

GODFORSAKENNESS

ACCORDING TO ST SOPHRONY THE ATHONITE

ARCHIMANDRITE EPHRAIM

Abbot of the Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi

St Sophrony divides the spiritual life into three periods. The first, the initial one, is that of the call to and inspiration for the struggle in question; the second is that of the withdrawal of 'perceptible' Grace and the experience of Godforsakenness; and the third is the return of perceptible Grace and its retention. Godforsakenness is not experienced by those who live Christianity as a moralistic or intellectual philosophical-cum-religious system, because such people have no empirical communion with God. They are unaware of the existence, the sharing of divine Grace, its advent and its removal. They may believe that God exists, but they do not have living faith, the faith of experience.

The subject with which we deal in this article is not one which is easily accepted by those who are not initiates in the life of divine Grace. We would say that it is rather daunting, as testified by the title: 'Godforsakenness'. It is, however, extremely important, the *sine qua non* for the spiritual life. Many—perhaps most—will say of what follows: 'This is a hard saying; who can bear it?'.¹ But St Sophrony, the blessed Elder who was recently enrolled into the Catalogue of Saints of the Orthodox Church and who, through his experience and writings, has left for us the unimpeded path for the life in Christ, stressed that God wants to see us perfect, as he is perfect.² And the path to perfection necessarily passes through the Golgotha of Godforsakenness.

At the important moment in our life, whenever it pleases God that we should define ourselves positively before him, we experience the supernatural revelation of God. Having offered up the whole of our freedom towards the observation of his commandments, we 'walk in the newness of life',³ we enter a particular spiritual milieu where we encounter God, share in his Grace empirically and experience states 'beyond reason and conception', which we could never even have imagined before. It is then that Christians begin, to all intents and purposes, to experience the spiritual 'new life', life in Christ.

Following the earlier Fathers of the Church, St Sophrony divides the spiritual life into three periods. He writes: 'The first, the initial stage, is the summons and the

¹ *Jn.* 6:60.

² See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988), 223.

³ *Rom.* 6:4.

inspiration to embark on the ascetic struggle; the second happens when the feeling of Grace is replaced by a sense of being Godforsaken... The third and final stage is the acquisition, for the second time, and preservation of “perceptible” Grace.⁴

The first period, that of the coming of divine Grace into the soul of those who believe, is a period of spiritual joy, a feeling of love and closeness to Christ, an experience of the sweetness of Grace, wonderful emotions in the heart, beyond expression in worldly, created words. Despite this, the holy Elder considers that this gift from God’s bounty is ‘unrighteous mammon.’⁵ Divine Grace cannot be absorbed in this period by Christians in a way that it becomes one with their nature for eternity. The faithful must enter the second phase, which is lengthy Godforsakenness.⁶ The more intensely they experienced the first visitation of Grace, the more commensurate will be the experience of the loss of it. Even the spiritually perfect experience Godforsakenness and, indeed, do so in perfect measure, the difference being that they know the manner of the struggle, God’s instruction, and this is why they are not disheartened.

In Patristic literature, particularly in the texts by Saints Ammon, ⁷ Macarius of Egypt,⁸ Diadochus of Photice,⁹ Isaac the Syrian,¹⁰ Maximus the Confessor,¹¹ John of Carpathos,¹² and Symeon the New Theologian,¹³ we encounter the periphrastic terms ‘removal of Grace’, ‘loss of Grace’, ‘contraction or diminishment of Grace’, and ‘a spiritual change or alteration’ to denote this second period. It is rare for the Fathers to use the daunting term ‘Godforsakenness’. The first to do so was Abbas Cassian

⁴ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1996), 68.

⁵ See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988), 206.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷ *The Letters of Ammonas* (Oxford: SLG Press, Convent of the Incarnation, 1995), *Letter IX*, 12–13 ‘But after the Spirit has given them joy and sweetness, He then departs and leaves them’.

⁸ Macarius the Egyptian, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* (London: A. J. Mason, D.D., 1921), *Homily VIII*, 66, ‘yet afterwards Grace retreated’. *Ibid.*, *Homily XVI*, 141, ‘when Grace withdraws’. *Homily XXVII*, 207. ‘Grace withdraws of set purpose’.

⁹ *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London-Boston: translated and edited by C.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, 1979), Diadochus of Photice, *On Spiritual Knowledge and discrimination*, 287. ‘Grace conceals itself a little’.

¹⁰ Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies* (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), *Homily 13*. The whole of the discourse, the contents of which are expressed in the title. ‘On the alteration and change that takes place in those who are making their way on the path of stillness...’, 200.

¹¹ St Maximus the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity* (London: translated and annotated by Polycarp Sherwood, Longmans, Green and Co, 1955), Century four, chapter. 96, 207. ‘There are four general kinds of dereliction’.

¹² *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London-Boston: translated and edited by C.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber 1979), St. John of Karpachos, *Texts for the monks in India*, 315. ‘It may happen that for a certain time a man is illumined and refreshed by God’s Grace, and then this Grace is withdrawn’.

¹³ Symeon the New Theologian, *Divine Eros, Hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian*, Hymn 48, verses 100–102, (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2010), 342. ‘He shall return with a gracious eye, and He shall see and grant for you to behold Him a little bit, and again He will abandon you, concealed from your eyes’.

at the beginning of the fifth century in his work *Conferences with the Fathers of the Desert*.¹⁴ The second, so far as we know, is St Sophrony, some 1600 years later and we believe he did so to emphasise the pain of this condition. Of course, the Elder also uses the synonymous terms removal or loss of Grace in his texts. We do not find systematic teaching regarding the period of the removal of Grace in the texts of the older Fathers. The first Fathers who analyzed it and wrote about it were St Joseph the Hesychast,¹⁵ St Silouan the Athonite¹⁶ and, thereafter, St Sophrony.¹⁷

How is this period experienced? The Elder writes that God, who has initially wounded the heart of the Christian with his love, then departs. An arena of struggles then opens before us which will last for years or perhaps decades.¹⁸ He says indicatively,

Struggles and battles begin after the first visitation of divine grace. It needs a long time for someone to assimilate the first grace that he received. And this assimilation comes about through patience and fortitude in periods when divine grace is withdrawn.¹⁹

Grace returns briefly, reinforces hope, renews the inspiration for the struggle, but then departs again.²⁰ These moments of the departure of Grace are moments of emptying for us, of spiritual poverty and experience of the pain of Godforsakenness, and they lead us to a form of despair. We feel as if a terrible curse has befallen us. And it is possible that the whole of our being will suffer and labor in pain: our nous, heart, soul, and body.²¹ Although initially all prayers and requests to God by the faithful are heard immediately in a wondrous way, now, during this period, every-

¹⁴ See Abbas Cassian, *Συνομιλίες με τοὺς Πατέρες τῆς ἐρήμου*, ἄββας Δανιὴλ 6, vol. 1 (Etoimasia, Athens, 2004), 274. «Ὁ προφήτης Δαυὶδ ἀναγνώριζε ὅτι αὐτὴ ἡ ἄρση τῆς Χάρης, γιὰ τὴν ὁποία μιλήσαμε, ἡ Θεοεγκατάλειψη—ἂν θὰ μπορούσαμε νὰ τὴν ὀνομάσουμε ἔτσι—εἶναι, ὡς ἓνα σημεῖο, γιὰ τὸ συμφέρον μας».

¹⁵ See Elder Joseph the Hesychast, *Ἡ Δεκάφωνος Σάλλιγξ*, 5ο σάλπισμα, Ἄρσις τῆς Χάριτος, in Elder Joseph Vatopedinos, *Ὁ Γέροντας Ἰωσήφ ὁ Ἡσυχαστής, Βίος—Διδασκαλία—Ἡ Δεκάφωνος Σάλλιγξ* (Holy Mountain: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi, 2016), 280–91. Cf. Elder Joseph, *Monastic Wisdom: The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast* (Florence, Arizona: St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, 1998), 357–68.

¹⁶ See the chapter 'Grace and Consequent dogmatic conscience' in Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (NY: Saint Vladimir's Press, Crestwood, 1991), 184–92.

¹⁷ For more, see Jean-Claude Larchet, 'Ἡ ἄρση τῆς χάριτος κατὰ τὴν ἐμπειρία καὶ διδασκαλία τοῦ Γέροντος Ἰωσήφ τοῦ Ἡσυχαστοῦ', *Πρακτικὰ Διορθοδόξων Ἐπιστημονικῶν Συνεδρίων Ἀθηνῶν καὶ Λεμεσοῦ, Γέροντας Ἰωσήφ ὁ Ἡσυχαστής, Ἅγιον Ὅρος—φιλοκαλικὴ ἐμπειρία* (Holy Mountain: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi, 2007), 375–86.

¹⁸ With St Paul in mind, St Sophrony says that the least amount of time required to absorb Grace is fifteen years. Usually it is longer. For St Silouan it was more than thirty years. See Archimandrite Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite*, 185–86. For Abbas Isaac the Syrian it was 30 years. See his *Discourse* 54, 410–11.

¹⁹ See the passage by St Sophrony in Metropolitan Ierotheos of Nafpaktos, *I Know a Man in Christ: Elder Sophrony the Hesychast and Theologian* (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2015), 225.

²⁰ See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988), 218.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

thing has changed, the heavens seem to have closed and God appears deaf to every supplication.²²

The holy Elder describes in detail this period of spiritual trials, which is a time of taking on the cross on all levels of the life of a Christian, internal and external:

For the fervent Christian everything in life gets to be difficult. There is a change in people's attitude towards him—he is no longer respected. What is willingly forgiven others is held against him. His resistance to physical ills is lowered. Nature, circumstances, people—all turn against him. He finds no outlet for his natural talents, though they are no less valuable than other people's. On top of all this he has to endure assaults from the demonic powers. And finally—the most painful and unbearable of torments—God deserts him. His suffering is complete—he is stricken on every level of his being.²³

‘The soul descends into hell.’²⁴

The Elder confesses that this Godforsakenness makes a strange impression. When God abandons us, we feel a void within our whole being. The soul laments because it knows neither if nor when the One that has withdrawn, Christ, will return. The soul experiences this terrible void as death.²⁵ ‘It is possible for God to appear ruthless to the soul. If, despite asceticism and labor performed with the utmost of our powers, we do not receive God's mercy, it is possible that we will suffer so terribly that, were it possible, we would deny any form of existence at all.’²⁶ This experience is so dreadful and so intense that this great and experienced contemporary ascetic is in a position to reveal that: ‘such thoughts and sentiments assault her concerning which it is better to remain silent’.²⁷

What is it that really happens? Does God in fact abandon the believer? Does God withdraw his Grace from us and leave us entirely alone? St Diadochus of Photice tells us that this is precisely the desire and task of the demons: to make us believe that the Grace of God does not dwell in our heart, so that we will not arm ourselves against them with the recollection of God.²⁸ What happens, then? St Sophrony emphasizes that God takes away the “perceptible” Grace,²⁹ but this does not mean that the on-

²² Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 200.

²³ Ibid., 200–201.

²⁴ Ibid., 194.

²⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1996), 13.

²⁶ Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 193.

²⁷ Ibid., 194.

²⁸ *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London-Boston: translated and edited by C.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, 1979), Diadochus of Photice, *On Spiritual Knowledge and discrimination*, 262–63.

²⁹ See Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 68.

tological communion between God and us is interrupted. This is not an objective, complete removal of Grace, but a subjective sense of the soul that experiences the diminishment and removal of Grace as Godforsakenness.³⁰ The action of Grace now remains within the faithful in a mystical fashion, not in a perceptible way. In other words, Godforsakenness is only apparently the case. 'Christ's own'³¹ experience, the abandonment of God through a shift of the heart, not of faith. The shift in the heart which was initially wrought at the first visitation of God and brought experiences of heavenly joy to the believer, now becomes a conveyor of hellish connotations.

St Sophrony stresses that: 'The more a man has tasted of the joy of unity with God, the more profoundly he suffers on being parted from Him'.³² Faith in God's providence, faith in contemplation cannot fail or be lost, however. This does not mean that the experience of Godforsakenness is not real, but Christians inherently believe that God is with them, as is the hope that they will once again experience the visitation of his perceptible Grace. This is the meaning of the words of Christ to St Silouan: 'Keep thy mind in hell and despair not'.³³ The faithful experience and bear the dreadful hell of abandonment by God through their mental sensations, but they do not despair, because they are strengthened by the faith of contemplation. This is what St Paul means when he writes that 'we walk by faith, not by appearances (i.e., the feelings)'.³⁴ 'Father Sophrony asserts that periods of the loss of Grace are necessary stages in ascetic growth, and are in fact paradoxically a manifestation of divine love. The experience of Godforsakenness contains life-generating divine power'.³⁵

When striving Christians have sunk into great sorrow, they try with all their strength and their abilities to find the reason why Grace has been removed and lost and to find a way back in order to acquire it again.³⁶ Likely causes are a relaxation of the spiritual struggle, negligence, or even acquiescence to a bad thought.³⁷

St Sophrony does not refer to these specifically, nor does he talk about the kinds of Godforsakenness,³⁸ but focuses his attention on pride, the root of all the passions, which he considers the prime cause of the loss of Grace on our part. He stressed that when we fall prey to the spirit of vainglory or complacency, we suffer

³⁰ See Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 28.

³¹ *Gal.* 5:24.

³² Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him As He Is*, 128.

³³ Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 42.

³⁴ *2 Cor.* 5:7.

³⁵ Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 32.

³⁶ Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 188.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 440.

³⁸ St Diadochus of Photice writes about two kinds of Godforsakenness, the removal of Grace for purposes of instruction and because of aversion. See *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London-Boston: translated and edited by C.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, Faber and Faber, 1979), Diadochus of Photice, *On Spiritual Knowledge and discrimination*, chapters 86–87, 286–87. St Maximus the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity* (London: translated and annotated by Polycarp Sherwood, Longmans, Green and Co., 1955), century four, chapter 96, 207–208.

Godforsakenness. 'But Grace is easily lost' through the subtle passion of vainglory,³⁹ as his spiritual father St Silouan used to say.

Despite this, St Sophrony underlines the fact that when we suffer a reduction or removal of the first Grace during the second period of our spiritual life, this occurs 'through God's providence'. This Godforsakenness is inevitable, even for the most conscientious ascetics.⁴⁰ 'Godforsakenness is not only a mode of divine presence, but even God's gift',⁴¹ 'is a gift of God's love'.⁴² The prime cause of Godforsakenness, then, does not originate with us, but it occurs as part of the all-encompassing wisdom of God's plan, of his instructive providence. It is what St Joseph the Hesychast characterized as 'the law of God'.⁴³ Concerning this, St Sophrony says:

First one receives God's grace, then grace withdraws and one passes through through God's chastening. However, everyone has to go through this training. Because even if one were to receive grace without the appropriate training, it could go wrong and contribute to his condemnation. One must pass through humility.⁴⁴

The period of Godforsakenness is compared by St Sophrony to the Biblical time when the Hebrews were sojourning in the wilderness before the occupation of the promised land. This progression is painful, though, at the same time, wondrous. Its deeper significance will be revealed to those who reach the end of the road.⁴⁵ In any case, the Elder stresses that: 'The point of being abandoned by God is to show us that we are not yet ready; that the path has not yet been followed to the end; that we must face still more exhaustive self-emptying, drink of the cup that He drank of'.⁴⁶

'God leaves us so that we may show our liberty'.⁴⁷ At this stage, 'The purpose behind this withdrawal of Grace is to give him the opportunity to manifest his freedom and fidelity to God'.⁴⁸ Through our emptying, through self-diminution to

³⁹ Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 329.

⁴⁰ See Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He is*, 129.

⁴¹ Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, 176.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴³ 'He removed Grace from you so that you may become wise. But it will come again. It does not abandon you. This is a law of God. But it will leave again. Yet once more will it come. As long as you don't stop seeking it, it will keep coming and going until it renders you perfect'. Elder Joseph, *Monastic Wisdom: The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast* (Florence, Arizona: St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, 1998), 127. 'For it is absolutely necessary for the Grace of God to leave, once a tried struggler has acquired a good taste of it in the beginning, so that he may be tested and become a practiced soldier of Christ'. *Ibid.*, 366.

⁴⁴ See the passage by Saint Sophrony in Metropolitan Ierotheos of Nafpaktos, *I Know a Man in Christ: Elder Sophrony the Hesychast and Theologian* (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2015), 353.

⁴⁵ See Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 126.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁷ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 218.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

the point of nothingness we are ‘cleansed from the “curse” of our inheritance,’ pride.⁴⁹ Through the trials of this period, God wants ‘to form the ascetic in His image, that is, to make him lord and king, to associate man with holiness and fullness of being in Himself’.⁵⁰

The purpose of this extended Godforsakenness is that, after their long and harsh time of testing, the faithful should acquire the ‘true’ riches of Grace as their inalienable and eternal possession. That Grace should be interwoven with our created nature to the extent that we become one, that we are deified, that the divine form of existence, without beginning, should be transferred to us.⁵¹

Godforsakenness is based by St Sophrony on the person of Christ. ‘Jesus Christ the man’⁵² experienced ultimate abandonment in Gethsemane and, in particular, on the cross, when He ‘cried in a loud voice... my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’⁵³ *Mutatis mutandis*, all Christians have to experience this emptying, as images of Christ, in order to receive salvation.⁵⁴ Intense moments of Godforsakenness are usually followed by great consolation from God, as in the case of St Silouan, who was overcome by the dark spirit of despair and after thinking that it is impossible for God to be silent⁵⁵ he saw Christ, the living *Theanthrōpos*. This is why Elder Joseph the Hesychast also stressed that ‘at the end of exhaustive patience, the Grace of God appears perceptibly’.⁵⁶

The sufferings during the time of Godforsakenness create a wound in the heart, a metaphysical pain, which, for St Sophrony was the leitmotiv of his life.⁵⁷ Through the experience of such sufferings, we can understand the sufferings of the whole of humankind and sympathize with every person.⁵⁸ ‘Through suffering our being expands’⁵⁹ and we pray for the whole of humankind. ‘Then it is that man *qua persona* really prays ‘face to Face’ with the Eternal God. In this encounter with the Hypostatic God the *hypostasis*, that at first was only potential, is actualized in us’.⁶⁰ For the Orthodox Christian, the meaning of life is the acquisition of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Absorption of divine Grace comes after the passing of many years of ascetic effort and the experience of its advent and departure. This absorption takes the form of spiritual knowledge, which St Sophrony defines as dogmatic con-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁰ See Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, Ὁ Ἅγιος Σιλουανὸς ὁ Ἀθωνίτης, 258.

⁵¹ See Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 69.

⁵² 1 Tim. 2:5.

⁵³ Matt. 27:46.

⁵⁴ See Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 128–29.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁵⁶ From Elder Joseph’s homilies to the monks.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 230 and passim.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 223.

⁶⁰ ‘Godforsakenness assists the realization of the hypostatic principle in man’ Nicholas Sakharov, *I love, therefore I am*, 197.

science.⁶¹ It follows that those who really know Orthodox dogma do not come from the sphere of academia, but from that milieu where empirical theology is cultivated and developed, as laid down by the Patristic tradition. And the preeminent locus for this is the monastery.

Those who experience Godforsakenness have to be aware of the path, of the instruction of God, so that they do not give up, lose heart, or retreat. The Blessed Elder emphasizes that many people tasted the first visitation of Grace, but, because they did not know the order of spiritual increase in Christians, when they were deprived of Grace during the period of its absence, they ceased to struggle and fell away from God. Indeed, they considered the first visitation by Grace to be a passing flare-up in the soul rather than an ontological experience.⁶²

In order to emerge victorious from the stage of Godforsakenness, Christians must exercise self-censure, must seek God's mercy with true contrition and humility of the heart, must be fully conscious with the whole of their being of the truth of the Lord's words: 'Without me you can do nothing.'⁶³ Self-censure leads to self-knowledge, to recognition of our ill-disposed inner state, of the dwelling which we ourselves have prepared for eternity, of our personal hell that we see being played out in the depths of our heart. In this way, we acquire a holy hate towards our self, self-hatred, as the Elder says, which slays all the passions.⁶⁴

Those who are tested during the period of Godforsakenness must not deviate from the observation of the commandments and of obedience. They must live in the belief of contemplation, must not offend their conscience and must have boundless patience. Those who live in perfect obedience to their spiritual father progress with less pain and great security along the path of Godforsakenness. The Elder emphasizes that, in the end, despair does not overcome ascetics. Even though their soul is hovering and trembling over the abyss of Hades, 'Still, in her depths hope lurks. The sense of being abandoned by God disappears, and the sun comes out again.'⁶⁵

The Blessed Elder recommends that, during the time of extended Godforsakenness, Christians should live as if Grace were abiding with them always, even if they are conscious of the void.⁶⁶ They should do 'everything that Grace has ever taught one',⁶⁷

⁶¹ Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 185.

⁶² Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 219. Cf. Elder Joseph the Hesychast, *Ἡ Δεκάφωνος Σάλπιγξ*, in Elder Joseph of Vatopedi, *Ὁ Γέροντας Ἰωσήφ ὁ Ἡσυχαστής, Βίος—Διδασκαλία—Ἡ Δεκάφωνος Σάλπιγξ* (Holy Mountain: Holy Great Monastery of Vatopedi, 2016), 291.

⁶³ *Jn.* 15:5. See Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 129.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 127 and 80.

⁶⁵ Archim. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 50. Cf. Elder Joseph the Hesychast, *Ἡ Δεκάφωνος Σάλπιγξ*, 290. St Isaac the Syrian advises monks who have exhausted their reserves of patience and cannot remain or persist in prayer to lie down and sleep until this dark and gloomy condition passes: '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.' Saint Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 50, 376.

⁶⁶ *On Prayer*, 69.

⁶⁷ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 219.

as the Elder quotes the words of St Silouan. In other words, the Elder has embraced the teaching of St Macarius of Egypt, who urges those who are experiencing such a situation to 'force himself to that which is good, even against the inclination of his heart, continually expecting His mercy with no doubtful faith'.⁶⁸ 'For man to love God when Grace works palpably in him is congenital and natural. But if someone is faithful and committed to the same love whilst he is enduring the crucifixion of Godforsakenness, it means that his love is approaching the fullness of perfection and becoming stronger than the death he is experiencing through kenosis and the loss of Grace'.⁶⁹

Those who live their Christianity as a moralistic or intellectual philosophical-cum-religious system do not experience Godforsakenness because these people do not have empirical communion with God. They are unaware of the existence of the divine Grace, of participation in it, of its advent and its departure. They may believe that God exists, but they do not have living faith, the faith of contemplation. This faith is missing among the moralists and intellectuals. This is what the Elder means when he writes 'Unbelievers have no idea of what it means to be bereft of God'.⁷⁰

I humbly pray that, in the wilderness of Godforsakenness we all keep our confession in Christ firm and unshakeable, so that we may come, by God's providence, to the promised land, that perfect condition in which, as St Sophrony the Athonite says, the depressing alternation of conditions will not occur, Grace will love us and will never abandon us again.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Macarius the Egyptian, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* (London: A. J. Mason, D.D. 1921), *Homily XIX*, 158–59.

⁶⁹ Archim. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life* (South Canaan, Pennsylvania, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press 2003), 115–16.

⁷⁰ Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 128.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 219.