

Prayers of the Ancient Church

Week 4

St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-c. 373 AD)

Born in Nisibis, died in Edessa

Deacon and Teacher in the church; wrote all of his work in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic

Of his writings, over four hundred hymns survive

"The greatest poet of the patristic age and, perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante." —

Robert Murray

From *The Pearl: Seven Hymns on the Faith*:

HYMN IV.

1. The thief gained the faith which gained him,
And brought him up and placed him in paradise.

He saw in the Cross a tree of life;

That was the fruit,

He was the eater in Adam's stead.

The fool, who goes astray,

Grazes the faith, as it were an eye,

By all manner of questions.

The probing of the finger blinds the eye,

And much more doth that prying blind the faith.

For even the diver pries not into his pearl.

In it do all merchants rejoice

Without prying into whence it came;

Even the king who is crowned therewith

Does not explore it.

2. Because Balaam was foolish,

A foolish beast in the ass spoke with him,

Because he despised God Who spoke with him.

Thee too let the pearl reprove

In the ass's stead.

The people that had a heart of stone,

By a Stone He set at nought,

For lo, a stone hears words.

Witness its work that has reproved them;

And you, ye deaf ones,

Let the pearl reprove to-day.

With the swallow and the crow did He put men to shame;

With the ox, yea with the ass, did He put them to shame;

Let the pearl reprove now,

O ye birds and things on earth and things below.

3. Not as the moon does thy light fill or wane;
The Sun whose light is greater than all,
Lo! Of Him it is that a type is shadowed out in thy little compass.
O type of the Son,
One spark of Whom is greater than the sun!
The pearl itself is full,
for its light is full;
Neither is there any cunning worker who can steal from it;
For its wall is its own beauty,
Yea, its guard also!
It lacks not,
since it is entirely perfect.
And if a man would break thee
To take a part from thee,
Thou art like the faith which with the heretics perishes,
Seeing they have broken it in pieces and spoiled it :
For is it any better than this
To have the faith scrutinized?
The faith is an entire nature
That may not be corrupted.
The spoiler gets himself mischief by it:
The heretic brings ruin on himself thereby.
He that chases the light from his pupils
Blinds himself.
Fire and air are divided when sundered.
Light alone, of all creatures,
As its Creator, is not divided;
It is not barren, for that it also begets
Without losing thereby.

4. And if a man thinks that thou art framed [by art]
He errs greatly;
Thy nature proclaims that thou, as all stones,
Art not the framing of art;
and so thou art a type of the Generation
Which no making framed.
Thy stone flees
From a comparison with the Stone [which is] the Son.
For thy own generation is from the midst of the deep,
That of the Son of thy Creator is from the highest height;

He is not like thee,
In that He is like His Father.
And as they tell,
Two wombs bare thee also.
Thou camest down from on high a fluid nature;
Thou camest up from the sea a solid body.
By means of thy second birth
Thou didst show thy loveliness to the children of men.
Hands fixed thee, when thou wast embodied,
Into thy receptacles;
For thou art in the crown as upon the cross,
And in a coronet as in a victory;
Thou art upon the ears, as if to fill up what was lacking;
Thou extendest over all.

From *Fifteen Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany*:

Hymn X.

(Resp.—Glory to Him Who came and restored it!)

1. Adam sinned and earned all sorrows;—likewise the world after His example, all guilt.—And instead of considering how it should be restored,—considered how its fall should be pleasant for it.—Glory to Him Who came and restored it!
2. This cause summoned Him that is pure,—that He should come and be baptized, even He with the defiled,—Heaven for His glory was rent asunder.—That the purifier of all might be baptized with all,—He came down and sanctified the water for our baptism.
3. For that cause for which He entered into the womb,—for the same cause He went down into the river.—For that cause for which He entered into the grave,—for the same cause He makes us enter into His chamber.—He perfected mankind for every cause.
4. His Conception is the store of our blessings;—His Birth is the treasury of our joys;—His Baptism is the cause of our pardon;—His Death is the cause of our life.—Death He alone has overcome in His Resurrection.
5. At His Birth a star of light shone in the air;—when He was baptized light flashed from the water;—at His Death the sun was darkened in the firmament;—at His Passion the luminaries set along with Him;—at His Epiphany the luminaries arose with Him.
6. Revealed was His Glory because of His Majesty;—revealed was His Passion because of His Manhood;—revealed was His Love because of His Graciousness;—revealed was His Judgment because of His Justice.—He has poured forth His attributes, on them that were His.
7. That whoso has looked on His Glory and despised Him,—may look again on His Glory and worship Him;—and whoso has scorned to taste of His Graciousness,—may fear lest he be made to feel His justice;—He has poured forth His helps on His worshippers.

8. Lo! the East in the morning was made light!—lo! the South at noonday was made dark!—The West again in turn at eventide was made light.—The three quarters represent the one Birth;—His Death and His Life they declare.

9. His Birth flowed on and was joined to His Baptism;—and His Baptism again flowed on even to His Death;—His Death led and reached to His Resurrection,—a fourfold bridge unto His Kingdom; and lo! His sheep pass over in His footsteps.

10. And like as, save by the door of birth,—none can enter into creation;—so, save by the door of resurrection,—none can enter into the Kingdom,—and whoso has cut off his bridge, has brought to nought his hope.

11. He put on His armour and conquered and was crowned;—He left His armour on earth and ascended,—that if any man desires the crown,—he may resort to the armour and win by it—the crown of victory which he yearns after.

12. He fulfilled righteousness on earth, and ascended.—But if He, the All-cleanser, was baptized,—What man is there that shall not be baptized?—for grace has come to baptism—to wash away the foulness of our wound.

13. The compulsion of God is an all-prevailing force;—[but that is not pleasing to Him which is of compulsion,]—as that which is of discerning will.—Therefore in our fruits He calls us—who live not as under compulsion, by persuasion.

14. Good is He, for lo! He labours in these two things;—He wills not to constrain our freedom—nor again does He suffer us to abuse it.—For had he constrained it, He had taken away its power;—and had He let it go, He had deprived it of help.

15. He knows that if He constrains He deprives us;—He knows that if He casts off He destroys us;—He knows that if He teaches He wins us.—He has not constrained and He has not cast off, as the Evil One does:—He has taught, chastened, and won us, as being the good God.

16. He knows that His treasures abound:—the keys of His treasures He has put into our hands.—He has made the Cross our treasurer—to open for us the gates of Paradise,—as Adam opened the gate of Gehenna.

Prayer of St. Ephrem

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages. Amen.