



DESIRE RIGHTLY ORDERED

A Study of Lust, Repentance, and Chastity

in the Orthodox Study Bible, with the Commentary of the Church Fathers

This study follows eight passages across the Old and New Testaments, read as the Orthodox Church has always read Scripture — together with the mind of the Fathers who received it. Each section pairs a scriptural narrative with patristic commentary (drawn chiefly from St. John Chrysostom, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and the Desert Fathers), and brings in St. Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* as a companion witness — his personal, autobiographical account of bondage and grace, read here as reflection rather than binding dogma (*theologoumena*).

Scripture references follow the Orthodox Study Bible (OSB), including Septuagint Psalm numbering where it differs from the Hebrew/Masoretic numbering used in most Western Bibles. Because the OSB translation itself is copyrighted, the passages below are presented as guided narrative summaries rather than reproduced text — read the full passage from your own OSB alongside each section for the full effect.

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Introduction

The Passions Are Not the Enemy

The Fathers do not begin the conversation about lust with the sinful act. They begin further back, with what St. Maximus the Confessor calls *propatheia* — the first stirring of a thought, before it has become a passion at all. In the Orthodox ascetical tradition, the passions themselves (desire, longing, eros) are not evil by nature. They are the raw energy of the soul, given by God, and they become sin only when misdirected toward the wrong object, or pursued in the wrong measure, at the wrong time.

This changes the shape of the whole study. The goal of the Christian life is not to extinguish desire but to reorder it. Eros redirected toward God, rather than suppressed or indulged, becomes part of the very engine of *theosis* — our transformation into union with Him. Every passage in this study traces some part of that arc: fall, flight, right order, inward battle, sacramental gravity, grace, and transfiguration.

A note on method: this study uses the OSB as its base text and draws its patristic voice chiefly from the Fathers received by the Church as authoritative interpreters of Scripture. Where St. Augustine appears, he is read as a personal, pastoral witness — his own hard road from disordered desire to grace — not as a source of binding Orthodox dogma. The distinction matters and is explained further in Section VII.

SECTION I

The Disorder of Desire

*Genesis 3:1–7 (OSB)***THE READING · Genesis 3:1–7 (OSB)**

The serpent does not begin by proposing sin outright. He begins with a question that subtly recasts God's command as arbitrary restriction: "*Has God indeed said...?*" Eve's response already shows the first crack — she adds a restriction God never gave (not touching the tree), a small distortion that primes her to see the command as harsher than it is. Then comes the escalation: she sees that the tree is good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable for wisdom. All three observations are, in themselves, simply true. The tragedy is not that she notices these things but that she reaches for them apart from God, trusting her own judgment of what is good over His word. Adam, present and silent, does not intervene. Both eat, and immediately their eyes are opened — not to wisdom, but to shame. They cover themselves and hide.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS**St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis***

Chrysostom reads the serpent's opening question as the pattern of every temptation since: sin rarely announces itself as sin. It first suggests that God's boundary is unreasonable, so that transgressing it can be experienced as liberation rather than loss. He notes that Eve's desire itself was not the problem — the fruit genuinely was good for food — the problem was the order of trust: her own perception was elevated above the command of God.

St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*

Maximus locates the fall not in the appetite but in the misuse of the appetite's God-given faculties. Pleasure itself, he argues, was created good; sin entered when pleasure was pursued through the senses apart from its right end in God, becoming an end in itself. This is the root definition of every later passion, lust included: a good faculty, unmoored from its proper object.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where in your own life does temptation begin with a subtle reframing of a boundary as unreasonable?
- Eve's desire wasn't false — the fruit really was good for food. Where do you struggle to distinguish a true good from a good pursued out of right order?
- What does it mean that shame, not wisdom, is what opens their eyes?

SECTION II

The Fall — David and Bathsheba

*2 Samuel 11:1–12:13; Psalm 50 (LXX) / 51***THE READING · 2 Samuel 11:1–12:13; Psalm 50 (LXX) / 51**

David's fall begins not with an act but with a look. It is spring, the season kings go to war, and David stays behind. From his roof he sees Bathsheba bathing, sends to inquire about her, and though he learns she is another man's wife, sends for her anyway. The narrative moves with clinical, unsentimental pace: seeing, wanting, sending, taking. When she conceives, David's cover-up escalates from deception to the engineered death of her husband Uriah — arranged with chilling administrative calm, a righteous man used as the instrument of his own death sentence. God sends the prophet Nathan, who confronts David indirectly with a parable of a poor man's single beloved lamb, taken by a rich man who had many of his own. David's fury at the injustice turns to horror when Nathan says: "*You are the man.*" David's response, unlike Adam's, is immediate and unguarded: "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" Psalm 50 (LXX) is received as his composition in the aftermath — not a plea to erase the memory or escape the consequences (the child still dies; the sword does not depart from his house) but a plea for an inward, re-created heart.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS

St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies Concerning the Statues*

Chrysostom points to the idleness of David's staying behind from battle as the first opening for the temptation — not because idleness itself is sin, but because the unoccupied mind is the passions' preferred ground. He holds up David's confession as the pattern of true repentance: no self-justification, no minimizing, only the direct acknowledgment of guilt before God.

St. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril reads Psalm 50 (LXX) as evidence that the deepest wound of sin is not the external consequence but the corruption of the inner man. David's plea for a clean heart, not merely clean hands, models repentance as ontological renewal — a request to be remade, not simply forgiven on the books.

ORTHODOX PRACTICE

The Church has always paired this psalm with sacramental confession. Psalm 50 (LXX) is prayed daily in Orthodox morning prayers precisely so that David's unguarded posture — specific, unminimized, hopeful of mercy — becomes the pattern the faithful rehearse before their own confessor.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where in the narrative was the moment David could have turned away, and didn't?
 - What is the difference between David's confession and a defensive or minimizing one?
 - Why does David ask for a new heart rather than simply asking God to undo the consequences?
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SECTION III

The Flight — Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

*Genesis 39:6–12***THE READING · Genesis 39:6–12**

Joseph is a slave in a foreign household, propositioned repeatedly by his master's wife, alone with her, with every worldly incentive to comply and, it would seem, no one to know. His refusal is theological before it is moral: “*How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?*” He names God, not Potiphar, as the one he would betray. When she persists day after day, and finally seizes his garment, Joseph does not stay to reason with the temptation or prove his own strength by remaining near it. He runs, literally, leaving the garment in her hand — a piece of physical dignity sacrificed for the sake of flight.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS**St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis***

Chrysostom singles out Joseph's flight, rather than any clever rebuttal, as the real lesson: he did not trust himself to out-argue the temptation, so he removed his body from its presence. Chrysostom reads this as a rebuke to any confidence that willpower alone, in proximity to temptation, is sufficient.

The Desert Fathers, *Apophthegmata Patrum*

The sayings of the Desert Fathers consistently commend *pheuge* — flight — as the ordinary ascetical strategy against lust, not as a last resort for the weak but as the normal wisdom for anyone who takes the passions seriously. Several sayings compare lingering near temptation, even with good intentions, to standing too near a fire and expecting not to be burned.

ORTHODOX PRACTICE

This is the scriptural root of a very practical, almost unglamorous Orthodox counsel offered in confession: structure your life, your habits, and your environment so that flight is possible before the moment of decision arrives. Chastity is won far more often in the boring architecture of daily life than in a single moment of heroic resistance.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where do you tend to stay in the room, confident you can manage the temptation, rather than leave?
- Joseph names God, not Potiphar, as the one he'd be sinning against. Does your own inner dialogue about temptation include God as the primary party, or mainly consequences to yourself?

- What would practical flight look like in your life this week — a concrete, structural change, not just a resolution?
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SECTION IV

Desire Rightly Ordered

*Song of Songs 2:3–7; 8:6–7***THE READING · *Song of Songs 2:3–7; 8:6–7***

Where Genesis 3 shows desire disordered and Genesis 39 shows desire fled from, the Song of Songs shows desire as it was meant to be: ardent, embodied, unashamed, and yet bounded by covenant and patience. The beloved delights in the lover under the shade of the apple tree; later the poem insists that love is “strong as death,” a flame no flood can quench. Three times the refrain warns against stirring up love before its proper time. The Song refuses two opposite errors: it will not treat desire as shameful, and it will not treat desire as lawless. It is intense precisely because it is rightly ordered — given its proper object, its proper covenant, and its proper season.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS**St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs***

Gregory reads the Song on two simultaneous levels: as a genuine celebration of covenanted human love, and as an allegory of the soul's own ascent toward God, whose eros for the Bridegroom is meant to be no less ardent than the Song's language of desire. For Gregory, the poem's intensity is not an embarrassment to be spiritualized away but the very evidence that desire, rightly ordered, is meant to burn.

St. Maximus the Confessor

Maximus's teaching on *eros* redirected toward God draws directly on this tradition: the same capacity for desire that can become lust, rightly ordered, becomes the engine of the soul's longing for union with its Creator. The passions are not eliminated in the saint; they are transfigured.

FOR REFLECTION

- How does the Song's refusal to be either prudish or lawless challenge common cultural framings of desire?
- What would it look like practically to let desire “wait its proper time” in your own life?
- Where have you experienced desire as something to be transfigured rather than merely suppressed?

SECTION V

Christ Relocates the Battle

Matthew 5:27–30

THE READING · Matthew 5:27–30

Christ does not loosen the commandment against adultery — He deepens it. “*Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” The saying is followed by the deliberately shocking counsel to tear out an offending eye or cut off an offending hand rather than be cast whole into judgment — hyperbole meant to communicate urgency, not a literal command to self-mutilation, as the Fathers uniformly read it. The teaching relocates the real battlefield: sin is not only the completed act but the will that entertains and cultivates the thought long before any act occurs.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS

St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*

Chrysostom insists this is mercy rather than severity: Christ names the actual location of the wound so that it can be healed at its root, rather than leaving the hearer to manage the mere symptoms of an unaddressed inner life. He reads the eye and hand not as literal body parts but as whatever occasion or companionship reliably leads a person into sin — that is what should be decisively cut off.

St. Maximus the Confessor

Maximus locates the true field of ascetic struggle in the *nous*, the mind or spiritual intellect, arguing that thoughts (*logismoi*) can be received, entertained, or refused well before any outward act, and that the entire discipline of watchfulness (*nepsis*) is trained on exactly this earlier, interior stage.

ORTHODOX PRACTICE

This is the theological basis for the Jesus Prayer and the broader Orthodox discipline of watchfulness: training attention to notice a thought at its first appearance (*propatheia*), before it has been entertained into a passion, and to turn the mind toward God rather than argue with the thought on its own terms.

FOR REFLECTION

- What does it look like to fight “upstream,” at the level of thought, rather than only in the moment of outward temptation?
- Is there a modern equivalent to Christ’s “eye” or “hand” in your own life — an occasion, habit, or access point that should be decisively removed?

SECTION VI

The Body as Temple

*1 Corinthians 6:12–20; Galatians 5:16–25***THE READING · 1 Corinthians 6:12–20; Galatians 5:16–25**

Paul confronts a Corinthian slogan — “all things are lawful for me” — used to justify sexual license, and answers that not all lawful things are helpful, and that the body must not become enslaved to anything. His argument is startlingly high: the believer's body is a member of Christ Himself, and a temple of the Holy Spirit, bought at a price. Sexual sin is treated as uniquely significant precisely because it is sin against one's own body in a way other sins are not — it implicates the whole psychosomatic person, not an isolated act. In Galatians, Paul sets the works of the flesh (among them lewdness and impurity) against the fruit of the Spirit, framing the whole conflict as a matter of which power one walks by, moment to moment.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS**St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians***

Chrysostom stresses that Paul's argument is not merely ethical but sacramental: because the body has been united to Christ in baptism and the Eucharist, sexual sin is a kind of sacrilege against a temple, not simply a private lapse with no bearing on anyone but oneself.

St. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril reads “walking by the Spirit” in Galatians as a real, ongoing synergy — not passive reliance on grace nor anxious self-effort alone, but the cooperation of a will genuinely turned toward the Spirit's leading, moment by moment, which alone bears the fruit Paul describes.

ORTHODOX PRACTICE

This is the scriptural foundation for the Orthodox insistence that the body itself is sanctified through fasting, prostrations, the sign of the cross, and reception of the Eucharist — the body is not a neutral shell for a soul in training, but a full participant in salvation, capable of glory or of shame.

FOR REFLECTION

- What changes if you think of your body as a temple rather than as your own private property?
- Where in your life do you experience the tension between “lawful” and “helpful”?
- What does “walking by the Spirit,” as an ongoing cooperation rather than a single decision, look like practically?

SECTION VII

Grace Breaking Bondage

St. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book VIII (companion witness)

THE READING · St. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book VIII (companion witness)

Augustine spent years a prisoner to disordered desire, famously praying, by his own account, “grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” His conversion in a garden in Milan is not, on his own telling, a willpower story. Torn within himself, weeping, he hears a child’s voice from a neighboring house repeating, as if in a game, “*tolle, lege*” — take up and read. He opens Scripture at random to Paul’s words in Romans, a call to put off the works of the flesh and put on Christ, and describes the chains of habit as simply breaking, all at once, unbidden. What follows is not triumphant self-mastery but a long, ordinary life of continued formation.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS

On reading Augustine within Orthodoxy

Augustine is honored in the Orthodox Church as a saint and a father of the Church, but his personal, autobiographical writing is received differently than his later systematic theology, much of which the East did not receive and in places explicitly disputes. The *Confessions*, read here, is not cited as a source of dogma but as *theologoumena* — a personal theological reflection, offered as the honest testimony of one struggling soul rather than a binding teaching of the Church. Read this way, his account of bondage and sudden grace sits comfortably alongside, rather than in competition with, the Eastern ascetical tradition’s more gradual, synergistic account of healing.

On synergy

Even Augustine’s own account, read closely, is not pure passivity: the years of restlessness, the reading, the weeping, the friendship of Alypius, all precede the moment in the garden. Grace does not bypass Augustine’s will so much as finally meet a will that had, however haltingly, begun to be oriented toward it — the same cooperation of grace and free assent (synergy) that undergirds the whole Orthodox sacramental life.

FOR REFLECTION

- Where have you been praying, like Augustine, “not yet”?
- Does Augustine’s story read to you as sudden grace, slow preparation, or both at once?
- How does distinguishing *theologoumena* from dogma change how you can honestly engage a source outside your own tradition without either rejecting or absolutizing it?

SECTION VIII

Transfiguration as the Goal

*St. Maximus the Confessor on the Passions and Theosis***THE READING · St. Maximus the Confessor on the Passions and Theosis**

The study closes where it began, with Maximus, because his vision supplies the arc's true end. The goal of the ascetical life, for Maximus, is not the mere absence of passion (a kind of Stoic numbness the Fathers explicitly reject) but *apatheia* rightly understood: a stable freedom in which the soul's capacities, including desire, have been reoriented wholly toward God, so that they can be exercised without being mastered by their objects. In this state, the same energy that once fueled lust becomes fuel for longing after God, and the same capacity for delight that once attached itself to disordered objects becomes the capacity for joy in the vision of God. Nothing God-given in the human person is destroyed in salvation; everything is transfigured.

COMMENTARY OF THE FATHERS

St. Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*

Maximus teaches that love (*agape*) is the right ordering of all the soul's desiring power toward God and neighbor, and that the ascetical struggle against the passions exists entirely in service of that reordering, never as an end in itself. Suppression without redirection, in his framework, is not victory but merely postponed defeat.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus

Gregory's dictum that "what is not assumed is not healed" — spoken originally of Christ's full humanity — is often applied by later Orthodox writers to the passions themselves: desire is not bypassed in salvation but assumed, healed, and transfigured, in the same pattern as the whole of human nature in Christ.

FOR REFLECTION

- What would it mean, concretely, for your own desire to be transfigured rather than merely restrained?
- Where have you already tasted desire redirected toward God — in prayer, in liturgy, in genuine love of another person?

The Sacramental Path

Orthodox practice does not leave this struggle as an abstract or private matter. Scripture and the Fathers point toward a concrete path, held together by the sacramental life of the Church:

- 1 **Confession** — Bring the specific struggle to a spiritual father — not a general sense of failure, but the actual pattern, honestly named, as David named his own sin to Nathan.
- 2 **A Rule** — Receive, rather than self-design, a concrete rule of prayer and fasting suited to the particular struggle, given by one's confessor.
- 3 **The Eucharist** — Approach as the medicine of immortality that heals what confession has uncovered, not as a reward reserved for those who have already overcome.
- 4 **The Prayer of St. Ephrem** — “Grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother” — prayed with prostrations, especially in seasons of struggle, as a discipline of the body alongside the soul.
- 5 **Watchfulness (Nepsis)** — The ongoing, unglamorous discipline of noticing a thought at its first stirring (*propatheia*), before it has become a passion, and turning the mind toward God rather than arguing with the thought.
- 6 **Real Accountability** — A human relationship that knows the actual struggle, not merely private resolve kept hidden even from those closest to you.

Notice the arc across all eight sections: disorder (Eden), fall (David), flight (Joseph), right order (the Song), the battle relocated inward (Christ), sacramental gravity (Paul), grace breaking bondage (Augustine), transfiguration as the goal (Maximus). None of these witnesses arrives at freedom by sheer effort alone — every one needed grace to meet a will that had, in some real if halting way, turned toward it. That cooperation of grace and will, not willpower and not passivity, is the whole of the Orthodox path through this struggle.



Closing Prayer

*O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth,
Who art everywhere present and fillest all things,
Treasury of blessings and Giver of life:
Come and abide in us,
And cleanse us from every impurity,
And save our souls, O Good One.*

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.