

St. Isaac the Syrian: Homily 2

St. Isaac the Syrian: Homily 2 Homily 2. On Thankfulness to God, In Which There Are Also Essential Elementary Lessons. The thanksgiving of the receiver incites the giver to give gifts greater than the first. He that returns no thanks in small matters is a dissembler and dishonest in greater ones also. If a man is ill and he recognizes his ailment, his healing will be easy. If he confesses his pain, he draws nigh its cure. There are many pangs for the unyielding heart, and the patient who resists his physician amplifies his torment. There is no unpardonable sin, save the unrepented one. Nor does any gift remain without addition, save that which is received without thanksgiving. The fool's portion is small in his eyes. Ever keep in remembrance those who surpass you by their virtue, so as to see yourself always as inferior to their measure. And be ever conscious of the bitter tribulations of the afflicted and oppressed, so that you may render due thanksgiving for your small and inconsequential troubles, and be able to endure them patiently and with joy. At the time of your defeat, when you are bound both with languor and slothfulness, and subdued by the enemy in the most painful misery and wearisome labor of sin, ponder in your heart on the former time of your diligence, and how you used to concern yourself even over the most minute matters, and the valiant struggle which you displayed, and how you were stirred up with zeal against those who would hinder you in your progress. Furthermore, reflect upon the groans which you used to utter because of the small faults that you committed due to your negligence, and how in all these things you took the crown of victory. For thus, with such and so many recollections, your soul is awakened as if from the deep and is clad with the flame of zeal. Then through fervent struggling against the devil and sin she rises up out of her sunken state as if from the dead, she is raised on high, and she returns to her ancient estate. Remember the fall of the mighty, and be humble in your virtues. Recollect the grievous transgressions of those who of old trespassed and repented, and the sublimity and honor of which afterwards they were deemed worthy, and take courage in your repentance. Be a persecutor of yourself, and your enemy will be driven from your proximity. Be peaceful within yourself, and heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Be diligent to enter into the treasury that is within you, and you will see the treasury of Heaven: for these are one and the same, and with one entry you will behold them both. The ladder of the Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend. Scripture has not explained to us what the things of the age to come are; and yet, how we might receive a perception of their delight here, without a change of nature and a translation to another place, Scripture has easily

taught us. For although it does this by the names of things desirable and highlyesteemed, which to us are sweet and precious, in order to stimulate us to ayearning for them, still when it says, 'which eye hath not seen, nor ear hathheard', and the rest, Scripture has declared to us that the good things to come areincomprehensible, and have no similarity to any thing here. Spiritual delight is not enjoyment found in things that exist substantially outside the souls of those whoreceive it. If it were, then the words, 'The Kingdom of the Heavens is within you'and, 'Thy Kingdom come', would mean that we have acquired matter of apalpable nature within us as the earnest of the delight found in that Kingdom. Forthe thing acquired must needs be like the earnest of it, and the whole like its part.And although 'as in a mirror' indicates 'not substantially', yet it does show clearly,in any case, the acquisition of a likeness. But if, as the true testimony of thosewho have interpreted the Scriptures says, this perception is the noetic operationof the Holy Spirit, and it is a part of that whole, then—besides that spiritualoperation which mediates between the Spirit and the saints through noeticperception—there is no palpable mediation by the senses for the delight of thesaints yonder, but instead of the senses there are only those receptacles of themind which contain everything in a well-ordered manner. And if we should call thisa profusion of light, we do not mean light that is not noetic. The lover of virtue isnot he who does good with valiant struggle, but he who accepts with joy the evils that attend virtue. It is not so great a thing for one patiently to endure afflictions onbehalf of virtue, as it is for the mind through the determination of its good volitionto remain unconfused by the flattery of tantalizing pleasures. No kind ofrepentance that takes place after the removal of our free will will be a well-springof joy, nor will it be reckoned for the reward of those who possess it. Cover a manwho stumbles, so long as you receive no harm from him, and give himencouragement; then your Master's loving-kindness will bear you up. Support witha word the infirm and those who are grieved at heart in so far as this lies withinyour hands, then the Right Hand that sustains all will also sustain you. Throughthe toil of prayer and the anguish of your heart commune with those who aregrieved at heart, and the Source of mercy will be opened up to your petitions.Belabor yourself in constant supplication before God with a heart possessing apure, compunctionate meditation, and God will protect your mind from filthythoughts, that His way may not be defamed through you. Continuously applyyourself to the study of reading the divine Scriptures with precise understanding,lest by reason of the idleness of your intellect, your sight be polluted with foreignpollutions. At a time when you think you will not be worsted, do not voluntarily make trial of your mind with lewd reflections which tempt you, because in this waywise men have been darkened and made fools. Do not store a flame in yourbosom. Without harsh tribulations of the flesh it is difficult for untrained youth to beheld under the yoke of sanctification. The beginning of the intellect's darkening(once a sign of it is visible in the soul) is to be seen, first of all,

in slothfulness with regard to the church services and prayer. For except the soul first fall away from these, she cannot be led in the way of error; but as soon as she is deprived of God's help, she easily falls into the hands of her adversaries. And again, whenever the soul becomes heedless of virtue's labors, she is inevitably drawn to what is opposed to them. A transition, from whichever side it occurs, is the beginning of what belongs to the opposite quarter. Practice the work of virtue in your soul and do not concern yourself with futile matters. Always lay bare your weakness before God, and you will never be put to the test by aliens when you are found alone, distant from your Helper. The activity of taking up the cross is twofold, in conformity with the duality of our nature, which is divided into two parts. The first is patient endurance of the tribulations of the flesh which is accomplished by the activity of the soul's incensive part, and this is called righteous activity (praxis). The second is to be found in the subtle workings of the intellect, in steady divine rumination, in unfailing constancy of prayer, and in other such practices. This second activity is carried out through the appetitive part of the soul, and is called divine vision (theoria). As for the first, that is, praxis, it purifies the passionate part of the soul by the power of zeal. And the second, theoria, through the action of the soul's love, which is a natural yearning, thoroughly filters out the noetic part of the soul. Thus every man who, before training completely in the first part, proceeds to that second activity out of passionate longing for its sweetness (or rather, should I say, out of sloth) has wrath come upon him, because he did not first 'mortify his members which are upon the earth', that is, heal the infirmity of his thoughts by patient endurance of the labor which belongs to the shame of the cross. For he dared to imagine in his mind the cross's glory. And this is what was said by holy men of old: 'If the intellect should wish to mount upon the cross before the senses have found rest from their infirmity, the wrath of God comes upon it.' His mounting of the cross which brings wrath upon itself does not result from the first part, that of patient endurance of afflictions which is the crucifying of our flesh, but results from the desire to ascend to divine vision (theoria), which is the second part and takes place after the healing of the soul. A man whose mind is polluted with the 'passions of dishonor', and who rushes to imagine with his mind the phantasies of the thoughts, is put to silence by Divine punishment, because he did not previously purify his mind through afflictions, and subdue the lusts of his flesh. But from what he has heard with his ears, and from the ink of his book-learning, he ran ahead of himself to walk in a way filled with gloom, while his own eyes were blind. For even those whose sight is sound and who are filled with light, who have obtained grace as their guide, are in peril both night and day. Their eyes are filled with tears, and they are diligent in prayer and weeping all the day and in the night, because they fear the journey and the great precipices that confront them and the illusions of dissembling shapes found mixed with truth. The things of God, they say, come of themselves, without one being aware of it. Yes, but only if the place is clean and not defiled. If the pupil

of your soul's eye is not pure, do not venture to gaze at the orb of the sun, lest you be deprived of your sight—which is simple faith, humility, confession from the heart and your small labors according to your capacity—and lest you be cast aside in alone region of the noetic world (which is the 'outer darkness', outside God, a figure of Hell) like that man who shamelessly entered into the wedding feast with unclean garments. From exertions and watching there springs purity of the thoughts. And out of purity of the thoughts, the light of the understanding dawns. From this the intellect is guided by grace into that wherein the senses have no power, either to teach, or to learn. Think to yourself that virtue is the body, but divine vision the soul, while both are one complete man in spirit, which is united out of two parts, the physical and the noetic. And just as it is impossible that our soul should come into being and be born without the complete forming of the body with its members, so is it impossible that there be divine vision, that second soul (which is also the spirit of revelation, and is molded in the matrix of the intellect that receives the substance of the spiritual seed) without the completion of virtue's labor; and virtue is the house of knowledge which is a host to revelations. Divine vision is the perception of divine mysteries which are hidden in things and causes. Whenever you hear of withdrawal or abandonment of the world, or of being pure from the world, then first you must learn and understand the term world, not as common, unlearned men do, but in its spiritual senses, and how many different things this name comprises. Then you will be able to know your soul, how distant she is from the world, and how great an intermingling she has with the world. World is a collective noun which is applied to the so-called passions. But if a man does not know first what the world is, he will never come to know with how many of his members he is distant from the world, and with how many he is bound to it. Many are the persons that with two or three members have parted from the world, and curb themselves with respect to these, and suppose themselves to be strangers to the world in their way of life. This, however, is because they neither understand nor prudently see that with two of their members they have died to the world, while their remaining members live within the body of the world. Howbeit, they have not even been able to perceive so much as their passions. And since they have no awareness of them, neither have they made an effort to heal them. By contemplative examination, the world is also called the aggregate of the collective noun which is applied to the separate passions. When we wish to give a collective name to the passions, we call them world. And when we wish to designate them specifically according to their names, we call them passions. The passions are portions of the course of the world's onward flow; and where the passions cease, there the world's onward flow stands still. These are the passions: love of wealth; gathering objects of any kind; bodily pleasure, from which comes the passion of carnal intercourse; love of esteem, from which springs envy; the wielding of power; pride in the trappings of authority; stateliness and pomposity; human glory, which is the cause of resentment; fear for the

body. Wherever these have halted in their course, there, in part, to the extent that the passions are inactive, the world fails from its constitution and remains inactive. Thus it was with each of the saints, that while they lived, they were dead. For living in the body, they lived not according to the flesh. Examine in which of these passions you are alive, and then you will know in how many parts you are alive to the world, and in how many you are dead. When you learn what the world is, by distinguishing these matters you will also come to know your entanglement in the world as well as your freedom from it. But that I may speak briefly: the world is the carnal way of life and the 'mind of the flesh'. Hence, a man's elevation above the world can also be recognized from these two things: from the good transformation of his way of life and from a discernment of his thoughts. Therefore, you may comprehend the measure of your way of life from that which arises in your mind with regard to the things it muses upon in its thoughts: for which things your nature effortlessly longs, what stirrings are aroused continually, and which are caused by an accidental circumstance; whether your mind has any perception at all of incorporeal thoughts; or whether all its motions are of a material sort; and whether the mind's material quality is something passionate, or only that the thoughts are the imprints of the physical aspect of a man's virtuous labor: for the mind involuntarily muses upon the things wherewith it performs the virtues. From these things the mind, in a wholesome manner, receives the cause of fervor and the gathering of its deliberations, for because of its lack of training the mind, with a good intention, prefers to labor in a corporeal manner, though it does not do so passionately. Observe also whether your mind remains unaffected by hidden confrontations with the imprints of thoughts because of a mightier ardor for the Divine, which is wont to cut off vain recollections. The few indications we have provided in this chapter will suffice a man for his enlightenment instead of many books if he lives quietly and has discernment. Fear for the body is often so strong in a man as to make him incapable of any deeds worthy of honor or praise. But when fear for the soul overshadows bodily fear, then bodily fear wilts before it like wax from the heat of a flame. But to our God be glory unto the ages. Amen.