

Once Upon a SAINT

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St. Ephrem the Syrian



Grant to me, Your servant, the spirit of humble-mindedness, patience, and love.

During the Great Fast, Eastern Christians of the Byzantine/Greek tradition say this prayer every day while prostrating. St. Ephrem, who penned this prayer, was born around the year 306, in the city of Nisibis (the modern Turkish town of Nusaybin, on the border with Syria). Ephrem's parents were young Christians, his father a pagan priest before his own conversion.

When Ephrem was a baby, his parents went to bed one night, and both had the same prophetic dream.

"I had the strangest dream, dear Yuma!" Said Ephrem's father.

"I too, Baba!" Replied Ephrem's mother, "I dreamt that a vine grew from little Ephrem's mouth and grapes from the vine. Birds began eating the fruit, and the more they ate, the more the grapes grew."

"I too had this dream!" Exclaimed Baba, "I wonder what this can mean! Let us write this dream down and remember it, and see what we can make of it when our little Ephrem is all grown."

At first the dream made no sense. Ephrem was smart, but he used the gift of intelligence to be impulsive and naughty. Despite his parents' incessant teaching of God's word, Ephrem loved to argue for fun and enjoyed thinking about sinful things. One day he was on an errand and he saw a pregnant cow. He decided to throw stones at it, and kept doing so until the cow finally fell down dead. It was then left to wild beasts.

On his way back home, he met the owner of the cow.

"My son, have you seen my cow? Did you drive her away?"

"No!" Ephrem lied loudly, "how dare you suggest such a thing! You're a stupid old man! Go jump in a lake!"

A few days later, Ephrem was hanging out with some shepherds. It got late, so he spent the night with them. During the night some sheep were stolen and Ephrem was accused of having worked with the robbers. He was sent to prison. In a dream, Ephrem saw an Angel.

"Ephrem, why are you here?" The angel asked.

"I'm innocent! I had nothing to do with stealing the dumb sheep!"

"Yes," said the angel, "you are innocent of stealing the sheep, but have you forgotten the poor man's cow?"

Ephrem was scared by the dream, for he understood that God had seen his wicked deeds. But he was also scared because he saw that the criminals with him were being tortured and even killed. He began to pray.

"Lord, see here! I'll be a monk, I'll turn away from wickedness if you keep me from getting punished!"

This wasn't the holiest prayer since it came more from his fear than a desire to be good, but God heard Ephrem anyway. The magistrate ordered that Ephrem be tortured on the rack, but just then dinner was being served so the magistrate ordered Ephrem back to his cell instead. Having forgotten about him, the magistrate assumed that Ephrem had received his punishment already, and let him go a while later.

Ephrem, meanwhile, was determined to keep his promise to God. He went straight to the hermits living in the mountains and put himself under the obedience of a holy monk, St. Jacob (or James, because they are the same name in Hebrew/Aramaic). Ephrem fasted, prayed and studied scripture in earnest. He wept day and night for his sins. God gave Ephrem the gift of words, song and poetry.

Ephrem's poems and hymns became more popular. Ephrem is also credited with starting the University of Nisibis. While it looked like Ephrem was becoming successful in the world, he was looking for a life of solitude with God, and decided to go to Edessa to be a hermit among hermits. In Edessa, Ephrem settled in a cave of the nearby mountain where some other monks were also hermits in nearby caves. There he prayed, fasted and studied. He learned to humble himself often and with great humor. Once after a long fast, when the meal brought to him was spilled accidentally, Ephrem got down on the floor, saying: "if the food will not come to me, I will go to the food." He then proceeded to eat off the floor.

One day Patriarch Basil (the Great!) visited and asked Ephrem if he would like to be a priest. Ephrem told St. Basil he was too great a sinner. Basil didn't think much of Ephrem's sins, but he asked him to prostrate together with him, and as the two lay before the tabernacle, St. Basil laid his hands on Ephrem's head and ordained him a deacon.

On January 28, 373, after a brief illness, St. Ephrem was received into the Heavenly Kingdom. Do you remember that dream his parents had? Well, we've come to understand that the grapes his parents saw sprouting forth were Ephrem's many songs, sent to "feed" the souls of the people of Christ. The name "Ephrem" even means "fruitful!" When we fast, praying St. Ephrem's prayers will help us enter the proper mindset: we must fast from

everything that keeps us from loving God, ourselves, and our brothers and sisters as we should. And like Ephrem, we should fast with joy and good humor!

Here is a part of the beautiful hymn St. Ephrem wrote about Pascha, called *Hymn to the Light*. This is not Ephrem's only Hymn to the Light. He wrote several, and enjoyed thinking about God manifesting Himself as Light. So take special note (even highlight!) all the references to light, because this is a profound theological hymn worthy of prayer, especially as we enter into Christ's resurrection. Glory and splendor are a kind of light, by the way, and "illumine" and "enlighten" refer to making things visible with light:

The Light of the just and joy of the upright is Christ Jesus our Lord.

Begotten of the Father, He manifested himself to us.

He came to rescue us from darkness and to fill us with the radiance of His light.

Day is dawning upon us; the power of darkness is fading away.

From the true Light there arises for us the light which illumines our darkened eyes.

His glory shines upon the world and enlightens the very depths of the abyss.

Death is annihilated, night has vanished, and the gates of Sheol are broken.

Creatures lying in darkness from ancient times are clothed in light.

The dead arise from the dust and sing because they have a Savior.

He brings salvation and grants us life. He ascends to his Father on high.

He will return in glorious splendor and shed His light on those gazing upon Him.

Our King comes in majestic glory.

Let us light our lamps and go forth to meet Him.

Let us find our joy in Him, for He has found joy in us.

He will indeed rejoice us with His marvelous light.

