



A Prayer To Our Lord Jesus Christ

by Saint Isaac the Syrian

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O Master Lord Jesus Christ,
who wept for Thy friend Lazarus
and shed tears of sorrow and compassion upon him,
accept the tears of my bitterness.
Through Thy passion heal my passions;
through Thy wounds cure my wounds;
through Thy blood purify my blood,
and mingle with my body the fragrance of Thy life-giving body.
Let the gall, which was given to Thee by the enemies,
sweeten my soul from the bitterness,
given to me by the adversary.
Let Thy body,
which was stretched on the tree of the Cross,
make my mind, pulled down by the demons,
fly towards Thee.
Let Thy head, which Thou bowed on the Cross,
lift up my head, smitten by the opponents.
Let Thine all-holy hands, which were nailed by the godless on the Cross,
raise me from the chasm of perdition
and bring me towards Thee,
as Thy most holy mouth has promised.
Let Thy face, which received slaps and spittles by the cursed ones,
bring a shine to my face, sullied by my sins.
Let Thy soul, which Thou, while on the Cross, offered to Thy Father,
lead me towards Thee by Thy grace.
I do not have a painful heart to seek after Thee;
I do not have repentance nor contrition
which bring the children back to their inheritance;
I do not have, O Master, entreating tears.
My mind has been darkened
by worldly and material things
and is not capable of looking at Thee in pain.
My heart has turned cold
from the multitude of temptations
and cannot warm itself
with the tears of love for Thee.
But Thou, O Lord Jesus Christ,
the treasury of good,
grant me complete repentance
and a painful heart,

so that I may go out (of my cell)
searching for Thee with all my heart.
Without Thee,
I am a stranger to any good.
Thus, grant me, O good one, Thy grace;
let Thy Father,
who, before all ages and eternally,
has begotten Thee from his bosom,
renew in me the form of Thine image.
I have forsaken Thee,
but do not forsake me;
I have come out away from Thee,
so come out in search of me,
and lead me into Thy pasture,
numbering me among the sheep
of Thine excellent flock
and feeding me together with them
the grass of Thy divine mysteries,
whose haunt is the pure heart
and in which
the illumination of Thy revelations is seen,
bringing consolation and refreshment,
to those who work hard
and suffer afflictions and various griefs for Thee.
Make us worthy of this illumination
through Thy grace and love for man,
O our saviour Jesus Christ,
both now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Saint Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh

A Homily from Made Perfect in Faith (Ch. 30)

by Father James Thornton

Saint Isaac the Syrian was born in Bet-Qatraje, on the western side of the Persian Gulf, near modern Bahrain and Qatar. He lived in the latter half of the seventh century. Very little is known of the details of his life. We know nothing, for example, of his family and know neither the year of his birth nor the year of his death. We know from his extant writings that he was an educated man, and that he became a monk at some early period of his life.

It is recorded that the region's Hierarchy, Catholicos George I, visited Bet-Qatraje in the year 676, met Saint Isaac there, and was sufficiently impressed by his learning and spiritual gifts that he consecrated him Bishop and sent him north to Nineveh (modern Mosul, Iraq). However, after only five months, the Saint resigned as Bishop. The reason for his resignation is obscure, but it is possible that, as a man dedicated to the ascetical life, Episcopal duties, in which one must interact to some large extent with worldly matters and with sometimes coarse and recalcitrant people, became unpalatable to him. Whatever the reason, Saint Isaac fled Nineveh and intensified his ascetical efforts. For some years, he lived as a hermit, allowing himself only a little bread and uncooked vegetables each day, and spending all of his time in prayer and reading spiritual works. After some time, as he grew older, his eyesight began to fail him, and so he retired to the Monastery of Rabban-Shapur, where he devoted the remainder of his life to the writing of spiritual and ascetical works, so that he could share his fruitful experiences with his brethren in Christ.

Saint Nicholas of Ohrid and Žiča says of Saint Isaac that, "He was without equal as a writer and guide in the spiritual life."¹ Indeed, how true that is! The great Holy Father's wise counsels, sayings, and observations run all through that excellent manual of Orthodox spirituality, *The Philokalia*. For example, we read these words: "Strive to enter the shrine within you and you will see the shrine of heaven, for the one is the same as the other and a single entrance permits you to contemplate both. The ladder leading to that kingdom is hidden within you, that is, within your soul: cleanse yourself from sin and there you will find the steps by which you ascend."²

Let us recall, with regard to these words, that the Orthodox way of life does not aim itself, like the ways of life of the sectarians, at mere good conduct, good citizenship, and conventional ethicality. To be sure, we are required to conduct ourselves morally, to obey the laws of our country when they conform to Christian teaching, and to be honest and just in our dealings with others. Yet that is only the first step, a "baby step," so to speak. Orthodox Christianity is not a religion of "baby steps." It is rather a science, a science of spiritual purification.

Medical science teaches us that to remain physically healthy, we must wash our hands and bathe our bodies frequently, avoid contact with objects that are contaminated with harmful bacteria, and eat only that which is clean, fresh, and suitably prepared. No sane person would think, for example, of cleaning up after pets or barnyard animals and then of preparing food or eating without having first washed thoroughly; and no one would think of eating uncooked chicken, of eating fish that has been left at room temperature for several days, or of eating vegetables that have spoiled. To do any of these things would be to put our physical bodies at extreme risk. Modern medical science instructs us about the importance of physical cleanliness, and the potentially lethal results of our inattention to its teachings. Orthodoxy is similar to medical science; however it is a science of the soul, a science of spiritual good health. It also teaches us what "spiritual bacteria" must be avoided, what must be cleansed away by spiritual washing, and what is safe spiritually to ingest. Just as most people are rigorous in their attention to physical cleanliness and the wholesomeness of what they

consume, so too must Orthodox Christians be rigorous in their spiritual life. That is because Orthodoxy, like medical science, instructs us about health, but, in this case, spiritual health and the spiritually lethal results of our inattention thereto.

Christ Himself commands, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."³ He refers to the struggle for spiritual perfection or perfect spiritual cleanliness. We all remember, from our studies of the New Testament, that the Pharisees were outwardly holy and ethical. One could say that they were "good citizens" *par excellence*. But Christ Jesus condemned them because they were inwardly imperfect and unclean. The Evil One assures us that perfection is impossible; by contrast, Christ, who understands and is merciful towards fallen men, states that spiritual perfection and cleanliness are within our grasp. Saint Isaac the Syrian writes, in the aforementioned passage, that we must search for the steps to the Kingdom of Heaven within us, and this we do, firstly, by cleansing ourselves of sin. If we choose not to strive for perfection; if we choose not to search for the steps to Heaven; if we choose not to cleanse ourselves, then we are simply lost, and good citizenship and elementary good ethics will not save us. How do we cleanse ourselves?

All of us here already know the answer to that question. To cleanse ourselves, we obey the Ten Commandments; we obey the Two Commandments of Christ; we pray with compunction; we fast in accordance with Church requirements; we fill our minds with the beauty of Holy Scripture and other Orthodox spiritual works; we foster virtue, especially humility, in our lives; we confess to a Priest and receive the Holy Mysteries frequently; and we say "no" to temptations, that is, we form the habit of turning away from spiritually unhealthy thoughts the moment they present themselves to our minds. Saint Isaac writes, "Dispassion does not mean that a man feels no passions, but that he does not accept any of them."⁴ In other words, even the great Saints and ascetics are tempted—obviously the Evil One never relents—, but the great Saints and ascetics refuse, by carefully nurtured habit, to receive, or to accept, or to entertain in the least, such temptations.

Saint Isaac writes elsewhere: "The purpose of the advent of the Saviour, when He gave us His life-giving commandments as purifying remedies in our passionate state, was to cleanse the soul from the damage done by the first transgression and bring it back to its original state. What medicines are for a sick body, that the commandments are for the passionate soul."⁵

Here, we see that Saint Isaac also draws upon the comparison between physical health and spiritual health, and upon the comparison between medicines for a sick body and medicines for a sick soul. Because of Adam's transgression, our bodies became weak and prone to disease and our souls became "passionate" and prone to the disease of sin. Yet we have it within our power, assisted by God's Grace, to annihilate the effects of Adam's transgression; not the effects on our bodies, which will someday die, but on our souls, which are made to live eternally.

Saint Isaac tell us, "This life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits."⁶ What does that mean for those of us who live in the world? It means that while all of us in the world have duties to our spouses, to our children, to other of our kinsmen, to our neighbors, to our professions or occupations, to our neighborhoods, communities, and nations, and so forth, nevertheless, we have our duties also to God and to achieve the salvation of our souls. Worldly duties are significant, but those to God are primary; they must come first. To put the world first is pure vanity, since that which is worldly assures, or tries to assure, a pleasant passage of time in this life, while that which is Godly guarantees us everlasting life.

Saint Isaac the Syrian gave the last years of his life, years in which he was nearly blind, to the recording of his spiritual experiences, and this he did for us, so that we and all Christians might gain from his hard labors. Let us listen with attention to this great Holy Father that we may recover that spiritual health that was an attribute of man when he was first created by God and that can become his attribute again through the spiritual science that is Orthodoxy.

Endnotes

1. Bishop [St.] Nikolai Velimirović *The Prologue from Ochrid: Lives of the Saints and Homilies for Every Day of the Year*, trans. Mother Maria. Prologue, Vol. I, *January, February, March* (Birmingham, U.K.: Lazarica Press, 1985), p. 106.
2. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. and ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and [Bishop] Kallistos Ware, Vol. IV (London, U.K.: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 202.
3. St. Matthew 5:48.
4. <http://www.roca.org/OA/137/137d.htm>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p. 364.

From [*Made Perfect in Faith*](#) (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2006), pp. 180-185. This superb book of homilies is highly recommended! Posted on 29 Sep, 2006 (n.s.).