

## THE CHRISTIAN ASCETIC TRADITION ON DEJECTION AND DESPONDENCY

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When we speak of the types, origins, and treatment of depression, we usually draw our thoughts from modern psychotherapy, even though the tradition of the Christian Church may shape and mold our ideas to some extent. But the Christian tradition has actually thought about and struggled with depression far longer and to much greater depth than the psychotherapy of the past century. In this article I focus on one of the ways that our tradition has understood and dealt with depression. I review here the most ancient teaching of our tradition on depression, a teaching a thousand years older than the notion of “the dark night of the soul.” This teaching sees depression among “the deadly sins.” I review first the ancient notion of the deadly sins in general. Then I describe the two forms of depression that the Church anciently recognized. Then I discuss the remedies that the ancient Church prescribed for these two forms of depression.

### The Deadly Sins

The Christian tradition’s most ancient wisdom about depression is to be found in the old lists of the deadly sins. Many people are familiar with the list of seven deadly sins. Roman Catholics and others in the West have referred to this list for hundreds of years. The list is translated into English in various ways. One common enumeration is pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust.

Now which of those seven great sins has anything to do with depression? They all might be connected to depression in one way or another, but the sin of sloth actually refers directly to depression. The idea is that depression causes us to want to do nothing. The use of the English word “sloth” gets the focus away from sadness. The use of the English word “sloth” implies that the feeling of sadness and the psychiatric affliction of depression are not sinful, but the self-indulgent laziness and indifference that come with sadness and depression are sinful.

But this is merely in English. The Latin words that have been translated “sloth” clearly do imply that sadness itself is somehow sinful. One of the Latin words for “sloth” is *acedia*, which is simply a transliteration of a Greek word that I shall shortly discuss more thoroughly. This word is the root of the English word “accidie,” which is still used from time to time in theological ethics. Another Latin word for “sloth” is *tristitia*, which simply means sadness. But these terms are merely Latin. The Seven Deadly Sins constitute a distinctly Western list. The precise form of the list of seven deadly sins that is now common in the West was developed in the Middle Ages. It was based on the thought of Saint Gregory the Great, who was the first pope of Rome that used that name and held the seat of Saint Peter between 590 and 604. To get to the real meaning of the tradition, however, we must go behind Gregory’s list to the sources that Gregory used.

Gregory's principal source was Saint John Cassian, who lived in what is now France and wrote in Latin in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries. Cassian himself was a disciple of Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius Ponticus was a native of the country of Pontus, an ancient country in the northeast of Asia Minor. Evagrius was very highly educated in Constantinople, but became a monk in the desert of Egypt in the last quarter of the Fourth Century. He was the first Christian to combine the deep and speculative theology of Origen, who had lived in Egypt in the Second and Third Centuries, with the practical spirituality of the desert monks. In later centuries the Church condemned some of the ideas that Origen and Evagrius held—they had notions about the pre-existence and transmigration of souls that are a far cry from the Biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body, not to mention other, even more arcane theological speculations. Their spiritual and psychological insights, however, were never condemned. To the contrary, they are still very much the heart of the tradition of prayer and discipline of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Evagrius had a list of eight deadly sins, though he did not call them that. Evagrius called them the deadly passions. Nowadays we usually use the word "passion" in a positive sense. We use it to refer to romantic or sexual desire. We also use the word "passion" to refer to the great energy that people throw into a field of work or study, as when we say that a student has "a passion for history." Sometimes we also use the word "passion" to refer to the zeal with which a person supports a cause, as when we say that someone is "passionate" for helping the poor and oppressed. But Evagrius did not use the word "passion" in a positive way. When Evagrius spoke of the passions, he was talking about things that happen to a person, things that overcome the person. Sexual passion still has that connotation in English; it takes over a person and rationality leaves. The passion of Christ also has that connotation in English; the suffering and death of the Lord were things that were done to Him, not things that He did to Himself. When referring to the states of the soul, therefore, the passions might more adequately be called compulsions or addictions. The passions are habits of thought, feeling, and desiring over which we have little or no control. The passions are limitations on our freedom, and therefore limitations on our ability to serve God as the only Master worth serving.

The eight deadly passions in Evagrius' list were gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, dejection, despondency, vainglory, and pride. Table 1 (at the end of this article) shows the relationship between Evagrius' list and the medieval list. Saint Gregory said that pride is "the queen of sins" and that from pride arise the sins of vainglory, envy, anger, melancholy, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Gregory combined the passions called dejection and despondency into the one sin of melancholy and added to the list the sin of envy. (See St. Gregory's *Morals of the Book of Job*, book 31, chapter 45 [paragraphs 87 to 91], commenting for the second time on Job 39:25.) Later followers of Gregory combined the sins of pride and vainglory into the single sin of pride. While Gregory's emphasis on envy was a significant contribution to this discussion (see Table 2 at the end of this article), it is our opinion in Orthodox circles that Saint Gregory and his later followers simplified things too much. I venture to say that it is also our opinion that modern psychotherapy has also simplified things too much. Depression is not just a

single syndrome of thoughts and feelings. Our task in this discussion, therefore, is to flesh out the Church's ancient understanding of and response to two different kinds of depression.

To understand what Evagrius had to say about depression, we must grasp his understanding of the soul. When we use the word "soul" we tend to think of a ghost, some kind of bodiless reality that continues to exist after death. The ancients did not understand the word that way. We use the word "soul" to translate the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή). That Greek term would be better translated as "life" or "life-force." In other words, the ancients understood the soul as whatever it is in a living thing that makes that thing alive. Aristotle classified souls (*psychai*, ψυχαί) into three kinds: plant souls, which merely live and grow; animal souls, which can also move around; and intellectual souls, which are also able to think. (See Aristotle's treatise on the subject simply titled *On the Soul*, though often labeled by its Greek or Latin name, Περὶ ψυχῆς or *De anima*.)

According to the ancients, the soul or life-force in a human being had three aspects. That is to say, the soul has different "parts" or faculties that do different things. Plato, the intellectual ancestor of Aristotle, Origen, and Evagrius, was the first to distinguish these three aspects of the soul (see his *Republic*, book iv, 439a – 441c). They are, first of all, the *logistikon* (λογιστικόν), the "intelligent" or "rational" aspect of the soul. The part of the *logistikon* that thinks and reasons is called the *dianoia* (διάνοια), but it is not as important to Evagrius and the other Greek Fathers as the *nous* (νοῦς), the "mind," or to be very precise, the part of the mind that knows when something is true just upon perceiving it. The second part of the soul is the *epithymikon* (ἐπιθυμικόν), the "appetitive" aspect of the soul. This is the part of the soul that desires things, such as food, water, shelter, sexual relations, relationships with people, and so on. The third part of the soul is the *thymikon* (θυμικόν), which is usually translated the "incensive" aspect. This translation is a bit misleading. The *thymikon* is indeed the part of the soul that gets angry, but it also has to do with strong feelings of any kind. Although the Fathers sometimes disagreed about this, the prevailing attitude seems to have been that God created all three of these aspects of the soul; they are all natural and part of God's good creation. Saint Maximos the Confessor, who lived in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries and was perhaps the greatest of the theologians of the Byzantine Empire, put it this way:

*The soul has three powers: the intelligence, the incensive power and desire. With our intelligence we direct our search; with our desire we long for that supernal goodness which is the object of our search; and with our incensive power we fight to attain our object. With these powers those who love God cleave to the divine principle of virtue and spiritual knowledge. Searching with the first power, desiring with the second, and fighting by means of the third, they receive incorruptible nourishment, enriching the intellect with the spiritual knowledge of created things.*

(Second Century of Various Texts, 25;  
in *Philokalia* vol. 2, trans. 1981, p. 193)

That is what ought to happen—but it is not what does happen. We no longer live as we were meant to live. We have become disordered beings. Instead of all three of these faculties working together smoothly and harmoniously under the leadership of the

rational aspect, the appetitive and incensive aspects are frequently in control of the intellect with the result that we are sinful, sick, and mortal. Evagrius' great insight (though perhaps he was influenced by Origen) was to relate the great diseases of the soul, the great disorders that encompass all the others, to the three aspects of the soul.

Which of the deadly passions are connected with which of the faculties of the soul? Saint John Cassian listed Evagrius' deadly passions in the following way: He said that the primary disorders of the intellective aspect of the soul were vainglory and pride. (He also said that envy was a disorder of the intellective aspect, thereby making it easy for Saint Gregory to add envy to the list of the principal passions.) Cassian said that the primary disorders of the incensive aspect of the soul were anger, dejection, and despondency. (Note that Cassian listed both dejection and despondency as disorders of the incensive aspect, thereby making it easy for St. Gregory to combine them into one passion.) Cassian said the primary disorders of the appetitive aspect of the soul were gluttony, lust, and avarice. (See Cassian's *Conferences*, Conference 24 [with Father Abraham on mortification], chapter 15. Cassian actually listed 18 vices in this passage, of which eight were the principal faults in Evagrius' list. In another passage Cassian said that before the coming of Christ there were ten principal passions, the other two being idolatry and blasphemy. See Conference 5 [with Father Serapion on the eight principal faults], chapter 22.)

Not all of the ancient fathers, however, agreed in all details with Cassian's schema. A treatise attributed to Eighth Century theologian Saint John of Damascus, for instance, considered envy a sin of the incensive aspect (see "On the Virtues and Vices," in the *Philokalia*, trans. 1981, vol. 2, p. 337). In this article I associate despondency with the incensive aspect and dejection with the appetitive aspect of the soul. I am indebted to Jamie Moran, a fellow OCAMPR member, for his discriminating insights on this matter. I believe the quotations from Evagrius in this article illustrate how these two passions really do differ experientially and consequently must be seen to arise from different places in the soul.

Before I go on with the discussion of the differences between the two depressions, I must comment briefly on the passions that we are not focusing on. I have summarized some basic information about all of the deadly passions in Table 2. I must pass by both of the primary disorders of the mind: *hyperephania* (ὑπερηφάνια), *kenodoxia* (κενοδοξία), and, in St. Gregory's list, *invidia*. *Hyperephania* literally means something like "shining out way too much." There is an appropriate kind of "shining out," that is, an appropriate recognition of one's abilities and talents and achievement. But *hyperephania* is a distortion. It thinks that we are ultimately self-sufficient, that we did it all by ourselves, that we do not really need anything or anybody. This is the kind of pride that makes us stubborn and judgmental and self-righteous. It gives rise to *kenodoxia*, which means "empty glory." *Kenodoxia* is a misdirection. It is empty beauty, empty knowledge, empty character. It has to do with false power over people. It encourages flattery from others. It does not size a person up for what he or she really is and does not give God the credit He deserves for giving us all that we have and all that we are. *Invidia* is the Latin word for "envy." It is a deprivation. It is vainglory turned

around. Vainglorious people build their self-respect around things they should not, but envious people do not have much self-respect and despise people who do.

I must also bypass two of the disorders of desire. One of them is called lust in English. The Greek term is *porneia* (πορνεία). That word itself comes from *porne* (πόρνη), which is the Greek word that means “whore” or “prostitute.” The passion of lust is not simply having sexual desire, which is perfectly natural and can be completely sinless. Lust is a distortion of sacramental union. The passion of lust is when a person has an impersonal and exploitative sexual desire. It is treating other people as if they were whores. The other passion of desire, which I must pass over, is avarice. The Greek term is *philargyria* (φιλαργυρία), which literally means “the love of silver.” Another way to translate it is simply “greed.” This is a misdirection. It has to do with having things and wanting to have things, thinking that having makes you a good person or insures a happy life. It can refer to all kinds of greed, not just for money and land and cars, but for such things as position, degrees, knowledge, and relationships.

And I must bypass two of the disorders of the will. *Orge* (ὀργή) is the Greek term for anger, but the Fathers were not thinking of the simple emotion. They were thinking more in the line of rage, which is extreme and uncontrolled anger, or hate, which is anger that one nurses and holds onto. The passion of anger is a distortion of good and appropriate anger, which is a sign that injustices are occurring and need to be redressed. Another passion of the incensive aspect is not so straightforward. It seemed to Saint John Cassian that gluttony should be classed as a passion of the appetitive aspect, but others of the Fathers saw it in a different way. The Greek word for gluttony is *gastrimargia* (γαστριμαργία), which literally means “belly-madness.” It is obvious to any foreigner that most Americans suffer from it. It is not just that we like to eat. Food is one of God’s greatest and most constant gifts to us! Nor is it just that we have trouble controlling our desire to eat; the desire to have food is closer to avarice and greed. The problem is that gluttony is a misdirection of the incensive aspect in two respects. On the one hand, it is a way of comforting ourselves, of making ourselves slow and heavy, of taking away our energy from the work that lies before us. On the other hand, it (physically as well as emotionally) weighs us down and keeps us from fighting evil in ourselves and in the world.

If you want to know more about all this, I recommend that you get and read *The Philokalia*. This is the great anthology of spiritual discipline of the Eastern Church. Works by both Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian are in it. So are many others. At present four volumes of the complete *Philokalia* are available in English; one is still unpublished. I recommend you go there to learn more about the origins and cure of vainglory, pride, lust, greed, hate, and gluttony. But this article looks at depression, so we are going to explore dejection and despondency in more detail.

#### Λύπη: Lype: Dejection

I am following the convention of using the English word “dejection” to render the Greek word *lype* (λύπη). The word can refer to both physical and mental pain, without any

connotation of sin whatsoever. The word can also refer to a holy sorrow. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that there is such a thing as a “godly *lype* [that] produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret” (II Corinthians 7:10, NRSV). But there is also, said that same Apostle in his very next breath, a “worldly *lype* [that] produces death.” This was the sin the disciples committed in the Garden of Gethsemane. After His prayers in agony, Jesus returned to His disciples “and found them sleeping because of *lype*” (Luke 22:45).

What is really going on here? Evagrius describes the passion of dejection this way:

*[Dejection] tends to come up at times because of the deprivation of one's desires. On other occasions it accompanies anger. When it arises from the deprivation of desires it takes place in the following manner. Certain thoughts first drive the soul to the memory of home and parents, or else to that of one's former life. Now when these thoughts find that the soul offers no resistance but rather follows after them and pours itself out in pleasures that are still only mental in nature, they then seize her [the soul] and drench her in sadness, with the result that these ideas she was just indulging no longer remain. In fact they cannot be had in reality, either, because of her present way of life. So the miserable soul is now shriveled up in her humiliation to the degree that she poured herself out upon these thoughts of hers.*

(*Praktikos*, 10; trans. 1981, pp. 17-18)

This passage says two things to me. On the one hand, dejection has to do with loss. It endures the kinds of loss that constitute normal sadness and grief. On the other hand, dejection also has to do with unreality. It distorts normal sadness and grief into hope for things that can never be. Saint John Cassian mentioned yet another aspect of dejection in his writings. He said:

*Occasionally we are even provoked to fall into this misfortune for no apparent reason, when we are suddenly weighed down with great sorrow at the instigation of the clever foe, so that we are unable to welcome with our usual courtesy the arrival even of these who are dear to us and our kinfolk, and we consider whatever they say in innocuous conversation to be inappropriate and unnecessary and do not give them a gracious response, since the recesses of our heart are filled with the gall of bitterness.*

(*Institutes IX.iv*; trans. 2000, p. 212)

Saint John Cassian was emphasizing the tendency of dejected people to turn away from other people and to turn inward. Both Evagrius and John Cassian illustrate how dejection is a disorder of the appetitive aspect of the soul. Our desire is misdirected. Our ability to love life is lost. To put it another way, these ancient fathers of the Church were well acquainted with what our contemporary psychiatry and psychology call depression.

### Ἀκῆδία: *Akedia*: Despondency

But our contemporary psychiatry and psychology are not so well acquainted with the passion of despondency. Most contemporary mental health professionals would diagnose a despondent person as having depression. We even have trouble distinguishing the words “dejection” and “despondency” from each other. But here the ancient fathers showed a depth of perception that is rare among mental health professionals at the present time.

I am following the convention of using the English term “despondency” to render the Greek word *akedia* (ἀκήδῖα). *Akedia* is a compound word. The first part is the prefix *a-* (ἀ-), which means “not” and is used exactly like the prefix “un-” in English. The second part is the abstract noun *kedìa* (κηδῖα), which itself is derived from the more concrete noun *kedos* (κῆδος). *Kedos* means “care for others,” especially the kind of care that you show when someone dies. To have *kedos* for the dead means that you care so much for the dead person that you wash the body, attend the funeral, and see the remains of the person respectfully buried, even though the person you loved is now dead and gone and will do nothing more for you in this life. *Kedia*, therefore, is the action of showing *kedos*. The noun *kedìa* is used twice in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. In both passages the word is used in reference to funerals (II Maccabees 4:49 and 5:10). The word is not used at all in the New Testament. A verb meaning “to bury the dead” is used in an alternate text of one passage, referring to the body of Saint John the Baptist (Mark 6:29), but not in the text of the New Testament that most of us read. But even though the word itself is not used in this context, it was displayed in the actions of some people when the Lord died. Saint Joseph of Arimathea displayed *kedìa* when he provided the tomb for the Lord. The myrrh-bearing women displayed *kedìa* when they went to that tomb, the action that led them to be the first to know that the Lord had risen from the dead.

So much for *kedìa*. But our present concern is with *akedia*. *Akedia* means *not* being like Joseph and the women at the tomb. *Akedia* means not caring, not doing the things that would show that one cares. The word *akedia* is also rare in the Bible. This term does not occur in the New Testament. The term occurs in three passages in the Septuagint and the verb form that is cognate to *akedia* occurs in six other passages. In only one of these passages is the use of the word very illustrative of its meaning. The superscription or title of Psalm 102 (numbered Psalm 101 in the Septuagint) reads, “A prayer of one afflicted, when suffering from *akedia* and pleading before the Lord.” The psalm goes on to describe the state of one suffering from *akedia* with these words:

*My days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.  
 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.  
 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin.  
 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places.  
 I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.  
 All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse.  
 For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink,  
 because of Your indignation and anger;  
 For You have lifted me up and thrown me aside.  
 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.*

(Psalm 102: 3-11, NRSV [Psalm 101:4-12, LXX])

Depression? Yes. But a particular kind of depression. Not just sadness. Not just grief. Not just sadness and grief stretched beyond normal limits, distorting reality, and withdrawing from others. Perhaps all that, perhaps not, but even when all that does happen, something else also happens. Borrowing a phrase from the Greek translation of Psalm 91:6 (numbered 90:6 in the Septuagint), the ancients called this the “noonday demon.” Evagrius describes it this way:

*The demon of acedia—also called the noonday demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour [roughly 10 in the morning] and besieges the soul until the eighth hour [about 2 in the afternoon]. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [about 3 in the afternoon, the hour for supper, the only substantial meal in the ancient monastic day], to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps (one of the brethren appears from his cell) [squared brackets in the original changed to parentheses; the translator supplied an ellipsis]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. The demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.*

(*Praktikos*, 12; trans. 1981, pp. 18-19)

In *akedia*, in despondency, one gives up thinking that it is worth going on. It is not just that things seem hopeless; they seem pointless. There's no use. It doesn't matter. It doesn't make any difference. It's not worth it. A despondent person says with contempt, "To hell with it." A despondent person says, "I don't give a damn how it turns out." Despondency is a disorder of the incensive aspect of the soul; it is a disorder of the will. All the fight goes out of us. We lose our passion. We are not committed anymore. And consequently it sometimes lacks the typical features of dejection and what we nowadays diagnose as depression. It may have more contempt than sadness, more anger than grief. It may have hyperactivity rather than slow and strained motions—but the hyperactivity has nothing to do with what really matters or what we ought to be doing at the time.

Our ancient fathers in God were well acquainted with depression, and they were insightful enough to discriminate two varieties of it. The two forms of depression are emotionally and behaviorally very much the same, and for that reason the nosology of contemporary psychiatry and psychology, which strives to be objective and behavioral, usually does not distinguish between them. Both of these forms of depression are revealed in sadness, tearfulness, distractedness, sleepiness, thoughts of death, and suicidality—all the signs and symptoms we discussed before. But they come from very different places within a human being. To be very brief and general, they differ in the following respects: Dejection is a disorder of desire, but despondency is a disorder of the will. Dejection has to do with relationships, despondency has more to do with existential issues of ultimate truth and meaning. Dejection has more to do with the loss of good things in one's life, but despondency has more to do with one's rejecting the good things in one's life, believing that they are not really good.

### Remedies for Dejection and Despondency

But our ancient fathers in God did not merely distinguish these two forms of depression. They also had some ideas about their causes and their cure. Just as Evagrius saw that dejection was caused by the loss of things that one loved, he knew that the cure had to be detachment. Not rejecting things or people—we know that they are gifts from our Creator’s hand—but disconnecting our self-esteem and happiness from them. Evagrius said:

*The man who flees from all worldly pleasures is an impregnable tower before the assaults of the demon of sadness. For sadness is a deprivation of sensible pleasure, whether actually present or only hoped for. And so if we continue to cherish some affection for anything in this world it is impossible to repel this enemy, for he lays his snares and produces sadness precisely where he sees we are particularly inclined.*  
(*Praktikos*, 19; trans. 1981, p. 21)

John Cassian had even deeper insight into the way to deal with dejection. Detachment may have been a sufficient cure for Evagrius, but John Cassian knew that other people would need more. Since dejection has an element of withdrawing from people, Cassian said:

*God, the Creator of all things, knowing better than anyone else how to right his handiwork and that the roots and causes of our offenses lie not in others but in ourselves, commanded that the company of the brothers should not be forsaken and that those persons should not be avoided who have been hurt by us or by whom we think that we have been offended. Instead he orders that they be won over, for he knows that perfection of heart is attained not by separation from human beings but by the virtue of patience.*

(*Institutes* IX.vii; trans. 2000, p. 213)

Our ancient fathers prescribed disconnection from things and re-connection to people as the cure for dejection. But what cure can there be for despondency? Evagrius said:

*When we meet with the demon of acedia . . . we are to sow seeds of a firm hope [with]in ourselves while we sing with the holy David: “Why are you filled with sadness, my soul? Why are you distraught? Trust in God, for I shall give praise to him. He it is who saves me, the light of my eyes and my God” [Psalm 42:5 (Psalm 41:6, LXX)].*

*The time of temptation [that is, the time when despondency leads us to want to make significant changes in our lives] is not the time to leave one’s cell, devising plausible pretexts. Rather, stand there firmly and be patient. Bravely take all that the demon brings upon you, but above all face up to the demon of acedia who is the most grievous of all and who on this account will effect the greatest purification of soul. Indeed to flee and to shun such conflicts schools the spirit in awkwardness, cowardice and fear.*

*Our holy and most ascetic master [Evagrius refers to Makarios the Great, one of the founders of Egyptian monasticism] stated that the monk should always live as if he were to die on the morrow but at the same time that he should treat his body as if he were to live on with it for many years to come. For, he said, by the first attitude he will be able to cut off every thought that comes from acedia and thus become more fervent in his monastic practices, by the second device he will preserve his body in good health and maintain its continence intact.*

(*Praktikos*, 27-29; trans. 1981, pp. 23-24)

Let us notice carefully what Evagrius was saying. He bases his prescription for despondency on two different passages in the Bible. First, he quotes from the Book of

Psalms. Remember that the monks in Evagrius' day prayed through all of the psalms every week; some even prayed through the entire Psalter every day. They knew the book by heart and, what is much more important, they took it to heart. Evagrius said that we must all do what the psalmists did. Look at the psalm that Evagrius quoted in the passage I just read to you. Evagrius quoted Psalm 42 (which is Psalm 41 in the Septuagint). That psalm begins with these words:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for You, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"*  
(Psalm 42:1-3 [Psalm 41:2-4, LXX])

That is a very good description of the mood and thought of a person in despondency. That same psalm goes on a few verses later to use the metaphor of being overwhelmed in water to describe the experience of despondency. The psalmist said,

*Deep calls to deep at the thunder of Your cataracts;  
all Your waves and Your billows have gone over me.*  
(Psalm 42:7 [Psalm 41:8, LXX])

But just a few verses later the psalmist reminded himself,

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my Help and my God.*  
(Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5 [Psalm 41:6, 12; 42:5, LXX])

This was the verse that Evagrius actually quoted. He could have quoted several other passages from the Psalms that use the same imagery and say more or less the same thing (for examples, Psalm 69 [Psalm 68, LXX], Psalm 89 [Psalm 88, LXX], and Psalm 93 [Psalm 92, LXX]). Evagrius was making the point that we should deal with despondency in the same way that the writers of the Psalms dealt with it, by going through the experience and trusting that God will lead us out on the other side.

But Evagrius went on to allude to a second passage in the Bible. When Evagrius said that we should "stand there firmly and be patient," Evagrius quoted from one of the most important passages of the Bible. The Book of Exodus tells the story of the people of Israel escaping from slavery in Egypt. They travel out of Egypt just a little way and come up against the Red Sea. Then they notice the armies of the Egyptian king coming after them in hot pursuit. What can they do? Turn and fight? They would be hopelessly defeated. Surrender? Then they go back into slavery. Kill themselves? But then everything was for nothing. There is only one thing to do, the ridiculous thing, the impossible thing. They must march into and through the sea. And so Moses says to them, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Exodus 14:13-14).

The point is this: The only way to deal with despondency is to face it, to endure it, to go through it. And when we do that, the Lord will fight for us and accomplish for us the salvation that we so deeply desire but are unable to bring to pass. Shall we sometimes get so scared of the deepest issues of life that we run away from them? Of course. Shall we make mistakes and commit even more sins when we do try to deal with the great questions of life and death and meaning and purpose and guilt and forgiveness? Certainly. Must we face our despondency all alone? No; the Lord has granted us friends, spouses, counselors, pastors, fathers and mothers in God to be with us and guide us along this painful and terrifying way.

But all of this is easier said than done. For people not in the grips of despondency, it is easy to advise others to stand firm and see the deliverance of the Lord. For people not in the clutches of the noonday demon, it is easy to counsel others to float on the waves of the bottomless deep. But to those in despondency, this is not enough. Is there nothing more that they can do? Is there nothing more that we can say to them to give them courage to endure? There is. It also comes to us from the Books of Psalms and Exodus. But it involves a change of simile. Despondency is indeed much like passing through the raging waves of the ocean, as we have already seen. But despondency is also much like wandering through a long, dry, trackless desert. Despondency is “a dry and thirsty land where no water is” (Psalm 63:1, KJV [Psalm 62:2, LXX]). What can keep us alive in that wilderness? What is there that can keep us from dismissing life, dismissing hope, dismissing all things good, true, and beautiful, dismissing the Maker of it all—as pointless illusion, cruel joke, waste of time?

Consider what happened to the people of Israel as they wandered through the Wilderness of Sinai. They faced all kinds of problems—famine, thirst, war. And one time they had to endure a plague of snakes. This is the story:

*The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food [the manna].” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

(Numbers 21:5-9)

This sounds like magic. But Christ our Lord saw this story as a prophecy. When He was talking to Nicodemus, Christ said,

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

(John 3:14-16)

So far as I have ever found, there is one and only one way to get through the wilderness of despondency. Another of the ancient fathers, St. Gregory of Nyssa, explains it.

Gregory wrote a commentary of the story of the journey of the people of Israel through the great wilderness of Sinai. Gregory said:

*There is one antidote for these evil passions: the purification of our souls which takes place through the mystery of godliness. The chief act of faith in the "mystery" is to look to him who suffered the passion for us. The cross is the passion, so that whoever looks to it . . . is not harmed . . . . [T]he person who looks to the One lifted up on the wood rejects passion, diluting the poison with the fear of the commandment as with a medicine. The voice of the Lord teaches clearly that the serpent lifted up in the desert is a symbol of the mystery of the cross when he says, The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert.*

(*Life of Moses*, 273, 277; trans. 1978, pp. 124-125)

How do we do that? How do we look to "the One lifted up on the wood"? By remembering the meaning of what He suffered. The suffering and death of Christ our Lord were not simply historical events, things that happened almost two thousand years ago. The suffering and death of Christ were a revelation of what has been happening in the depths of the being of God since He created the world. According to the Book of Revelation, the Lamb of God has been slain "from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8, KJV). The suffering and death of Christ reveal what is happening now deep in the heart of God, what God Himself suffers until the end of the age. To put it another way, when we look to Christ, when we imagine Him on His cross, we must learn to see that He is still suffering, that He is experiencing right now all that we are experiencing, all the pain, all the fear, all the rejection, all the depths of our inner hell. He knows, better than we do, how we feel, how we hurt, why we cry. Every tear that we have ever shed, fell from God's eye.

One of the greatest Christian psychotherapists of the past century was Frank Lake, a British psychiatrist who wrote a very long and very profound text entitled *Clinical Theology*. In that great work Lake tells the story of a university student who wrestled with despondency. That student wrote:

*I went alone into the chapel. The panic of what I would do to myself to stop the intolerable pain drove me to my knees, my tongue moving incoherently, my soul stretched tight with a weeping longing. When I was still left alone my very despair drove me to a horror and fury which was unafraid of recrimination. I was staggered by the milk-and-water apologetic God who could not calm this storm, who smiled sympathetically but abstractedly and whom I could not touch. We can bear humans to fall off their pedestals but not God Himself. After the first stunning realization of what God was, my whole mind, soul and body came into co-ordination and rose in unity to hate with entire, full-blooded, no holds barred hatred of the God who had so fooled mankind. Life surged back into every artery and vein, full red blood, as there streamed out from me powerful and unchecked hatred and loathing of a master whose creation had been working wrongly for centuries and who was not wise enough, strong enough or caring enough to mend it. I was livid with His apathy. Didn't He know what His carelessness had done to us? For the first time in my life I dared to demand an explanation. When none came, I was angrier than I ever remember being. I turned my eyes to the plain wooden cross and I remembered Calvary. I stood in the crowd which crucified him, hating and despising him. With my own hands I drove the nails into his hands and his feet, and with bursting energy I flogged him and reviled him and spat with nauseated loathing. Now He should know what it felt like—to live in the creation He had made. Every breath brought from me the words: "Now You know! Now You know!"*

*And then I saw something which made my heart stand still. I saw His face, and on it twisted every familiar agony of my own soul. "Now You know" became an awed whisper as I, motionless, watched His agony.*

“Yes, now I know” was the passionate and pain-filled reply. “Why else should I come?” Stunned, I watched His eyes search desperately for the tiniest flicker of love in mine, and as we faced one another in the bleak and the cold, forsaken by God, frightened and derelict, we loved one another and our pain became silent in the calm.

(Lake, 1966, pp. 822-823)

The cure for despondency is to go through it to the end, and to remember that Christ our Lord is with us, every pain-filled step of the way.

### Summary

Dejection and despondency are two of the deadly passions. They can kill the soul, driving out all our joy and all our hope. Both of them are deprivations. Dejection is a deprivation of our natural tendencies toward love and union; despondency is a deprivation of our natural ability to make decisions and fight for things right and good and beautiful. But dejection and despondency, and indeed all the passions, can be cured. When we have a disorder of one aspect of the soul, we stir up both of the other aspects of the soul to return the ailing aspect to health. In the case of dejection, when the appetitive aspect of the soul, our capacity for desire and yearning, is disordered with depression, we stir up our minds and our wills. We think upon the transience of all created things, and we turn ourselves away from them. We remember our own imperfection, and we turn ourselves back to the community of other fellow pilgrims in this vale of sorrows. And in the case of despondency, when the incensive aspect of the soul, our capacity for fighting for truth and goodness, is lost in the desert of our emptiness—at such a time we stir up our minds and our hearts. We remember that the journey is long, we remind ourselves of the intellectual foundations upon which we have built our lives—and we rekindle our love. For when our wills are weak, our desire for God can still be strong, and can lead us through that long and pathless desert, to oases of joy even in this life, and at last to the river flowing from the Throne.

TABLE 1

### **DEADLY PASSIONS AND DEADLY SINS**

	<u>Evagrius Ponticus</u>	<u>Western Tradition</u>
Incensive Aspect (το θυμικόν)	Gluttony (γαστριμαργία)	Gluttony ( <i>ventris ingluvies</i> )
	Anger (ὀργή)	Anger ( <i>ira</i> )
	Despondency (ἀκήδεια)	Sloth ( <i>tristitia</i> )
	Dejection (λύπη)	

Appetitive Aspect (το ἔπιθυμικόν)	Lust (πορνεία)	Lust ( <i>luxuria</i> )
	Avarice (φιλαργυρία)	Avarice ( <i>avaritia</i> )
Intellective Aspect (το λογιστικόν)	{ Vainglory (κενοδοξία) } { Pride (ὑπερηφανία) }	Pride ( <i>inanis gloria</i> )
		Envy ( <i>invidia</i> )

In general the Greek Fathers used the terms above. The Latin terms above are the terms used by St. Gregory in his original list. St. Gregory distinguished pride, *superbia*, in a category by itself as the origin of the seven sins listed here. In other or later texts one might find the term *gula* used for gluttony or *acedia* (a transliteration for the Greek term for despondency) for sloth or despair.

TABLE 2

### ASPECTS OF THE SOUL AND THEIR RELATED PASSIONS

ASPECT	FUNCTION	GOAL	DISTORTION	DEPRIVATION	MISDIRECTION
Intelligent (το λογιστικόν; <i>to logistikon</i> )	Mind*	Rulership of the person; service to the other aspects; connection with ὁ Λόγος ( <i>ho Logos</i> ), God the Word	Self-sufficiency, "pride" (ὑπερηφανία; <i>hyperephania</i> )	Envy ( <i>invidia</i> )	Vainglory (κενοδοξία; <i>kenodoxia</i> )
Appetitive (το ἔπιθυμικόν; <i>to epithymikon</i> )	Desire	Union with others and with God in love (ἔρως, <i>eros</i> )	Lust (πορνεία; <i>porneia</i> )	Dejection (λύπη; <i>lype</i> )	Avarice (φιλαργυρία; <i>philargyria</i> )
Incensive (το θυμικόν;	Will	Standing, fighting,	Anger (hate, rage)	Despondency (ἄκηδία;	Gluttony (γαστριμαργία;

<i>to thymikon)</i>		dying for Truth in depth of spirit (θυμός, thymos)	(ὀργή; <i>orge</i> )	<i>akedia)</i>	<i>gastrimargia)</i>
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\*The Greek Fathers did not consider the mind to be equivalent to reason. The mind contains both νοῦς, *nous*, the subfaculty that perceives truth intuitively, and δίανοια, *dianoia*, which reasons. Of the two, δίανοια is significantly less important than νοῦς. The νοῦς knows the truth of things instantly, while the δίανοια has to labor to get to truth, if it ever does. In the fallen state of humanity, however, the νοῦς has lost much of its intuitive power because of human slavery to the passions. The δίανοια is a better guide to truth when one is considering geometry, astronomy, architecture, and other things that do not involve human emotions and values, but is easily clouded and misguided when human emotions and values are considered (in ethics, religion, politics, aesthetics, and so on).

### ANNOTATED LIST OF REFERENCES

Evagrius Ponticus. (1981). *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*. Trans. John Eudes. Garden City, NY: Image Books. (Originally written c. 390).

Evagrius was the first Christian to blend the high theology of Origen with the spirituality of the early Egyptian monks. This work was the first to describe the “eight deadly passions.”

(St.) John Cassian. (2000). *The Institutes*. Trans. Boniface Ramsey. Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 58. New York: Newman Press. (Originally written c. 420).

Cassian brought the teachings of Evagrius to the West. This recent translation contains the complete text of Cassian’s work (not all English translations do). *The Institutes* contains chapters on each of the eight principal faults is the companion volume to Cassian’s *Conferences*, which many consider the greater work.

(St.) Gregory of Nyssa. (1978). *The Life of Moses*. Trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson. New York: Paulist Press. (Originally written c. 390).

One of the three “Cappadocian fathers,” Gregory here gives a highly allegorical interpretation of the life of Moses and the events of the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt.

Lake, Frank. (1966). *Clinical Theology: A Theological and Psychiatric Basis to Clinical Pastoral Care*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

One of the great works integrating modern psychological research with the Christian spiritual and pastoral tradition. Leanne Payne says it is the one

book that every Christian counselor should have. This book is enormous (1160 pages of text!). It is now out-of-print. An abridged version is available, but it has deleted so much of the original that it is hard to follow. Copies are sometimes available from the Clinical Theology Association in Great Britain.

(St.) Nicodimos of the Holy Mountain and (St.) Makarios of Corinth (compilers). (1979, 1981, 1984, 1995). *The Philokalia*. (4 volumes to date). Trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. London: Faber and Faber. (Originally published 1782).

The *Philokalia* is the outstanding anthology of spiritual and mystical writings of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. It is highly monastic, but its profound insights are applicable to people outside the monastery as well as to those within it.

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