

Some thoughts from the Church Fathers on Difficulties in Prayer:

Although prayer is a habitual action for us, it needs preparation... So, morning or evening, immediately before you begin to repeat your prayers, stand awhile, sit for a while, or walk a little and try to steady your mind and turn it away from all worldly activities and objects. After this, think who He is to whom you turn in prayer; then recollect who you are, who it is who is about to start this invocation to Him in prayer. Do this in such a way as to awake in your heart a feeling of humility and reverent awe that you are standing in the presence of God. It is the beginning of prayer, and a good beginning is half the complete task. *St. Theophan the Recluse*

In order to pray a man must struggle to his last breath. If we do not find prayer difficult, perhaps it is because we have not really started to pray. *Abba Agathon*

Abba Macarius was asked, 'How should one pray?' The old man said, 'There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, "Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer say, "Lord, help!" He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy. *Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Abba Macarius*

Pray simply. Do not expect to find in your heart any remarkable gift of prayer. Consider yourself unworthy of it. Then you will find peace. Use the empty cold dryness of your prayer as food for your humility. Repeat constantly: I am not worthy; Lord, I am not worthy! But say it calmly, without agitation. *St. Macarius of Optina*

I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great numbers. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me; I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy. *Abba John the Dwarf.*

But since we say that God is plenteous in mercy, why is it that when amidst temptations we unceasingly knock and pray, we are not heard and He disregards our prayer? This we are clearly taught by the Prophet when he says, 'The Lord's hand is not little, that it cannot save; nor is He heavy of hearing, that He cannot hear; but our sins have separated us from Him, and our iniquities have turned His face away, that He doth not hearken.' [Isaiah 59:1-2] Remember God at all times, and He will remember you whenever you fall into evils. *St. Isaac the Syrian*

Ask with tears, seek with obedience, knock with patience. For thus he who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. *St. John Climacus.*

Go and have pity on all, for through pity, one finds freedom of speech before God. *Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky*

Sometimes prayer seems to flag and we cry, 'Make haste unto me, O God' (Ps. 70:5). But if we do not let go of the hem of His garment, help will come. It is vital to dwell in prayer in order to counteract the persistently destructive influence of the outside world. *Archimandrite Sophrony*

When you stand praying, burdened with many sins and overpowered with despair, begin to pray with hope, with a fervent spirit, and remind yourself that 'the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered!' (Rom. 8:26). When you remember with faith this action of the Spirit of God within us, then tears of emotion will flow from your eyes, you will feel in your soul peace, sweetness, justification, 'and joy in the Holy Spirit,' (Rom. 14:17) and you will cry in your heart, 'Abba, Father!' *St. John of Kronstadt, My Life in Christ pg. 125*

Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things *are* possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24)

At times our soul is suffocated and is, as it were, amid the waves; and whether a man reads in the Scriptures, or performs his liturgy, or approaches anything whatever, he receives darkness upon darkness. He leaves off [prayer] and cannot even draw nigh to it. He is wholly unable to believe that a change will occur and that he will be at peace. This hour is full of despair and fear; hope in God and the consolation of faith are utterly extinguished from his soul, and she is wholly and entirely filled with doubt and fear. Those who have been tried by the mighty waves of this dark hour know from experience the change that follows upon its completion. God does not leave the soul in these things an entire day, for otherwise she would perish, being estranged from the Christian hope; but he speedily provides her with an "escape" (1 Cor 10.13). But even if the oppression of this darkness should be prolonged, you should expect that a change to the better will proceed swiftly out of the midst of it. I admonish and counsel you, O man, if you do not have the strength to master yourself and to fall upon your face in prayer, then wrap your head in your cloak and sleep until this hour of darkness pass from you, but do not leave your dwelling. This trial befalls those especially who desire to pass their life in the noetic discipline, and who throughout their journey seek the consolation of faith. For this reason their greatest pain and travail is the dark hour when their mind wavers with doubt. And blasphemy follows hard upon this. Sometimes a man is seized by doubts in the resurrection, and by other things whereof we have no need to speak. Many times we have experienced all these things, and we have written of this struggle for the comfort of many. Blessed is he who patiently endures these things within the doors [of his cell]! Afterward, as the Fathers say, he will attain to a magnificent and enduring dwelling. This struggle, however, does not cease immediately, nor in an hour; nor does grace come once and for all and dwell in the soul, but little by little of one and the other: sometimes trial, sometimes consolation. A man continues in these things until his departure. In this life we should not expect to receive perfect freedom from this struggle, nor to receive perfect consolation. For thus is God pleased to govern our life here: that those who journey in the way should be in the midst of these things. To him be glory unto the ages of ages. Amen. (St Isaac the Syrian, Homilies 50, in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, pp 241-42)

When you are praying alone, and your spirit is dejected, and you are wearied and oppressed by your loneliness, remember then, as always, that God the Trinity looks upon you with eyes brighter than the sun; also all the angels, your own Guardian Angel, and all the Saints of God. Truly they do; for they are all one in God, and where God is, there are they also... Try to understand what this means. *Elder Herman of Mt. Athos*

My hope is the Father, my refuge is the Son, my shelter is the Holy Spirit, O Holy Trinity, Glory to You.
Iannikos the Great