

# *Coping with Spiritual Paralysis*

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Excerpt from Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way

## **Obstacles in the prayer**

"For the enemy has pursued me; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead." (Ps 143.3)

In times of **spiritual aridity**, prayer does not stop. There is nothing to demand that it stop, since the entire soul is still inclined toward God and righteousness. It is not as if it has lost its power or will to strive or to pray, for spiritual aridity has no effect except the absence of the solace, pleasure, and loving encouragements that are the companions and fruits of prayer.

**Spiritual languor**, on the other hand, affects the will. Here, the attack is aimed even at our attempt to pray and to persevere in prayer. A man may stand to pray, but he finds neither words to say nor power to carry on. He may sit down to read, but the book in his hands turns, as St. Isaac the Syrian says, "into lead." It may remain open for a whole day, while the mind fails to grasp a single line. The mind is distracted, unable to concentrate on or follow the meaning of the words passing before it. The will, which controls all activity, is impotent.

Although the desire to pray is present, the power and will to do so are absent. In the end, even the desire to pray may fade. Man becomes unable and unwilling to pray, adding to his suffering and sorrow. His problems seem entirely insolvable.

If man tries to plumb the depths of his soul, he finds himself at a loss, for its depths are beyond his reach. It is as if his spiritual footing has been lost, alienating him from the essence of his life. If he tries to examine his faith and secretly measure it in his heart, he finds that it has died, gone. If he knocks at the door of hope, if he clings to the promises of God he had once cherished and lived by, he finds in what he used to find hope has now turned to ice. Hope is stuck in the cold present and not willing to move beyond it.

The enemy seizes this opportunity, striking with all his firepower. He launches an offensive - to convince man of his failure, of the ruin of all his struggle and effort. The enemy tries to persuade man that his whole spiritual life was not true or real, that it was nothing but fanciful illusions and emotions. He clamps down on man's mind that he might once and for all deny the spiritual life.

Yet, amidst all these crushing inner battles, the soul somehow has an intuition that all these doubts are untrue and that something must exist on the other side of the darkness. It also feels that, in spite of itself, it is still bound to the God who has forsaken it. The soul continues to worship God without realizing or even wanting to! Deep within, far away from the mind's eye or discernment, the heart continues to pray - albeit it is a prayer that gives him no comfort or assurance.

When the enemy seeks to deal his fatal blow, trying to force the soul to renounce its faith and hope, he encounters no response. The soul may give in to the enemy in the battle of the mind in complete surrender and to the farthest limits of error. But it is absolutely impossible for the soul to take action, for at the point where imagination and thought turn into action, the will springs forth like a lion out of his den to terrify all the foxes of corruption.

Hence, behind spiritual languor there exists a relationship with God that, though inactive, is real and still very strong, stronger than all the whispers of the devil. Yet until the decisive moment of danger, this relationship sleeps.

This relationship remains hidden from the soul. It is vain to try to convince a soul of its existence, that the soul might rely on this or reassure itself of its presence. For in this tribulation, the soul is called to stand alone.

The soul remains within the sphere of God's dominion. Although unaware, it is still making progress and on the right path. It is still led by an invisible hand and carried by an unfelt power. The tangible proof for all this is the extreme, constant grief of the soul over its fall from its former activity, zeal, and prominent effort into its present state.

The movement of faith was born one day within the heart of the pilgrim, now on the trek whose final destination is God. Faith was lit like a lamp with the light of God. It was kindled by love and zeal and has pushed the soul forward on its march. The pilgrim must not believe that this movement can be abruptly withdrawn from the depths of his heart, that he can be left in such sudden emptiness.

It cannot be assumed that a man will constantly see or feel the light or warmth of God. Yet both are constant and active, both in the light of this life as well as in its darkness, its coldness as well as its warmth, its happiness as well as its grief. The way of the spirit is not to be measured exclusively by periods of light, warmth, joy, or fruitful activity. Periods of impasse, of darkness engulfing the soul, of grief which oppresses the heart, periods of coldness paralyzing all spiritual emotion are inseparable parts of the narrow spiritual way. Such conditions seem adverse, painful, and deadly. What matters is how we face them. This is what determines our worthiness to

proceed further, completing the blessed struggle until we receive our crowns.

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This debilitating languor of the spirit is by far the direst tribulation of the soul, indeed the climax of its purging experience. It is similar only to death. Only under the wing of the Almighty's perfect providence can man withstand such a trial, for during this ordeal the soul in its grief, like Job, reaches the point in which it yearns for death.

During all these torments, the afflicted person is not totally deprived of the hope of God's mercy. He never stops looking up toward God, even on the verge of despair; rather, he waits for a great and wonderful salvation. Inasmuch as the tribulation presses hard, his soul becomes clearer and purer. The vision of the Almighty's majesty is unveiled, together with the intensity of his love and faithfulness toward the human soul. Previous sufferings seem to fall like scales from the eyes of the soul. It is here that the soul builds up its faith in God. It is not on the basis of blessings that pass away, on protection and visible care, nor on tangible evidence or reasonable proof, but on "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11.1).

In the same way, every soul that loves Christ will be, without exception, vindicated at the end. No matter how bitter the spiritual experience, it still knows its final share. It crawls forward, injured but looking toward Christ. The soul, the forsaken beloved, calls to him who has bought her with his blood, never once swerving from her trust in her Lover.

Trust may fade from view but is never lost. Faith may sometimes come to a halt but never comes to an end. Feelings of love may sink out of sight, yet they are still preserved in the depths of the soul to spring forth at the end of the trial with an invincible power.