



# Taking Prayer a Bit Higher

By John La Boone

*"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." – Romans 12:1*

We are now in the Season of Lent, a time when many Christians take on some special study, abstinence or devotional practice to become penitent and to exercise greater spiritual self-discipline that will help them live according to God's laws. There is a wide spectrum of Lenten practice. Some folks give up things they would otherwise enjoy fairly regularly. Giving up chocolate seems to be very popular. Other kinds of fasting are used to join in the spirit of Jesus spending 40 days in the desert during which he was tempted by Satan.

Some Christians prefer to take on something extra rather than to give something up. Group or individual study programs, regular reading of the Bible, saying the Daily Office, or extra time spent in prayer are ways that are often used as Lenten disciplines. The common denominator in all this is turning one's thoughts away from the routine comforts, pleasures and illusions of this world to concentrate instead on our relationship with God so we can more fully discover his will for us.

In Christian history there have always been men and women who had a special desire to turn away from worldly things and spend their time and energy contemplating God, not just during Lent but more universally throughout their lives. That includes those who were called *stylites*, sometimes known as *pillar dwellers* or *pillar saints*. The term comes from the Greek word *stylos* which means "column." These hardy souls took up residence on top of pillars or columns where they felt that they could be freed from the distractions and temptations of personal comfort and human fellowship in order to concentrate more intensely on their relationships with God.

They chose to be in fellowship with God full-time, praying, contemplating, and eagerly reaching for experiences with the Divine. The columns were outdoors and usually had some sort of small platform on top. Some might possibly have had a very tiny hut on the platform to give some relief from the scorching sun but the serious stylites managed without the hut. At least in theory, if you got used to passing up the enjoyment of this world you would realize how much better it is to belong to God

alone – plus, with that level of devotion you would have a better chance of saving your soul from damnation. It was Lent on steroids.

The earliest and certainly the most famous stylite we know of was Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder who lived from about 390 to 459 in the Common Era. He

was born in the Province of Adana (present-day Turkey) in the Eastern Roman Empire, the son of a shepherd. By the time he was 13, he had developed a great zeal for the Christian faith, and at age 16 he entered a monastery. There he adopted ascetic practices that were so extreme that his fellow monks thought he was much too fanatical for any sort of communal life so they asked him to leave. He spent several years in different monasteries but living in an ordered religious community just didn't work out for him.



Legend says that when he left the last one, he next shut himself up in a (ground-level) hut for a year and a half, and during Lent he went without eating or drinking for the whole 40 days. When he emerged, everybody believed that his survival was a certified miracle. A lot of these stories about the lives of the saints of old are prone to great exaggeration, and I certainly think this Lenten abstinence is one of them. But it's pretty safe to say that he did some impressive self-denial and people noticed.

Simeon next went to dwell on a remote mountain slope, living a life of self-denial and prayer. He gained a reputation as a holy man and people started seeking him out to ask for his advice, blessings and prayers. Some sightseers just liked to watch him. In the days before Facebook and cable TV people sought out saints just to be in on something special. Simeon attracted a lot of curious people, but after a while the crowds started getting on his nerves. Even being a full-time saint he was having trouble finding time for his own devotions because of the demands of the crowds, so he began looking for a way to have more privacy. He found a stone column still standing among the ruins of Telanissa in Syria and built a small platform on top of it. This would be his new home and provide a sanctuary in which he would devote himself to belonging to God.

Like the medieval anchorites who built cells onto the outsides of churches for hermit-like lifestyles, being a full-time ascetic usually means depending on others to meet one's Spartan needs, especially when it comes to acquiring food. And for a holy person, people thought it was an honor to make those provisions. Boys from the nearby town were allowed to climb up the column to bring him flatbread and goat's

milk. Food could also be hauled up in baskets with a rope, not that he did a lot of eating or drinking. At this point people usually start wondering about how he used the bathroom. There isn't anything specific recorded, but I don't think he would have come down from the pillar for that several times a day and spoiled the effect he was working so hard to achieve. One can only assume that there were times when it wasn't a good idea to stand too close to the column. Ancient people were not as squeamish about many things that disturb us today.

When some monastic elders living in the nearby desert heard about Simeon and this radical form of religious devotion they decided to test him to see if he was doing all that out of pride or true humility. So they ordered him to come down, figuring that if he would not, he was being prideful and then they would drag him down. But when he showed a willingness to comply, they were convinced that he was acting humbly and they told him to just stay where he was. He got better with practice, so to speak. His first column was just over nine feet high but he moved several times to higher columns, the last of which was more than 50 feet high.



He lived on an open platform that measured about one square meter that also had a little railing around it. On this last column he lived and prayed for 30 years. It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter and he stayed there all the time. No days off and no vacations. He sometimes prayed standing up straight with his arms outstretched. His favorite prayer posture was almost yoga-like. He would stand up straight and bend at the hips until his forehead came close to his ankles and then straighten back up, over and over and over again while praying. One spectator watching him do this noted 1,244 repetitions before he stopped counting.

Even though Simeon needed his space, he was never completely detached from the world. Pilgrims and tourists alike flocked to see him, and each afternoon he set aside time to counsel people. He would allow them to use a ladder to climb part-way up the column – just close enough to be able to have a conversation, even if it meant hollering at each other – and he would give advice and pray for people. He wrote letters, preached and he instructed disciples from his perch. He warned people against profanity and usury, especially. Even though he practiced an extreme lifestyle

and devotional regimen, in his preaching he promoted temperance, compassion, common sense and the avoidance of fanaticism.

Eventually a double wall was erected around his column to keep the crowds back a bit. In a society based on religion, he was a rock star. Simeon's fame spread to the Church hierarchy and the imperial court. The Emperor Theodosius II and his wife Aelia Eudocia held him in great respect and sought out his counsels. He corresponded with other religious notables of his day. Simeon and other stylites were sometimes asked to arbitrate disputes. There was plenty to do. He died on September 2 in 459 at age 69, having spent a total of 37 years living on top of stone columns. He breathed his last while stooped over in prayer.

Simeon was given a funeral presided over by Martyrios, the Patriarch of Antioch, and it was attended by a huge crowd of the faithful. He was buried not far from his column, but afterward different communities began to vie for his remains as relics. The City of Antioch finally claimed most of his remains and many believed that their holiness would protect that unwalled city from marauders. He is considered an important saint in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, which celebrates his feast day on January 5.

Simeon's example inspired others to take up the stylite vocation, and in the following century stylites became commonplace in Asia Minor. There were some women stylites, too, but little, if anything, has been recorded about them. We do have histories of many notable men who imitated Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder, including Saint Simeon Stylites the Younger, Saint Daniel the Stylite, and Saint Alypius the Stylite. The younger Simeon, when he was just starting out, had a column erected near the column of his mentor, a hermit named John, so that he could converse with him and receive instruction over the next eight years. After John died, Simeon the Younger went solo and is supposed to have kept the lifestyle up for 68 years.

Daniel was ordained a priest by Gennadius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who stood on a ladder to perform the ceremony and celebrate the Eucharist. His career on columns lasted 33 years. Alypius built his pillar next to a church, and then later two monasteries were constructed by his pillar, one for monks and another for nuns. He spent most of his adult life on his perch and died in the year 640 supposedly at the age of 118. He must have died as an elderly person but I would not want to bet money on his making it to age 118 with so little self-care. They say that for the last 14 years of his life he was unable to stand and had to lay on his side way up in the air.

All the years of confinement, maintaining uncomfortable positions, lack of good nutrition, dehydration, no medical care, exposure to the elements, extreme fasting, interference with sleep, and intentional mortification of the body took a big toll on



the stylites who must have lived with continuous significant bodily pain. But there was a strong belief in earlier centuries that the soul could be purified and elevated by taming the body with pain and privation.

Two efforts were made to introduce the stylite vocation into Western Christianity but it just didn't go over well. In the East, stylites practiced through the 12<sup>th</sup>-century, and in the Russian Orthodox Church the phenomenon went on until 1461. There were some stylites who actually lived inside of hollow columns instead of on top of solid ones. Another variation was the dendrites who lived and followed their hermitic vocations up in living trees. The most famous one was Saint David the Dendrite also known as David the tree-dweller or David of Thessalonika. David was a monk in the Monastery of Saints Theodore and Mercurius. He was notable for his piety, humility, fasts, study, vigils and virtue.

When monastery's the abbot passed away, the monks unanimously elected David to be the new abbot but he refused and instead climbed up into an almond tree next to the monastery where he lived for the next three years. During that time, the story says he received instruction from an angel, and then the angel directed him to come down from the tree and live as a recluse in a cell that David's disciples would prepare for him. In his 20-year seclusion he prayed, counseled, performed at least one exorcism, and attracted attention as an inspirational holy man providing an example of how to live uncorrupted by the world.



There are so many ways to try to live out religious devotion. I do my best not to find fault with approaches that are different from my own, but at some point questions arise about God's will and physical or mental self-injury. I believe that the wholesome delights of this world are meant to be enjoyed and it does not injure the soul to embrace them. But different people have different needs when it comes to finding a satisfying relationship with God and becoming spiritually refreshed. Plus, in any area of life to find what works we normally have to first try a lot of things that don't work. Each of us has to make our own discoveries.

No one has ever asked me what would make a good Lenten devotional practice, but if they did I would say to buy some food, clothing, toiletries and medicine, and give them to the poor. Then tomorrow do the same thing again. And again the following day. If possible spend some time talking with lonely people. Show respect to anyone

who obviously doesn't get much respect in life. Smile at people. Tell jokes to people who are depressed or discouraged. Give lots and lots of compliments. A personal ministry of encouragement and goodwill is a wonderful thing. One good act will lead to another, and I believe that will be most pleasing to God during Lent or in any season. If we can do good works on top of a stone column that's fine, but all those things work pretty good right here on the ground.

*O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. – Book of Common Prayer, prayer for the human family*