



My Beloved Ones,

I write to you today from the holy city of Jerusalem, having been blessed to be able to liturgize with my fellow pilgrims in the Church of the Holy Resurrection. As I prayed for you, my flock, and all faithful Orthodox Christians on this sacred site, I thought, of course, of the Fast we are preparing to undergo—and of the Great Feast we shall be blessed to celebrate in a few months' time.

The period of Triodion, which begins this Sunday, is a time of preparation; of making sure both our bodies and minds are prepared for the spiritual and physical challenges that will come with Great Lent. Of course, this first Sunday of Triodion, as always, commemorates the humility of the repentant Publican, comparing him to the overly righteous Pharisee; but today, I wish to discuss a particular Saint.

For it just so happens that on this first Sunday of Triodion, we commemorate the life of a saint whose most famous prayer will be familiar to all who know the Lenten services. I am of course, referring to St. Ephraim the Syrian.

St. Ephraim was born in Mesopotamia in the 4th Century. When he moved to Edessa, in what is today Syria, he found a city full of heretical teachings. There was an especially gifted, but Gnostic teacher named Bardaisan, who was turning Christians from the True Faith through deceptively beautiful hymns. St. Ephraim then saw it as his duty to compose equally beautiful and poetic hymns and prayers that were Orthodox in every way. He is therefore considered by many, the first hymnographer of the Church.

St. Ephraim's most well-known contribution is of course the prayer that is read at every weekday Lenten service: *"O Lord and Master of my life, grant me not a spirit of sloth, meddling, love of power, and idle talk. But give to me, your servant, a spirit of sober-mindedness, humility, patience, and love. Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother, since you are blessed to the ages of ages..."*

Though this prayer may be simple, it is deeply profound, for it teaches us precisely the way in which we should live, not only during Lent, but every day of our life as Orthodox Christians. We ask our God and Creator that through His help we not become complacent, overly materialistic, nor that we abuse our friend and fellow neighbor; but instead that we maintain control over our passions, in a spirit of quiet humility, patience and love.

Truly, as we are all given over to weakness, it is this spirit of acknowledging our own faults and not judging our brother that is often very difficult. Yet this is precisely why we must trust in God with whom *"...all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26), and use the beginning of Triodion to pray regularly and often.

Only through prayer and sincere reflection can we ensure that our spirits are calmed, and that with a calm heart and clear mind, we might be better able to emulate the worthy Publican, and forgive even the hurtful words of the Pharisee.

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Metropolitan of Atlanta