

CHAPTER 9

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NARROW GATE IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Someone posed a question to the Lord Jesus: "Lord, are there few who are saved?" He said to them: "**Strive to enter through the narrow gate**, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, "Lord, Lord, open for us", and He will answer and say to you, "I do not know you, where you are from", then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets". But He will say, "I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity" (Luke 13:23-27).

In His sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus said: "**Enter by the narrow gate**; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. **Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it**" (Matthew 7:13, 14).

A) WHAT IS THE NARROW GATE?

What is the narrow gate which the Lord asks us to go through?

The "narrow gate" or the "difficult road" means the willing control over the soul, and bearing afflictions and pressures which come to us, with patience, joy and thanksgiving. It is what the Lord means by carrying the cross.

B) CHRIST'S LOVE AND HIS CALL FOR US TO ENTER BY THE NARROW GATE

In the first chapter of this book we expanded on the strong love of God for man, the love which passes all understanding. Here is a question which presents itself: "**Does the strong love of God to man contradict with - I do not say God allowing His children to be afflicted and to suffer - His call for them to freely enter by the narrow gate and carry the cross?**"

Jesus said there are many difficulties of different kinds which will come to His children and those who believe in Him. **He called His followers to enter by the narrow gate and to go**

through the difficult road and He made carrying the cross and walking behind Him a condition for Christian Discipleship. He said that He sends His Disciples "as lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3), in the world they will have tribulation (John 16:2), the time is coming that whoever kills them will think that he offers God service (John 16:2), they will be hated by all for His name's sake (Matthew 10:22) and that they will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice (John 16:20).

The question which presents itself is: **"How does the call of facing and enduring afflictions agree with the assured love of God? It is possible to pose the question in another form: "If God really loves us, does He not care about our afflictions?"**

The answer to this question is found in the saying of Isaiah about the Lord God: "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them" (Isaiah 63:9). That means God is afflicted by our afflictions. That is strange; and if this is so why does He allow the affliction to happen and He is able to prevent it? There must be a Divine wisdom in these afflictions; else He would have not allowed them.

The afflictions which come to man are for his good and this agrees with the love of God, His goodness and His righteousness. He said: "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7) and in the past He said by the Prophet Isaiah: "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:16) and by the Prophet Zechariah: "For thus says the Lord of hosts: "For he who touches you touches the apple of His eye" (Zechariah 2:8).

In the beginning of Christianity, the mere belief in Christ and following Him meant entering into the circle of afflictions and enduring persecutions which in most cases led to death - martyrdom. "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

In spite of that the Christian faith spread in every part of the world. The Christians preferred to follow Christ and endure pains and sufferings, than to deny Him for the vain glories of the world. There must be a mystery behind the difficulties and sufferings. In fact there are blessings behind the tribulations, since the martyrs and confessors were not naive or foolish to bear afflictions for nothing.

C) WHAT IS THE WISDOM BEHIND THE NARROW GATE?

1 - IT IS THE COMMAND OF CHRIST AND HIS WAY:

We have mentioned the command of the Lord Jesus concerning entering by narrow gate. The difficult road through which we enter by the narrow gate is the road of the cross. **Christ walked this road and experienced it with His blessed feet. It is the road from Bethlehem to Golgotha. If the difficult road is the road of the Cross, the difficulties themselves are carrying the cross. What did the Lord say about that?**

"He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38), "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27) and "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34).

Some people might think that these commands are only for the Disciples of the Lord and His Apostles. St. Luke explains that these commands are for all. He said: **"Then He (Jesus) said to them all,** "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). To confirm this point, when the Lord was asked by the rich young ruler: "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" the immediate response of the Lord was: "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; **and come, take up the cross, and follow Me"** (Mark 10:17, 21). It is clear from these words that following Christ requires carrying the cross, meaning, accepting difficulties and bearing pains with gladness of heart.

The narrow gate is the gate which Jesus entered from His birth in the flesh, and the difficult road is the road which He walked through from Bethlehem to Golgotha. It is easy to perceive that when we follow the life of Christ in the flesh on earth.

Here are some of the trials and difficulties which the Lord endured: His birth in a stable of animals, like the most inferior person in the world, His flight to Egypt from the tyrant King Herod who wanted to kill Him, the challenges of the resistant Jews in the three years of His ministry, bearing oaths and insults like the most despised of His creatures, betrayal of Judas Iscariot who knew what he was doing, and accepting suffering on the Cross with His freewill for the salvation of mankind.

All these were forms of the narrow gate by which Jesus entered with His freewill when He

was in the flesh on earth.

2 - TO RESEMBLE CHRIST:

The Lord Jesus is our highest model, Whom we imitate and walk after the steps of His feet. "Christ suffered for us, **leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps**" (1 Peter 2:21). We are expected "**to be conformed to the image of His Son**, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). What is the image of the Son of God except the image of holiness and suffering: "He is despised and rejected by men, **a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief**" (Isaiah 53:3).

The Lord Jesus loved and desired suffering: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50). About Him St. Paul said: "**For the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame**" (Hebrews 12:2). The Lord Jesus asked James and John the sons of Zebedee: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" **They said to Him, "We are able"** (Matthew 20:22).

One of the fathers once said: "**The joy in enduring suffering is the measure of the temperature of the love of the soul to Christ. The perfect man welcomes suffering and has joy in it. The lukewarm person escapes from the difficulties. The Lord Jesus verified His love for mankind by suffering for us. Hence it is appropriate and just for man to prove his true love to Him by suffering for His sake**".

The greatest offering a Christian presents to God is **offering himself a spiritual sacrifice together with the sacrifice of Christ His crucified Savior**. This is what St. Paul meant in his command to the Romans: "**Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God**" (Romans 12:1).

3 - THE ROAD OF ALL SAINTS:

The Lord Jesus said in a general way: "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38; Luke 14:27). **All the righteous people went through the difficult road by the narrow gate carrying the cross, as the Lord made of carrying the cross and following Him a condition for becoming His disciples.**

The Apostles who were the firstborn believers in the New Testament entered by the narrow gate like their Teacher, and went through the road of the cross with joy.

The Apostle James says: "**My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,**

knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:2-4).

The Apostle Peter says to the believers: **"If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind (likewise), but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you"** (1 Peter 3:13; 4:1, 13, 14).

In the introduction of the Book of Revelation, St. John directs his talk to the believers saying: **"I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ"** (Revelation 1:9). It is clear from these words that the tribulation is a companion to the kingdom **"the tribulation and the kingdom of Jesus Christ"**.

Again in the conversion of St. Paul to Christianity, we read that the Lord Jesus appeared to Ananias the Bishop of Damascus who baptized Paul and said: **"For I will show him (Paul) how many things he must suffer for My name's sake"** (Acts 9:16). We notice that these words were not a kind of punishment for Paul because of his persecution of the Church of the believers. But they were an unveiling of the blessings which await Paul from the tribulations for his faith and ministry.

That is strange! **Are the tribulations counted among the blessings?** Yes, that is what the Lord Jesus said. When Peter told Jesus on behalf of the Disciples: "See, we have left all and followed You". Jesus answered: "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time-- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, **with persecutions**-- and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:28-30). **We see how Jesus counts the persecutions among the blessings which man receive in this life!**

The Apostle Paul wrote about the suffering and tribulations and what accompanies them from blessings:

Paul considers them fellowship with Christ in His sufferings: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Philippians 3:10).

Paul rejoiced in the sufferings: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). This is a strange expression in which Paul revealed that the believers form the mysterious unseen Body of Christ. They are now suffering and by doing that they complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.

When Christ said on the Cross: "It is finished!" (John 19:30), He meant that the salvation of mankind has been completed by His death on the Cross. But the sufferings of Christ and His afflictions are not completed yet. The believers complete them with their endurance of anything which come to them for the sake of Christ and believing in Him.

Again St. Paul reveals that tribulations and enduring them are our qualifications for the eternal kingdom. He used to strengthen the souls of the believers in Asia Minor, telling them about the blessings of the tribulations and their consequences. He said: **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22).

To the Thessalonians Paul wrote: "I sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know" (1 Thessalonians 3:2-4).

More than that, we see that Paul has passed the stage of enduring the afflictions patiently. He now glories in the tribulations as a companion to faith: "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3, 4). **Not only he glories in them but also rejoices in them:** "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

In the afflictions, the help of the grace of God appears and it is comforting that they we share the sufferings of the Lord. **Even more than that, the Apostle Paul raises the tribulations and sufferings and make them spiritual gifts from God to man:** "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29).

If we now leave the Apostles of Christ and go to the saints in general, we find that they all agree about the blessings of the narrow gate and the difficult road, the road of the cross. The sayings of the saints express their own personal experiences.

The Church books which contain the sayings of **St. Paul the Simple** the disciple of St. Antony the Great, contain one saying only by St. Antony: **"He who escapes from the affliction escapes from God"**.

In a farewell sermon by St. Macarius the Great to his children the monks he said: "Who would ever be crowned without striving? Who would become rich without working? Who would win without first toiling? Is any lazy man able to collect money, or any idle person preserve his riches? **With many tribulations we enter the kingdom of heaven. Let each one of us toil with joy, knowing that behind it there is every riches and comfort"**.

St. Pachomius the Great the father of communal monasticism said: **"Accept all the trials with joy anticipating the glory which follow them. If you realise that you will not spare enduring them, to the extent that you ask God not to take them away from you"**. He also said: **"Do you thing that only burning and cutting the body members are confession for the Lord? No, but also the toil in worship and the attacks of the devil and the illnesses. He who endures all that with thanksgiving is the martyr. Otherwise, there was no need for St. Paul to say "we are killed all day long" (Romans 8:36). Paul did not die an apparent death every day but he endured with patience whatever came to him"**.

St. Isaac El-Soriany said: **"Do not abhor difficulties because by enduring them you gain honor, and by them you come nearer to God. The Divine cry is inside them and the good person endures the disasters with joy"**.

St. Barsnofious said: **"Why do you shrink from the afflictions like a worldly person? Do not you know that the afflictions are for the saints? Did you not hear that "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the Lord delivers him out of them all"? (Psalm 34:19). Do you not know that the righteous is tested by the affliction like gold by fire? If we are righteous, we are tested by afflictions and if we are sinners we are chastised by the afflictions"**.

One of the fathers said: **"I have faith that each person who guards himself strongly by his will for the sake of God, God counts him as a martyr. The tears he sheds in the difficulties, are counted by God as blood"**.

4 - THE WAY WHICH SUITS MAN SPIRITUALLY:

If God permits tribulations for mankind, it does not mean that He is content with the suffering of man. God on the contrary wants the spiritual good for man. **God knows the nature of man, and his desire for the earthly and bodily matters, and He deals with man in a way which suits him.** After God drowned every living creature by the Flood at the time of Noah and after Noah left the Ark and built an altar for the Lord, **the Lord smelled a soothing aroma.** Then the Lord said in His heart, **"I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done"** (Genesis 8:20, 21).

The Apostle Paul says: **"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish"** (Galatians 5:16, 17).

St. Paul also says about the nature of man which inclines to do evil: **"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I**

will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:18-24).

Hence we see that man is weak according to his nature and formation. Besides there are many strong factors which pull him to every earthly and fleshly desire. **As a result, tribulations are useful for man because they warn him, waken him up and bring him back to his right senses. As a result, man lifts up his heart and mind to God.** The Psalmist says: "My help comes from the Lord" (Psalm 121:2).

The Prophet David says: "Now in my prosperity I said, "I shall never be moved". Lord, by Your favor You have made my mountain stand strong; you hid Your face, and I was troubled" (Psalm 30:6, 7). The Psalmist says that in the time of his strength he is not shaken. Then immediately God hid His face and His help from him and he became worried and troubled. Immediately after that the Psalmist says: "I cried out to You, O Lord; and to the Lord I made supplication. Hear, O Lord, and have mercy on me; Lord, be my helper! You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness" (Psalm 30:8, 10, 11).

Man is so weak and his will disappoints him, though he knows what is right. Except for the grace of God which supports us many times and which warns us by various ways and means, we would have become in a bad state. In His dealings with His creatures, God handles each one in a way which suits him, for his best. Unfortunately, man does not wake up except through tribulations. **Someone says: "Tribulations is the language of God for the sake of His love!"** Hence we see that the tribulations which man face are useful for his salvation.

Also by tribulations God purifies man from his errors and weaknesses. The Lord says: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:1, 2). The process of purifying needs sometimes cutting parts of the branches and pruning. If the plant is able to speak and express its feeling, we realise that it suffers when it is pruned. Some plants leak juices, like tears, when they are cut!

This is what God does with His children whom He loves, He prunes them that they may bear more spiritual fruit. **One of the fathers says: "When the branch is pruned, its juice flows as if it is weeping. Yet soon its buds sprout, open up and become beautiful flowers then delicious ripe fruits. Likewise, the Christian, as a mysterious branch in Christ the True Vine, when he is surrounded by pain appears - at the beginning - as if crushed by the pain. But soon he is renewed, his vitality increases and the fruits of the Holy Spirit in him multiply".** St. Augustine says: "The chaff is different from the wheat. When the threshing machine go over both of them it crushes the chaff and purifies the wheat".

5 - THE ROAD TO ETERNAL GLORY:

The Book of Acts tells us about the Apostles Paul and Barnabas after they had preached the gospel in some of the cities in Asia Minor "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22). The word "must" indicates the need of the many tribulations!

The Thessalonians showed willingness to accept the Christian faith and their faith and virtues grew exceedingly. The Apostle Paul wrote to them encouraging and explaining that the tribulations which they endure are but manifest indicators for them that they may be counted worthy of the kingdom. He said: "We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God **for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;** since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us **when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels"** (2 Thessalonians 1:3-7).

The Apostle Paul writes also to the Corinthians saying: **"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory"** (2 Corinthians 4:17).

The Apostle John pictures for us in the Book of Revelation in the world to come the glory of those who endured the tribulations. He says: "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen".

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" And I said to him, "Sir, you know". So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:9-17).

Pain and tribulations are sure signs of being worthy of eternal joy. This is what our Lord

revealed when He said to His Disciples: "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy" (John 16:20).

D) THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NARROW GATE IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

The principle of the narrow gate is not limited to the tribulations and pressures which meet man from the outside. It also includes the freewill efforts which man chooses to fulfil in his spiritual striving. We here present some of these efforts in the spiritual life.

FIRST IN REPENTANCE:

Certainly, repentance is one of the narrow gates which man goes through with his free will. In repentance man is watchful with himself and does not give in to unholy desires. Let us understand the command of the Lord Jesus: "**Strive to enter through the narrow gate**" (Luke 13:23) as Jesus speaks about something which man does with his free will.

St. John Saba (the Spiritual Elder) says: "Adam of the flesh born from Eve has children born for him which resemble him in the world of the flesh. Likewise Christ the Spiritual Father - from the Baptism and repentance - has children born for Him which resemble Him in the spiritual world. How do we find it (repentance) if it is near? **Lord, show it to us, it is at the gentle narrow gate. He who is patient and enters by its dark gate immediately faces the kingdom of light and will rejoice.**

This gate is the entrance of life. Whatever chamber is inside you, its gate is repentance. No one hopes in you (repentance) and goes to hell. No one goes to heaven without you. Who sees God without you? He who hopes in you does not fall in the hands of the devil. He who is purified has been washed by you. He who waters a plant from your rain gathers the fruits of joy. He who puts drops from your water in his eyes sees God in his heart. He who takes you as an intercessor, the doors of the riches of God open for him. You saved David from sin. The verdict of destruction passed over the people of Nineveh, but you stood up and saved them".

DIFFICULTIES OF REPENTANCE:

The Lord Jesus calls all who labor and carry heavy burdens to give them rest. He calls them to carry His yoke and depicts it as easy and light (Matthew 11:28-30). No doubt, evil people and sinners are among those who labor whom He calls to give rest.

Rest does not come without repentance. The saying of Jesus that His yoke is easy and light does not mean that repentance is without difficulties. On the contrary, it has assured difficulties because it signifies entering by the narrow gate and walking on the rough road. On the other hand Jesus accompanies all those who walk in the road of repentance. He comforts, supports and strengthens them. Also the feeling of the company of Jesus, His compassion, gentleness and sweetness make the repentant person forget all the troubles of the road.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES OF REPENTANCE?

1 - Doing away with desires:

We can not deny the role of the grace of God in any good work man does. The Lord Jesus said: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5) and "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). Hence repentance needs the grace of God to accompany the person who wants to repent. Jeremiah cries out to God saying: "Restore me, and I will return, for You are the Lord my God" (Jeremiah 31:18). **This however does not cancel the role of man in saving himself by his own will, his toil and his determination to live with God.**

We remember the saying of St. Augustine: "God who created you without you, does not save you without you". It means that you did not participate in creating yourself (created you without you), but as for the salvation of your soul, you should have a role in it with your will and by striving and the rest. The grace of God does not save you if you are passive and do not do the works of repentance.

There are desires which man loves and which have enslaved him. To get rid of them needs resistance, determination and trust in the help of God, as well as trust in one's self.

Put the whole world with what it has on one side of the scale and put Christ, His love and His glories on the other side. Then make up your mind of whom you chose, Barabbas or Jesus (Matthew 27:17). Barabbas is a symbol of the present world which is put in the evil. Be ware to resemble the Jews in their choice of Barabbas in front of Pilate the Roman ruler.

I do not know the desire or the desires which enslave you, they might be many. But I remind you of the command of Christ to love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30) and He who loves father or mother more than Him is not worthy of Him. And he who loves son or daughter more than Him

is not worthy of Him (Matthew 10:37). If this is the case about genuine love (love of fathers, mothers and sons), what do we say about the love of lust and the unholy love?

I also remind you of the saying of the Lord: "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:38, 39).

Listen to what I say to you: "If you really wish with all your heart to live for God, He will give you the strength and the victory", "all things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23), and "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). **The child is weaned with difficulty from breast feeding. Yet he cannot gradually eat the food of adults and grow before he is first weaned.**

Striving is important in every stage of life and there is no rest from striving at any time in one's life. Spiritual attacks for man may vary in the different stages of his life. But striving is man's weapon by which He wins and conquers.

The Apostle Paul says: "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27). The Apostle Paul was discerning not to become disqualified. That was in spite of all the labours he presented to his Master, the toil of his ministry, the many divine revelations which he saw and were revealed to him. The same Apostle again writes to the Hebrews saying: "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:4). If that was the measure of striving of this giant Apostle, what would we do?

2 - Giving up bad friendships:

Friends and friendships can be very critical because of their strong influence on man. The words of the Teacher Paul are very true: "Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits" (1 Corinthians 15:33). When a dirty unclean hand holds an object, it contaminates it. On the contrary, good friendships which Christ confirm are great blessings to man, and great help to him in his spiritual life and striving. One may be attached to a friend from his youth - the time of innocence - and it happens that this friend deviates as he grows up. If this friendship continues, it has serious consequences and it mostly leads to the corruption of the second party.

By his formation and nature, man is attracted to evil, and thus the Holy Bible advises us to escape from evil and sinful situations. This is what was said to Lot when he was living in Sodom and Gomorrah: "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains, lest you be destroyed" (Genesis 19:17). He was warned from even looking behind lest his heart will be attracted to something in the city. He was also warned from staying anywhere in the plain.

3 - Ridding of bad established habits:

A habit - any habit - is established in man by exercising it and for a long time. It is like a tree which could be pulled out with its roots when it is still young, but it is very difficult to pull it out when its roots are established in the ground.

As we acknowledge what we said and the extent of the effect of some of the bad habits on man, yet we say that nothing is impossible to change. The Apostle Paul says: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13) and if man with his strong deep faith is able to move mountains and make miracles and wonders, would he fail to get rid of a bad harmful habit?

We are unable to name all the bad habits, but certainly they are all known to us. We shall not deal here with the bad habits related to sexual problems. Instead we shall point to some of the bad habits which many people take lightly, as they may not consider them bad enough habits, such as smoking, drinking a little, and drinking tea and coffee and the like.

The harm to health from the habit of smoking and drinking are well known and do not need a proof. Someone may say that smoking and drinking and other narcotics are harmful when they become habits. But what about the excess in drinking tea or coffee?

We say that the danger from any habit is that it enslaves man. The habit of drinking tea and coffee and not doing without them, have in many cases restrained those who drink them from nice spiritual practices such as fasting by abstaining from food and drink for a period of time. These people are accustomed to drink something as soon as they wake up in the morning, and they deprive themselves of the blessings of fasting without food or drink and the wisdom behind that.

Do not take habits lightly - any habit - since bad habits enslave man and deprive him from his freedom which Christ gave him as a gift. Our Savior came to free us from all the ties which we enslaved ourselves to by our free will. Thus we know that only Christ is able to free us completely: "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

The above words are not only directed to those who are enslaved by some bad habits, but also are a warning to every person who is taking the first step in that direction. We should remember that a huge building starts with one stone, and a large book starts with a word written on the first line of the first page, followed by lines and lines then pages and pages.

If you enjoy the freedom in Christ, beware not to be enslaved to anything at all. Be careful and be diligent. Before the Apostle Paul said: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), he said: "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Philippians 4:11, 12).

4 - Remembering old sins:

Among the difficulties which face repentance is remembering old sins, which one may have got rid of. The devil waves them in front of him and uses them to excite unholy emotions in him which result in defiling his feelings.

The Church prays for this matter in the prayer of reconciliation in the Holy Eucharist and asks God to cleanse us from all blemish, all guile, all hypocrisy, all malice and the remembrance of evil entailing death. If the devil is able to lead man to the atmosphere of sin once more - even by thought - he leads him to evil entailing death.

Overcoming such matters requires will, toil and patience. We should not be scared from our spiritual enemies and not be weakened by them. We are nothing without God, and if we feel the presence of God near us, let us say: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) and "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

SECOND IN SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

The principle of the narrow gate in the subject of repentance concerns passive matters. Yet there are essential constructive matters for the spiritual life to man which are like the spirit to the body. There is no sense in resisting passive matters without supporting life with positive ones which are the food for the spirit of man. Perhaps the most important constructive spiritual matters are prayer, fasting, reading the holy books, and confession. Obviously our talk will not detail each of them, but our subject is the principle of the narrow gate for each of them.

The saintly fathers advised us about an important principle in spiritual life, which is the principle of "forceful advancing". They extracted this principle from the teachings of Christ: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force"; [has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it (New International Version of the Bible)] (Matthew 11:12). It is not an easy principle as some may imagine.

Everything in life - anything - is not obtained except with difficulty, toil and effort, specially if it is a valuable matter. **Each of the student, the merchant, the farmer and the worker do not get what they want if they do not work hard, toil and labour. What about heaven which we are struggling to go to? If the student, for example, studies hard and resists his body desires for rest and sleep for the sake of the certificate which he studies for, how much toil and striving heaven deserves from us?**

1 - IN PRAYER:

We read about our Lord Jesus that He used to spend all night long in prayer. He is the Holy One Who was not in need of prayer used to pray with such depth and continuity. But, we are deceived by our physical body, which shows weakness and heaviness in its members, and as we yield to it, we stop practising prayer.

What did the fathers who practised spiritual life say about this point?

St. Isaac El-Soriany says: "Do you work only when you have the desire to work, or you labour even if you do not have the desire to work? **Know well that to force yourself to work is important in both worldly and spiritual lives.** It is essential in prayer, reading the holy and spiritual books and attending the Eucharists in the church. Do not obey the lazy deceitful body which is full of sin. The body desires to rest all the time, not caring about eternal destruction which it pays for its little vanishing rest".

He also says: "**The more man toils, labors and forces himself for the sake of God, the more is the Divine help which is sent to him, surrounds him, facilitates his striving and paves the road in front of him.** If you ask to what limit I force myself? **I tell you to the point of death for the sake of God. It is better for you to die while you are striving than to live defeated**".

Man should never slacken. Instead he should force himself in prayer even if he does not feel the power of prayer or the inner comfort (spiritual dryness).

St. Aphram El-Soriany says: "Pour tears in front of God so that your prayers become like incense in front of Him. Water is needed to put out fire and tears are needs for the times of temptations. Water puts out fire and tears put off evil desires". St. John El-Dargy says: "The weeping eye is a permanent baptismal font for repentance and renewal".

2 - IN FASTING:

If forcing the self is essential for practising prayer, it is also essential for fasting - specially by abstaining from food and drink - as many are the blessings of fasting. What are the experiences of the fathers concerning fasting and forcing the self to it, which is entering through the narrow gate?

St. Macarius the Great says: "Longsuffering is patience, and patience is victory, and victory is life, and life is the kingdom, and the kingdom is God. A deep well has sweet nice water. **The gate is narrow and the road is difficult,** but the city is full of joy and happiness. The tower is high and strong, but inside it are valuable treasures. Fasting is heavy and hard, but it leads to the kingdom of heaven. Doing good is difficult and demanding, but it saves from fire by the mercy of our Lord to Whom be glory".

St. Pachomius the Great the father of communal monasticism says: "**Great is the victory of patient people**". All our teachers the fathers as well as the Holy Books command and encourage patience. Be patient and strong, because the saints who had patience received the promises. Have a big heart in order to be crowned together with His pure soldiers. Be steadfast in fasting and continue in prayer. **Wait for the Lord until He lifts up the tribulations from you. To this extent, God does not forget the dry saliva in your mouth when you are fasting. You need that in the difficult time** when you are leaving this world".

St. Isaac El-Soriany says: "Every person who strives against sin and its desires should begin with fasting, specially if the striving is for an inner sin".

He also says: "After our Good Saviour showed Himself to the world at the River Jordan, He started from this point (fasting). When He was baptised, He was immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where He fasted forty days and forty nights. Those who want to follow His steps, should build the foundation of their striving following His example".

St. Eronimos (Jerome) answers those who do not fast lest they their bodies weaken and says: "It is better for your stomach to get sick than for your soul to get sick, and for your knees to shake than for your purity to shake. Control and enslave your body else you be rejected".

3 - IN READING THE HOLY BOOKS:

If we spoke about forcing the self for prayer and fasting, it is necessary to speak about spiritual readings, the forefront of which is reading the Holy Bible. The word of God is the best support for man in his sojourn in the world and his continuous striving. St. Paul says: "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4). The Holy Bible is the best guide for us as strangers in this world.

4 - IN CONFESSION:

Certainly, confession of sins to a priest is entering through one of the narrow gates. Shyness prevents many people from confessing their sins and practising this holy sacrament, by which we gain forgiveness of sins. They deprive themselves from the blessings of this sacrament by standing in front of and not entering through the narrow gate.

Shyness, hard and painful as it may be, is useful for man. It makes us realise the ugliness of sin and the extent of sorrow it brings us when we fall in it. It also makes us perceive the shame and failure which result from sinning. All such feelings are essential and useful for man and for his repentance.

It is useful for man to suffer because of his sin as he acknowledges and confesses it; he has already enjoyed it when he was committing it. For this the saintly fathers said that the sacrament of confession is a strong leash which controls man and prevents him from returning to sin.

Jesus Ben Sirach says: "Never be ashamed to admit your mistakes" (Sirach 4:26). **One should go through the wall of shyness, force himself to enter through the narrow gate**, in order for him to win the comfort of his conscience, when the Holy Spirit transfers our sins in the sacrament of confession and put them on Christ Who carries the sins of the whole world and in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, which He completed on the Cross (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14); Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 1:9; 2:1, 2).

F) THE PRINCIPLE OF THE NARROW GATE IN LIFE'S PROBLEMS

Many are the problems which face man in his life. Some of them are resolved one way or the other. **The other problems are not solved except by entering by the narrow gate and going through the difficult road. We shall deal with some of the basic problems of life in a brief way:**

1 - FAMILY PROBLEMS:

By this we mean the problems of marriage and divorce. When problems occur between a married couple, one of the parties might prefer to end the marriage by going to court to get a divorce.

This attitude is against the law of Christ which indicates no divorce except for adultery. **It is possible for this marriage to continue if the unjustly treated party carries his/her cross, enters by the narrow gate and go through the difficult road.**

Those who attempt to dissolve the marriage as a quick solution to their problems, tread on the law of Christ. At the end, they will reap the fruit of what they did in other kinds of problems which will affect them as well as their children.

2 - PROBLEMS OF WORK:

The problems of work are also numerous. There are the problems of employment, promotion, occupying key positions, transfer to other cities, ... etc.

The feeling of injustice may lead a person to do something wrong, physical or spiritual. He may even fall in the sin of condemnation, anger, wrath and other sins. Beside the spiritual error, he might harm his health and get high blood pressure, sugar diabetes, heart and/or psychological troubles, which might lead to bad consequences.

If man follows the steps of his Lord and enters with his free will by the narrow door - the door of forbearing injustice - he would gain the blessings of patience, forbearance and all the good promises which the Lord promised those who are persecuted for His sake.

The person who experiences injustice should realise well that Christ the God accompanies all those who enter by the narrow gate and go through the difficult road carrying their cross. He should also be sure that God will compensate his material loss by other material and spiritual blessings in his life, health, family and in every thing he extends his hand to.

The blessings which God gives cannot be counted and they include all kinds of blessings.

It is worthwhile to look at Christ and meditate in Him. About Him is said: "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). We should also remember what Jesus said: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master" (Matthew 10:24, 25), "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20), and "For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:31).

God will not let injustice prevail, as if there is no God Who rules this Universe. Listen to the Prophet David as he says: "Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret-- **For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; But the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace"** (Psalm 37:1-11).

3 - PROBLEMS OF SICKNESS:

Forbearing the sicknesses of the body is a narrow gate for man to enter by his free will and he gains great rewards. One of the saintly fathers reported that he saw four high grades in heaven. The first **was for a forbearing patient thanking God.** The second was for a healthy

person who is hospitable to strangers and courteous to the weak. The third was for a striving hermit in the wilderness. The fourth was for a disciple who is obedient to his spiritual father for the sake of God.

The forbearing patient is like he who presents his body a sacrifice to God. The late Fr. Bishoy Kamel the Priest of St. Georges, Sporting, Alexandria, Egypt, as he was suffering from the horrible illness of cancer, he used to smile and call this terrible illness "The illness of paradise".

4 - WORLDLY DESIRES:

Worldly desires are numerous, and they take many forms, which hide many risks and dangers. **Our saintly fathers saw in front of them the open comfortable road which they refused to walk through. They rather entered freely through the narrow gate knowing that blessings await them there. Christ waits for all His beloved at the narrow gate, enters with them as they walk through the difficult road.**

The book "Paradise of the monks" mentions a story about an elderly monk who lived in the wilderness. He used to drink water from a source twelve miles away from where he lived. Once as he was going to the source of water we said to himself: "Why do I trouble myself this way? I should move and live near the source of water". As he was thinking about that, he looked behind and saw an elderly person counting his steps. He asked him: "Who are you?" He answered: "I am the angel of God, sent by God to count your steps, for God to give you your reward!" When the elderly monk heard that, he rejoiced and lived five miles further from the source of water.