

**THE GIFT OF TEARS IN ISAAC OF NINEVEH:
A TRANSITION TO PURE PRAYER AND THE
VIRTUE OF MERCY**

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Current psychological perspectives as well as contemporary Scripture study have much to tell the twentieth century American of the interplay between the body, psyche and spirit. It becomes increasingly clear that the spiritual life cannot be effectively pursued without a mature understanding of the interaction of these three elements of the human personality. The stereotypes of prayer and holiness which have accumulated in Western Catholicism are undergoing considerable alteration in the light of these modern contributions. The saint can no longer be admired as one would regard an immobile statue with a placid smile on its face. He is a dynamic human being and his response to God cannot be considered apart from the multiplicity of emotional and physiological responses.

Commensurate with this first condition has been the tendency of the West to downplay the value of the body due to neo-Platonic influences found in such thinkers as Augustine. For the Greek East, however, it is not such a new idea to consider the place of the body in prayer. A more wholistic orientation in the spiritual life is provided, as well as a more consistent connection with the scriptural view that the body is not evil in itself, but a component of the goodness of creation. The Greek Fathers' writings on prayer, then, are less hesitant to show how the entire person-including physical and psychological processes-cannot help but be caught up in the movement of the soul towards union with God.

This pneumo-psychosomatic interplay provides the interpretive key to the concept of the "gift of tears" in the mystical writings of the Greek Fathers. Tears is an external physical response which signals a decisive point in the inner journey of the soul. Similar to

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the modern developments which encourage prayer for "inner healing" (sometimes facilitating in the recipient a release of the anguish of past psychological injuries through an unexpected flood of tears), the Eastern tradition closely associates the dynamics of the external person with the inner workings of his mind and spirit. The "gift of tears" as described by the Greek Fathers is the expression of a spiritual transition, an indication, as David Lichter says in his article in *Diakonia*, of an "inner struggle we are all involved in but try earnestly to hide."¹ Moreover, it is a sign of exodus, of liberation.

To explore this phenomenon in greater depth, let us examine the mystical treatises of Isaac of Nineveh, one of the foremost Eastern spokesmen for the role of tears in the progress towards mystical union. On surface level, there is very little about Isaac that would attract a twentieth century American Christian to read him. Not only is it difficult to identify with a man when so little is known about his life, but this is compounded when what little is known seems so entirely foreign to forms of spirituality as they have evolved in the West.

Isaac lived in the second half of the seventh century. He was born in Bet Katraye beneath India. George Katholikos ordained him a bishop in the monastery of Bet Abe, but the public life did not appeal to Isaac and he maintained his pastoral responsibilities for only five months.² He then withdrew to the mountains of Bet Huzaye, living a strictly contemplative life with the other monks involved there.³ One piece of information which provides an insight into his temperament is his nickname "the Second Didymus"; this is because his fellow monks admired his meekness in speech, his placid kind and gentle spirit.⁴ Isaac's life with the monks entailed a good deal of asceticism and the practice of spiritual exercises.

Possessions, refinement in dress, copious food, frequent rest, a comfortable dwelling place are the outward things the mystic has to renunciate. But there is more. The life of discipline . . . has to be arranged on a basis in which recitation of the Scriptures, the service of prayer, fasting and vigils have a dominant place.⁵

Repentance

Having glimpsed the milieu of the writer, let us now examine Isaac's description of the movement of the soul towards divinization, developing the role of the gift of tears in this schema. We will

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then provide a brief analysis of how this gift leads to greater responsiveness to the world of people and events.

Repentance is the beginning of the spiritual life of Isaac's conception. The self makes a decision to lead a new life in accordance with God's plan, to submit this will to being directed by God. Almost immediately, a revolt, an interior war occurs, with all the forces of a man's inner life - his emotions, his desires, the powers of darkness - opposing this decision. Although previous to the moment of repentance, the self could have been quite confident of its own abilities, now the self cannot but perceive itself as vulnerable and weak. The person has consciously chosen to live a God-like life, yet not every part of his personality corresponds immediately to this ideal. (St. Paul describes this battle against "the flesh" in Galatians 5). In a certain sense, the perception that the "affections," such as hatred, lust, bitterness, envy, possessiveness, are in opposition to God heightens the realization that man is mortal, that he is destined to die. "As a rose will fall at a breath of the wind, so at a little puff on even one of those elements of which you are composed you will die."⁶

At the root of all these negative drives is the soul's pride, its unwillingness to acknowledge that it is dependent on God's love above any other security. The only means of countering this profound bondage is to desire and yearn for *humility*, the serene acceptance of the reality that one's life belongs to God. But *humility*, an important and frequently repeated word in Isaac's writings, is not attained without the pain of *praxis*. Like Paul wrestling with the "thorn" in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10), the soul must be humiliated with an awareness of its fragility, that only in God can it find the strength it needs to be free.

Do not compare any of the ethical practices with a man's throwing himself day and night on his face before the cross. If thou desirest that thy fervor may never abate, and that thy tears may never fail, then practice this. Blessed art thou, o man, if thou thinkest of what I have told thee, without seeking any other thing night and day.

Through strict solitude, fasting and other forms of asceticism, the soul is purified, gradually gaining control over the passions which held it in bondage.⁸ The disordered affections are said to emerge from wounds in a man's inner life, but the security of knowing God's love heals these wounds.⁹

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To cite a parallel from the Western tradition, such an experience of humiliation before God is not unlike that of St. Francis as he referred to himself as a "useless worm."¹⁰ In a sense, the closer the soul moves towards God the more it becomes aware of the barriers which separate it from experiencing Him. The heart suffers because of its unquenchable yearning to taste His love. Yet Isaac affirms that such suffering is essential for the strengthening of the soul.

By frequent experience of divine help in temptations a man acquires firm faith which makes him unafraid and gives him a firm heart in trials.¹¹

The soul learns the value of detachment from immediate, interior struggles while fixing its heart on future mysteries and glories.¹²

A True Brokenness

Such humiliation is not to be confused with the impulse towards self-hatred or "dejection," as Isaac calls it. This is in his view a great evil - a deterrent to spiritual perfection.¹³ Nonetheless, the trials do provoke a radical sense of separateness. The soul knows intuitively its destiny to become a pure vessel of God. It knows that this is why it was created, yet in increasing intensity it faces the reality that its impairments interfere with this destiny. (Romans 3:23: "All fall short of the glory of God") It experiences a death, "a death to the illusion of self-importance," a death to past modes of behavior aimed at self-satisfaction, and a surrender to being recreated in the way that God desires.¹⁴ In the silence of his cell, the monk cannot but hunger for this interior change: "Let us love silence until the world is made to die in our hearts."¹⁵

At some unanticipated point in this process of purification, the heart, which has been hardened by years of bitterness and hatred, is at last broken open and replaced by a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Tears of grief burst from the depths of the inner being which has been tormented so long in *angst* and in the fear of death.¹⁶

Some tears cause a burning heat, others render fat. All tears which flow for grief or distress of heat caused by sins make the body lean and burning with heat. And often when these tears are shed, one will even feel that his marrow is injured.¹⁷

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This first manifestation of tears in Isaac's conceptualization is a crying out in the darkness, a thirsting for salvation. This gift is not only a weeping which springs from an honest appraisal of the self, from that humility which has at last been attained, but it is a lamentation for the condition of bondage which affects the entire human race. The world is perceived as it truly is—perverted, "bent" (to use C. S. Lewis' term in his *Space Trilogy*), infected by demons and the powers of darkness.¹⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa says, "It is impossible for one to live without tears who considers things exactly as they really are. . ."¹⁹ Reflecting back on his past life, the monk cannot help but regret his previous strivings after possessions and pleasures which now seem valueless.

and henceforth this world will be in his eyes as a prison and its first sweetness will be more bitter than any bitter thing and the love of his life and is desirable: beauty will seem the type of hell.²⁰

But tears of grief soon give way to a new level of growth. The bitterness and hatred stemming from self-centeredness has flooded out from the soul; the poison which festered in its wounds has been emptied out. Tears of grief are transformed into tears of mercy.

Then by them [tears of grief] the gate leading to the second order will be opened by him, an order which is far superior, because it contains the sign of the receiving of mercy. Those tears which have their origin in insight make the body fat [swell?]; they flow spontaneously and compulsion has no share in them. They also anoint the body and the aspect of the face is changed. For a joyful heart renders the body beautiful. These tears moisten the whole face when the mind lives in solitude. The body acquires by them as it were some sustenance, and joy is diffused over the face.²¹

Using the traditional Catholic typology of the three stages of the mystical journey developed in Louis Bouyer's *Introduction to Spirituality*, it seems to me that the experience of tears emerges at the transition from the stage of purification to the stage of illumination. The fundamental dividedness or *dipsychia*²² of the personality has been healed. The soul experiences joy in a unique vision of God which up till that moment had been smothered by the passions. Isaac uses the terms "bodily state" and "spiritual state" to indicate

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this transition. As we will discuss later, the Syrian does not deeply explore how the soul passes into the third state of union.²³

A State of Tears

He states specifically that these tears continue day and night for a period of almost two years, followed by a phase of profound rest in God and freedom from temptations.

Through the tears the soul receives peaceful deliberations. From peaceful deliberations it rises unto serenity of insight, and by serenity of insight a man reaches the sight of hidden things. For purity is brought about by being free from war.²⁵

The mystic can only express this ineffable vision which follows the outpouring of tears in poetic language. Borrowing from the neo-Platon'ic tradition, he compares the soul to a mirror, or image of God. The death of asceticism precedes the birth of a spiritual child and tears-"mingled with "joy which exceeds the sweetness of honey"- are the indication of its springing forth to life in the soul.²⁶ Another image which he employs to describe this interior liberation is that of a bird taking flight from the earth. When the soul is encumbered by the passions, it struggles to rise from the ground. During the practice of "deliberations, recitation and works and fear" as well as virtuous activities, he stretches out "wings of flesh." But with "wings of the mind" (pure prayer), these human efforts cease and the search for God becomes less of a strain. Swiftly, effortlessly, the soul "approaches unto heavenly things and is removed far from the earth."²⁷ In examining Isaac's poetic descriptions of the attainment of "pure prayer," one cannot help but think of Teresa of Avila's brilliant use of the phoenix image in her *Autobiography*. The following excerpt not only provides a Western contrast with Isaac's flight metaphor, but illustrates an emphasis on fire and heat which Isaac himself associates with the experience of tears and pure prayer.

I was amazed at having experienced this fire, which seems to proceed from on high, and from the true love of God, for, however much I desire and strive and am consumed with the effort to attain it it is only

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-- when His Majesty so pleases, as I have said on other occasions, that I am able to obtain so much a single spark. It seems to consume the old man, with his faults, his lukewarmness and his misery; it is like the phoenix, from the ashes of which, after it has been burned (or so I have read), comes forth another. Even so is the soul transformed into another, with its fresh desires and its great fortitude. It seems not to be the same as before, but begins to walk in the way of the Lord with a new purity.²⁸

The soul which has attained this splendid perception of God now becomes conscious of the many ways in which He has been generous in the past in all the details of life. He is aware of the tremendous "providence" of God.²⁹ Just as Paul was lifted outside of his body, the mystic at last is freed from the limitations of corporeal conceptions of God.³⁰ Each moment of the day and throughout the stillness of the night vigil, the heart is moved with profound gratitude.

The mind is concentrated; a fervent heat burns in the heart and unspeakable joy arises in the soul. Further sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation makes the mind drunk then it is to him as if he dwelled in heaven, during his vigils that are so full of good things.³¹

Even more significant than these elements of gratitude; of detachment from the corporeal realm, of joy, is the burning love which characterizes the state of the soul in pure prayer. Although at one time the monk may have adhered to belief from motives of fear or self-centeredness, now faith is imbued with the inescapable reality that he is loved and is in love with a God who is living, dynamic, a "consuming fire." Such burning love cannot but release tears.

Every time when the thought of God is stirred in his spirit, the heart will become hot with love at once, the eyes will shed multitudinous tears; for love is accustomed to shed tears at the recollection of the beloved. He that is in this state will never be found destitute of tears, because he is never without abundant recollection of God, so that even during sleep he speaks with him. Love is accustomed to practice these things and this is the accomplishment of man in this life.³²

Constant Prayer

Advanced as this mystical awareness may seem, it is not the end point of the spiritual life for Isaac. Interior growth is limitless in his

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understanding; struggles and wounds still must be confronted beyond *penthos*, so there is no place for self-assurance in the monk's disposition.³³ Beyond pure prayer, the soul eventually realizes «constant prayer," a state of permanent consciousness of the immanent and transcendent presence of God.³⁴ Once again to refer to Bouyer's typology, this is perhaps the third or "unitive" phase of the mystical journey, comparable with the point in Ignatius of Loyola's prayer life when he experienced visions of the Trinity in the world even while carrying on a multiplicity of apostolic endeavors.³⁵

As I noted earlier, there is not a large emphasis in Isaac's thought on this third phase. Rather, it seems that for him the crucial "quantum leap" is precisely at *penthos*, the outpouring of tears and the attainment of *apathia*. In contrast, his treatment of the transition between phases two and three, from pure prayer to constant prayer, seems smoother, less dramatic, less defined. This lack of emphasis on mystical union is entirely reasonable to me, since it is probably during the trials of the first stage that the novice will need the greatest encouragement and direction from his spiritual guide. Throughout the spiritual life, certainly beyond the phase of purification, there will be suffering. Yet it seems to me that the novice is more vulnerable to abandoning the spiritual quest than the monk who has passed beyond *penthos*. He does not yet fully perceive the glory of God and is in great need of every available teaching and external incentive in order to persevere. It is a different case, however, for those who have tasted the glories of the state of pure prayer which Isaac describes.

Mercy Towards Others

Having completed our analysis of mystical consciousness and the role of tears in the *Treatises* of Isaac of Nineveh, I will now attempt to link his experience with that of contemporary spirituality by showing how *penthos* produces in the heart the virtue of mercy for the world and all humanity. The modern reader may say to himself, "Well, all this talk of tears is poetic, but what effect does it have on behavior? Is it practical? What does Isaac have to say about the inter-relationship between this profound love for God and the call of charity to neighbor and the world?"

Isaac gives us no indication that he has overlooked the classic rule of discernment from the New Testament that the good tree must give forth good fruit (Luke 6:43). In other words, true love of

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God always gives birth to holy actions, to a response of service and care for one's brother. Isaac identifies strongly with this principle:

He who neglects the sick, shall not see light. And who turns away his face from one in distress, may his day be dark. And who despises the cry of the vexed, may the sons of his house grope in darkness.³⁶

In his understanding, it is the soul that has passed beyond tears which is most prepared to serve the world and humanity in a fully Christian way. Previous to this point the soul is still tremendously possessive; it has its own needs to fulfill and uses others rather than loves them.

do not think that in behavior thou hast reached anything till tears wme forth; for thy hidden being still ministers to the world. . . This means, that thou art on the same stage of behavior with faithful lay people. For thou workest with thy outer man in the service of God but the inward man is still without fruits.³⁷

The heart which has been freed of its narcissism through tears now sees all men through the compassionate eyes of God. The heart finds itself "full of mercy for all mankind" and is "afflicted with pity for them and burns as with fire without personal discrimination."³⁸ Isaac states that the criterion indicating that pure prayer has been achieved is "a heart full of mercy unto the whole created nature man, fowls and beasts, demons and whatever exists, so that . . . at the sight of them the eyes shed tears on account of the force of mercy which moves the heart by great compassion."³⁹ To underline the virtue of mercy, he discusses Jesus' willingness to eat at table with harlots and publicans "without making any distinction between those who were worthy and those who were not."⁴⁰ He also cites tales from the lives of the Desert Fathers, including that of the hermit Agathon, who for six months took care of a sick man that he had found abandoned in the street. "Then he said, as the story runs, I wished that I could find a leper and give him my body and take his - this is perfect love; let us resemble our Fathers, that we may be thought worthy of grace, as they were."⁴¹

Certainly what Isaac is describing parallels the spiritual development of the Wanderer in the Russian classic, *The Way of A Pilgrim*, when the narrator says, "I felt a burning love for Jesus Christ and for all God's creatures,"⁴² and later in the book, "The whole outside world . . . seemed to me full of charm and delight. Everything drew me to love and thank God; people, trees, plants,

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animals. I saw them all as my kinsfolk, I found in all of them the magic of the Name of Jesus."⁴³ Although the Pilgrim passed into many strange villages, always encountering in his travels unfamiliar faces, still he felt an openness and acceptance for everyone. "And during the day if I happened to meet anyone, all men without exception were as dear to me as if they had been my nearest relations."⁴⁴ Isaac's experience of mercy could also be associated with the nature mysticism of St. Francis and St. -Bonaventure, who exalted Christ and the Trinity in the immanence of all creation.

Paradoxically, it is in solitary prayer rather than in external action that Isaac the Syrian sees the greatest opportunity to express mercy towards the human race. Different from the approach of modern spirituality which tends to intermingle the active and contemplative spheres of experience, we must acknowledge, after all, that Isaac's approach is that of a contemplative hermit. He explains a vocation, which, as Thomas Merton discovered, is not easy for the twentieth century American pragmatist to identify with. One has the impression that, for this Syrian hermit, concrete action in the world should not necessarily take precedence over the constant and still surrender to the presence of God - what he calls the "universal part." This is especially true if the monk has the advantage of living in an environment which is separate from the many distractions and demands of society. Taking the side of Mary rather than Martha in Luke's famous gospel account (chapter 10), Isaac states succinctly, "It is sufficient in the eyes of God, that we keep love of our fellow-man with our mind only . . . that is more excellent."⁴⁵

NOTES

1. Rev. David Lichter, "Tears and Contemplation in Isaac of Nineveh," in: *Diakonia*, Vol. XI, no. 3 (1976) p. 254.
2. Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises* (Germany; Nieuwe Reeks, 1969) tr., by A. J. Wensinck, p. xviii.
3. *Ibid.*, p. xix.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.
6. E. Kadloubovsky and G. Palmer, *Earl Fathers from the Philokalia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954) p. 207. also see Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, p. 308.
7. Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 40.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 324-325.
10. J. Jorgensen. *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City: Image, 1955) p. 245.
11. Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Philokalia*, p. 203.
12. Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 266.

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- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 122 and p. 335.
- 14 Lichter, "Tears," p. 255.
- 15 Kadlubovsky and Palnuor, *Philukalia*, p. 207.
- 16 George Maloney, *Inward Stillness* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension, 1975) p. 105.
- 17 Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 165.
- 18 Isaac, *Treatises*, pp. 276-277.
- 19 Maloney, *Stillness*, p. 113.
- 20 Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 155.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 22 Louis, Luuuy, *J11ud1c1u11 nu Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1961) p. 248.
- 23 Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 164.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- 28 Teresa of Avila, *Awobiography* tr. by E. Allison Peers (Garden City, Image, 1960) p. 386.
- 29 Isaac, *Treatises*, p. 489.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 372.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 33 Lichter, "Tears," p. 253.
- 34 Isaac, *Treatises*, p. xli.
- 35 Effrid UU11cn, *1...11...* of My...llc *10...111...* (N.Y.: Mc11tur-0111c1a, f)(5) p. 200.
- 36 Isaac, *Treatise*, p. 383.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 341.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 42 R. French, *1ur W111...a Pilgrim* (N.Y.: Ballantine, 1977) p. 31.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 45 Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, p. 382.