

Mary of Egypt

A Life Transformed



The Prayer of Mary of Egypt

“Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance.”

September 25

Asking for God's guidance

Amma Mary of Egypt (ca. sixth century) left her home in Alexandria and lived for seventeen years *“as a fire for public depravity.”*¹ During a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher she was overcome with a desire to venerate the wood of the cross of Jesus and experienced a profound awareness of her need for repentance. A mysterious power, perhaps her own sense of unworthiness, prevented her from entering the church. She prayed to the Virgin Mary for help, promising to *“go wherever you as my mediator for salvation shall order and lead.”* The next day she was able to enter and in the presence of the cross *“understood the promises of God and realized how God receives those who repent.”* As she was leaving the church she prayed again to the Virgin saying, *“Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance.”* Mary was led into the Palestinian desert where she remained a hermit, with only one visitor, for forty-seven years. Mary's

¹ All quotations for today are from Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publication, 1987. Pp 27 and 48.

prayer is an inspired understanding of the process of repentance. It displays a spirit humbled by awareness of sins and a desire for new life.

September 26

Traveling the way of repentance

Amma Mary of Egypt prayed, *Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance.*"²

Amma Mary's prayer is a concise summary of the goal of monastic art and gives a vision of the entire Christian path. We will reflect on each part for the next five days.

"Now therefore, lead me wherever you please" shows Mary's humble desire to place her new life totally in God's hands. This act of turning toward God's desires for her is the consequence of her honest confrontation with the pattern of her previous life of hedonism. Repentance is not a rational decision. It has deeper psychological roots. At the door to the church something inside Mary's psyche creates a tension between her passion to venerate the cross of Jesus and her sense of

² Ibid., 48.

unworthiness. The barrier between Mary's past and her desire for God seems impossible to cross. Her old unrestrained passion now yearns for a new life and she realizes that she must place this redirected passion totally in God's hands. "*Now therefore, lead me wherever you please*" is her first step on the path.

September 27

A desire for fullness of life

*"Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance."*³

Like Arsenius, Amma Mary knows her life is incomplete and she prays "*lead me to salvation.*" At the door to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher she realizes that her life of unrestrained sexual pleasures has no destination. Its colors and excitement are evaporating in relation to "something" drawing her into the church. Its focus is in the wood of the cross of Jesus. We cannot know what she was thinking or feeling as she brought her life to the cross. The intensity of her desire to enter shows a passion to leave her former life behind; to let it die. But in that emptiness Mary

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

has no idea of what her new life will be like or where it will begin. Her words “*lead me to salvation*” show her desire for the Virgin Mary’s help. Mary, who was in full control and certainly self-assertive in her former life is now placing her life in God’s hands. She has turned completely toward God to fulfill her desire for fullness of life. Her request for “salvation” is a present need, not something for the future. She places the weight of her emptiness in God’s hands and is willing to wait for God’s love.

September 28

A desire for what is true

*“Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, **teach me what is true**, and go before me in the way of repentance.”⁴*

A humble spirit is not full of its own wisdom. Mary of Egypt has forsaken everything that was futile and self-destructive in her life. She has an “empty slate.” Like so many women and men who were led to the desert, Mary could have re-written her life with a self-constructed pattern of ascetic disciplines. But a self-help program was not her desire. She had spent seventeen years choosing

⁴ Ibid., 48.

her own destiny and found it empty. As she leaves the church in Jerusalem she wants a very different form of life. She desires “*what is true*” and now relies on God, rather than herself, to be her teacher. Mary wants a life that is real, that is truly herself, and is authentically human. She is willing to let God show her all these things and learn to see life and herself through God’s eyes.

September 29

A desire to remain in God’s presence

“Now therefore, lead me wherever you please; lead me to salvation, teach me what is true, and go before me in the way of repentance.”⁵

What is “*the way of repentance?*” The desert elders experienced repentance as a daily renewal of their lives and their dependence of God. It is a pathway leading to transformation where each step is guided by God’s Spirit. All aspects of the “*monastic art*” are disciplines that help each person discern God’s presence on the path and rely on God’s strength and guidance. Mary of Egypt knew she must rely on God to lead her to fullness of life. At the same time she knew the power and

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

enticement of the memories of her former life. She was honest about her weakness and “the infamy of her deeds”⁶ brought her “shame and contrition.” She feared God’s judgment, but was rescued by God’s love. “Filled with faith”⁷, Mary of Egypt accepts the Virgin Mary as an exemplar who will help her accept God’s desires for her life. It is not coercion; it is a genuine self-emptying that makes room for God’s love. The only way to experience that love is to remain in God’s presence.

September 30

Continuing on the way

“When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The latter struck at him as much as he pleased, but in vain, and he said to him, ‘What is your power Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do; you fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all; in one thing only do you beat me.’ Abba Macarius asked what that

⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 44.

was. He said, 'Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you.'"⁸

Abba Poemen said, "To throw yourself before God, not to measure your progress, to leave all self-will; these are the instruments for the work of the soul."⁹

Amma Sarah said, "If I prayed that all men should approve of my conduct, I should find myself a penitent at the door of each one, but I shall rather pray that my heart shall be pure towards all."¹⁰

Amma Syncletica said, "Just as one cannot build a ship unless one has some nails, so it is impossible to be saved without humility."¹¹

The desert elders all agree.

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[Icon of Mary of Egypt and Zossima is from the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint George of Choziba, Wadi Qilt, Israel. Photo by David Keller.]

⁸ Benedicta Ward, SLG, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975. Macarius 11, 129-130.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Poemen 36, 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Sarah 5, 230.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Syncletica 26, 235.