

Second Chances

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On March 4th the Church celebrates the memory of Saint James the Faster. He was, as his title tells us, a man who fasted and prayed, but he also faced temptations that almost killed him.

He lived in the sixth century, and entered the monastic life at a young age. Because of his holy life, he was granted the ability to cure the worst diseases. People traveled great distances to be prayed over and healed by this wonder-working monk.

One of the devil's wiles for monks is to tempt them with lust, and so it was with James. A woman came to him, having been challenged by cynical companions to see whether she could undermine his composure. She pretended to weep bitterly and to need his help desperately. Then she tried to seduce him.

Knowing that lust was a strong personal temptation for him, James put his hand into the fire and let it be badly burned, in order to force his attention away from his aroused desire. The horrified woman, as we might imagine, never forgot this.

She changed her own life, and repented of having tried to lead him into sin.

James continued to alleviate the most severe illnesses and conditions, while still being pursued by his own demon of lust. When a mother and father brought their suffering daughter to him, he used his gift of healing, and the girl was cured. But then he failed to honor the gift of his monastic calling, and had sexual relations with her.

Perhaps he panicked, or perhaps he feared being found out and losing his reputation for holiness. Whatever it was that drove him, he killed the girl, and threw her body into a river.

James wandered into the wilderness, grieving over his sin. He came upon a desert monastery, and confessed his sin before all the brothers. The abbot urged him to stay, fearing that in his misery he might harm himself. But, feeling unworthy of such kindness, he left and continued to wander. He made a kind of grave for himself, and stayed there for many years, begging God to forgive him and comfort the girl's parents.

At first, the prayers of this monk whose prayers had been so powerful seemed to go unheard. But a severe drought hit the area where he was living, causing immense suffering and loss. He prayed humbly for rain, and when big raindrops began splashing down on the dry earth, he knew he had been forgiven.

During this first week of Great Lent we begin reading from Proverbs. On March 5th we read: "...if you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (2: 3-5).

Saint James the Faster "cried out" and "raised his voice" in his long wilderness repentance. He found God's understanding and experienced His willingness, even after the most deadly sins, to give us a second chance.