ‘deep heart’<sup>2</sup> because that is the place where God manifests Himself. Above all, we aim to uproot the passion of pride within us, because this is the passion which buries the heart, leaving us feeling as if we no longer had a heart. ‘Pride stops us from loving,’ says St Silouan.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, true love proceeds from humility, for the humble man has room in his heart for God and his fellow-men. As long as we are proud we will be separated from our heart; we will live only according to our little minds, totally missing the ultimate purpose of our coming into this life, and will end up as dry leaves blown about aimlessly by the wind. If, however, we succeed in finding our deep heart, then our mind will drop anchor not only in the heart, but also in the depths of heaven where our life is ‘hid with Christ in God’.<sup>4</sup> And God will come and make His abode in us.

1. *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 269.

2. Cf. Ps. 64:6.

3. *Saint Silouan*, p. 229.

4. Col. 3:3.

No matter how greatly we have corrupted our hearts through sin, there comes a time when, like Zacchaeus, we burn with the desire to know the Lord, to know just Who He is.<sup>5</sup> No matter how dense the darkness of the pit of sin into which we have sunk, sooner or later the moment comes when the question of eternity refuses to be ignored any longer. We begin to see our past life as one massive betrayal of God, as a wholly unjust offence against Him. Our spirit now yearns for things eternal, for we have begun to see the vanity of anything that does not bear the seal of eternity. This is a crucial moment, for our eternal future depends entirely on the direction we choose to take. If we turn to the living God and accept His word, ardently desiring to see the Face of the Lord, He will enlighten us and begin His work of salvation in our soul. We will embark on an adventure with God. All we need is the desire to know Him, together with a little humility. This desire is the small part we offer up to God in faith, and without it God will not act. To our small part He then adds the infinitely greater part that is His grace, which enlarges our hearts fourfold and saves us.

According to St Cyril of Alexandria, Zacchaeus was consumed with the desire to know God the Saviour in person and to see His kind (τὸ εἶδος). This is the seed of salvation and when this seed falls into the heart of man, he has a great longing to see Who the Lord is. Once he is possessed by this longing he will do certain things which will seem mad in the eyes of this world, but which will in fact prepare the way for his first meeting with the Saviour. Such was the case of Zacchaeus when he began to seek the Lord. And

5. Cf. Luke 19:3: 'He sought to see Jesus who he was.'

this was the Lord's desire, for the Son of God came to save sinners. It is hardly astonishing that He should want to save a chief publican: in every time and place, the Lord seeks out His own.

Zacchaeus' desire made him run ahead and climb a sycamore tree so that he could see the Lord. But what was happening in his heart was visible only to Him Who is both God and Man. The crowd could not see the transformation of his heart, nor could they understand the nature of his desire. But even before Zacchaeus had seen Him, the Lord had perceived the movement of Zacchaeus' heart in a supernatural way, with the eyes of His divinity. He saw that the wild and greedy heart of the chief publican had now begun to soften and, melting with desire, had become transfigured so that he was ready to bear within himself the image of Christ.

Zacchaeus has ignored his reputation and esteem, which hinder man's approach to God, and he now attracts public scorn. In his shame he becomes kin to the Lord Jesus Who, at this point in the Gospel, is on His way to be crucified on the Cross of shame in order to deliver the world from the shame of sin. In our desire to see the Lord we too will make fools of ourselves, bearing as much shame as possible in order to achieve our goal: to find our Lord and Saviour. We are indifferent to the opinion of men and any fear of becoming a laughing-stock fades away. For we know that the Lord will grant us the honour of seeing His Face – which is far more beautiful than we can ever imagine – and our souls will be truly satisfied with His glory.<sup>6</sup> On account of his

6. Ps. 16:15 (LXX): 'χορτασθήσομαι ἐν τῷ ὀφθῆναί μοι τὴν δόξαν σου.'

burning desire, then, Zacchaeus despised all his worldly honours and was pleased to look ridiculous in the eyes of the people, if he could only gain a different kind of honour: that of finding favour with the Lord and being visited by Him.

As soon as the Lord came to the sycamore tree He looked up and saw the publican and spoke the following word: ‘Zacchaeus, hasten and come down!’<sup>7</sup> To delay in the spiritual life is a dangerous thing. When God calls us and addresses a word to us, we must be like Abraham: we must heed His invitation and set off promptly wherever He leads us. So the Lord’s first word to Zacchaeus is ‘Hasten!’ and the next is, ‘Come down!’ or, ‘Humble yourself! Come down from the height of your position in the world, from your high-mindedness and also from the sycamore tree. God is calling you! Be clothed with humility and receive the joy of salvation.’ As always, the Lord speaks short and powerfully direct words: ‘Hasten! Come down!’ In other words, ‘Have you caught fire? Then run!’ It was because Zacchaeus had been prepared by his desire, and even more by his humility, that he was able to take these words to heart. These words of divine fire go straight to the heart of the matter; Zacchaeus understood that if he truly desired to meet with the Lord Himself, he would have to add humility to his desire. And if he wanted to respond to the greatness of the honour of receiving the Lord in his house, he would need to respond in all haste. And so he did: ‘He made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.’ His joy was the joy of salvation, the joy of encountering the Saviour Jesus, and he was oblivious of the surrounding world. ‘And when they saw it, they

7. For what follows see Luke 19:5-8.

all murmured, saying, that [the Lord] was gone to be the guest of a man that is a sinner.' But the Lord, bearing in mind the salvation of Zacchaeus and his whole household, ignored the petty scandal of the crowd, as He often did, for the sake of saving a soul.

Then 'Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord...' This is an important moment: Zacchaeus *stands* upright, face to Face with the Lord of hosts and converses with Him. This standing before the Lord with holy boldness is made possible only by repentance which attracts grace to man, and so strengthens his being that he becomes like a lion in his repentance: his courage is such that he can endure all things. In humility he now stands and converses with His God, desiring to sacrifice everything in the fulfilment of his repentance. Thus did the life-giving energy of the Word of God flood Zacchaeus' heart with grace. As he stood before his Creator, he uttered these words of repentance: 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.' Aware of the new life which has come into his heart, Zacchaeus boldly promises the Lord that he will rectify all his transgressions.

God redeems man's whole life, his past and even his future by means of repentance. Our life is full of sins, betrayals, transgressions and injustices, but repentance renders them powerless, wiping them out so that in God's sight, on the Day of Judgment, they will be no more. Every kind of contact with the Lord burns up man's impurities, cleanses and saves him. We see this in the case of Isaiah: God touches his lips with a burning coal saying, 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and

thy sin purged.’<sup>8</sup> The merest contact with God, then, was enough to blot out all Zacchaeus’ iniquities, yet he needed to confess them verbally before the Lord.

According to the law of that time, crimes were punishable according to the degree of negligence. The most severe penalty involved paying out four times the loss one had caused. And Zacchaeus, taking upon himself the madness of repentance, subjected himself to the most severe judgment possible and undertook to pay back fourfold any injustice he had committed.

The Lord’s visitation provokes extraordinary bravery in man, in that he becomes willing to take upon himself the whole responsibility for his transgressions. He blames no one but himself, and this reconciles him to God and to his brethren. The Desert Fathers used to say that if a man could not take the blame for his deeds, he would never find peace on earth. The chief publican not only confessed his sins, blaming himself; he also opted for the severest condemnation. This meant distributing all he had. Such was the strength he had gained in his repentance brought about by his encounter with the Lord.

There is yet another mystery hidden within this meeting of man with God: Zacchaeus became kin with the Lord in spirit. In his desire to see the Lord, he had accepted the shame of becoming a laughing-stock and in all this he was granted the grace of bearing the shame of the Cross. According to the Apostle Paul, such grace has the effect of opening man’s heart. It stretches and enlarges him fourfold – in breadth, length, depth, and height.<sup>9</sup> Zacchaeus too, having

8. Isa. 6:7.

9. Cf. Eph. 3:18.

accepted the shame of the Cross, was enlarged in the four directions of the Cross: he desired greatly to compensate fourfold every victim of the injustices he had committed. Thus, in a prophetic and prefigurative manner, his heart received the grace that flowed from the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. That is, the mystery of the Passover from death to life was made active in him in advance of Golgotha, just as it had been in the Prophets and the Righteous of the Old Testament and, indeed, as it is in all who receive the commandment of God and obey it. Zacchaeus' heart was so enlarged that he embraced all men, especially those to whom he had been unjust. Bearing shame for the sake of seeing the Lord, Zacchaeus placed himself on the path that the Lord Himself was travelling and, finding in Him a companion, he passed from shame to glory.

So great was the change in Zacchaeus, and so radical the transformation of his heart that the Lord Himself exclaimed, 'This day is salvation come to this house.'<sup>10</sup> Indirectly, the Lord was saying that He is God, and that whosoever is ready for the visitation of God is granted salvation. The Lord had only to fix His gaze upon Zacchaeus for him to be quickened with the new life of salvation. The same happens to us when the Lord looks upon us: we have only to behold His Face, and all at once death no longer has dominion over us. To behold the Face of the Lord, then, is the 'one thing needful'.

But first we need to leave the 'camp' of this world. As the Apostle says, 'Let us go forth therefore unto him without [outside] the camp, bearing his reproach,'<sup>11</sup> and be will-

10. Luke 19:9.

11. Heb. 13:13.

ing to bear a little shame for His name's sake. This world has its own laws and values, but we must live according to God even if it means becoming a laughing-stock. And what a small price to pay if we can only meet the Bridegroom of the Church, Who came among us and will come again to judge the world with His divine justice.

The Lord calls Zacchaeus a son of Abraham because Zacchaeus manifests a faith similar to that of his forefather Abraham. He responds to God's call even as Abraham did, and he therefore receives the grace of sonship. The Lord puts His seal on this, saying that 'the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Lord of Heaven has come down to earth to seek out man who perishes in his sins. Zacchaeus voluntarily forsook everything, like Abraham, and was willing to look foolish for the Lord's sake, and that is why the Lord was pleased to justify and glorify him.

Genuine faith is born of repentance. It refuses to compromise with the world, for it is no longer impressed by the things of the world, by its transient idols and false love. But true faith, inspired by divine love, is absolute. And because it is absolute, man takes on a kind of madness in his effort not to lose the salvation which he has been granted. He is happy to become a fool even as Zacchaeus became a fool, for he knows that true wisdom is born of such foolishness. Thus, God is pleased to dwell in such souls as seek Him wholeheartedly, who despise the good opinion of this world and embrace the same reproach as our Lord Himself embraced for our sakes.

12. Luke 19:9-10.

ourselves, and presenting ourselves as though we were at a certain stage, and thus upsetting our whole spiritual life and becoming Pharisees?

**A.** Father Sophrony found this distinction of purification, illumination and deification too philosophical. He even said to one of our dearest friends, 'Let us not spy on ourselves', that is, let us not analyse the events in spiritual life. I think that the other three-fold presentation of the spiritual life – man's calling by grace, the time of struggle when the grace which accompanied that calling diminishes, and the definite return of grace – is more natural.

If we examine ourselves in the light of what we learn when grace is with us then we are being taught of God. For example, when we do not find the grace of the Comforter within us, this is a clear indication that we are not righteous and that we must repent – and this is all we need. The spirit of repentance is a great gift. Abba Ammonas says that the spirit of repentance is like a fiery circle around us which prevents us from falling. If we preserve this spirit of repentance we shall not only have inspiration for negative asceticism (that is, to avoid this and that), but we shall also enrich our life positively and conquer our unregenerated nature. It is only necessary to observe the following: if we find it difficult to pray, if we find it difficult to humble our spirit and to put ourselves below our brother, it is a sure sign that we need to repent.

**Q.** The difficulty I have in leading people on the path of Christ is to make them overcome two fears: the fear of shame and the fear of pain. In taking the steps which you have presented to us, the most difficult thing, I think, is to

overcome these fears. This is what I try to do in my parish. People will not come to confession although their souls are burdened and things are driving them crazy, because they cannot overcome the shame to admit their sins. How do you lead people in this direction?

A. I think that both the strength to bear shame and the strength to suffer are gifts from God. When I was a young and inexperienced spiritual father, Father Sophrony told me to encourage the young people to confess precisely the things of which they are ashamed, for if they learn to do so, shame is transformed into strength against the passions, and they will overcome sin. I knew that he was right, but I never understood how this works because I never had the habit of asking questions to Father Sophrony. I would listen to him and sometimes he would clarify something he had said before. But one day I was in Thessalonica in a big church where a friend of mine is the priest. As it was the Sunday of Zacchaeus, I was asked to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and to preach on that passage of the Gospel. The best way to prepare yourself for a sermon is to read the passage a week beforehand and to think about it each day. The passage itself gives you the solid thought, around which you can construct your sermon. But I did not find the time for this, so I got up early in the morning to prepare and as I read the passage of the Gospel, the words of my Elder – ‘encourage the young people to bear shame’ – suddenly sprang to mind. And I understood that this is precisely what had occurred in the person of Zacchaeus. He bore shame voluntarily, and the Lord, Who was on His way to Jerusalem in order to suffer the Cross of shame, saw Zacchaeus bearing shame for His sake and recognised in him a kindred spirit. Zacchaeus

had put himself prophetically in the way of Christ, in the way of the Cross, and in a prophetic way the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ was activated in the heart of Zacchaeus. His heart was enlarged and he was able to enter into the power of faith. Christ has saved us through the Cross of shame, so when we suffer shame for His sake He considers this as gratitude, and in return He transmits to us His grace which regenerates our life.

This is exactly what happens in confession. Those who confess sincerely and take upon themselves the shame for their sins are regenerated. But those who shrug their shoulders and say, 'Nothing special, the usual things...', they do not bear any shame, their heart remains unmoved, and they hardly receive any benefit. But those who, with shame and a contrite heart, strip their souls naked before God and before another mortal 'of like passions'<sup>14</sup> with them – that shame of theirs really finds the heart, humbles it and brings it to the surface. This then opens the heart to receive the grace of regeneration, of consolation. We see this in the life of many that come to us: the greater the shame they bear with contrition, accusing themselves before God, the greater the grace they receive to amend their lives and make a new beginning.

The same goes for suffering. You can only suffer if you love. Zeal is as strong as death, the Old Testament says. But in the New Testament we learn that love is even stronger than death. So when we have borne shame for Christ and He has in return gratified us with the energy of His love, we are able to suffer and to go through hardships without even noticing them, hardships which we would not be able to

14. Acts 14:15.

bear without His grace. It is clear from the words of the Lord to St Silouan, ‘Keep thy mind in hell and despair not,’ that if someone sees himself as worthy of hell, he cannot possibly protest against a harsh word or an illness, for he has already condemned himself to damnation in hell. You see that through voluntary suffering and self-accusation, we avoid even observing other hardships for we have already opted for the severest one, which is the one we truly deserve. People who practise this way not only do not notice hardships in this present life, but sometimes even receive grace to be healed of incurable diseases.<sup>15</sup>

A man who had cancer, a mutual friend of Elder Porphyrios and Father Sophrony, told me that the Elder had said to him, ‘Be careful not to let your prayer become weaker than the pain of the cancer.’ And he told me that for as long as he kept the prayer, the consolation brought by prayer overshadowed the pain. But as soon as the energy of his prayer diminished, the pain of the cancer would become unbearable.

**Q.** I have difficulties in fully grasping the meaning of ‘Keep thy mind in hell and despair not’; and yet the idea of the inverted pyramid makes me understand that we are in hell. But if we are in hell with Christ in extreme humility we have no reason for despair for we know that after that comes the resurrection. Is that correct?

**A.** Of course, but I would like to add one thing. A simple way of understanding ‘Keep thy mind in hell and despair not’ is this: What is hell? Hell is the absence of God.

15. See St Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, p. 13.

nothing else. But for us, who know that we can stand before the Face of God and say, 'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,' psychology is left behind. For us there are other rules. We must do everything we can to stand in that grace that we have received.

**Q.** I asked this question because I think that as priests we often turn to psychology very rapidly. How do we get the balance right?

**A.** In Greece for example, some spiritual fathers collaborate with Christian psychologists and sometimes they have good results. But the last word is given by the Church. If we are wise scribes initiated into the Kingdom, we shall draw out of our treasures things old and new.<sup>56</sup> That is to say, all the knowledge we have acquired in this world we shall lay down for the service of God and of our fellows. Everything can be useful – we draw out old things and new things. The old things are the gifts of the psychological man, of the ordinary man; the new things are the gifts of the Holy Spirit that God has added to us. Everything must work harmoniously for the building up of the temple of God in our hearts.

**Q.** You previously mentioned that you knew Elder Porphyrios and I was wondering if you had any stories you could relate to us.

**A.** I can tell you my personal story in which he revealed his gift. I visited him several times. Once I had been on the Holy Mountain for two months. I had a great pain in my heart and I was praying continuously over a certain matter.

56. Cf. Matt. 13:52.

I had seen my sister in Athens, and she had told me that she couldn't have a child. I had never kept any contact with my family and I generally show little interest in them. But that news hurt me, and I started praying for her with all my strength. When I left the Holy Mountain, I asked a friend of mine to go with me to see Elder Porphyrios. When we arrived there, the Elder was ill in bed. We entered and took his blessing, and immediately he asked me, 'Have you got anything to tell me?' I said to him, 'Yes, Geronda. I am very much afflicted because of my sister here in Athens.' But I didn't tell him what the problem was or what work she was doing. He said to me, 'Yes, she cannot have a child. But tell her that it is psychological. If she calms down she will have one.' I hadn't told him that she was married or anything at all. I remained speechless.

I went back to Athens and I said to my sister, 'If this man of God said that without me even telling him anything, and things were so clear to him that he even promised that you will have a child, it means that God wants you to have one. Go and get his blessing!' Another friend of mine took her to see the Elder. He blessed her and she had a child after twelve years of marriage. You can see everything from this: his clairvoyance, his prophetic gift and the miracle of God. I visited him several times but that was the only time he showed me so clearly his gift of clairvoyance, and the only time he foretold an event. But I have heard so much more about him; the whole of Greece can relate such miraculous stories about him.

Once an Hegumeni from the north of Greece went to ask him where to dig for water on the monastery property. And he told her, 'Dig in such and such corner, behind the

monastery, by the road.’ He described the place as if he were seeing it on television, he had never been there. And the Hegumeni thought to test him and said, ‘But Geronda, there is no road there!’ ‘Just a moment!’ he said to her. And he began to draw a plan of the monastery on which he showed her the actual place. And she fell down before his feet and asked forgiveness.

There are many such cases. I remember, for instance, the Hegumeni of a big convent in Greece with many sisters. She is a good chanter, but her health is a bit fragile. Once they had an all-night vigil in their monastery and she was singing. At the Doxology, the sisters took the note very high. And she got frightened, thinking to herself, ‘How will I reach such a high note? When I sing *Agios Athanatos* (‘Holy and Immortal’), I will collapse, I will have to stop; it is impossible for me to reach so high.’ But she made the sign of the Cross and continued. And she managed it. As soon as she went into her room the telephone rang. It was Father Porphyrios. He said to her, ‘The Immortal One came and took away your death, your mortality. Glory be to Him!’ He knew the thoughts of people and in this case, he perceived the thought which was troubling the Mother Superior and he called her to confirm and console her after the vigil.

And I have heard so many other stories from people, common friends who came to our monastery from Greece and knew Elder Porphyrios. He was indeed a great Saint, a great Prophet.

**Q.** I wonder if Elder Sophrony ever spoke about the condition of the Orthodox Church in the world today.

**A.** He was a man who really went through all the stages: