

Two Remembrances

Our complex minds retain the memory of innumerable things, but we read in the spiritual fathers that there are two remembrances in particular that we must strive to keep uppermost in our minds in order to achieve salvation: the remembrance of God and the remembrance of death.

The Remembrance of Death.

We will speak first about the remembrance of death. Sleep is a kind of death, from which we usually awake, but every night we should consider the fact that we may have just day on earth, and that our our body during the possible, also, that, even if we might die the next day in an accident or from a heart attack or stroke.

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experienced our last soul might depart from coming night. It is we are young, we

So it follows that we must be ready for death and prepared for judgment at all times. Our souls must be constantly cleansed through confession, and we must be united with our Saviour in the Holy Mysteries as often as They are offered to us, so that we will be prepared for death whenever it might come.

Cultivating the remembrance of death will encourage us to prepare in these ways. In order to remind themselves of death, some holy monks have kept their own coffin in their cell, sometimes even using it as a bed. One person I knew kept a tiny skeleton in his icon corner so that every evening during his prayers, he would remember death and confess his sins to God.

In Step 6 of *The Ladder*, St. John Climacus writes:

“As of all foods, bread is the most essential, so the thought of death is the most necessary of all works. The remembrance of death amongst those in the midst of society gives birth to distress and meditation, and even more, to despondency. But amongst those who are free from noise, it produces the putting aside of cares and constant prayer and guarding of the mind. But these same virtues both produce the remembrance of death, and are also produced by it.”

“A true sign of those who are mindful of death in the depth of their being is a voluntary detachment from every creature and complete renunciation of their own will.”

“Anyone who wishes to retain within him continually the remembrance of death and God’s judgment, and at the same time yields to material cares and distractions, is like a man who is swimming and wants to clap his hands.”

“Let us rest assured that **the remembrance of death**, like all other blessings, **is a gift of God**; since how is it that often, when we are at the very tombs, we are left tearless and hard; and frequently when we have no such sight, we are full of compunction?”

“It is impossible, someone says, to spend the present day devoutly unless we regard it as the last of our whole life.”

St. John also tells of a certain Hesychius the Horebite, who was neglectful of his salvation until he died for one hour. When he came to himself, he closed himself up in his cell where he then lived for twelve years in silence and great asceticism until, when he was about to die, said, “No one who has acquired the remembrance of death will ever be able to sin.”

“Beholding thee, O grave, I fear the judgment of God, and I weep, for the common destiny of all mankind comes to mind. . . . O death, who can escape thee?”

On this same topic, the holy bishop, St. Ignaty Brianchaninov, wrote:

“Our mind is so darkened by the fall that unless we force ourselves to remember death, we can completely forget about it. When we forget about death, then we begin to live on earth as if we were immortal, and we sacrifice all our activity to the world without concerning ourselves in the least either about the fearful transition to eternity or about our fate in eternity. Then we boldly override the commandments of Christ; then we commit all the vilest sins; then we abandon not only unceasing prayer, but even the prayers appointed for definite times—we begin to scorn this essential and indispensable occupation as if it were an activity of little importance and little needed. Forgetful of physical death, we die a spiritual death.”

“On the other hand, he who often remembers the death of the body, rises from the dead in soul. He lives like a stranger [on the earth]. . . where no earthly pleasure gains his love. . . . He condemns no one, for he

remembers that at the judgment of God, such judgment will be passed on him as he passed here on his neighbors. He forgives everyone everything, that he may himself obtain forgiveness and inherit salvation. He is indulgent with all and merciful that such indulgence and mercy may be shown unto him. He welcomes and embraces with joy every trouble or trial that comes to him. . . . If the thought comes to him to be proud of his virtue, at once the remembrance of death . . . drives it away.”

“Do not fritter away the time given you for repentance. Do not rivet your eyes on the earth where you are a momentary actor, an exile, where you are given a chance to offer repentance . . . in order to avoid eternal torment. Use the short spell of your pilgrimage on earth to acquire a haven of peace, a blessed refuge in eternity. . . . Beg our Saviour for this by the fulfillment of Christ’s commandments. Beg by sincere repentance for the sins you have committed. Beg by thanking and praising God for all the trials and troubles that are sent to you. Beg by an abundance of prayer. And beg by means of the Jesus Prayer combined with the remembrance of death.

These two activities—the Jesus prayer and the remembrance of death—easily merge into one activity. From the Prayer comes a vivid remembrance of death, as if it were a foretaste of it; and from this foretaste of death the prayer flares up more vigorously.”

The greatest of the holy fathers practiced the remembrance of death. The author of the life of St. Pachomius the Great tell of him, “that he maintained himself constantly in the fear of God with the remembrance of the eternal torments and pains which have no end. . . . By this means the Saint kept himself from evil and roused himself to do better.”

The following is from Letter 51 by the Elder Joseph.

“How vain and unsteady this world is! . . . Today we are alive and sing sweetly; tomorrow we shall die and the worms will eat us.”

“Behold, another new year! Once again, wishes and hopes. But death is lurking somewhere, waiting for us, too. Some day or night will be the last one of our life. Therefore, blessed is he who remembers his death day and night and prepares himself to meet it. For it has a habit of coming joyfully to those who wait for it, but it arrives unexpectedly, bitterly, and harshly for those who do not expect it.”

The Remembrance of God.

The second remembrance, which is linked to the first, is the constant remembrance of God. This remembrance is essential for us to develop spiritually and for us to grow so close to God that we learn to unite our will with His.

Here are some thoughts on the remembrance of God from St. Theophan the Recluse:

“When the remembrance of God lives in the heart and there maintains the fear of Him, then all goes well; but when this remembrance grows weak or is kept only in the head, then all goes awry.”

“Everywhere and always God is with us, near to us, and in us. But we are not always with Him, since we do not remember Him; and because we do not remember Him, we allow ourselves many things which we would not permit if we did remember. Take upon yourself this task—to make a habit of such recollection.”

“It is possible to replace the thought of God by the Jesus Prayer, but where is the necessity for this when they are one and the same?”

“Our whole object is to acquire the habit of keeping our attention always on the Lord, Who is omnipresent and sees everything, Who desires the salvation of all of us and is ready to help us towards it. This habit will not allow you to grieve, whether your sorrow be within or without; for it fills the soul with a sense of perfect contentment, which leaves no room for any feeling of scarcity or need. It makes us entrust ourselves and all we have into the Lord’s hands, and so gives birth to a sense of His permanent protection and help.”

“All the time from waking to sleeping, walk in the remembrance of the omnipresence of God, having always in mind that the Lord sees you and assesses every movement of your thoughts and heart. For this purpose pray the Jesus Prayer unceasingly, and if you are at home, frequently approach the icons and bow down or prostrate yourself according to the movement and demands of your heart. Thus during the whole day your time will be frequently interrupted by these prostrations, and will be passed in the unceasing thought of God and in performance of the Jesus Prayer, during every kind of occupation.”

“Remembrance of God is something that God Himself grafts upon the soul. But the soul must also force itself to persevere and to toil. Work, making every effort to attain the unceasing remembrance of God. And God, seeing how fervently you desire it, will give you this constant recollection of Himself.”