

**+ Arsenius the Great +  
A Mentor for Seeking Christ  
In Stillness and Prayer**



Abba Arsenius said,

“Strive with all your might to bring your interior activity into accord with God.”

“If we seek God, he will show himself to us, and if we keep him, he will remain close to us.”

## **Down-sizing from riches to rags and out-sourcing self-reliance**

“While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, ‘Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.’ And a voice came saying to him, ‘Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.’”

“Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness.’”

### **A life-changing prayer**

Beginning in the third century thousands of men and women left the materialism, futility and anxieties of the Roman Empire and fled to the deserts of Egypt. They were seeking a more complete experience of God through solitude and silence.

One of those who entered the desert was a man called Arsenius. He was born in 354 and died in the desert in 449 at the age of 95. Arsenius lived in Constantinople. He was educated in Latin and Greek, a philosopher and scholar. In early adulthood he lived in the palace of Emperor Theodosius the Great and was tutor to the emperor’s sons Arcadius and Honorius. Arsenius was also street-wise, embroiled in the politics and intrigues of the empire. He wore fancy clothes, was held in high esteem, and enjoyed political influence because of his proximity to the Emperor.

In the year 394, the year of Theodosius’s death, Arsenius, while still living in the palace, asked God, “Lord, show me how I can be saved.” A voice responded, “Flee from people and you will be saved.” Arsenius fled to the

desert of Egypt and for almost 56 years was a hermit, in constant prayer, study of scripture, and became a mentor to others who sought God.

Arsenius, while living in the most sophisticated center of power in the Roman Empire, knew that his royal community, while enjoyable and effective, lacked the depth of union and community that humans are created to have. Arsenius sought newness of life. His transformation included a radical shift of his norms for daily life as well as the spiritual values of his life. Yet, this inward shift was embodied by a new way of life in very specific ways. He chose an austere ascetic life that was proper for him and made that life and example his alms-giving to God. His mentor in the desert was Abba John the Dwarf who lived in Scetis, a desolate desert region west of the Nile delta. John was an anchorite, who lived in solitude, but who mentored a few disciples. Abba John said,

“Watching means to sit in the cell and be always mindful of God. This is what is meant by, ‘I was on the watch and God came to me.’”

“I think it is best that a person should have a little bit of all the virtues. Therefore, get up early every day and acquire the beginning of every virtue and every commandment. Use great patience, with fear and long-suffering, in the love of God, with all the fervor of your soul and body.”

“One day Abba John was sitting down in Scetis, and the brothers came to him to ask him about their thoughts. One of the elders said, ‘John, you are like a courtesan who shows her beauty to increase the number of her lovers.’ Abba John

kissed him and said, ‘You are quite right, Father.’ One of his disciples said to him, ‘Do you not mind that in your heart?’ But Abba John said, ‘No, I am the same inside as I am outside.’”

Other monks in the desert were aware of Arsenius’ education, sophistication and former political influence. Once he was sitting with an illiterate monk who had been a shepherd and listening to his experience of monastic life. His fellow monks asked: “Why are you wasting your time? What can a classics scholar learn from a shepherd?” Arsenius responded, “I have indeed been taught in Latin and Greek, but I do not even know the alphabet of this shepherd.”

### **An inner transformation**

Arsenius learned from Abba John that to embody the will of God in our lives we must first commit ourselves to the inner life so that God can be shaped in us. Only then can we overcome the self-centered focus of our lives. He knew that the arena of transformation is the presence of God within ourselves and in other people who mentor us. The path to transformation for Arsenius was exile into silence and stillness, away from the inhabited world. His path is not the path for everyone, yet what he learned in embracing a major change in his life is filled with wisdom for all. Through his willingness to embrace the change in his life he experienced *a healing of the soul*.

Arsenius desired a new life that would reach beyond a mere change of occupation or venue. He rejected one system of fundamental values for another system of values. His spiritual transformation was not to another way of experiencing life but to *another mode of existence*. His new way of life was not a rejection of life in the world

or a renunciation of his bodily existence. The heart of this new life was a transformation of the will in which the whole person is permeated with God's desires. Mystical experience may be part of this new life, but is not its goal. Mystical experience flows from the new life that is now lived from the union of the soul with the will of God.

The birth of this spiritual perspective becomes possible when we realize that we are part of the web of life, the flow of all creatures and the created world. This lessening of boundaries is the result of a desire for change and a renewal of the will. Arsenius knew that the will is located within the dynamic life of the soul *where resurrection is always possible*. The power of the will has no measure, and when it is directed toward goodness will not be resisted by God. The will, when free of the subjective influence of both material desire and rational evaluation, participates in the image of God in us.

“It happened that when Abba Arsenius was sitting in his cell, he was harassed by the demons. His disciples, on their return, stood outside his cell and heard him praying to God in these words: ‘God do not leave me. I have done nothing good in your sight. But according to Your Goodness, let me now at least make a beginning of doing good.’”

“It was said of Abba Arsenius that on Saturday evenings, preparing for the glory of the Sunday, he would turn his back on the sun and stretch out his hands in prayer toward the heavens, until once again the sun shone on his face. Then he would sit down.”

A disciple of Abba Arsenius asked him, “Is it good to have nothing extra in the cell? I know a brother who used to have some vegetables and he has pulled them up.’ Abba Arsenius replied: ‘Undoubtedly that is good, but it must be done according to one’s ability. For, if one does not have the strength for such a practice, then one will soon plant others.’”

“Abba Daniel used to tell how when Abba Arsenius learned that all the varieties of fruit were ripe, he would say, ‘Bring me some.’ He would taste a very little of each, just once, giving thanks to God.”

### **An experienced mentor**

Perhaps the wisdom of Arsenius can help us who want to embody our experience of God in our daily lives and work. We too have been called to a desert. Unlike Arsenius, our desert is not a desolate and remote place apart from our families, friends and workplace. But like Arsenius, our desert will become the place of our resurrection. In the same way that Arsenius was mentored by the shepherd, we can let ourselves be mentored by God in solitude and prayer and learn to mentor each other. We will be surprised by wisdom as we discover the presence of God in each other. The desert of our silence will become our path to new life and our desert cell will become not only the place of our solitude and listening, but also will be embodied in the way we live. We will become what we experience in our cell. Like Abba John the Dwarf, we will be the same on the outside as we are on the inside.

### **A three-fold path to “the way of salvation”**

Arsenius desired the mystery of salvation. The Greek word he used in his prayer can mean abundant health, life, breath, and sustenance for living. Salvation in this context is a verb, not a noun. Salvation is living a God-filled life, here and now, in *this body* and on *this earth*, and among the people we live with and encounter every day. Salvation is to be lived. It is breathing in and manifesting the image of God in us.

God’s response to Arsenius’s prayer was an exhortation to flee, become quiet, and to pray (rest in peace). These three ascetic actions form a stream of living water that will flow into our lives.

**Fleeing** means both *leaving behind and moving toward*. It is an action, not a thought. Fleeing is the threshold of repentance that leaves what is superficial, scattering, and futile behind and initiates movement toward transformation. Fleeing, in this sense, is a form of discernment. It is waking up to what is missing and a desire to move toward what is real.

**Silence, within solitude**, is a freely chosen willingness to let go of all that inhibits listening to ourselves and God. The vocation of quiet listening exposes the self-centeredness, self-interest, and lack of compassion that have limited our lives. Silence is a first step leading toward transformation and listening is the womb of civility.

**Constant prayer** is what Arsenius and other desert elders called “resting in God’s presence.” It is the freedom we experience when we are no longer attached to ourselves and the need to control our lives. It relieves us from the intense weight and anxiety we place on ourselves by trying to create ourselves in our own image. Resting, or peacefulness, is an environment of grace we experience

when our hearts have expanded with the presence and fullness of God's energies and love. The desert elders called this "purity of heart." They sought a state of complete openness to God's will, unattachment to material possessions, easily satisfied needs, and letting go of control of their life with God. This resting in God was the source of true charity and compassion. It is an awareness of our union with all creation. It opens our eyes to the sacredness of every living creature. Inner peace gives birth to compassion because our personal desires have become congruent with what God desire for the life of the world. When we are able to speak and act from this inner peace, humility become tangible. It is God's gift, not our accomplishment.

Reflection:

- What seems futile, scattering, or unhealthy in society or in your life?
- What do you wish to flee toward?
- How can you balance your need to "flee" with your need to remain active in society?
- If you flee, how do you envision this taking place without leaving society? How will it be possible for you to practice an "interior monasticism" in your life? (i.e. be present to your "cell" or life of prayer in the midst of all the other aspects of your daily living?)
- How can "resting in God" exist in grace-filled tension with "getting things done"?
- In what ways can your prayer be constant?
- What will support your life of prayer?
- What would you like to tell Arsenius?

- What would you like to ask Arsenius?

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