

THE WISDOM OF THE
DESERT FATHERS
AND MOTHERS

PARACLETE ESSENTIALS

THE WISDOM OF THE
DESERT FATHERS
AND MOTHERS

Foreword by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION BY
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The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers

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FOREWORD

If books could be weighted according to the power of their words, you wouldn't be able to hold the volume that is now in your hands. Given the cost of printing books, we can all be grateful that it's available in paperback. But the wisdom printed on these pages is the kind of thing humans have historically written on stone. This is a heavy book.

I say this because I didn't know what I was getting into the first time I encountered Antony of the desert. When his biography was assigned to me in an undergraduate class on Christian classics, I remember feeling relief that it was so much shorter than Augustine's *Confessions*. I was looking forward to a light evening of reading. But I did not get very far into this story about a man who heard Jesus' words to the rich young ruler and decided to obey them himself before I forgot what time it was. I remember leaning expectantly over the pages as I tried to make sense of wrestling matches with demons and the rigors of ascetic practice for the sake of drawing near to God. When Antony's friends dragged him from his cell after twenty years, I sat in wonder that he was a picture of health with power to heal and raise the dead. Here was a human being transformed. I sat up half the night, reading that description over and again.

A son of Southern Baptists, I grew up going to revival meetings where some of the best storytellers in the world told me the story of Jesus. By the time I was seven, I was so captivated by the power of Jesus that I promised him my whole life. My pastor told me it was the most important decision I would ever make—that this one choice changed everything. But a decade later, when I was a student on a Christian college campus, I was disappointed by how little had changed. Could Jesus really make me into a whole new person?

Antony gave me hope that a new life in Christ was possible. But he also showed me, in no uncertain terms, what new life would cost—nothing less than everything. I was scared to death, but I was also unexplainably attracted to this person. Like Nicodemus who came to Jesus in the night, I wanted to slip away and listen to this man.

In time I learned that I was not the first to have this feeling. When word got out about Antony's transformation, the "desert became a city." Those who came proved that Antony was not an exception. Devoting themselves to a life of prayer and the hard work of stability, a whole host of men and women grew in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, Syria and Turkey to become wise mothers and fathers in the faith. They gathered themselves in communities called "lauras" and "sketes." When hungry souls came looking for a word, they listened prayerfully and spoke succinctly. The "sayings" collected here under the names of those who said them are the sound advice that folks took home with them. I doubt they wrote them down immediately. These are the sort of words that, if you really hear them, you don't have to write them down. They stay with you forever.

The heart of desert wisdom, just like the heart of Jesus' gospel, is in the memorable images and words of instruction that came in short sayings from the ammas and abbas. But just as Peter, Paul, and John wrote reflections to help us make sense of the sayings of Jesus, more systematic thinkers came along to make sense of the desert wisdom also. Evagrius and John Cassian are the best known of these scholars. Their reflections help us put the pieces together into a whole—the desert wisdom as a vision for what life with God and other people can be. They are secondary, of course. Without the radical commitment and total abandon of someone like Antony, their work would have never been possible. And yet, without their careful thought, we may well misunderstand the gift of the mothers and fathers. Part of the wisdom of the tradition, I suppose, is that we need experience and reflection, theology and practice.

I live my life with Jesus and other friends in a Christian community that has been described as part of a “new monasticism.” I never cease to be amazed by how many people in our hypermodern culture of virtual reality show up at our door and dinner table, eager to talk about one thing: how to live the way of life that Jesus taught and practiced. As I pass the potatoes or sit across a cup of tea from these souls, I see a glimmer of hope in their eyes. I suspect it's something like the hope I felt that first night I sat up reading about Antony of Egypt. Maybe, I kept thinking, a whole new life is possible. Maybe it's already here. Maybe we really can become the church we dream of. Coming back to the words in this book helps me keep hope alive. The church doesn't just believe another world is possible—we've seen it. If it could happen in the fourth and fifth centuries, it

can happen where we are today. May we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, become the new creation we long for.

—*Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove*

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most enduring images used to describe the Christian spiritual life are the wilderness and the desert. On one level, Christians have used these images to describe spiritual experiences involving feelings of God's absence or abandonment. Christians often describe their feelings of spiritual loneliness and times of separation from God as periods of wandering in the wilderness. Often these same Christians, feeling that God is somehow testing them as they experience devastating losses, physical pain, or spiritual forlornness, compare their time of suffering to Jesus' experience of being tested in the desert.

While these images often suggest an aridity of spirit, however, they also evoke powerful visions of renewal and redemption. In Exodus 16, as the Israelites murmur their threats at Moses for leading them into such a situation, God provides food and water for them and guides them into a new land of promise. In Matthew 4:1–11 (Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), Jesus finds himself alone in the wilderness with the great tempter, Satan. After forty days and forty nights of what appear to be exhausting struggles, Jesus emerges from his desert period prepared to face the challenges of his forthcoming ministry. The wilderness stories of the Israelites and of Jesus provide the foundational narratives of desert spirituality in the Christian traditions.

The history of the earliest Christian communities after Jesus' life and ministry is indeed the story of a wilderness experience. Very soon after Jesus' death, according to the account in Acts, several of his followers were killed for preaching his message

of a coming new kingdom of God. One of the persecutors, Saul of Tarsus, suddenly experienced conversion to the nascent Christian tradition (while in the desert), changed his name to Paul, and soon became one of the tradition's most ardent supporters. During a period of roughly twenty years or less, Paul and his followers established numerous churches throughout the Mediterranean region. In his letters, Paul offered his advice to several churches about internal doctrinal matters—what does it mean to be *ekklēsia*, or church?—as well as about external matters—how should the church or Christians deal with the Roman government?

During the first four centuries of the Common Era, Christianity experienced tremendous persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Paul and the writers of the Gospels had already warned their communities that the coming of the new kingdom would be fraught with perils for the faithful (1 Thessalonians 3:1–5, 5:1–11; Mark 13). But as the early Jesus movement migrated into urban areas and established churches, it came increasingly into conflict with the Roman Empire, which required total obedience to its laws of emperor worship. With their belief in the coming new kingdom in which their own God would reign supreme, many Christians refused to submit to the Empire's insistence that the true God was the Roman emperor. With such refusals began a series of persecutions of Christians under a string of emperors from Nero to Diocletian.

When the persecution was at its height in the first two centuries of the Common Era, church theologians such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Origen encouraged faithfulness to the developing doctrine of the church as well as to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

For Justin, persecution provided the opportunity to show true faithfulness to Christ by dying for him in the manner in which he had died for his followers. Thus, during these centuries of the developing Christian community, martyrdom became its central expression of faith. Early Christian martyrs enacted their own desires to be united with God through their passionate defenses of their faith and through their deaths. The passion of the martyrs for their faith attracted many new converts to Christianity, and suddenly the community found itself engaged in internal arguments about baptism and the nature of a true Christian.

Yet, these internal arguments did not halt the growth of Christianity. In fact, some have claimed recently that Christianity continued to grow in spite of martyrdom because of the frequent tendency of Christians to intermarry with non-Christians in the Empire. Whatever the reasons, Christian communities experienced slow but steady growth between the second and fourth centuries. By the time of Constantine, who issued an edict of toleration that ended the persecution of Christians, the Christian church had grown so large that it confronted new problems. Suddenly, the church found itself not having to engage in a process of self-definition.

When the emperor Constantine came to power in the early part of the fourth century, he ushered in a new attitude toward the Christian religion. Constantine himself probably experienced some kind of conversion to Christianity in 312, when he attributed his victory over his rival to the deity he referred to as the Unconquered Sun. While many Christians believed that their God had given Constantine the victory, he did not differentiate between his monotheism and that of the Christians. Thus, he

adopted the Christian cross as his battle symbol, and he placed the “Chi-Rho” symbol of Christ on his coins beginning in 315. Moreover, the emperor thought of himself as a ruler whose duty was to establish and promote a united church. As the first Christian Roman ruler, Constantine supported the growth of the church. In order to repay Christians for the years of persecutions by the Empire, he built new churches and had new copies of the Bible made. For the first time in its history, the church began to flourish as both a religious and a political institution.

In this time of relative peace, several new developments occurred in the church. First, the absence of persecution provided ample time for local bishops to begin debating the essentials of the Christian faith. Most notably, a number of debates about the person and nature of Christ took place. In earlier centuries, Christians did not have the leisure to argue about whether Jesus was fully divine or fully human or about how his two natures commingled, if they indeed did, with one another. In 325 a church council convened at Nicaea to attempt to settle this question, and offered some tentative answers that could be accepted by most churches in the East.

Such ecumenical councils led to a second development in early Christianity: the establishment of orthodoxy. In response to both internal and external pressures, these councils sought to develop belief-statements that would promote Christian self-definition. These creeds contained a number of doctrinal propositions to which believing Christians were required to assent as a proof of their right belief (orthodoxy). Those who could not assent to the creedal formulations were labeled “heretics,” and were ousted from the church and sometimes killed

because of their disagreement. Thus, the Christian community, which had fought so long against the persecution of the Empire, now began to persecute its own members for their unwillingness to agree with the doctrines the councils had established as the essentials that defined a Christian. For the outside world, the creeds functioned as documents of self-identification; for the church, the creeds defined orthodoxy.

Finally, as Christianity grew comfortable in its role as the official religion of the Roman Empire, many Christians became less and less comfortable with the church's too easy adopting of the culture. In the eyes of these believers, the church's new focus on establishing doctrinal correctness, along with its emphasis on creating a clerical hierarchy to monitor such orthodoxy, neglected the missionary impulse of the earliest Christian communities. Moreover, the passionate commitment of the martyrs to their faith was lost in the wrangling of the bishops and priests over fine philosophical points of theological doctrine. In addition, many Christians expressed deep dissatisfaction that the role of bishop, originally a religious office as set out in the New Testament, now involved obeisance to the Empire that had once persecuted Christians. Since the bishop now functioned as a political figure, many of his religious decisions favored the Empire rather than the church. This comfortable relationship with the emperor also meant that the church received financial support from the Empire, and the Christian church suddenly expanded into an institution whose too easy association with Rome corrupted it in the eyes of many of its congregants.

Many of these dissatisfied Christians began to flee the church in search of a purer form of Christianity untainted by collusion

with empire. Thinking that they could return to an earlier expression of Christianity, these individuals fled the church in order to live lives of solitude and prayer as they sought to recapture the passion of second-century Christians for their faith. Thus, monasticism, perhaps the greatest movement to come out of the fourth-century church, developed and flourished.

But the Eastern, eremitic monasticism of the later fourth century is not the cenobitic (community) monasticism familiar to so many Western Christians. To be sure, these early monks practiced various forms of asceticism, and they saw themselves as returning to Christianity the kind of pure expression of faith that they thought was missing in the fourth-century church. Yet, these monks formed no communities with rules of faith and life that governed their practice. They did not congregate in monasteries and meet to observe fixed hours of prayer. Nor did they participate in the transmission of biblical texts through copying them, as later monks did. Rather, these monks were individuals who fled to the caves in the Egyptian desert to seek ecstatic union with God. One scholar observes that this “ascetical theology was a theology dominated by the ideal of the martyr who hoped for nothing in this world but sought for union with God in his passion.”¹ These individuals usually renounced their material possessions and practiced a deep degree of self-sacrifice that recalled the spirit of Christians facing persecution in the earliest Christian communities. As with later monastic communities, the foundational elements of these monks’ lives were chastity, abstinence, and unceasing prayer.

By the end of the fourth century, thousands of these hermits had settled along the length of the Nile River, and nearly 5,000

had established themselves in the desert on the outskirts of Alexandria. While they formed no distinct group or movement, these individuals later came to be known as the desert fathers, even though women also practiced this eremitic lifestyle. So powerful was the wisdom and purity of these desert monks that Christians from urban congregations continually streamed to the monks' caves seeking sagacious words of advice. Visitors to the monks' cells, or prayer chambers, addressed them with this formula: "Speak to me a word, Father, that I may live." The monks' answers were gathered early on in the collection called *Paradise* or *Apothegms of the Fathers* or, in most modern editions, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Later generations of monks used these wise sayings and stories, which were sometimes directed to specific situations in a particular city, congregation, or monastic setting, as the basis for their own monastic life. For example, Basil of Caesarea and later Benedict of Nursia and John Cassian incorporated many of the teachings of the desert fathers into their monastic rules.

Several of the fathers became so famous for their wisdom and their acts that their contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, wrote biographies of these great hermits. Perhaps the most famous of the desert fathers was Antony of Egypt (251–356), who lived to be 105 years old. Not long after Antony's death, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote an account of Antony's life that soon became a model for all other early Christian biographies. Athanasius' book appears to have become an immediate bestseller and to have remained one up through the Middle Ages. In his *Confessions*, Augustine remarks on the power of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*: "They found there a book in which was written the life of

Antony. One of them began to read it. He was amazed and set on fire, and during his reading began to think of taking up this way of life and leaving his secular post in the civil service to be your servant.” Indeed, Antony’s conversion experience and his decision to become a monk bear remarkable similarities to Augustine’s later description of his own conversion, though Athanasius’ account is not nearly as theologically, or psychologically, freighted as is Augustine’s.

When he was eighteen, Antony’s parents died, leaving him all their property and wealth, as well as the responsibility of bringing up his younger sister. Not long after this event, he heard a preacher reading Matthew 19:21–22: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” He went immediately and sold all his possessions, giving the money to the poor, but keeping just what he and his sister needed to live a frugal life.

Antony soon heard another preacher reading Matthew 6:34: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Sorry that he had not obeyed God’s direction fully from the beginning, Antony situated his sister in a convent, gave up the rest of his belongings, and dedicated his life to God’s service. He then set out for the desert, where he ensconced himself in a series of caves and cells, moving farther and farther away from populated villages.

According to Athanasius’ biography, Antony’s days were filled with unceasing prayer and self-sacrifice. He found himself tormented by the harsh conditions of the desert, and he was often confronted with wild animals, which sometimes were

demons in disguise. In a mirror of Jesus' temptations during his forty days in the wilderness, Satan and his minions tempted Antony often and arduously. Satan and his demons disguised themselves as beautiful creatures and as terrifying animals to test Antony's faithfulness to God. These tempters also placed enticing material possessions in Antony's path in hopes that the monk would succumb to the greedy desire to possess such goods. Eventually, Satan left Antony alone because the monk's relationship to God was so strong that he could not be moved.

Although Antony preferred to remain in solitude, his fame nevertheless spread far and wide, so that even Constantine wrote him a letter seeking counsel. Pilgrims flooded to see this great man of God and to solicit his wisdom. In addition to his teachings on chastity and the ascetic life, Antony reminded those who sought his advice to love one another, to avoid gossip and lies, and to avoid heresies such as the Arian belief that Jesus is not of the same substance as God.

There has been some question as to whether or not Antony was the first desert hermit. Antony himself mentioned that he sought out an old man for advice about an eremitic vocation. Whether or not this man was Paul the Hermit (d. 342), Antony claimed that he had "seen Paul in paradise." St. Jerome, most famous for his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, wrote a brief biography of Paul in the fifth century. Many contend that Jerome's purpose was to show that Paul had really been the first desert hermit.

Whatever Jerome's purpose, we do have one more brief biography of a famous desert father. Like Antony, Paul left for the desert at a young age—in Paul's case, sixteen. The highlight

of Jerome's *Life of Paul* is the encounter between Antony and Paul, where the two embrace warmly and discuss briefly the eremitic life. In a story reminiscent of the Old Testament tale of Elijah and Elisha, at his death Paul passes his cloak to Antony much as Elijah passes along his mantle of prophecy to Elisha.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers contain the collected wisdom of these desert hermits. While none of them gained the fame or notoriety of Paul or Antony, each monk had his own followers who sought sagacious advice from him. Unfortunately, little is known about many of these figures, for no biographical material is recorded for most of them. One of the better known was John the Dwarf, who was born about 339. When John was eighteen, he traveled to Scetis to be trained by Father Ammos. In order to preserve his solitude, he dug himself an underground cave. Yet another well-known hermit was Evagrius, who spent ten years as a disciple of Macarius of Alexandria and was famous for his scholarship and rigorous asceticism. He produced two works on the ascetic life, *Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer*. Whether famous or not, each of the desert fathers passionately sought union with God and taught those who came to them the values of constant prayer, fasting, Scripture reading, and love.

What do the desert fathers have to say to us today? It's clear that most contemporary Christians cannot practice the severe asceticism of the desert fathers, nor do they desire to do so. Many cannot leave home and family to strike off into remote wilderness areas in order to seek ecstatic union with God. In fact, as monasticism developed, so did the divide between the professional contemplatives—that is, those called to the monastic vocation as a way of life—and those Christians who

remained a part of society and lived their vocations in the midst of the messiness of everyday life. While the former sometimes condemned the latter, and the latter often admired the former, the commitment to ascetic practices was transformed into daily rituals that could be woven into the fabric of daily life.

Thus, the desert fathers act as guides to the interior life. In their sayings and in their lives, they counsel humility, prayer, patience, and introspection. The desert fathers teach us that deep contemplative practice provides eternal wisdom for our daily lives.

A WORD ABOUT THE TEXT

Athanasius' *Life of Antony* can be found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). For Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes*, I have also used the translation available in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4. The Penguin edition of *Early Christian Lives* (1998), edited by Carolinne White, has proved enormously useful in providing background materials of these biographies. Henry Chadwick's *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967) remains a superb introduction to the period in which the desert fathers lived and worked. I have also used Helen Waddell's *The Desert Fathers* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), supplemented by Benedicta Ward's *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian, 1975). The selection of the sayings of the desert fathers in this Paraclete edition comprises a very small portion of the huge number of

sayings available. However, I have not included most of the longer apothegms, and I have left out stories and sayings that are specific to particular issues concerning the monastic life.

I have remained true to the spirit of the text even where I have mildly modernized it. I have replaced archaic words where necessary. Thus, for the word “cell,” which is simply a monk’s dwelling place but which today has other connotations, I have used “prayer chamber.” I have altered the syntax and sentence structure of the sayings and the biographies to make them livelier and more appealing to a contemporary audience. Most often this simply means casting sentences in the active rather than the passive voice.

I trust that the words of the desert fathers will speak to you today even as they spoke to Christians thousands of years ago.

—*Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.*

THE LIFE OF ANTONY OF EGYPT

by Athanasius

PREFACE

Athanasius addresses his life of Antony to monks in Europe:

You have entered into an admirable contest by seeking to equal or outdo the monks of Egypt in striving for moral perfection through strict self-discipline. May God fulfill this desire for you.

You asked me to write about Antony's life. You want to know about his early life, and what his life was like before he dedicated himself to God. You want to know also about the end of Antony's life and whether or not the legends you've heard about him are true, so that you may imitate him. I write this biography joyously, since Antony shows us the perfect path to virtue. The memory of Antony's life and work enriches me and encourages you to follow his example.

You should believe everything you hear about Antony. He performed extraordinary works, and you have until now only heard about the least remarkable ones. For even I do not know everything about him, and I will not be able to tell you accurately everything about his exceptional character. If you want to know more of Antony's merits, you must ask questions of those you meet from Egypt, for they will tell you all they know about him

and provide a full account of Antony's remarkable life. But since you may not have the chance to talk with these people, I have written down for you those things I know myself—for I visited him often—and those I learned from a person who spent a good deal of time with him. I hope that from my account you will learn the truth about Antony. If I tell you too many things, you might be skeptical of his miracles. I also do not want you to hear any words that are not justified by Antony's merits, for I don't want you to think of this man as incapable of performing a miracle despite his great reputation.

~ LIFE OF ANTONY ~

- 1 **A**ntony, then, came from Egypt; he was the son of well-born and devout parents. He was brought up so carefully by his family that he knew nothing apart from his parents and his home. While he was still a boy, he refused to learn to read and write or to join in the silly games of the other little children. Instead, he burned with a desire for God and lived a life of simplicity at home, as the Bible says of Jacob. He also often went with his parents to church but did not fool around as little children tend to, nor did he show a lack of respect as young boys often do. He concentrated on what was being read and put the useful precepts into practice in his way of life. He was never a nuisance to his family, as children usually are because of their desire for a variety of dainty foods. He did not long for the pleasures of more delicate food; he was content with just what he was given and asked for nothing more.
- 2 When he and his little sister were left completely on their own after their parents died (Antony was around eighteen years old), he took good care of his house and his sister. Before six months had passed, though, he was on his way to church one day when he thought about how the apostles had rejected everything to follow the Savior. He thought about how the early Christians had sold their possessions and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet to distribute to the needy. What great hope was stored up for those people in heaven! As he

was thinking about these things, Antony entered the church. As he went into the church, he heard this Gospel being read: *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me* (Matthew 19:21).

When he heard this, Antony applied the Lord's commandment to himself, believing that because of divine inspiration he had first remembered the incident and that this Scripture was being read aloud for his sake. He immediately went home and sold the possessions he owned. He possessed 300 fertile acres that he shared among his neighbors to prevent anyone from bearing a grudge against him or his sister. All the rest of his possessions, which were movable goods, he sold. The great profit he made from the sale of these goods he gave to the poor. He kept a little for his sister's sake, because she seemed more vulnerable on account of her youth.

- 3 On another occasion when Antony had gone to church and heard the Lord saying in the Gospel: *Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own* (Matthew 6:34), he shared all the rest of his wealth with the poor. He was not content to stay at home, but he left his sister to be brought up by some faithful and good women. Now free from all worldly ties, he entered into a harsh and severe life. There were not yet many monasteries in Egypt at the time, and there was no one who was familiar with the remote desert. People who wanted to serve Christ settled at a distance from their own villages. On a neighboring estate there was an old man who had lived a solitary life since his youth. When Antony saw this old man, Antony wanted

more than anything to imitate the man's goodness. When he started out, Antony lived in places that were not too far from his home. Later, though, whenever he heard about someone who was engaged in this disciplined life, Antony would go out and search for him. He would not return home until he had seen the person he longed to see. After he began in this way, his resolve grew stronger every day until he reached the point where he no longer thought of his family wealth or of his relatives. He focused his desire and his attention on the task he had undertaken, and worked with his hands. For he knew that the Bible teaches that anyone unwilling to work should not eat. Apart from what he needed for bread, the money he earned he gave to the poor. He prayed often, for he had learned that he should pray to the Lord constantly. He also listened intently to the Scriptures so that none of its lessons would be lost on him. He preserved all the Lord's commandments in his memory.

✧ He led his life in such a way that all the brothers loved him with a pure love. He obeyed everyone whom he visited. Eager to learn, he assimilated their various individual gifts. He imitated the self-restraint of one, the cheerfulness of another. He emulated the gentleness of one, the nocturnal devotions of another, and the dedication in reading of yet another. He admired one who fasted and another who slept on the bare ground, praising the endurance of the former and the compassion of the latter. He kept in mind the love they all showed one another, and he returned to his own place refreshed by every aspect of their virtues. There he would ponder all he had learned and try to imitate the good points of each one.

He was never provoked to anger. The only fire that burned in his heart was his determination to excel in the deeds just mentioned. He did this in such a way that he was dear to them all, even though he surpassed them in glory. When his neighbors and those monks whom he visited often saw him, they called him God's friend. Some loved him as a son; others loved him as a brother.

- 5 While Antony was busy with doing all these things that caused so many to love him, the devil, who could not bear to see a young man with such outstanding virtues, began to attack him. First, he tried to drag Antony away from the life to which he had committed himself. He made Antony remember his wealth, his sister's protection, and his family's social status. The devil tried to stimulate in Antony a desire for material things, the short-lived honors of this world, the pleasures of different kinds of food, and many other attractions that belong to an indulgent life. He reminded Antony of the great difficulty in obtaining the life of virtue. He also reminded him of the body's weakness. He created great confusion in Antony's thoughts, hoping to call him back from his intentions. But when, as result of Antony's prayers to God, the devil realized that he had been driven out by Antony's faith in Christ's sufferings, he seized the weapons with which he normally attacks all young people, using seductive dreams to disturb Antony. First he tried to unsettle him at night by means of hostile hordes and terrifying sounds, and then he attacked him by day with weapons that were so obviously his that no one could doubt that Antony was fighting against the devil. For the devil tried to implant dirty thoughts, but Antony pushed

them away by means of constant prayer. The devil tried to titillate his senses by means of natural carnal desires, but Antony defended his whole body by faith, by praying at night, and by fasting. At night the devil would turn himself into the attractive form of a beautiful woman, omitting no detail that might provoke lascivious thoughts, but Antony called to mind the fiery punishment of hell. In this way he resisted the onslaught of lust. The devil without hesitation set before him the slippery path of youth that leads to disaster, but Antony concentrated on the everlasting torments of future judgment and kept his soul's purity untainted throughout these temptations. All these things confounded the devil. A young man was now tricking this evil creature who thought he could become God's equal, as if the devil himself were a wretched creature. A man made of flesh defeated the devil, who tries to defeat flesh and blood. The Lord, who became flesh for our sake and thus granted the body victory over the devil, was helping Antony.

6 At last the devil found he was unable to destroy Antony and that Antony's thoughts were always driving him back. So, crying and gnashing his teeth, he appeared to Antony in a form appropriate to his nature. An ugly dark boy threw himself down at Antony's feet, weeping loudly and saying in a human voice, "I have led many astray, and I have deceived many, but you have defeated my efforts, just as other holy people have done." When Antony asked him who was saying this, the devil replied, "I am the friend of sin. I have used many different kinds of shameful weapons to attack young people, and that is why I am called the spirit of sinfulness. How many of those who were determined to live chastely have I tricked!

How many times have I persuaded those starting out hesitantly to return to their former foul ways. I am the one who caused the prophet to reproach the fallen, saying, *The spirit of sinfulness has led you astray* (cf. Hosea 4:12), and I am the one who made them fall. I am the one who has often tempted you, and always you have driven me away.” When the soldier of Christ heard this, he gave thanks to God and, strengthened by greater confidence in the face of the enemy, he said, “You are utterly despicable and contemptible; your blackness and your age are signs of weakness. You do not worry me any longer. *The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me*” (Psalm 118:7). At the sound of Antony’s singing, the apparition immediately vanished.

- 7 This was Antony’s first victory over the devil. It was the first sign of the Savior’s power in Antony. The Savior *condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit* (Romans 8:4). But this triumph did give Antony a sense of security. The devil’s powers did not fail completely. The devil, like a roaring lion, was always watching for some way to pounce on Antony. Knowing from the Bible that the devil’s wiles are numerous, Antony kept his commitment firm by skillful effort. Antony realized that although Satan had been defeated in the struggles of the flesh, he could use new strategies and more deadly weapons against him. Thus Antony disciplined his body more and more, afraid that he, who had won some contests, might lose others. He thus began to live a more rigorous rule of life. Even though everyone was amazed at this young man’s tireless dedication, Antony endured his

discipline patiently because he knew that voluntary servitude to God would transform habit into nature.

- 8 Antony so endured hunger and sleeplessness that his powers were considered astonishing. He very often spent the entire night in prayer and ate only once a day, after sunset. Sometimes he continued fasting for two or three days at a time and only ate and drank on the fourth day. He ate bread and salt, and drank a little water. I think it is better not to say anything about his consumption of meat and wine, for most monks do not consume either one. When he did allow himself to rest, he used a woven rush mat covered with goats' hair. Sometimes he would simply lie on the bare ground, and he refused to anoint his body with oil. For he used to say that it is hardly possible that the bodies of those who use such things, and especially young men's bodies, should grow strong if they are softened by smooth oil. Instead they ought to use rigorous exercises to control the flesh, as the Apostle Paul said: *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Corinthians 12:10). Antony also stated that wearing down the body's energies in this way could revive a person's mental powers. That is the reason he did not measure the value of his tasks by the length of time spent, but with the love and willing servitude characteristic of a novice. He continued to maintain his desire to progress in the fear of God. Wanting to add new achievements to the old ones, he kept in mind Paul's words: *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 3:13). He remembered

also what Elijah said: *As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today* (1 Kings 18:15). Antony explained that “today” did not mean just past time but that every day he was entering battle, and he wanted to prove himself worthy in God’s sight, pure of heart, and ready to obey God’s will.

- 9 Then the holy Antony, bearing in mind that a servant of God should organize his life based on the life of the great Elijah, moved away to some tombs not far from his own village. He asked one of his friends to bring him food at regular intervals. When this brother had shut him up in one of the tombs, Antony remained there alone. But the devil was afraid that the desert might become inhabited because of Antony, so he gathered his followers and tortured Antony by beating him all over. The intensity of the pain deprived Antony of his ability to move and speak. At a later time he would tell how his injuries had been so serious that they were worse than all the tortures devised by other men. However, God’s providence saved him. The next day the brother arrived with food as usual and found the tomb’s door smashed down and Antony lying half-dead on the ground. He lifted him on his shoulders and carried him back to his house in the village. When people heard about this, many neighbors and relatives came running and in their grief performed the funeral rites for Antony. When the night was half over, a deep weariness overcame those keeping watch. Then Antony, his spirit gradually returning, drew a deep breath and lifted his head. When he saw that the man who had brought him there was awake while all the others were lying fast asleep, he beckoned to the man

and begged him to carry him back, without waking anyone at all, to the place where he had been living.

10 So Antony was carried back to his tomb, and stayed there alone as he had before. Since he could not stand up because of his recent beatings, he prayed lying down. After praying, Antony would say in a loud voice, “Look, here I am. I don’t run away from fighting with you. Even if you bring me more difficulties, you cannot separate me from Christ’s love.” And he would then chant these words: *Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear* (Psalm 27:3). When he heard this, the devil was amazed that Antony had dared to come back. The devil was furious. Gathering his dogs together, he said to them, “See how Antony is overcome neither by the spirit of sinfulness nor by physical pain. To top it all off, he is disrespectful in his challenges to us. Take up all your weapons; we must attack with greater force. Let him feel, let him feel; he must understand who it is that he is provoking.” When the devil spoke, all those listening to him agreed with him, for the devil has immeasurable ways of doing harm. Then there was a sudden noise that caused the place to shake violently. Holes appeared in the wall, and a swarm of different kinds of demons poured out. They took on the shape of wild animals and snakes, and instantly they filled the whole place with apparitions in the form of lions, bulls, wolves, vipers, serpents, scorpions, leopards, and bears. They each made noises according to their individual natures: The lion roared, eager for the kill; the bull bellowed and made menacing movements with his horns; the serpent hissed; the wolves leaped forward to attack; the spotted leopard showed

all the different wiles of the one that controlled him. Each of their faces bore a savage expression, and the sound of their voices was terrifying. Mauled and beaten, Antony experienced even more atrocious pains in his body; but he remained unafraid, and his mind was alert. Although the wounds of his flesh made him groan, he maintained the same attitude and spoke as if mocking his enemies: “If you had any power, one of you would be enough for the fight; but since the Lord has robbed you of your strength, you are broken and so you attempt to use large numbers to terrify me. The proof of your weakness is that you have taken on the shapes of unreasoning beasts.” He continued to speak with confidence: “If you truly have any influence, if the Lord has granted you any power over me, here I am: Eat me up. But if you cannot, why do you use up so much energy? For the sign of the cross and faith in the Lord is for us a wall that no assault of yours can break down.” Although they made numerous threats against the holy Antony, they did not succeed. They made fools of themselves, not of Antony.

- 22 Jesus did not fail to notice his servant’s struggle. He came to protect Antony. When Antony raised his eyes, he saw the roof opening above him. As the darkness dissipated, a ray of light poured in on him. As soon as this bright light appeared, all the demons vanished, and the pain in Antony’s body suddenly stopped. The building that had been destroyed was restored. Antony immediately understood that the Lord was present. Sighing deeply from the bottom of his heart, he spoke to the light that had appeared to him: “Where were you, good Jesus? Where were you? Why weren’t you here from the beginning

to heal my wounds?” And a voice came to him: “Antony, I was here, but I was waiting to watch your struggle. But now, since you have bravely held your own in this fight, I will always help you and I will make you famous throughout the world.” When he heard this, Antony stood up and prayed; he felt so greatly strengthened that he realized he had received more strength now than he had before he lost it. Antony was thirty-five years old when this happened.

22 Later, as his willing commitment caused him to grow in spiritual goodness, he went to the old man I mentioned earlier and begged that they should live together in the desert. When the old man refused, giving as his excuse his old age and the novelty of the plan, Antony went forth to the mountain alone, having lost all fear of that way of life, and attempted to open up a path to the desert that had before now been unknown to the monks. However, not even there did his tireless adversary give up. Determined to obstruct Antony’s commitment to this way of life, the devil threw down a silver plate in his path. When Antony saw it, he recognized the cunning of that ingenious trickster. He stood still and fearless, and, looking at the plate grimly, he rebuked the one trying to trick him with the illusion of silver. He said to himself, “Why is this plate here in the desert? This track is remote and there are no traces of any travelers. If it had fallen out of someone’s luggage, it could hardly have lain unnoticed, for it is too large. If the person who lost it came back, he would certainly have found what had fallen out because this place is so empty. This is a product of your cunning, you devil, but you will not hinder my intention. May your silver plate go to hell with you.”

As soon as Antony said this, the plate disappeared like smoke from the face of the fire.

23 Next Antony saw a piece of real gold lying in his path. It is not clear whether the devil put it there to deceive him, or whether God revealed it to prove that Antony could not be seduced even by real riches. Antony marveled at the size of this piece of shining metal and quickly ran all the way to the mountain, as if he were escaping from a fire. After crossing the river, he found a deserted fort full of venomous animals. He settled in the fort as its new tenant. Immediately on his arrival, a huge number of snakes fled as if they had been chased out. Antony then blocked up the entrance with stones and stayed there all alone, storing up enough bread for six months as well as a small supply of water. He did not go out to receive any visitors. Even when he took his bread supply through the roof twice a year, he did not talk with those who brought it to him.

24 When crowds of people spent the night outside his door so they could question him, they heard noisy voices as if a number of people were saying to Antony, “Why have you moved into our home? What have you got to do with the desert? Leave other people’s property alone. You cannot live here; you cannot endure our attacks.” At first those outside thought some people had entered the walls and were quarreling with Antony. But when they looked in through the gaps, they saw no one and realized demons were fighting Antony. They were terribly frightened and called to Antony for help. He came to the door to comfort the brothers; he begged them not to be afraid and asked them to go away. He assured them that their

fear was caused by the demons. “Make the sign of the cross,” he said, “and leave without fear. Leave these demons to mock themselves.” So the people returned to their homes while Antony remained there unharmed, never tiring in his struggle. For he increased in his commitment, and the weakness of his opponents accorded him the greatest relief in his fight and made him steadfast of mind. When crowds of people came to the desert again, they expected to find him dead. But he sang from within, *Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God* (Psalm 68:1–2). He also sang, *All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!* (Psalm 118:10).

25 Antony spent twenty years in the desert in this way, staying out of humankind’s sight. Many came to see him in their desire to imitate his commitment to his way of life. A number of people who were suffering also gathered outside his door. When they at last managed to tear down the doors by force, Antony appeared to them with an aura of holiness as if he had emerged from some divine sanctuary. Everyone was stunned at the beauty of his expression and the dignified bearing of his body, which had not grown weak through lack of exercise. His face had not grown pale as the result of fasting and fighting with demons. To the contrary, his body looked as if no time had passed. What a great miracle. What purity of mind he had. Never did excessive frivolity cause him to burst out laughing; never did the thought of past sins make him frown, nor did the high praise bestowed on him by his admirers make

him conceited. The solitude had in no way made him uncivilized, and the daily battles with his enemies had not brutalized him. His mind was calm, and he maintained a well-balanced attitude in all situations. Then the grace of God, through Antony, freed many people from unclean spirits and from various illnesses. His speech brought comfort to those who were grieving, instructed the ignorant, reconciled those who were angry, and persuaded everyone that nothing should be valued higher than Christ's love. He set before their eyes the great number of future rewards as well as the mercy of God, and he made known the benefits granted because God did not spare His own Son but had given him for the salvation of us all. His words had the immediate effect of persuading many of those who heard him to reject human things. This was the beginning of the colonization of the desert.

16 I should also mention what happened in the region of Arsinoe. Antony planned to visit the brothers there. He had to swim across the Nile River, which was full of crocodiles and other dangerous animals. He and his companions crossed the river without harm and returned safely, too. After that he continued steadfastly in his ascetic efforts, and he inspired many of the brothers by his teaching. In a short time a large number of monastic prayer chambers came into existence. He guided these monks with a fatherly affection.

17 One day, when the brothers who had gathered there were asking the holy Antony to provide some guidelines for their way of life, he raised his voice with a prophet's confidence and said that the Scriptures were sufficient for all teaching of the rule. He taught also that it would be an excellent idea for the

brothers to support each other with mutual encouragement. “And so,” he said, “you should tell me, as if I were your father, what you have learned, and I will reveal to you, as if you were my sons, what I have discovered as a result of my great age. But let this be the first rule, shared by all of you, that no one should weaken in the firmness of his commitment to the way of life he has chosen. He should strive always to increase his commitment to this undertaking as if he were just starting out, especially because human life, compared to eternity, is very short.” After beginning in this way, Antony was silent for a while. Marveling at God’s great generosity, he then added, “In this present life, things of equal value are exchanged: The seller does not receive more from the buyer. But the promise of eternal life is brought at a low price. As it is written: *The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away* (Psalm 90:10). If we have lived in God’s work for eighty or a hundred years, working hard, we will not reign for the same amount of time in the future. Instead, in exchange for the years I mentioned, we shall be granted a reign lasting throughout all ages. It is not earth that we will inherit, but heaven. We shall leave this corrupt body and we shall receive it incorrupt.

18 “And so, my children, do not let yourselves grow weary. Do not be seduced by pride in your achievement. *For the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us* (Romans 8:18). No one, once he has rejected this world, should think he has left behind anything important. The entire earth, compared to the infinity of the

heavens, is small and limited. Even if we renounce the whole world, we cannot give anything in exchange that is of similar value to the heavenly dwellings. If each person considers this, he will immediately realize that if he abandons a few acres of land or a small house or a moderate sum of gold, he ought not to feel proud of himself in the belief that he has given up a lot. Nor should he become despondent, thinking that he will receive only a little in return. For just as someone considers one dollar of no value in comparison with winning one hundred dollars, so, too, anyone who renounces possession of the entire world will receive in heaven a hundred times as much in more valuable rewards. In short, we must realize that even if we want to retain our riches, we will be torn away from them against our will by the law of death, as it says in Ecclesiastes. Why then do we not make a virtue of necessity? Why do we not voluntarily abandon what must be destroyed when this light comes to an end, so that we might gain the kingdom of heaven? Let Christians care for nothing that they cannot take away with them. We ought rather to seek after that which will lead us to heaven, namely wisdom, chastity, justice, virtue, an ever-watchful mind, care of the poor, firm faith in Christ, a mind that can control anger, and hospitality. Striving after these things, we shall prepare for ourselves a dwelling in the land of the peaceful, as it says in the Gospel.

- 29 “Let us bear in mind that we are servants of the Lord and that we owe a service to him who created us. For a servant does not reject present or future authority on account of past service, and does not dare to claim that because of his past he ought

to be released from the task at hand. Instead, he continues to perform the same service with unbroken commitment so as to please his master and so that his wages will not be fear and beatings. In the same way it is right for us to obey the divine commandments, knowing that he who is a just judge will judge each person where he finds him, as the prophet Ezekiel testifies. Even the wretched Judas, because of one night's sins, lost out on the rewards for all his past achievement.

20 “We must therefore be steadily committed to this way of life with God as our helper, for it is written: *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God* (Romans 8:28). Let us reflect on the Apostle's claim that he dies each day, so that we can avoid idleness. If we bear in mind the unpredictability of our human condition, we will not sin. For when we wake from sleep, we are unsure whether we will reach evening, and when we lie down to rest at night, we should not be confident that daylight will return. We should be aware always of the uncertainty of our life and know that we are governed by God's providence. Not only will we not go astray nor be swept away by some flimsy desire, but neither will we be angry with anyone nor strive to accumulate earthly treasures. Instead, fearing death each day and always thinking about our separation from the body, we will trample upon all that is transitory. The desire for women will disappear, the fire of lust will be extinguished, and we will pay our debts to each other, always holding before our eyes the coming of the final retribution. For a powerful fear of judgment and a terrible dread of punishment destroy the incentives of the lustful flesh and support the soul as it slips off the cliff's edge.

27 “I pray then that we should use every effort to press on toward this life’s goal. Let no one look behind him as did Lot’s wife, especially since the Lord has said that no one who puts his hand upon the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven. To look back means to have second thoughts about your undertaking and to become entangled once more in worldly desires. Do not fear the word ‘virtue’ as if it were unattainable. Do not think that such an endeavor, which depends on our will, is alien to you or something remote. Man has a natural inclination to this kind of effort, and it is something that awaits only our willingness. Let the Greeks pursue their studies across the seas and go in search of teachers of useless literature in foreign lands. We, however, feel no compulsion to travel across the waves, for the kingdom of heaven is to be found everywhere on earth. That is why the Lord says in the Gospel: *The kingdom of God is among you* (Luke 17:21). The virtue that is within us requires only the human will. For who can doubt that the natural purity of the soul, were it not tainted by filth, would be the source of all virtues? A good Creator must necessarily have made the soul good. If we hesitate, we should hear the words of Joshua, who said, *Incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel* (Joshua 24:33). And John expresses a similar idea about virtue when he says, *Make his paths straight* (Matthew 3:3). For to have a straight soul means that the blemish of any vices does not stain its original soundness. If it changes its nature, then it is said to have gone astray, but if it preserves its good nature, then that is virtue. The Lord has entrusted our soul to us: Let us keep what has been entrusted to us in

the same state as it was in when we received it. No one can put forward as an excuse that what is born in him is external to him. Let him who made us recognize his own creation, and let him find his own work as he created it. Our natural adornment is enough for us: You who are human must not disfigure what divine generosity has granted you. To wish to alter the works of God is to desecrate them.

- 22 “We ought to be careful to ensure that we control the tyrannical passion of anger, since it says in the Bible, *Your anger does not produce God’s righteousness* (James 1:20), and *Desire gives birth to sin, and that sin, when fully grown, gives birth to death* (James 1:15). The divine voice has recommended that we should protect our soul with unceasing vigilance and lead it toward perfection with all care and effort, because we have enemies who are trained to trip us up. These are the demons whom we must fight without a truce, according to the testimony of the Apostle who says: *For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). Huge numbers of them are flying through the air here; the enemy troops are rushing all around us. I am not able to describe their diversity, so I shall leave this task to those who are more competent than I. I shall give a brief account, though, of the things one should be aware of, specifically the tricks the demons have devised against us.
- 23 “First of all, we should hold firm in our minds the fact that God has made nothing that is evil and that the demons did not derive their origin from any arrangement on his part.