

March 25

## God beyond things

Abba Evagrius said, *“When you are praying do not fancy the Divinity like some image formed within yourself. Avoid also allowing your spirit to be impressed with the seal of some particular shape, but rather, free from all matter, draw near the immaterial Being and you will attain to understanding.”*<sup>i</sup>

Evagrius, like Isaac, is speaking of prayer without an agenda: *“the contemplation of God alone.”* He gives advice for going beyond the limitations of words or thoughts that so often determine our expectations for prayer. We can avoid imagining *“the Divinity like some image”* or *“the seal of some particular shape.”* The challenge of imageless contemplative prayer is to be free from *“all matter”* and trust that there is a way of knowing God that does not depend on rational and physical activity. Without denying the integrity of our bodies and minds we can release control of our prayer and *“draw near the immaterial Being”* and *“attain understanding.”* This is knowledge of the heart based on relationship. It is resting in God.

March 26

## God within things

Abba Evagrius also said, *“We seek after virtues for the sake of attaining to the inner meaning of created things. We pursue these latter, that is to say the inner meanings of what is created, for the sake of attaining to the Lord who has created them. It is in the state of prayer that he is accustomed to manifest himself.”*<sup>ii</sup>

The path to *“the contemplation of God alone”* begins with what we can see, touch, and smell. Praxis gives us another way of seeing the world. Evagrius is practical in his understanding of prayer and creation. He begins *“where we are”* and moves to *“the inner meaning of created things.”* The purpose of prayer is not to escape created things, but to discern God’s presence in them. Our experience of God in prayer helps us see that same presence in created things *“for the sake of attaining to the Lord who has created them.”* Awareness of the *“inner meanings of what is created”* is prayer! The heavens and the earth manifest the presence of God and lead us toward *“the contemplation of God alone.”*

## Desire and Persistence

Abba Evagrius said, *If you long to pray then avoid all that is opposed to prayer. Then when God draws near he has only to go along with you.*<sup>iii</sup>

This is such great advice. It is so simple. Yet the path from “*If you long to pray...*” to a life of prayer is not easy. The “catch phrase” is “*avoid all that is opposed to prayer.*” We may say, “*I’m too busy.*” “*There is never enough time.*” “*My mind wanders.*” “*I can’t find a good place.*” “*There are children all around and they need my attention.*” “*I’m not sure what to do.*” “*I don’t like the silence.*” “*I can’t stay still.*” “*My schedule changes all the time.*” “*I don’t want to change.*” What opposes your prayer? How can your longing for God be fulfilled? What decisions will you have to make to honor your longing? Even though there are many venues and methods for prayer, Evagrius’ advice requires some action. “Showing up” is the hard part. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Evagrius reminds us that whenever and however we pray, God is already waiting and desires “*only to go along with you.*” Do not lose heart.

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<sup>i</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, 66,66

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 51,63

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 65,65

Excerpted from: David G. R. Keller. *Desert Banquet: A Year of Wisdom From The Desert Mothers And Fathers*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.