

**⇒ BY WAY OF THE DESERT**



365 DAILY READINGS



# BY WAY OF THE DESERT

COMPILED AND MODERNIZED BY

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THE FERTILE CRESCENT is never far from desert wilderness, and the biblical story unfolds among a people familiar with dry sand and hot sun. Throughout the Bible, great spiritual decisions resulted from encounters with God in this silent wilderness.

It was in the desert that Jesus began his public ministry with forty days of retreat. After his baptism by desert-dwelling John, Jesus wisely sought uninterrupted time alone with his heavenly Father. Subjected to powerful temptations, Jesus emerged from his wilderness experience not only with a clear understanding of his assignment, but also with the strength to accomplish it.

Other people of the desert include Elijah, who discovered that God spoke not in the noisy earthquake, wind, and fire, but with “a still, small voice,” a voice he detected as he was in the desert hiding from Jezebel.

The experience of those ammas, abbas, monks, nuns, and solitaries who left the world in order to seek God quietly continues a grand biblical precedent. Not only John the Baptist and Elijah, but David also escaped to the desert, avoiding the wrath of King Saul. There can be little doubt that he conceived the substance of many of his psalms in that lonely place.

Nations as well as individuals sought the clarity of the desert. Here, in this arid land, the Israelites wandered with Moses for the span of an entire generation looking to God to lead them. The experience transformed them spiritually.

Abraham, the father of the wandering nation, as we observe near the beginning of the biblical drama, lived his own nomadic life in the desert until God had prepared him for his destiny.

The desert, then, is a place where one's relationship with God may become vivid and inspiring. This severe landscape beckoned alluringly to Christian men and women during the declining years of the Roman Empire. By the fourth century, thousands of Christians lived in the desert areas spanning hundreds of miles on both

sides of the Nile, from Egypt to Syria. We may never fully understand what forces motivated them to seek an ascetic life. Yet from their comments, we conclude they sought a purer spirituality than they could find among the distractions of ordinary life. Placing ultimate trust in God, they took extraordinary risks to live in areas wild and barren of resources.

In the book *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, we read about a place in Egypt called Cellia, because of the many hermit cells that were scattered about the desert there. “Those who have already begun their training in Nitria and want to live a more remote life, stripped of external things, withdraw there. For this is the utter desert and the cells are divided from one another by so great a distance that no one can see his neighbor, nor can any voice be heard.” Living alone in their cells, the hermits experienced “a huge silence and a great quiet.” Only on weekends would these reclusive monastics see each other, in order to receive Holy Communion and worship at church with others in their spiritual community. A fascinating article with photographs may be found on the Internet at [www.toureypt.net/featurestories/kellia.htm](http://www.toureypt.net/featurestories/kellia.htm).

These Christian hermits and monks came from regular occupations in common life. Many were illiterate, and few had any religious training. The more experienced of them attracted followers seeking spiritual direction. Their followers addressed them as “abba” (father), “amma” (mother), and sometimes simply as “old man” or “old woman.” These were not official titles, but designations of high regard. A few among these hermits became famous and, to their own dismay, drew many visitors from far away. St. Antony’s cave remains a popular tourist destination, as is the monastery of St. Catherine’s at Mount Sinai.

Living in a desert freed a person to ponder basic spiritual issues with extended prayer and meditation. While survival required time and attention, there were many quiet, unmolested hours. Monks, nuns, and solitaries explored their personal inner space. It is their recorded insights (some of which are gathered in this collection) that began our rich heritage of Christian mysticism. Centuries later, Meister Eckhart and many others received spiritual direction from these early seekers.

The original texts of these desert writings are in Coptic, Greek, and Syriac. Most of the remarks and anecdotes

began as oral tradition and evolved over time into a mixture of legend, quote, and sources unknown that makes a scholar's work difficult. Many sayings remain anonymous, while others may be attributed to several speakers. By medieval times, a Latin translation, *Verba Seniorum*, became the accepted authoritative collection of much of this material.

The selections included in this daily devotional guide represent a wide sampling of the literature associated with the desert fathers and mothers. Within this collection is also a sprinkling of sayings and writings from a few other contemplatives of their time. All have been freshly paraphrased for modern readers. Perhaps, as you read, you will find yourself in contemplation for brief periods in your own personal "desert." Know, then, that you are in the company of men and women for whom the life of the Spirit was the only goal.

Spiritual seekers and disciples of these abbas and ammas often asked for "a word." These short sayings were offered for the listener to reflect upon for long periods of time, until this word of wisdom became an indwelling source of spiritual truth for the seeker.

In order to aid you, the reader, in keeping the essence of the “word” or desert saying in your heart throughout the day, a small portion of the saying or a portion of Scripture upon which it is founded is provided at the end of each daily reading. For the reader who wishes to keep the short phrase in mind, this focus point aids both in remembering the longer “word” throughout the day, and in forming a refrain for meditation, the way various psalms repeat short lines. An example occurs in Psalm 136, where the responsive refrain to every line is “for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Here, then, is wisdom from the desert. May the desert offer up spiritual riches for your journey.

**⇒ BY WAY OF THE DESERT**



I \* J \* A \* N \* U \* A \* R \* Y

*Some judge one day to be better than another,  
while others judge all days to be alike.*

*Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.*

*Those who observe the day,  
observe it in honor of the Lord.*

ROMANS 14:5-6

**A**BBA ARSENIUS began to prepare for the glory of Sunday on Saturday evenings. He turned his back to the sun and stretched his hands toward heaven in prayer. He continued this posture all night, until the light of the rising sun struck his face. Then he sat down.

**Observe the day in honor of the Lord.**

## 2 JANUARY

*Our beloved brother Paul  
wrote to you according to the  
wisdom given him, speaking  
of this as he does in all his  
letters. There are some things  
in them hard to understand.*

2 PETER 3:15-16

ANTHONY tested a group that came to visit him by quoting a verse of Scripture. Beginning with the youngest, he asked each for an interpretation. They responded as well as they could, but Antony told them he did not think they understood the verse.

Finally, he turned to Abba Joseph. “How would you explain these words?” Joseph replied, “I do not know.”

Antony was elated. “Abba Joseph has found the way, because he admitted he did not know.”

**Abba Joseph found the way,  
because he admitted he did not know.**

### 3 JANUARY

*For where your treasure is,  
there your heart will be also.*

MATTHEW 6:21

**A**MMMA SYNCLETICA said, “We should always be discreet, remaining a part of the community rather than following our own desires. We are exiles from the world. We devote ourselves to faith in God. We have no need of the things we have abandoned. In the world, we had status and a wide variety of food. Here we have a little to eat and not much of anything else.”

**For where your treasure is,  
there your heart will be also.**

4 JANUARY

*The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion  
is over all that he has  
made.*

PSALM 145:9



**A**BBA ZENO did not accept any gifts. This hurt the feelings of those who brought him things. Others approached Zeno with a desire for a souvenir of their visit with the old man. Since he had nothing to give them, they also went away disappointed. “What shall I do?” he asked. “The ones who bring things are as troubled as the ones who seek something. I know what I will do. I will accept all gifts and pass these things on to anyone who asks.” After adopting this policy, Zeno experienced peace and was able to satisfy all his visitors.

**The Lord’s compassion  
is over all that he has made.**

## 5 JANUARY

*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the LORD will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*

*Therefore confess your sins to one another,  
and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*

*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

JAMES 5:15-16

**A**MMATHA THEODORA taught, “Living in peace is good. Wise people practice continual prayer. Be aware that evil will arrive to burden your soul the moment you determine to live in peace. It will pollute your thoughts and ravage your body with sickness. Evil will weaken both soul and body until you think you cannot pray any more. If we are careful, we can overcome these temptations.

“I know an ascetic who had chills, fevers, and headaches as soon as prayers began. She reasoned, ‘I am sick. I am going to die. I will pray before I die.’ With this kind of personal motivation, she conquered her sickness and negative thoughts.”

**Wise people practice continual prayer.**

6 JANUARY

*You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive  
me with honor. Whom have I  
in heaven but you? And there  
is nothing on earth that I desire  
other than you. My flesh and my heart  
may fail, but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.*

PSALM 73:24-26

**A**BROTHER asked Euprepus, “How does the fear of God live in the soul?” The old man replied, “If you have humility, live in poverty, and do not pass judgment on others, the fear of God will come to you.”

**God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.**

7 JANUARY

*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*

*And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the*

*Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

GALATIANS 2:20

**W**HEN SOMEONE asked Abba Antony what activity would please God, he answered, “Follow my instructions. Keep God in your thoughts at all times. Conduct your life after the pattern taught in Holy Scripture. Remain in one location rather than constantly traveling around.”

**I live by faith in the Son of God.**

## 8 JANUARY

*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*

LUKE 10:41-42

**E**VAGRIUS spoke intelligently at a meeting. The priest commented, “Abba, if you lived at home, you would probably be a leading bishop, but you sit out here in obscurity.” This filled Evagrius with Godly sorrow, but did not disturb his peace. Bowing slightly, he quoted Job: “I did speak once or twice, but never again.”

**There is need of only one thing.**

9 JANUARY \* \* \* \* \*

*Beloved,  
never avenge yourselves,  
but leave room for the wrath of  
God; for it is written, "Vengeance  
is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

ROMANS 12:19

**A** BROTHER who had been hurt by another brother visited Sisois of Thebes. He reported his injury and commented that he wanted to get even. The hermit advised him to leave all matters of vengeance in God's hands. The brother refused to drop the matter. "I can't rest until I get even."

Sisois then invited the offended brother to join him in prayer. The hermit stood and prayed, "O God, we don't need you anymore. We can take vengeance ourselves." The brother fell repentantly to the hermit's feet. "I will not continue quarrelling with my brother. Please forgive me."

**Beloved, never avenge yourselves.**



I I J A N U A R Y

*Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.*

PSALM 115:1

**J**OSEPH OF THEBES said, “God recognizes three honorable things. The first is when someone who is weak accepts temptations with gratitude. The second is behavior that is pure and unadulterated with human motive. The third is when a disciple obeys a spiritual father, surrendering all self-will.”

**Not to us, O Lord, but to your name give glory.**

I 2 \* J A N U A R Y

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

*Sorrow is better than laughter,  
for by sadness of countenance  
the heart is made glad.*

ECCLESIASTES 7:3

**A**MMMA SYNCLETICA said, “There are two kinds of sorrow. One is helpful; the other harmful. Sorrow is helpful when we weep for our sins, and for the ignorance of others. This sorrow will not allow us to become complacent, but instead prods us on toward true goodness. Our spiritual enemy sends sorrow that produces lethargy. This is harmful sorrow, and we need to drive it away with prayers and psalms.”

**There are two kinds of sorrow.  
One is helpful; the other harmful.**

### I 3 JANUARY

*God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,  
to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,  
because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie  
and worshiped and served the creature  
rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!*

ROMANS 1:24-25

**A**BBA ISAIAH explained that when God takes pity on a rebellious soul, he allows it to experience self-induced suffering, prompting the soul to turn to him again.

**God prompts the rebellious  
soul to turn to him again.**

## I 4 J A N U A R Y

*God's kingdom isn't something you can see.*

*There is no use saying,*

*"Look! Here it is" or "Look! There it is."*

*God's kingdom is here with you.*

LUKE 17:20-21 CEV

**A**BBA ANTONY said, "Become familiar with virtue. It is not something that is far from us; neither is it outside us. We have the capacity for virtue and we can have it if we desire it. The Greeks sail across seas to expand their knowledge, but there is no necessity for us to travel for the kingdom of God. We do not need to cross an ocean to find virtue. Our Lord told us the kingdom of God is within us. We possess everything we need to become virtuous."

**The kingdom of God is within us.**



16 JANUARY

*Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,  
and a tongue rested on each of them  
[when the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost].*

ACTS 2:3

**A**BBA LOT visited Abba Joseph and summarized his religious life this way: “Abba, I recite the liturgy the best I can, sometimes I fast, I pray and meditate, I try to live peacefully with others, and I attempt to cleanse my thoughts. What more can I do?”

The old man Joseph stood up, stretching his hands toward heaven. His fingers seemed to be ten lamps of fire. He said to Lot, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

**If you will, you can become all flame.**

17 JANUARY



*Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

PSALM 51:9-12

**A**BBA ELIAS asked, “What can sin accomplish when there is penitence? How can love function when there is pride?”

**Create in me a clean heart, O God.**

I 8 JANUARY

*Love your enemies, do good, and lend,  
\* expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great  
\* and you will be children of the Most High;  
\* for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.  
\* Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.  
\* LUKE 6:35-36  
\*  
\* \* \* \* \**

**A** BBA ZENO said, “If you want God to hear your prayer quickly, then before you pray for anything else, even your own soul, when you stand and stretch out your hands toward God, pray with all your heart for your enemies. When you do this, God will respect all that you ask.”

**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

## 19 JANUARY

*Be strong in the LORD and in the strength of his power.*

*Put on the whole armor of God,*

*so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

*For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,*

*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.*

*Therefore take up the whole armor of God,*

*so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day,*

*and having done everything, to stand firm.*

EPHESIANS 6:10-13

**A**MMMA SYNCLETICA said, “The best athletes must compete with stronger opponents.”

**Be strong in the Lord.**

20 JANUARY

*Whenever you face trials of any kind,  
consider it nothing but joy,  
because you know that the testing  
of your faith produces endurance;  
and let endurance have its full effect,  
so that you may be mature and complete,  
lacking in nothing.*

JAMES 1:2-4

**O**THERS report that Amma Sarah struggled against sexual temptation for thirteen years. She never prayed that the spiritual warfare should end. Instead, she prayed, “God, give me strength.”

**The testing of your faith produces endurance.**