

**January 1 – Monday**

**Circumcision of Christ – Colossians 2:8-12**

**Completed and Restored: Colossians 2:8-12, especially vs. 8:** “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men . . . and not according to Christ.” The last two centuries present a grim succession of evil alliances, exhausted ideologies, revolutions, violence, and war. Ironically, certain ideas at first appear attractive, visionary, and hopeful, and only later expose the true, deeply flawed state of humanity.

Today’s epistle opens with a warning against the inherent danger of every philosophy and tradition that arises from our imagination (vs. 8). The apostle directs us instead to God’s ultimate truth, offered to the human race through tangible events and persons: God’s saving revelation in Christ.

In Christ we possess the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6). The Lord Jesus enables us to cope with the misery of history. His apostle urges us not to allow ourselves to be cheated by vain imaginings, for we are united to Christ in whom “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9).

In Christ we are “complete” (vs. 10). In Him we have “[put] off the body of the sins of the flesh” (vs. 11) and are “raised . . . through faith in the working of God” (vs. 12). Consider the breath of what the Apostle Paul unveils to us here!

The faithful in Christ have found the way to be “complete” (vs. 10) in the Lord Jesus, for when God became man, He joined His nature to our fallen and confused state. He opened the Way to restore our humanity.

We know what life looks like apart from Christ: domination and tyranny that crush the spirit and make us slaves. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are joined to God. As “Head of all rule and authority,” Christ fulfills humanity.

Now, subject to God, we become renewed persons. In Him we find increasing freedom to become what He created us to be. How is that so? Being united to Him, we choose to put off “the body of the sins of the flesh” and to covenant with Him (vs. 11). In place of the mirage of self-realization, we regain our being as the Creator Himself designed us.

Among God’s ancient people, circumcision was evidence “in the flesh” of a covenant with God. Now, however, “circumcision is no longer performed with a knife . . . but in Christ Himself; for no human hand circumcises . . . but the Spirit . . . in baptism,” says Saint John Chrysostom (“Homily 6 on Colossians,” *ACCS New Testament*, vol. 9, p. 31-32).

Rejoice to be joined to Christ in His Church! The Lord’s circumcision is evidence that we are united to Him, freed from the debasing control of earthly powers and authorities. With Christ as our Head, every earthly government, authority, and force is exposed as relative and subject to Him. These earthly powers are worthy of obedience only so long as they derive their powers from Him and do not usurp His rule. Might does not make right.

When we are baptized into Christ, we are given power to fight the day-by-day struggle to become whole, integrated persons. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “Adam contracted the debt; by our subsequent sins we increased the amount owed. . . . [But] Christ took all these away and pardoned them. . . . so that no trace of it might remain. This is why He did not erase it but tore it to pieces” (p. 33).

The merciful God gives us “healing, purification, enlightenment, protection, salvation, and sanctification of soul and body.” Let us yield ourselves “as instruments of righteousness to God . . . for [we] are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:13-14). We “were raised with Him through faith in the working of God” (Col 2:12).

*O Christ who lovest mankind, take away the heavy burden of my sins, cleanse me of every stain of flesh and spirit, and teach me to fulfill holiness in Thy fear, unto true, eternal life.* – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

**January 2 – Tuesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost**  
**Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25**

**The Voice of the Lord:** *Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25, especially vs. 12:25:* “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.” The Prophet David composed this beautiful hymn lauding the voice of the Lord: “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory hath thundered, the Lord is upon the many waters. The voice of the Lord in might, the voice of the Lord in majesty, the voice of the Lord who breaketh the cedars, yea, the Lord will break the cedars of Lebanon. And He will break them small like the calf of Lebanon, and His beloved is like a son of the unicorns. The voice of the Lord who divideth the flame of fire, the voice of the Lord who shaketh the wilderness, yea, the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kaddis. The voice of the Lord gathereth the harts, and shall reveal the thickets of oak, and in His temple every man uttereth glory” (Ps 28:3-9).

In today’s epistle the words of the Apostle Paul, like those of the Psalmist David, help us to heed the voice of the Lord. Although the Lord’s voice breaks great trees and makes mountains *skip* (Ps 113:4), shaking and gathering animals into herds, this voice is never impersonal. It is neither a brute power nor inanimate energy, nor does it lack intelligence.

Rather, the voice of the Lord is meaningful and personal, coming from our God who conveys His intention, purpose, and result. Thus the Apostle Paul entreats us, “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks” (Heb. 12:25).

The voice of God is recorded by His people in Holy Scripture, by a community brought together by His voice. Scripture is our primary written witness of God’s words and accomplishments. Here we also discover what God is doing at this very moment and what He will bring about through time unto eternity.

At the center of all Scripture is the Word of God, for the voice of the Lord comes to us as God the Word. The Word achieves everything described in Psalm 103: He “stretchest out the heavens . . . maketh the clouds . . . laid the foundation of the earth . . . coveredst it with the deep . . . gave drink to every beast . . . causeth the grass to grow . . . giveth meat to all in due season.”

More important than these provisions are the people He brings forth – a host “innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore” (Heb 11:12). He covenants with us, calls us His people, and goes before us to do battle on our behalf. He bears us up in His arms “as a man carries his son” (Dt 1:31).

The Apostle Paul deplors the refusal of the early people of God to hear and obey the voice of the Lord, who raised up the Prophet Moses to lead them into a land of their own. At the boundary of that land, they “would not go up, but disobeyed the word of the Lord [their] God. And . . . murmured” (vss. 1:26-27).

Through the great Law-giver, God clearly told them by His Word – His own voice from the mountain – that He would give them the land. “Yet, in all this matter [they] did not believe the Lord [their] God” (vs. 1:32). Hence, Saint Paul says, “they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth” (Heb 12:25). They died in the wilderness, outside the promised land!

May we always heed the message God gives to us through “Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 25): Jesus, the Incarnate voice of the Father, “His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (vs. 1:2). We have greater divine promises than did ancient Israel. Let us not refuse God, for we shall “not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 12:25).

*As Moses communed with God and, in an ineffable manner, received Thy voice in his ear, do Thou prepare us to worship Thee, O Word of the Father, and ever to hear and to obey Thee.* – Verse from Cheesefare Sunday

## January 3 – Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

### James 1:1-18

**Coping with Trials: James 1:1-18, especially vs. 2:** “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” The first-century brethren to whom the Apostle James is writing are in the midst of a test of their commitment to the Lord Jesus. As the apostle warns, such *perasmos* (“trials”) are often accompanied by personal suffering. Although these brethren do not face martyrdom, those he addresses must stand fast as “confessors” of the faith, to use the Church’s terminology.

The Apostle James is counseling us as well, for our own faith is being tested. On television and in the media, in classrooms at college and secondary school alike, we are bombarded with materialistic, godless messages. Scant allowance is made for spiritual truth, still less for the possibility of miracles, asceticism, chastity, traditional morality, or worship.

Indeed, spirituality in almost any form is treated as either nonexistent, unimportant, or worthy of ridicule. Let us wake up! Our faith is being repudiated, undermined, and brushed aside!

Patience is necessary if we are to endure this constant, unrelenting assault on the sacred. Saint James advises us to “let patience have its perfect work, that before God we may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (vs. 4).

Above all, we should never underestimate the worldly learning and persuasiveness of those who oppose the Orthodox faith. They ride the crest of a wave of popular acceptance. When we feel ourselves incapable of speaking the truth, or lacking sufficient wisdom, we “ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to [us]” (vs. 5).

We strengthen our faith by standing before the holy icons, reading Scripture, and absorbing the hymns and prayers of the Divine Liturgy. These reinforce our commitment to God, so that we do not become like one “who doubts,” nor “like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (vs. 6). We avoid adopting a worldly outlook that would make us “double minded” and “unstable” in our ways (vs. 8), for in such a case we will not “receive anything from the Lord” (vs. 7).

In the midst of our success-driven culture, we who lack riches and status look to Jesus Christ, who also was poor, and “glory in [our] exaltation” with Him before God the Father (vs. 9). If we are wealthy by worldly standards, then we remember how fleeting and uncertain riches can be. In the heat of the marketplace, our financial worth can wither like the grass and perish. We know that “the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits” (vs. 11).

Instead, let us labor for that which lasts for eternity. If we endure temptation and are approved of God, we “will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (vs. 12).

Above all, we do not blame God for our struggles. We understand that we may be drawn away – either by our “own desires” (vs. 14) or by whatever “gives birth to sin” (vs. 15) – and run the risk of falling into the full-blown sin that “brings forth death” (vs. 15). The worst outcome is to be captured by this world: its assumptions are deadly, no matter how plausible they sound.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (vs. 17). With God we escape from the changing fads of this materialistic world, for in Him “there is no variation or shadow of turning” (vs. 17). Like a mother, He gave us birth that we might become “a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (vs. 18) – an entirely new kind of humanity. Let us hold onto this gift from our Father and keep His name holy all our days.

*Show me to be a dwelling-place of Thy Spirit; and in no wise the dwelling-place of sin.* – Post-communion Prayer

## January 4 – Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

### James 1:19-27

**Self-Deception: James 1:19-27, especially vs. 25:** “*But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*” What standard should we use if we wish to measure ourselves honestly, to assess accurately who and what we are? Saint James teaches us to look “into the perfect law of liberty” (vs. 25) – by which he means the Lord Jesus, for only Christ embodies the perfect law of liberty for mankind.

By looking at Him and measuring ourselves in turn, we are enabled to see ourselves without distortion, inflation, or self-flattery. The Lord neither enlarges our moral and spiritual height nor diminishes it, nor does He pass over any desire of our hearts. In musical terms, we can liken Him to that pure note or pitch with which any slight tonal variation, sharp or flat, will immediately cause discord.

Christ our God is the reliable standard to use for authentic assessment of every person, no matter what our race or tongue. Being Himself pure and undistorted, He accurately reflects all our “filthiness and overflow of wickedness” (vs. 21), as well as our potential for “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father” (vs. 27).

The Elder Joseph the Hesychast explains how the Lord mirrors every element of our lives so well: “Once someone has tasted wine, he can tell if they give him vinegar instead.” The Lord Jesus is the wine; to know Him is to know both the bad and the good within ourselves.

First, the Lord Jesus shows us how slow we are to hear (vs. 19). When asked why He speaks in parables, Jesus replies, “Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:12-13).

Instead, He opens our ears that we may be *swift to hear*. “God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear” (Is 35:4-5).

Foolish as we are, we are often swift to give way to wrath rather than offering a kind or healing word (Jas 1:19). Invariably, our wrath “does not produce the righteousness of God” (vs. 20). As Solomon wisely said, “A stone is heavy, and sand is cumbersome; but the wrath of a man without discernment is heavier than both” (Prv 27:3).

Thankfully, Jesus Christ our Savior turns us from wrath. When His disciples are ready to destroy a community of Samaritans who will not receive the Lord, Jesus rebukes them, saying, “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Lk 9:56).

Jesus Himself implants His words in our heart and enables us to receive His gifts and spirit of meekness (Jas 1:21). He it was who “was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb [was] silent before his shearers” (Is 53:7). He reveals the beauty of a meek and quiet spirit in the face of violence. Christ Jesus exemplifies His beatitude “blessed are the meek,” for at the end of all things, He “shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5).

Jesus our Lord blesses us when we care for the widow and orphan (Jas 1:27) instead of exploiting or ignoring the poor and defenseless: “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:40).

Let us follow Saint James’ teachings and look steadily “into the perfect law of liberty,” our Lord Jesus Christ, not as forgetful hearers but as doers of the work Christ gives to us (Jas 1:25). Only He can keep us unspotted from the world and undeceived in our hearts (vs. 26).

*Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge; and implant in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments!* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

## January 5 – Forefeast of Theophany

### 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

**Apostolic Evangelism: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, especially vs. 23:** *“I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now I do this for the gospel’s sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you.”* Above all else, the Apostle Paul perceives himself as an evangelist – one serving under Christ (vs. 21) that he “might by all means save some” (vs. 22). Here, he is speaking of the men and women with whom he has come into contact. He knows, as the Lord Jesus demonstrates in the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:2-23), that some will hear the Gospel and yet never “obtain it” (1 Cor 9:24). Others, including even the apostle himself, risk being “disqualified” (vs. 27) through personal failure or dereliction.

Knowing the value of the “imperishable crown” (vs. 25) that our Lord Jesus holds out to every disciple, Saint Paul is determined to do everything in his power to become “a partaker of” that crown (vs. 23). He encourages those he trained up in the faith, such as the Corinthian Christians to whom he addresses this passage, to “run in such a way that [they] may obtain it” as well (vs. 24).

Saint Paul is holding himself up to us as a model to follow in the practice of evangelism. Under Christ, each one of us must likewise become the servant of all men, if we are to win them to the Lord Jesus (vs. 19). Likewise, we must be sensitive to the spiritual outlook of those with whom we interact (vss. 20-23). Our conduct is thus disciplined and “temperate in all things” (vss. 24-27).

There is profound irony in the apostle’s call to use our freedom in the service of others. It is a radical proposal, to say the least, but St. Paul asserts that it is essential if we are to “win more” people to the glories, beauties, and life-giving truths of our faith. Let us never hoard our faith, but be willing to pay the price! Christ has directed us to make disciples of all men (Mt 28:19).

We note, however, that the apostle proposes approaching the mission of discipling others in a sensitive way, mindful of their persona spiritual orientation. There is a delicate balance between our role as slaves of the Master, with the obligation to evangelize, and the need to remain sensitive to others outside the faith. The Gospel requires us to reach out with our faith, but at the same time it demands genuine consideration of others.

Saint Paul approaches the Jews as a fellow Jew, and the pagan Romans as a Roman citizen. He does not compromise his integrity by bending himself like a pretzel, nor does he change his colors like a chameleon. Rather, he starts from the assumptions he shares with those he encounters. He finds a place to meet them on common ground.

Finally, the apostle uses an illustration from the Greek games, one which would be familiar to every first-century Corinthian. Engaging others with the new and radical truth of Christianity is a demanding task, which can be likened to competitive sports. If we are to overcome society’s false assumptions, deep-seated erroneous concepts, and comfort with half-truths, we must become tough competitors ready to fight for the truth we value so highly.

What are we to do? First, we keep the “imperishable crown” we offer (vs. 25) – the kingdom of God – ever in mind. Second, we remain “temperate in all things” (vs. 25).

The ascetic disciplines we practice are not intended to punish us, but to train us in how to obtain salvation and then evangelize others. If we fail to discipline our bodies and bring them into subjection, we may discover that although we have preached to others, we ourselves have “become disqualified” (vs. 27).

*Of Thine immense goodness, O Lord God, show me the path of Thy will in every meeting with others, and grant me to walk in Thy sight without sin, but to Thy glory and honor. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, On Prayer*

## January 6 – Feast of Theophany

Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

**Salvation Has Appeared: Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7, especially vs. 11:** “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” If we are seeking one short, inclusive statement in Holy Scripture that best summarizes the work of our Lord Jesus from the time of the annunciation of His birth to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost on the apostles, what better choice than this quote from today’s epistle?

“The grace of God,” the eternal Father’s love, was definitively revealed when our Lord Jesus came to minister among us in the flesh. The “appearance” in time of the only-begotten Son is the supreme gift of divine condescension on behalf of all mankind. When the Apostle Paul speaks to Titus of the “salvation [that] has appeared to all men,” this single phrase encompasses all that Christ our God did as a man to assure the possibility of everlasting life for our race.

Who defines divine “grace” and “love” more fully than the Lord Jesus? According to Saint John Chrysostom, when we see that our numberless sins have been forgiven, “this in no common degree awes and humbles the soul . . . for it received not punishment, but obtained pardon, and infinite favors” (Manley, *Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 987).

From the moment we perceive the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth and follow Him with all of our heart and soul, our mind and strength, we attribute everything thereafter to God’s grace and love. How can we possibly define God’s grace? Our words cannot do so, and yet Jesus Christ is the grace of God embodied before our eyes.

Let us move beyond rational concepts and definitions and embrace the mystery of the divine Himself. Let us affirm and celebrate our union with Him as received in holy baptism and chrismation. Let us struggle to become fully one with His immaculate Body and precious Blood. When we say that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19), this claim is not a logical, reasoned postulate. Rather, Christ is God’s undeniable claim upon our lives, wills, and actions, both now and forever.

Jesus Christ is neither a myth nor an idealization of everything good, true, beautiful, and perfect. Yes, all these ideals are embodied in Him, both when He appeared in history and when He will appear again (Ti 2:13). Indeed, His life, teachings, and deeds are better documented than the evidence collected about Caesar and many of the other ancient greats.

“God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us. Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.” This is the message we celebrate today. The word *theophany* means “appearance of God.” We celebrate the Lord God’s baptism as a theophany, because on that occasion the three Persons of the Trinity were at last disclosed by name.

Thus, when he says “the grace of God . . . has appeared” (Ti 2:11), Saint Paul goes beyond the idea of grace merely being displayed in some action or monument. God has appeared personally. The Father gives His only-begotten Son as His gift to the disordered world of men, and the Spirit confirms the truth of His Word.

The appearance of God has but one purpose: to bring “salvation . . . to all men” (vs. 11). God diagnoses our human condition and administers the cure. Seeing our plight, He does not stand aside from the degradation He sees strewn across the dark tracks of human history. Rather, He acts. He exceeds the wonder of the burning bush, or the thunder and smoke on Mount Sinai.

He humbly takes on our flesh, walks among us, and dies as one of us in order to trample down ubiquitous death that hangs like a pall over every nation and every person (Is 25:7-8). He is the Way by which we deny ungodliness and worldly lusts so that we may live soberly and righteously in this world (Ti 2:12).

*Great art Thou, O Lord, and wondrous are Thy works, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders. Glory to Thee, O Christ our King and our God, glory to Thee! – Great Blessing of the Waters*

## January 7 – Synaxis of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John, Tone 6

### Acts 19:1-8

**The Gift of the Holy Spirit: Acts 19:1-8, especially vss. 1-2:** “And . . . Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’” Why do these unnamed disciples at Ephesus know nothing of Holy Spirit? As disciples of the Forerunner and Baptist John, they have only learned about repentance as the preparation for the Messiah who will come and “baptize [them] . . . with the Holy Spirit” (Mt 3:11).

The Apostle Paul does not miss this golden opportunity to tell them that the true Messiah has already come (Acts 19:4). Immediately, at the apostle’s hands, these men receive holy baptism, as the Lord commanded (Mt 28:19). They are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit in holy chrismation, and receive the Eucharistic gifts. Then “the Holy Spirit came upon them” (Acts 19:6).

The knowledge of the Holy Spirit is a normal experience for all who are in Christ. That is why the apostle asks, “Into what then were you baptized?” (vs. 3). And yet today many among the faithful have only the barest knowledge of the Holy Spirit, and little or no experience of His presence.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “The true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ’s sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 169).

Every one of the holy mysteries or sacraments emphasizes this obtaining of the Holy Spirit. At the service of baptism, we pray to Christ that each new servant will be filled “with the power of Thy Holy Spirit . . . that he may be no more a child of the body, but a child of Thy kingdom.” Along with this prayer, we ask that the servant of God, “having preserved the gift of Thy Holy Spirit, and increased the measure of grace committed unto him . . . may receive the prize of his high calling and be numbered with the first-born.”

Then, when the newly baptized servant of Christ receives chrismation, we pray that our Lord, having illumined His disciple by water and the Spirit, will grant “unto him the seal and gift of Thy holy, and almighty, and adorable Spirit.” The Holy Spirit keeps him in sanctification, confirms him in the Orthodox faith, and delivers him from the evil one and his machinations.

Finally, every time we receive holy communion, we pray to God, “Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these Gifts . . . changing them by Thy Holy Spirit . . . that to those who shall partake thereof they may be unto cleansing of soul, unto the remission of sins, unto the communion of Thy Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of Heaven, unto boldness toward Thee, and not unto judgment or unto condemnation.” Always we pray for the Holy Spirit to come, indwell, and act within us.

The Lord Jesus intends for us to know Him through the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls (Jn 14:16-17). He expects us to work with the Spirit to achieve what He teaches and commands (vss. 16:13-14). Saint Seraphim explains that “the Holy Spirit . . . brings into our hearts the kingdom of God and opens the way for us to win the blessedness of the future life” (p. 170).

For this reason, the work of the Spirit is described thus during Orthros: “All creation together is regenerated . . . and returns to its former being. . . . He doth establish all creatures and preserve them in the Father and the Son. . . . By the Holy Spirit hath all holiness and wisdom been observed.”

*O Heavenly Spirit, Light, Life and a living supersensuous Fountain, purify our offenses, for Thou deifying Fire projecting from Fire, and distribute Thy gifts upon us and save our souls.* – Verse for Pentecost

## January 8 – Monday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost

### James 2:14-26

**Faith Works: James 2:14-26, especially vs. 17:** “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” We note how carefully this sentence from James’ epistle is constructed so as to emphasize the primacy of faith in our Christian life. We further observe how the Apostle James qualifies his remarks about faith by adding the phrase “by itself,” followed by the stipulation, “if it does not have works.” The Fathers of the Church are of one accord concerning both the primacy of faith and the need for robust faith to lead us to good works.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “Only the good deed done for Christ’s sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life, nor the grace of God in this life” (*Little Russian Philokalia, vol. 1: Saint Seraphim*, p. 86). Although Saint Seraphim does not directly refer to *faith*, we understand that no one does *good deeds* “for Christ’s sake” unless he has faith in Christ, trusting in the Lord’s authority over all his works.

Although we are baptized and chrismated, we sometimes receive holy communion as a matter of habit. Perhaps we were brought up to approach the chalice every Sunday. If such is the case we may lack faith in Christ, even though we consider ourselves to be good Orthodox Christian. A basic key, essential to the life in Christ, appears to be missing.

Saint Seraphim implies that trust in Christ is the true basis for all “good works.” Orthodox training, at any age, is meant to awaken our faith, so that we truly trust in Christ and do never act solely on the basis of accumulated habit.

Saint Seraphim further assures us that doing good works for the Lord provides us with grace now, in this present life, and also leads us toward eternal life in the age to come. Likewise, Saint James assumes that every good work must be done for Christ’s sake, although he does not specifically say so. The emphasis on Christ is clear when we read the whole of Saint James’ epistle, especially verses 5-8 in the first chapter.

Those of us who do good works for Christ because our parents taught us to do so are greatly blessed. However, if our parents assumed that we would do good for Christ’s sake, but never helped us understand the true reason for our works, we may simply continue our habits as adults without ever wondering why.

Both the Apostle James and Saint Seraphim confirm that doing good is our duty as Christians. Why does Saint Seraphim warn that the blessing is lost if those good deeds are done without faith in Christ? Our good works are blessed because of our faith; works done for other reasons lack the necessary foundation for this blessing from Christ.

Isn’t it enough to believe in Christ? Surely, we receive God’s blessing simply by confessing our faith in Him in few words. No doubt, such expressions are a form of faith in the Lord. However, if we end with such a confession, our faith is still-born, according to Saint James.

Saint James warns that we risk becoming truncated Christians if we never undertake good deeds based on our confession of Christ. This is why he speaks of “faith by itself” and emphasizes that such faith “is dead” (vs. 17).

Mere basking in the Nicene Creed does not confer the fullness of God’s blessing. True Christians share in labor with Christ our God. The Lord speaks of how we are “yoked” to Him (Mt 11:29-30). Our faith in Christ leads us to put on His yoke and do His works, pulling with our Master and yoke-mate. Let us be blessed by doing good works in Christ (Eph 2:10)!

*O Christ our God, may I carry out every deed and word, in saving fear of Thee.* – Chrismation Prayer



## January 9 – Tuesday of the Thirty-Third Week after Pentecost

### James 3:1-10

**Teaching Christ: James 3:1-10, especially vs. 1:** “*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*” Saint James warns those drawn to a ministry of teaching to consider the work cautiously. First, he reminds us that teaching Christ is a high calling, for a teacher faces higher standards before the judgment seat of Christ (vs. 1). Since stumbling is a human characteristic “in many things” (vs. 2), while what is taught is perfect in all respects, we ought to be slow to teach until we attain a high level of self-control. Lastly, since teaching often involves speaking and “no man can tame the tongue” (vs. 8), there is good reason to approach an educational mission with caution.

As we begin our consideration of this passage, we recognize that there are different levels and kinds of teaching. What does it mean to serve at the very highest level of pedagogy – to teach about Christ? The idea that one might teach anyone about the Lord seems absurd, if we look at the task soberly.

However, the teaching of the faith remains an essential ministry within the Church (Eph 4:11), even if the endeavor borders on the preposterous. We must keep in mind that the Christian teacher is not asked to conduct an academic course about Christ in the abstract. Understanding the limitations of the human mind – his own as well as that of others – the true teacher of the faith never seeks to convey a mere body of intellectual information.

The true Christian teacher necessarily speaks from the heart, from the inmost aspect of his being, which the Fathers call the *nous*. In the *nous*, all learning takes place through an immediate encounter with Christ, not through the abstract concepts of the rational mind.

Holy communion, for example, does not offer us mere thoughts about Christ Jesus; rather, we receive His all-pure Body and Blood. In like manner the faithful do not read the Bible simply to learn about the Lord, but rather to meet the God the Word in the words of Holy Scripture.

Christianity is never taught, only “caught.” Thus, the true teacher must know Christ personally. According to Saint Peter of Damascus, every teacher ought to “pay attention to what the Savior teaches him and do all he can to escape from the enemies’ traps . . . As Saint James the Brother of God rightly says, ‘All good giving and every perfect gift comes from above’ (Jas 1:17)” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 154).

Since “we all stumble in many things” (vs. 2), those of us who teach the faith need great self-control. The all-encompassing virtue of the soul “is self-control, by which I mean abstinence from all passions,” says Saint Peter of Damascus. “The person who possesses this virtue does not tolerate any thought or word, any movement of hand or foot or of any other member of the body, unless it is essential to the life of the body or to the soul’s salvation” (p. 219).

The Apostle James identifies one of the most difficult hurdles for self-control: management of the tongue. The speech of fallen men is “unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (vs. 8). True Christian teaching is shared through action, yet every teacher must speak as well. We must always remain aware that danger is near when we speak, for “out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing” (vs. 10).

Saint Paul calls the true teacher to become “an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tm 4:12). Here is a humbling standard for anyone called to be a Christian teacher. Apart from the grace of God, how can we hope to teach Christ?

*O Most-good Lord! Send down upon us the grace of Thy Holy Spirit, so that by attending to the teaching Thou dost give us, we may grow into the glory of Thee, our Creator, our most holy Truth, and our only Way. – Prayers During the Day*

## January 10 – Wednesday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost

### James 3:11-4:6

**Wisdom From Above: James 3:11-4:6, especially vs. 17:** “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” The Apostle James distinguishes “earthly, sensual, demonic” wisdom from the true “wisdom that is from above” (vss. 15, 17). Likewise, Saint Paul differentiates between “the wisdom of this world” and “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:20-21).

According to Saint James, we must conduct ourselves faithfully if we wish to enter into “the meekness of wisdom” from above (Jas 3:13). Note how the apostle speaks of this higher wisdom as a dwelling place where we may situate our hearts. He likens the wisdom of this world to another kind of a residence “where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (vs. 16). We are often tempted to stray into just such a place, and there we find ourselves living in bitterness and missing the joys of the true wisdom “from above.”

To help us enter into this “wisdom that is from above” (vs. 17), Saint James lists several key obediences: we are to draw near to God, cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, lament, mourn, and weep. In short, we are to “humble [ourselves] in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift [us] up” (vss. 4:10).

By speaking of wisdom as a location, the epistle writer strengthens his point that these two types of wisdom are contradictory – indeed, they are completely antithetical. A spring will only send forth one kind of water, never both *fresh* and *bitter* from the same opening (vs. 3:11). Trees bear the one fruit that their nature produces (vs. 12).

Thus, when we choose to live in envy, self-seeking, confusion, and other evils, we can expect only earthly, sensual, and demonic wisdom to prevail (vss. 15-16). But Saint James tells us that if we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord and open our hearts to Him, we allow the Spirit to enter and provide the “wisdom from above” (vs. 17).

The first key for drawing near to God is prayer. “Prayer is one wing, faith the other, that lifts us heavenward,” writes Tito Colliander. “With only one wing no one can fly: prayer without faith is as meaningless as faith without prayer” (*Way of the Ascetics*, p. 56). The Prophet David affirms: “It is good for me to cleave unto God” (Ps 72:26). We are to cry out, like Saint Augustine: “Let me know Thee, Thou that knowest me . . . O Thou strength of my soul, enter into it and prepare it for Thyself . . . without spot or wrinkle” (*Confessions* 10.1, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 1, p. 142).

The next key is moral purification: we must *cleanse our hands* (Jas 4:8). Saint John of Kronstadt advises us to “observe temperance and simplicity in food and drink; preserve chastity; do not foolishly squander the balsam of your life; do not seek after riches or luxury” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 152).

First and foremost, the goal of this cleansing is to purify the heart. Even good thoughts during prayer open the way for the devil to slip in, which ultimately results in the adultery of our spirit. For this reason, Saint James calls us “adulterers and adulteresses,” because our “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (vs. 4). We are to beg the Lord, “Help me to keep my thoughts on Thee, that I may hear Thee speaking in my heart.”

Finally, our cleansing is achieved by persistent repentance. This is why we “lament and mourn and weep” (vs. 9). “And if you fall again,” says Saint Peter of Damascus, “then rise again, without despairing at all of your salvation, no matter what happens. So long as you do not surrender yourself willingly to the enemy, your patient endurance . . . will suffice for your salvation” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 170).

*May the Lord keep your soul and body from every evil and from every adversity caused by the devil and from every imagination causing disturbance; may the Lord be your light, your protection, your way, your strength, the crown of your joy and eternal help.* – Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*

**January 11 – Saint Theodosius the Great**  
**Hebrews 13:7-16**

**A Sacrifice of Praise: Hebrews 13:7-16, especially vs. 15:** “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His Name.” Consider the nature of Orthodox worship, as offered in the Divine Liturgy from start to finish: as Christ’s Church, we present “...the sacrifice of praise to God...” in our Lord. The Liturgy begins as the celebrant offers The Enarxis: “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” Throughout, the language of our worship is eucharistic, an offering of “...all glory, honor and worship...” to the life-giving Trinity, “...now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

In the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, The Prayer of the Proskomedia that follows the Great Entrance is offered as the Divine Gifts are placed upon the Holy Table. Compare it to the Apostle’s words: “O Lord...Who dost accept the sacrifice of praise from those who call upon Thee with their whole heart...” Likewise, the opening words of the Priest as he offers The Holy Anaphora are “It is meet and right to hymn Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks unto Thee, and to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion...”

All these words come out of the same Tradition that is expressed in this passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews. The central act of Orthodox Christian worship is pure adoration of God; for, in the Liturgy, we recall the Apostles “...who have spoken the word of God” to us, whose faith we strive to follow, as we consider “...the outcome of their conduct” (Heb. 13:7).

Jesus Christ, our God, remains as the unchanging focus of Orthodox praise and worship (vs. 8). Through the Church’s two-thousand year history, we continue in praise to the Lord, refusing to “...be carried about with various and strange doctrines...” (vs. 9), refusing to diminish the centrality of our Savior, both God and Man. Instead, having a “...heart...established by grace” (vs. 9) the Church worships “...the One to come” (vs. 14).

On entering an Orthodox temple, the visual impact of icons predominates. The message is “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (vs. 8). Among all that may be said of the Divine Liturgy, foremost it is the celebration of Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord. We speak “again and again” of the only-Begotten, the eternal Word of God the Father; and we recall ourselves to His coming in the flesh from the all-holy, Birth-Giver of God, the Theotokos, and ever Virgin Mary. We celebrate with the Angels and the Magi Jesus’ birth in the cave. We speak of His Baptism at the hands of the Forerunner John in the Jordan. In our prayers, we call upon the Twelve and the Seventy who were our Lord’s Disciples and, later, His Apostles to us.

The dominant message of the Divine Liturgy, as the Apostle Paul says, is to “...proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). So, in the Liturgy, we hear of the “...night in which He was betrayed, - or rather, gave Himself up for the life of the world.” We celebrate “...the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Session at the right hand, and the second and glorious Advent.” Christ is the One Whom we “...offer in behalf of all, and for all,” and to Whom we address the words, “We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee, and we pray unto Thee, O our God.”

To be Orthodox is to be sanctified with Jesus’ blood (Heb. 13:12). “We have an altar from which those who serve...” in any other earthly tabernacle have no right to eat (vs. 10). May the Lord help us to be worthy of our calling as His people! May He always receive our sacrifices “...upon His holy, most heavenly, and ideal altar as a savour of spiritual sweetness!”

*Send down upon us, O Lord, Thine unworthy servants, in Thine unspeakable and boundless love toward mankind, Thy divine grace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

## January 12 – Friday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost

1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; 2:6-10

**Searching the Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:1-2,10-12; 2:6-10, especially vs. 1:10:** “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you.” Saint Theophan the Recluse offers two prescriptions for overcoming the disease of ignorance in the heart. “First and most necessary is prayer,” he says, “by which we must implore the Holy Spirit to pour His divine light into our hearts.”

Second, we must probe “deep for the knowledge of [truths], in order to see clearly which of them are good and which bad. We should judge them not as the world and the senses do, but as they are judged by . . . the Holy Spirit . . . the word of the divinely inspired Scriptures, or that of the holy fathers and teachers of the Church” (*Unseen Warfare*, p. 90).

If we read the Scriptures with the Church, if we search them, praying to the Spirit to bestow right judgment upon us through these divine texts, we will find healing. In these verses, Saint Peter reveals three ways that we heal the disease of ignorance by searching the Scriptures: the restoration of true perspective, the correction of ingratitude, and relief from forgetfulness.

Searching the Scriptures restores our right perspective on life. Secular humanism refers to a world devoid of God, or marginalizes God as an idea confined to people with a particular interest in religion. Scripture, by contrast, approaches God as *the* primary actor amidst all of human history. He alone offers salvation to all nations, and He alone makes sense of everything that bewilders us.

Note how widely these two views differ! Saint Peter, speaking to his fellow Christians, calls us *pilgrims* and *sojourners* (vs. 1:1, 2:11), for he accepts that we belong to a kingdom “not of this world” (Jn 18:36). He sees us as an elect people (1 Pt 1:2; 2:9) who are brought into existence by the actions and love of God (vs. 1:2). We are not merely a group of individuals who happen to come together for religious rituals. Ours is no chance gathering, but an integral part of a plan by which God addresses the sin, sickness, ignorance, and confusion in history.

Christians are not the first people to whom God disclosed His plan to restore all things. The Old Testament prophets received many foresights. As Saint Peter says, they “inquired and searched carefully” into the plan of God (vs. 1:10). Further, by “the Spirit of Christ who was in them,” they were able to foretell “the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (vs. 1:11) His triumph over death.

We know that the revelations to the prophets are fulfilled (vs. 1:12 and 1 Cor 10:11)! Consider the great privilege we have received as Christians, for we are the first to know the whole truth. The generations before us did not receive the blessing of knowing Jesus Christ; they only glimpsed, through the ancient prophecies, the truths now known to us in detail.

The honor we have received humbles our mind and fills our heart with gratitude, for God has made us into His people. We have good reason to “stand aright” and offer “a sacrifice of praise,” in the words of the Divine Liturgy. Scripture heals ingratitude!

Finally, as Saint Peter says: we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” for we have been called “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (vs. 2:9). Saint Peter reminds us how ancient Israel, once called to be the people of God, was “cast away” (Rom 11:15), while we, “who once were not a people . . . are now the people of God” (1 Pt 2:10).

Let us read the Scriptures to be healed of our forgetfulness. We remember that we “have obtained mercy” (vs. 2:10). We come to Holy Scripture for perspective, and discover mercy!

*Illumine our hearts, O Master, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**January 13 – Saturday after Theophany**  
**Ephesians 6:10-17**

**Defeating the Adversary: *Ephesians 6:10-17, especially vs. 12:*** “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*” No Christian who reflects on the events of the last hundred years can easily dismiss the apostle’s claim that we are engaged in a global spiritual struggle. On the contrary, many alive today have witnessed depravity, genocide, atrocity, and self-indulgence on an enormous scale. The spiritually awakened know that behind these depraved human choices are the spiritual forces of evil, and the demonic powers sent from hell.

No other explanation fully accounts for the madness and viciousness that swept over the world in our “enlightened” modern era. Rather, historical events only serve to underscore the wisdom of the apostles and Church Fathers. The Church knows the “spiritual hosts of wickedness” (vs. 12). How well Saint Paul grasped the truth that history is the Church’s struggle against evil!

Let us therefore heed the saint’s admonition. God knows we are weak, so let us “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (vs. 10). The forces ranged against us are neither blind nor inanimate, but personal foes who wish us the worst. As the Apostle Paul urges, we must “put on the whole armor of God, that [we] may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (vs. 11).

“Gird[ing our] waist with truth” (vs. 14) is essential for all the faithful when we live in a world flooded with lies. We know that “from the beginning” the devil is the father of lies (Jn 8:44). He deceived our mother Eve with a lie (“You shall not die” – Gn 3:4), and now all the descendants of Adam die (1 Cor 15:22).

The adversary sows his half-truths in any of us who are willing to listen. To those of us who are overly quick to compromise, he whispers that we must avoid being rigid. To those inclined to “strive about words” (2 Tm 2:14), he urges us to contend for our opinions. Let us instead gird ourselves with Truth!

The “breastplate of righteousness” (vs. 14) shields our heart against moral weakness and failure. It protects us from lies such as “everyone does it,” or “one time won’t matter.” God’s commandments are never intended to confine us, but rather to protect against the cruel consequences that inexorably follow wrongdoing. Our true moral life is based on praise, thanksgiving, and love – gifts from God to encourage us to strive toward purity.

“The gospel of peace” (vs. 15) prepares our feet to walk always in the way of the Lord. Jesus our Lord made no war with the scribes, Pharisees, or chief priest. He offers His kingdom of peace to all. Let us preserve the peace we have in the Lord, for if we do, there is no situation or attack on our persons that can turn us into soldiers of hate.

The “shield of faith” (vs. 16) does indeed “quench the fiery darts of the wicked one,” along with all his burning doubts, accusations, and heated suggestions for arousing the passions. Let us use our well-trained trust in God to cool the mind, steady the heart, and sober our emotions in every situation. Faith responds to the adversary by trusting the sure promises of God.

The “helmet of salvation” (vs. 17) protects our mind, for we attain in by a thorough knowledge of Scripture and the teachings of the Church Father. This helmet covers those who regularly read and study our Holy Tradition. Let our minds be filled with God’s impregnable power against despair and hopelessness.

Lastly, the “sword of the Spirit . . . is the word of God” (vs. 17). When the Lord Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, He uses Scripture to cut down the enemy’s invitations. Let us train well in the use of this sword.

*Glory to Thee, O Lord! Thou hast armed us that we may stand against the adversaries.*

**January 14 – Sunday after Theophany, Tone 7**  
**Ephesians 4:7-13**

**Christ's Gifts: *Ephesians 4:7-13, especially vs. 7:*** “*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*” When God provides us with a fellow disciple who has gifts superior to our own, we should consider it a blessing. Truly, those who discern more quickly, who bear humiliation with glory, who love when we cannot, who accept pain with grace and embrace defeat with joy, who seem always to say the right thing, truly are messengers from God. They show us the narrow way that leads to life in Christ Jesus (Mt 7:13-14). They are His encouragement to us.

If “this or that man possesses any superiority in any spiritual gift, grieve not,” Saint John Chrysostom advises us, for “his labor also is greater.” More importantly, “baptism, the being saved by faith, the having God for our Father, our all partaking of the same Spirit . . . are common to all” (“Homily 11 on Ephesians,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 103).

“To each one of us grace was given” (Eph 4:7), not once by continually, until we are fully equipped “for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (vss. 12-13). We need not miss out on the victory of Christ our God. Each of us has a host of allies to help us make that victory our own. The saints themselves draw us onward in the Spirit until we measure up to “the stature of the fullness of Christ” as completed human beings (vs. 13).

In today's passage, Saint Paul refers to the victory procession of the triumphant Christ (vs. 8). By using the image of leading “captivity captive,” Saint Paul recalls that while men are slaves of that universal tyrant, death, we the faithful in Christ no longer share this fate. Death may be the captor of all, but “Christ Jesus has made [us] free from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2).

At His Ascension into the kingdom of Heaven, Christ “led captivity captive” in His great victory procession. Yes, we were once enslaved to death, but we are no longer in eternal bondage. As we sing at Pascha, “He hath trampled down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

The Gospel reports that death was led before the angels of heaven in chains by our victorious Christ. We are witnesses to this cosmic spiritual victory every time we turn death aside – whenever we love instead of hate, give rather than take, purify ourselves of the passions, and worship our risen Lord. He gives “each one of us grace” (Eph 4:7) to perform these death-defeating deeds and to speak life-bestowing words to others.

Sometimes we are so engaged in our battle against death – in the little skirmishes of daily life – that we fail to remember we have a host of allies standing beside us in our struggle. Christ gives us comrades for our spiritual battles, and Saint Paul names them for us in verse 11. Do we need to know the basics of the faith? We turn to the *apostles*. Do we not yet understand how to apply Christ's truth? He gives us *prophets*.

Who encourages us to hold to the faith when we falter? The *evangelists* are there to strengthen us. And when we fail, the Lord Jesus gives us *pastors* who counsel us in our struggles. Do we need further training in how to win? Christ gives us *teachers* throughout our lives, first at church school or catechism, then later through adult education, homilies, and caring counsel from our friends and family.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). God is equipping us now, “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man,” completed fully in Christ (Eph 4:13).

*Thou only art holy, Thou only art the Lord, O Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.* – The Doxology

## January 15 – Monday of the Thirty-Fourth Week after Pentecost

### James 2:14-26

**Faith Works: James 2:14-26, especially vs. 17:** “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” We note how carefully this sentence from James’ epistle is constructed so as to emphasize the primacy of faith in our Christian life. We further observe how the Apostle James qualifies his remarks about faith by adding the phrase “by itself,” followed by the stipulation, “if it does not have works.” The Fathers of the Church are of one accord concerning both the primacy of faith and the need for robust faith to lead us to good works.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “Only the good deed done for Christ’s sake brings us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life, nor the grace of God in this life” (*Little Russian Philokalia, vol. 1: Saint Seraphim*, p. 86). Although Saint Seraphim does not directly refer to *faith*, we understand that no one does *good deeds* “for Christ’s sake” unless he has faith in Christ, trusting in the Lord’s authority over all his works.

Although we are baptized and chrismated, we sometimes receive holy communion as a matter of habit. Perhaps we were brought up to approach the chalice every Sunday. If such is the case we may lack faith in Christ, even though we consider ourselves to be good Orthodox Christian. A basic key, essential to the life in Christ, appears to be missing.

Saint Seraphim implies that trust in Christ is the true basis for all “good works.” Orthodox training, at any age, is meant to awaken our faith, so that we truly trust in Christ and do never act solely on the basis of accumulated habit.

Saint Seraphim further assures us that doing good works for the Lord provides us with grace now, in this present life, and also leads us toward eternal life in the age to come. Likewise, Saint James assumes that every good work must be done for Christ’s sake, although he does not specifically say so. The emphasis on Christ is clear when we read the whole of Saint James’ epistle, especially verses 5-8 in the first chapter.

Those of us who do good works for Christ because our parents taught us to do so are greatly blessed. However, if our parents assumed that we would do good for Christ’s sake, but never helped us understand the true reason for our works, we may simply continue our habits as adults without ever wondering why.

Both the Apostle James and Saint Seraphim confirm that doing good is our duty as Christians. Why does Saint Seraphim warn that the blessing is lost if those good deeds are done without faith in Christ? Our good works are blessed because of our faith; works done for other reasons lack the necessary foundation for this blessing from Christ.

Isn’t it enough to believe in Christ? Surely, we receive God’s blessing simply by confessing our faith in Him in few words. No doubt, such expressions are a form of faith in the Lord. However, if we end with such a confession, our faith is still-born, according to Saint James.

Saint James warns that we risk becoming truncated Christians if we never undertake good deeds based on our confession of Christ. This is why he speaks of “faith by itself” and emphasizes that such faith “is dead” (vs. 17).

Mere basking in the Nicene Creed does not confer the fullness of God’s blessing. True Christians share in labor with Christ our God. The Lord speaks of how we are “yoked” to Him (Mt 11:29-30). Our faith in Christ leads us to put on His yoke and do His works, pulling with our Master and yoke-mate. Let us be blessed by doing good works in Christ (Eph 2:10)!

*O Christ our God, may I carry out every deed and word, in saving fear of Thee.* – Chrismation Prayer

## January 16 – Tuesday of the Thirty-Fourth Week after Pentecost

### James 3:1-10

**Teaching Christ: James 3:1-10, especially vs. 1:** “*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*” Saint James warns those drawn to a ministry of teaching to consider the work cautiously. First, he reminds us that teaching Christ is a high calling, for a teacher faces higher standards before the judgment seat of Christ (vs. 1). Since stumbling is a human characteristic “in many things” (vs. 2), while what is taught is perfect in all respects, we ought to be slow to teach until we attain a high level of self-control. Lastly, since teaching often involves speaking and “no man can tame the tongue” (vs. 8), there is good reason to approach an educational mission with caution.

As we begin our consideration of this passage, we recognize that there are different levels and kinds of teaching. What does it mean to serve at the very highest level of pedagogy – to teach about Christ? The idea that one might teach anyone about the Lord seems absurd, if we look at the task soberly.

However, the teaching of the faith remains an essential ministry within the Church (Eph 4:11), even if the endeavor borders on the preposterous. We must keep in mind that the Christian teacher is not asked to conduct an academic course about Christ in the abstract. Understanding the limitations of the human mind – his own as well as that of others – the true teacher of the faith never seeks to convey a mere body of intellectual information.

The true Christian teacher necessarily speaks from the heart, from the inmost aspect of his being, which the Fathers call the *nous*. In the *nous*, all learning takes place through an immediate encounter with Christ, not through the abstract concepts of the rational mind.

Holy communion, for example, does not offer us mere thoughts about Christ Jesus; rather, we receive His all-pure Body and Blood. In like manner the faithful do not read the Bible simply to learn about the Lord, but rather to meet the God the Word in the words of Holy Scripture.

Christianity is never taught, only “caught.” Thus, the true teacher must know Christ personally. According to Saint Peter of Damascus, every teacher ought to “pay attention to what the Savior teaches him and do all he can to escape from the enemies’ traps . . . As Saint James the Brother of God rightly says, ‘All good giving and every perfect gift comes from above’ (Jas 1:17)” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 154).

Since “we all stumble in many things” (vs. 2), those of us who teach the faith need great self-control. The all-encompassing virtue of the soul “is self-control, by which I mean abstinence from all passions,” says Saint Peter of Damascus. “The person who possesses this virtue does not tolerate any thought or word, any movement of hand or foot or of any other member of the body, unless it is essential to the life of the body or to the soul’s salvation” (p. 219).

The Apostle James identifies one of the most difficult hurdles for self-control: management of the tongue. The speech of fallen men is “unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (vs. 8). True Christian teaching is shared through action, yet every teacher must speak as well. We must always remain aware that danger is near when we speak, for “out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing” (vs. 10).

Saint Paul calls the true teacher to become “an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tm 4:12). Here is a humbling standard for anyone called to be a Christian teacher. Apart from the grace of God, how can we hope to teach Christ?

*O Most-good Lord! Send down upon us the grace of Thy Holy Spirit, so that by attending to the teaching Thou dost give us, we may grow into the glory of Thee, our Creator, our most holy Truth, and our only Way. – Prayers During the Day*



**January 17 – Saint Anthony the Great**  
**Hebrew 13:17-21**

**Problem Leaders: Hebrews 13:17-21, especially vs. 17:** *“Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account...”* [RSV] Impious leaders pose a thorny issue for Christian: how to obey and serve a corrupt superior in a manner that keeps the Lord Jesus’ and the Apostles’ counsel to obey whenever possible. The disclaimer, “whenever possible,” applies only when a leader orders something contrary to the Law of God - whether at work, in the government, or in the Church.

Should Christians receive an order clearly opposed to God’s will, they are not to obey. The consequences of not obeying may be very difficult or painful. Typically, situations of this sort “feel” complicated, but the difficulties usually relate to the consequences rather than to the choice which the Lord requires. Often, there are avenues of appeal or means for avoiding an order that forces one to choose between what a leader demands and what the Lord Himself commands. Certainly all godly avenues for avoiding a moral dilemma should be pursued. Furthermore, the struggle of faith in the face of certain consequences is eased when we recall the Lord’s admonition to expect suffering as normal (Mk. 8:34). Remember, the Lord Jesus promised blessings to those who will follow Him faithfully, whatever the cost (Mt. 5:11).

Still, there are those circumstances in which a leader is simply wrong, perhaps morally, possibly because he is inept, or because he himself is convinced of some ill-advised policy. St. John Chrysostom asks, “When he is wicked should we obey? Wicked? In what sense? If indeed in regard to faith, flee and avoid him, not only if he is a man, but even if he is an angel come down from heaven....” Note St. John’s disclaimer: if following a leader will corrupt or distort one’s faith, “flee and avoid him,” if possible. Then the great Saint cautions us: “...but if in regard to life, do not be overly curious....For hear Christ saying, ‘The Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat’ (Mt. 23:2,3). The Lord means that they have the dignity of the office, but are of unclean life. Attend, however, not to their life, but to their words.” The Christian ought to refuse, retreat, or resist *only* when he is being invited into wickedness. Never should one contribute to evil in the world by obeying and performing a wicked deed. Let the example of the martyrs inspire us never to compromise with evil nor to acquiesce in a corrupt enterprise.

On the other hand, the Christian is to continue under a “bad” leader so long as the essential bond between himself and the Lord is not threatened with breach or compromise. Embarrassment, loss of money, wasted time, or poor results are no basis for fleeing and avoiding. There may be personal suffering, but the Lord will bless the steadfast who obey and serve when doing so is unpleasant or unfruitful, just as long as evil does not result.

St. John Chrysostom says: “For as regards their character, no one would be harmed from this. How so? Because their characters are manifest to all, and because, even if he were ten thousand times as wicked, he would never teach what is wicked.” So one should obey a leader who speaks of ideals, right goals, and good practices, even if he does not live by them. Note: God the Holy Spirit moves in the Holy Mysteries even if a Priest himself is unworthy of them.

Notice that the Apostle is writing here about leaders in the Church. Hence, if we should find ourselves under a unworthy clergyman, let us heed the right teaching even if the leader only gives “lip service” himself. The Prophet Samuel said, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). Rest assured: a morally corrupt Church leader still will give an account for his ministry. Through all, Beloved, let us pray for all who are over us.

*O God, give the grace of the Holy Spirit to all leaders in the exercise of ministry.*

**January 18 – Saints Athanasios and Cyril, Patriarchs of Alexandria**  
**Hebrews 13:7-16**

**Establish Your Heart: Hebrews 13:7-16, especially vs. 9:** “For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.” Yes! The food that feeds the heart is grace! Nothing can match it! Ask, “Where can I find this grace to feed and establish my heart?” The text plainly states that it is at “...an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat” (vs. 10). The true altar, from which grace is obtained is the Holy Table of Christ our God. Heed the Apostle’s admonition: “...go forth to Him...” (vs. 13). Consider this: why do we fast and cut off all earthly foods before Holy Communion? Clearly the answer is: So that the sweetness of the Holy Gifts may be tasted, savored, and never, ever confused with lesser things of this creation.

In the Temple of the ancient People of God, when the flesh of animals was offered, one portion was holocausted to represent self-offering to God, and another portion was eaten as a type of communion with the Holy One. But those former types have given way to The Prototype, Who feeds us with His life-giving Body and Blood. So, remember what separates us from the ancient practice and its perishable food: we partake of the Holy Communion “...of the precious and all-holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, unto the forgiveness of sins and unto life everlasting.” He is the gracious food that establishes our hearts. And, if the thought occurs to draw near in the hope of having the heart established by the grace received in Christ, then listen well to the other admonitions the Apostle gives in these verses.

Follow “...those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you...” (vs. 7), for their conduct in life shows what grace means to accomplish in us. Obedience to apostolic order does not crush freedom, but establishes it on a sure foundation that frees and strengthens us. The Apostles were deified by obeying Christ - as their conduct after Pentecost amply reveals.

Conversely, refuse to “...be carried about with various and strange doctrines” (vs. 9). These abound in the permissive, confused cultural milieu of this life. Rather, “...test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1).

Indeed, “...go forth to...” Christ (vs. 13). The imagery used in this expression goes back to a Roman concession: they would crucify criminals outside the city gates of Jerusalem, so as not to offend the pious Jews in maintaining ritual purity (vs. 12). When we make Christ central in our hearts and give Him first place in our lives, we step aside from this world’s values.

Let us give Christ and His Body, the Church, the primary place in life. To do so, we will have to bear “...His reproach” (vs. 13). However, better to suffer because of choosing to obey Him even when it may mean being avoided, rejected, or even attacked; for in this world we have no permanent city except with “...the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

Seek the one sure place we can exist now in our full humanity (Heb. 13:14), the ‘city’ that is to come - the kingdom of God, revealed in this present life within the worship of the Church.

Yes, it is within the Church that we may freely praise and give thanks to Christ our God without reservation (vs. 15). His truth is taught in the household of God. It is sung among us, read and chanted to establish our hearts. Be fed at His table with His Body and Blood.

All this does not mean to say withdraw from this world or its pain, need, and suffering. Not at all! “...do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (vs. 16). These admonitions and directives are Life, and they will help us discover that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (vs. 8); may our hearts be established in His grace!

*Preserve my soul pure and upright by Thy grace, through the saving fear of Thee.*

**January 19 – Friday of the Thirty-Fourth Week after Pentecost**

**1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; 2:6-10**

**Searching the Scriptures: 1 Peter 1:1-2,10-12; 2:6-10, especially vs. 1:10:** “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you.” Saint Theophan the Recluse offers two prescriptions for overcoming the disease of ignorance in the heart. “First and most necessary is prayer,” he says, “by which we must implore the Holy Spirit to pour His divine light into our hearts.”

Second, we must probe “deep for the knowledge of [truths], in order to see clearly which of them are good and which bad. We should judge them not as the world and the senses do, but as they are judged by . . . the Holy Spirit . . . the word of the divinely inspired Scriptures, or that of the holy fathers and teachers of the Church” (*Unseen Warfare*, p. 90).

If we read the Scriptures with the Church, if we search them, praying to the Spirit to bestow right judgment upon us through these divine texts, we will find healing. In these verses, Saint Peter reveals three ways that we heal the disease of ignorance by searching the Scriptures: the restoration of true perspective, the correction of ingratitude, and relief from forgetfulness.

Searching the Scriptures restores our right perspective on life. Secular humanism refers to a world devoid of God, or marginalizes God as an idea confined to people with a particular interest in religion. Scripture, by contrast, approaches God as *the* primary actor amidst all of human history. He alone offers salvation to all nations, and He alone makes sense of everything that bewilders us.

Note how widely these two views differ! Saint Peter, speaking to his fellow Christians, calls us *pilgrims* and *sojourners* (vs. 1:1, 2:11), for he accepts that we belong to a kingdom “not of this world” (Jn 18:36). He sees us as an elect people (1 Pt 1:2; 2:9) who are brought into existence by the actions and love of God (vs. 1:2). We are not merely a group of individuals who happen to come together for religious rituals. Ours is no chance gathering, but an integral part of a plan by which God addresses the sin, sickness, ignorance, and confusion in history.

Christians are not the first people to whom God disclosed His plan to restore all things. The Old Testament prophets received many foresights. As Saint Peter says, they “inquired and searched carefully” into the plan of God (vs. 1:10). Further, by “the Spirit of Christ who was in them,” they were able to foretell “the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (vs. 1:11) His triumph over death.

We know that the revelations to the prophets are fulfilled (vs. 1:12 and 1 Cor 10:11)! Consider the great privilege we have received as Christians, for we are the first to know the whole truth. The generations before us did not receive the blessing of knowing Jesus Christ; they only glimpsed, through the ancient prophecies, the truths now known to us in detail.

The honor we have received humbles our mind and fills our heart with gratitude, for God has made us into His people. We have good reason to “stand aright” and offer “a sacrifice of praise,” in the words of the Divine Liturgy. Scripture heals ingratitude!

Finally, as Saint Peter says: we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” for we have been called “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (vs. 2:9). Saint Peter reminds us how ancient Israel, once called to be the people of God, was “cast away” (Rom 11:15), while we, “who once were not a people . . . are now the people of God” (1 Pt 2:10).

Let us read the Scriptures to be healed of our forgetfulness. We remember that we “have obtained mercy” (vs. 2:10). We come to Holy Scripture for perspective, and discover mercy!

*Illumine our hearts, O Master, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**January 20 – Saint Euthymios the Great**  
**Galatians 5:22-6:2**

**Walk in the Spirit: Galatians 5:22-6:2, especially vs. 25, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”** Saint Paul here portrays a cornucopia pouring overflowing with spiritual fruit; he points to this one, that one, one over here, one over there: “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (vss. 22,23). The beauty of this produce of the Spirit of God touches the heart, for it comes from the very Spirit Whom we know, in Whom we are sealed. The Spirit is He Who meets us in worship of Christ and God our Father, and as we venerate the Saints. Why does the Apostle bring this fruit of the Spirit to our attention? It is to encourage us to “...walk in the Spirit” (vs. 25), to step out into this world and share what the Spirit produces, yes, even if we have had only the tiniest taste.

The love that is the fruit of the Spirit is in a class by itself among the sundry feelings, states, and activities that are called ‘love.’ The Spirit teaches us a greater love, very different in quality, a love that only comes to us when we crucify “. . . the flesh . . .” (vs. 24). On the other hand, the flesh has a resistant will opposing the Holy Spirit. The flesh turns those whom it dominates toward an evil lifestyle that resists true conformity to God’s will. The flesh is dark, sinister slavery that lofts the passions “...like high walls that shut out the resplendence of the Spirit....”

The flesh is a deadly traitor stalking about within our souls and hearts to ‘liberate’ the passions and desires. It invited Christ to fore go the Cross (an absurdity). The flesh definitely suggests that we give free reign to conceit, to provoking others, and to envy. Our flesh is surreptitious. It calls conceit, ‘self-assurance,’ and it renames ‘provoking others’ as ‘open challenging,’ and it provides ‘envy’ with a new slogan: ‘having a fair share.’ But it is death to ‘kindness’ and ‘goodness,’ ever opposing ‘gentleness’ and ‘self-control’ (vss. 22,23).

To approach the heavenly banquet and feed upon the fruit of the Spirit is what the Apostle is offering us. But it comes with conditions: we have to “...walk in the Spirit” (vs. 25), and that entails restoring others around us “...in a spirit of gentleness...” (vs. 1). We have to connect the gentleness which the Spirit reveals to aid our efforts at godly gentleness (vs. 1). We cannot remain aloof and ‘play spiritual games.’ Saint Paul says that the way to beat that kind of temptation is to ‘consider ourselves’ lest we also be tempted (vs. 1). Woe to us when we forget our capacity to sin, our tendency to be driven by our “...passions and desires” (vs. 1). As the Lord teaches: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone...” (Jn. 8:7).

Bearing others’ burdens (Gal. 6:2) is not possible until we work with the Spirit deeply to correct our lives. Who among us can undertake this project humanly impossible project? Who?! Only the Spirit of the living God, and only when our spirits welcome Him Who will assist us to “...worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23,24). Are we Christ’s? Then the Apostolic caution applies: “...those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). This enemy, the flesh, must be faced with no glossing, avoiding, or forgetting.

Lastly, ask, what is “...the law of Christ” (vs. 6:2) we are to fulfill? Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn. 13:34). As Saint John Chrysostom puts the matter: “The soul is situated in the middle of the struggle between virtue and vice. If the soul uses the body as it should, it makes itself more spiritual. But if it departs from the Spirit and yields itself to evil desire, it renders it more earthly.” So, we return to the Apostle’s words: the Holy Spirit as our Co-laborer gives fruit; but He does so only as we “walk in Him” (Gal. 5:25). Yield to vice, or walk in the Spirit.

*O Holy Spirit, do Thou Thyself work in us those things which are pleasing in Thy sight.*

## January 21 – Sunday of Zacchaeus, Tone 8

### 1 Timothy 4:9-15

**Godliness Profits Eternally: 1 Timothy 4:9-15, introduced by verse 4:8:** “For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.” The opening verse of today’s epistle reading hinges upon the preceding verse, quoted above. Indeed, verse 8 contains the “faithful saying . . . worthy of all acceptance” of which Saint Paul speaks. The apostle acknowledges the value in *bodily exercise* (an activity highly esteemed today), but more greatly exalts *godliness* for its immeasurable worth in terms of both temporal and eternal life.

Saint Paul set godliness before the younger Timothy, his traveling companion and representative, holding up this trait as the prime reason for their mutual labor and for the *reproach* they are suffering (vs. 10). Although we are separated from Saints Paul and Timothy by two thousand years, we should not be quick to dismiss godliness, a quality highly regarded by these apostles. Certainly, we will not do so if we “trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe” (vs. 10).

The Apostle Paul commands us to be godly in thinking, speaking, and acting. Other people may discount us for superficial reasons such as age, education, or gender. We may not be ordained, nor have faced the circumstances of someone else’s struggle. But if we live a godly life, our actions speak volumes to everyone.

Our lives, not merely our words, command authority and instruct (vs. 11). We pray that others will find in this manner of living what “is profitable for all things” (vs. 8), more than they do in the lifestyles of depraved, selfish, and arrogant men.

Godliness may go out of style from time to time, but never with God. When we proceed authentically, we are godly in heart, mind, and action. We encourages other “believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (vs. 12).

This virtue which Saint Paul commends so highly involves love, under the best and the worst of circumstances, and especially *agape*, the highest possible love, divinely inspired. Godliness always trusts God; godliness holds to the highest standard of moral purity. Godliness is “peaceable” and “reverent” (vs. 2:2), does “good works” (vs. 2:10), and is content with life’s basic necessities of food and clothing (vs. 6:8).

Christ reveals the depths of godly living, so that the apostles may understand and commend godliness themselves. We in turn learn how to attain godliness of heart and soul in many ways: by reading Scripture and the Church Fathers, listening to our pastors, hearing the doctrines of the Church expressed in our liturgical texts, and studying the dogmas set forth by the Ecumenical Councils.

To help us embrace godliness, we first receive grace through “the laying on of the hands of the eldership” (vs. 4:14) at our baptism and chrismation. The Holy Spirit has already illumined our minds for godliness through the sacraments, and Saint Paul exhorts us never to “neglect the gift that is in [us]” (vs. 14).

Godliness grows within, becoming manifest as we “meditate on these things” and “give [ourselves] entirely to them” (vs. 15). There is no magic path for attaining this way of life. We have to labor for Christ’s sake, but the Holy Spirit aids us to grow into “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). Let us be encouraged and make “[our] progress . . . evident to all” (1 Tm 4:15).

*Implant in my heart an increase of Thy love . . . whereby Thou didst sojourn in the world.* – Saint Isaac the Syrian

## January 22 – Monday of the Fourth Week before Lent

### 1 Peter 2:21-3:9

**Christ-like Suffering: 1 Peter 2:21-3:9, especially vs. 21:** “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. . . .” In this passage the Apostle Peter admonishes us to follow the Lord’s example in suffering. He recalls the Lord’s Passion (vss. 22-24), reminds us that Christ is watching over our souls (vs. 25), counsels wives (vss. 3:1-6) and husbands (vs. 7), and advises the community of the faithful (vss. 8-9).

While the subjects covered by Saint Peter range widely, a careful reading discloses their deeper unity under the mandate to suffer like Christ. Very simply, our Lord Jesus expects every member of His Body to live by a norm that runs contrary to the assumptions of the world (Mt 16:24). We are to bear whatever trials God permits to come our way, without complaint. Above all, we maintain our integrity in Christ: we give no offense, we are innocent and patient in suffering, we mistreat no one, and accept wrongs against ourselves cheerfully.

Three of the apostle’s exhortations stand out. First, we are to remain firmly committed to the Lord Jesus, even in suffering; we must never deservedly earn afflictions by committing sin; and finally, we never return evil for evil but bless everyone, come what may.

Saint Peter reviews our Lord’s Passion – the supreme model for Christian life – in verses 22-24. Here, the apostle applies the Suffering Servant prophecy (Is 53:4-12) to Christ. However, let us remember that Saint Peter is not speaking theoretically, but rather from experience: the events he describes changed his life (Mk 14:46-72). Initially, Peter resisted the Lord Jesus’ declaration that He must suffer (vss. 8:31-32), yet later he embraced Christ’s sufferings for his salvation.

In declaring that our Lord “committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (vs. 23), Saint Peter reveals how we are to behave when we unfairly suffer. The Passion was endured by Him “who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth . . . [but] bore our sins . . . that we . . . might live for righteousness” (vss. 22-24). Christ maintained integrity, purity, and innocence; He never wronged others.

The Apostle Peter underscores our Lord’s example by noting that when He “was reviled [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten” (vs. 23). Christ our Savior faced many provocations to return evil for evil; instead, the Master blessed. Saint Peter witnesses to this example, for which he later gave his own life, and summons us to follow.

Even as the topic shifts to marriage, Saint Peter’s three challenges to us persist. He counsels “wives [to] be submissive to [their] own husbands” (vs. 3:1), imitating the holy women of old who “trusted in God . . . being submissive to their own husbands” (vs. 5).

The calling of the Christian woman – even one whose husband does “not obey the word” (vs. 1) – is to pursue a pure and holy life. She is not to feign servility, but rather win her husband to Christ by living chastely, reverently, gently, and quietly (vss. 1-4). Her aim is to be free of sin, like Christ. The Christian wife will, in all circumstances, “do good, [but be] not afraid” (vs. 6). Never retaliating, she is always blessing.

The apostle likewise counsels husbands – and all of us who constitute the Church, as “heirs together of the grace of life” (vs. 7) – to be of one mind with Christ (see Phil 2:5). May we who are united to Christ Jesus submit to Him and be like Him: compassionate, tenderhearted, and courteous, never “returning evil for evil” (vss. 8-9)!

*O Lord, enable us, with spotless conscience, to suffer with Thee that we may be found worthy to be drawn up on high with Thee to the Jerusalem above in the kingdom of heaven. – Orthros verse for Holy Monday*

## January 23 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week before Lent

### 1 Peter 3:10-22

**What Great Lengths! 1 Peter 3:10-22, especially vs. 18:** *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit . . . .”* God exerts great effort to restore us to Himself. As the Gospel proclaims, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). When we look freely into this mystery, we discover God’s unswerving love for mankind. His incalculable efforts touch heaven and earth, things visible and invisible, angels and men, minds and hearts, that from the faintest flickering of hopes Christ “might bring us to God” (1 Pt 3:18).

According to the Apostle Paul, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). God’s perfect love goes to unimaginable lengths for our sake. Our minds and hearts cannot possibly comprehend God’s grace, initiative, and sacrifice, for “He . . . did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all” (vs. 8:32).

In today’s reading, the Apostle Peter takes us on a whirlwind tour of the expanses of God’s love. At the center is an unimaginable wonder: Christ our God embraces suffering for us. He, the only sinless One, dies for the unjust. “Taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7), He is “put to death in the flesh” (1 Pt 3:18).

While in the tomb, Christ preached in Hades to the spirits bound in the prison of death (vs. 19). He gives us baptism, the antitype of salvation, to remove the filth that keeps our consciences apart from God (vs. 21). And once He is raised from the dead, He “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God” (vs. 22) to make intercession for us (Rom 8:34).

How can it be that God, who is beyond all change, who created all that exists, who is not bound by what He has created, suffered “once for sins” (1 Pt 3:18)? According to Saint John of Kronstadt, God is “a Spirit, an incomplex Being . . . not composed of a series or of a multitude of thoughts, or of a multitude of words or creations, but . . . wholly, in one incomplex thought, God.”

Such a mystery staggers the mind. At Great and Holy Thursday orthros, the Church contemplates this poignant miracle: “Today, He is suspended on a Tree who suspended the earth above the waters. He who wore a false purple robe covered the heavens with clouds. He was smitten who in the Jordan, delivered Adam.”

He suffers for us by taking on our mortal flesh, joining His changeless Person to our changeable humanity in the Virgin’s womb. Love chooses to bring us to Himself by offering “the just for the unjust” (vs. 18). Indeed, this is going to great lengths!

Having died, our deathless Lord entered the precincts of Hades. “Now Thou hast revealed Thy hidden things as God and Man to those who are in Hades also, who shouted, saying, ‘There is none holy save Thee, O Lord.’” We tremble at His death, for the “element of life was seen to be dead in a manner transcending the mind” (Holy Saturday orthros).

Finally, so that we might share in the mystery of His Death and Resurrection, our Lord Jesus Christ gave us baptism to wash us clean of our sins, and seal of the Spirit to seal us in the heavenly places with Him. “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

Let us take note that He also gives us a task for this life: we are to mortify “[our] members which are on the earth” (Col 3:5) while He aids us in our feeble efforts. Being at the right hand of the Father, He eternally intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). Yes, surely Christ our Savior goes to great lengths to “bring us to God” (1 Pt 3:18)!

*Glory to Thee, O Christ our God and our hope, glory to Thee!* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**January 24 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week before Lent**  
**1 Peter 4:1-11**

**Suffering in the Flesh: 1 Peter 4:1-11, especially vss. 1-2:** “He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” Earlier in this same epistle, Saint Peter declares that Christ suffered death “in the flesh” purposely, in order “to bring us to God” (vs. 3:18). Now, when he tells us to “arm [ourselves] also with the same mind” (vs. 4:1), he is urging us to embrace an intention similar to the Lord’s.

We should not read the expression “suffered in the flesh” as applicable only to martyrs and confessors, for a vital truth would then be lost. Suffering is common to everyone and takes many forms: persecution, injury, disease, financial reverses, rejection. While Saint Peter’s primary concern throughout his first epistle is with physical persecution, he is well aware that *suffering in the flesh* extends beyond the afflictions imposed on those who died for Christ.

This suffering may also come to one who has indulged in sinful living, but now withdraws for Christ’s sake and ceases to “run . . . in the same flood of dissipation” (vs. 4). As we would expect, the Apostle advises us against living “in the flesh for the lusts of men” (vs. 2). We should avoid “lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (vs. 3), determined to avoid all such indulgence.

But social isolation may follow when we choose to stop living “in . . . dissipation” (vs. 4). According to *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Saint Peter is talking about the vices then prevalent in Asia Minor, “where excessive drinking, along with unspeakable practices, took place in connection with the worship of various deities.” Let us bear in mind that these vices are well known today, even though they are no longer part of the worship of any deities!

As a fledgling disciple, Saint Peter learned the captivating power of a sinful mind. Christ tells us that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mk 7:21-23).

Among the Fathers of the Church, Saint John Climacus commends the pain of struggling for chastity and purity, especially since we have a vital hope of *ceasing from sin* (1 Pt 4:1-2). “Purity means that we put on the angelic nature. Purity is the longed-for house of Christ and the earthly heaven of the heart. Purity is a supernatural denial of nature. . . . He is pure . . . [who] expels fleshly love with divine love, and . . . has extinguished the fire of passion by the fire of heaven” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 15.1-3, 7, p. 104).

Keep in mind that Saint John does not limit the virtue of chastity to sexual purity, but rather asserts that “chastity is the name which is common to all the virtues.” In our struggle to gain purity, God helps us take certain steps that are necessarily accompanied by pain. We observe our passions, repent sincerely, and confess thoroughly; we undertake fasting, abandon self-reliance, and strive for unceasing prayer.

“Let no one thoroughly trained in purity attribute its attainment to himself, for it is impossible for anyone to conquer his own nature,” Saint John cautions. “When nature is defeated, it should be recognized that this is due to the presence of Him who is above nature.” Indeed, we never endure such sufferings apart from God, but rather in the presence of His love.

*I am caught in the depths of sins. O Savior, draw me out of passion, and save me!* – Orthros for Sunday of the Prodigal Son



## January 25 – Thursday of the Fourth Week before Lent

### 1 Peter 4:12-5:5

**Clothed with Humility: 1 Peter 4:12-5:5, especially vs. 5:** “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” The Apostle Peter bids us to clothe ourselves in humility, a virtue manifested through gentle actions and graceful words. He likens humility to a spiritual garment which we put on as our visible apparel. Indeed, humility is visible lowliness: it arises from a meek heart and makes no outward show of piety.

According to Saint John Climacus, “It is one thing to be humble, another to strive for humility, and another to praise the humble . . . The first belongs to the perfect, the second to the truly obedient, and the third to all the faithful” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 25.19, p. 153).

If we are to take our place among the faithful, as our holy father among the saints suggests, we may come to recognize the seven marks of this “nameless grace in the soul . . . known only to those who have learned it by experience [as a] gift from God.” As the Lord says, “Learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29).

What does humility entail? First, we may anticipate every “kind of ascetic hardship, together with prayer that springs from an afflicted heart and is accompanied by many tears” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 29). To be truly humble means afflicting ourselves and shedding tears, for we discover how profoundly we are captive to sin. The humble “sow with tears [but] shall reap with rejoicing . . . They wept as they cast their seeds. But in their coming shall they come with rejoicing, bearing their sheaves” (Ps 125:6-8). The harvest of humility is a merciful heart granted by the Lord, who richly rewards all who labor in His fields.

Second, we must know ourselves. We receive fear of the Lord as a grace, for God Himself teaches us how feeble we are. He helps us remember that “we are dust . . . [and our] days are as the grass,” for when the “wind is passed over it, then it shall be gone, and no longer will it know the place thereof” (Ps 102:12-14).

Third, humility requires us to avoid wickedness. “Where humility is combined with the remembrance of God,” observes Saint Philotheos, “there is the place of God, the heaven of the heart in which, because of God’s presence, no demonic army dares to make a stand” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 17).

Fourth, if we are truly humble, we are thankful for our deliverance from past sins. We gladly endure trials inflicted on us, “accepting them as . . . [our] due on account of . . . former offenses” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 185). The humble offer their trials to God for correction of sins.

Fifth, the humble soul is filled with compassion, kindness, and mercy. We are to extend the same love to everyone, as our Heavenly Father does (see Mt 5:45). Saint John Climacus describes the “holy team” of humility and love: while “the one [humility] exalts, and the other [love], supporting the exalted ones, never fails” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.37, p. p. 156).

Sixth, the humble esteem others as greater than themselves. “The higher a man ascends in humility, the lower he appears in his own eyes . . . The humble man does not wish to be compared even with the lowliest and is grieved when . . . given first place” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 38).

Lastly, humility bears indignity, humiliations, and the most despised conditions, for “God rejoices when He sees us running to meet dishonor, so as to crush, strike, and destroy our vain self-esteem” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.45, p. 157).

*Out of the night my spirit awaketh at dawn unto Thee, O God. Teach me Thy righteousness; enlighten the eyes of my understanding lest at any time I sleep unto death in sins.* – Orthros verse

## January 26 – Friday of the Fourth Week before Lent

### 2 Peter 1:1-10

**The Life in Christ: 2 Peter 1:1-10, especially vs. 3:** “Divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue . . .” The familiar phrase “the life in Christ” comes from the writings of Saint Nicholas Cabasilas and Saint John of Kronstadt. Saint John’s teaching concerning the life in Christ are eminently practical, for “its constant theme is that man is engaged in a spiritual warfare, which it is his business to win” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. xxvii). Cabasilas likewise encourages us to work with God’s grace, that we may hope to gain our salvation.

In today’s epistle, Saint Peter employs seven images to describe the life in Christ: precious faith; knowledge of God the Holy Trinity; a call; participation in the divine nature; escape from the corruption of the world; cleansing from old sins; and election by our Savior.

When our faith in God is weak or under assault, we would do well to recall the apostle’s clear declaration that faith does not come to us primarily through our own efforts, but rather as a gift from God (vs. 1). Our attraction to the Lord Jesus and His teachings, the Church, the Holy Scriptures, and the saints awakens in us when the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts and souls.

No clenching of our fists is needed to deepen our convictions, nor do we require mighty efforts to still our inner doubts, nor a diligent ascetical regimen. None of these efforts, alone, will give us *precious faith* (vs. 1) unless God acts. Faith, like life itself and the air we breathe, is God’s gift. By all means, let us ask for that precious gift!

The life in Christ is a relationship. We tend to think we know other people through physical association, but much we know of others is gained through our mind and heart. We know God primarily through the heart, via our spirit, for “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24).

The Lord provides a rich array of tangible means for knowing Him: access to His temples, true writings concerning Him, holy communion, icons, and fellowship with other members of His Body, especially those who are well-acquainted with Him. Through these media we find “grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God” (2 Pt 1:2).

Our attraction to the Lord Jesus comes through the Holy Spirit, who echoes Christ’s *call* (vs. 3): “Come to Me. . . . Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me . . . and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29). The life in Christ begins with a beckoning from the Holy Trinity, which elicits our own heart’s answer.

The moment we begin to share life with Christ, we participate in God’s *divine nature* (2 Pt 1:4). He rubs off on us, so to speak, infusing Himself into us and changing us as we heed Him.

Being joined to the Lord Jesus defends us against “the corruption that is in the world through lust” (vs. 4). Christ opposes the hatred, lies, and thievery that swirl around us! These evils are forever active in this world, but when we embrace the life in Christ we partake of another realm, being “more than conquerors through Him” who loves us (Rom 8:37).

The beauty of the life in Christ is being “cleansed from [our] old sins” (2 Pt 1:9). More and more the taint of this world diminishes, healed by our choice to live in and with Christ our God. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9).

The life in Christ is our free choice, but it becomes possible because our *call and election* comes from Him (2 Pt 1:10). “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). How shall we answer?

*May I ever remember Thy grace and henceforth live not unto myself, but unto Thee, our Master and Benefactor, O Bread of life, Fountain of holiness, and Giver of good things.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**January 27 – Translation of the Relics of Saint John Chrysostom  
Hebrews 7:27-8:2**

**The True High Priest: Hebrews 7:26-8:2, especially vss. 8:1, 2:** “*We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.*” In the Epistle to the Hebrew Christians, Saint Paul carefully compares and contrasts the ancient worship of the People of God in the Temple at Jerusalem with the worship of God’s People who are disciples of Christ the Lord. The Apostle assumes that, in every generation, God’s People accept that they are sinners (vss. 26,27) who need to be saved from eternal separation from God. Implicitly, they admit a yearning to “...obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

Anciently, the People of God relied upon a high priest to “...offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s...” (Heb. 7:27). Our greater advantage as Christians is that “...we have such a High Priest Who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...” (Heb. 8:1). Though a man, Christ is not ‘like all others,’ including the high priests of old, with sin’s fatal ‘weakness’ (vs. 7:28). When we sin, we ask our spouse, child, or friend to forgive us, relying on the bonds of love as a ground of hope that we will gain relief from our offense. We know they are sinners like we are and hope they will understand and extend forgiveness.

However, the People of God, ancient and Christian, always have recognized that when it comes to God, the issue of sin presents an apparently ‘insurmountable’ problem. Like the whole defiled human race, we live under the judgment of God Almighty that “...in whatever day you eat from [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil], you shall die by death” (Gn. 2:17). The ubiquity of death in human experience directly connects to the universality of sin among us. How then do we face the all-Holy God and seek His forgiveness? After all, He still stands by His charge against sin and its effect on us. God remains undefiled, without sin. On what common ground can we expect forgiveness from the infinitely good God and perfect Creator?

However, in Christ a new dimension is introduced: a “...great salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him...” (Heb. 2:3). “...the gospel was preached to us...who have believed...” (Heb. 4:2, 3). Yes, a message of good news (the literal meaning of ‘gospel’) came from Christ and was put into effect by Him for us: that we may “...come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). In comparing and contrasting the situation of the ancient People of God and that of Christians, the Apostle turns us toward the Lord Jesus as ‘High Priest.’

In Christ there is a qualitative leap away from the high priests of old. Our High Priest is “...holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens...” (Heb. 7:26). Our “...High Priest...is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...” (vs. 8:1). Our High Priest partakes of Divinity Himself, being “...of one essence with the Father...,” Who is the very Word of God “...by Whom all things were made.” Thus, He is one of us. In addition, for our salvation from death and separation from God, the Son of God “...was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” He lived in the sinful world as a man, fully demonstrating the love and willingness of God to embrace even death “...to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him...” (Heb 7:25).

Are you a sinner? Aren't we all? Well, we have a “...Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which [Jesus Christ] the Lord erected...” (Heb. 8:2). As our ultimate High Priest, He “...is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...” (vs. 8:1) to save us.

*O Lord, grant me pardon and forgiveness of my sins and sanctify my soul.*

**January 28 – Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (First Sunday of Triodion), Tone 1**  
**2 Timothy 3:10-15**

**Let Us Be Apostolic: 2 Timothy 3:10-15, especially vss. 10-11:** “*But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions . . .*” During the Divine Liturgy, after the oblation of bread and wine is offered to our Lord and His peace is extended to all, we confess the symbol of faith: the Nicene Creed. We affirm therein our belief in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

In today’s epistle, Saint Paul calls upon us to stand up for our apostolic birthright in three specific ways. First, we embrace the apostles’ message from the heart; second, we are to adopt a manner of living worthy of the apostles’ standard; and finally, we must be willing to pay the price for being faithful to the apostles’ truth.

Saint Paul states that we practice the faith of the apostles when we “have carefully followed my doctrine [and] manner of life” (vs. 10). Let us never suppose that we are apostolic witnesses merely because we speak about the faith reasonably well. What Saint Paul means by *following* involves our manner of living – a consistent day-in, day-out application of the convictions we learn from the apostles. Let us speak apostolic words, but even more so strive to live their form of life. If we behave consistently as Orthodox Christians, then our manner of living will correlate directly with that of the apostles.

Of course, we do not set out to mimic the way the apostles lived. Instead, we begin by praying for the intercession of those great servants of the Lord. The Church Fathers are adamant that true theology flows from true prayer. Doctrine and manner of life are not assimilated by our rational faculties alone. God gives these gifts to us when we follow His path, seeking deep healing for our hearts and souls and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

To be apostolic is to have the same life purpose and trust in God as the apostles. According to Saint Paul, the truly apostolic person trusts in the same Holy Spirit who guided the apostles in their day-to-day lives. The life-giving Spirit leads us to embrace the apostles’ goals as our own. Furthermore, with the Spirit of God guiding us, we also accept their doctrine and manner of life wholeheartedly. We walk their path naturally, for we trust Christ our God without reservation, as they did.

Let us turn all our decisions and actions over to Christ! Saint Peter once asked, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69). The apostles refused to listen to anyone who pressed them to follow another purpose: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

Third, being apostolic means to be willing to embrace the cost of sustaining our faith. If we are to follow the apostles’ doctrine and manner of life, then we follow Christ, whatever may come. Yes, we pray that we hold fast to the apostles’ faith, embrace their manner of living, and freely accept whatever price this world may extract from us for doing so.

In this vein, let us consider the Greek New Testament word *martyrion*. Prior to the Christian era, this word merely referred to a “witness.” Within a single century, however, it came to mean “one who pays the price of death for Christ.”

We “united ourselves unto Christ” at baptism, and we live by what we have seen and heard of Him in the life of His apostolic Church – Christ’s own radiant Body. Be willing to love, persevere, and to suffer for Him as He wills. Glory to Jesus Christ!

*O Holy Apostle Paul, plead that we preserve thy good confession to our last breath.* – Vespers for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

## January 29 – Monday of the Third Week before Lent

### 2 Peter 1:20-2:9

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy – False Teachers: 2 Peter 1:20-2:9, especially vs. 2:1:** “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.” In this epistle, the Apostle Peter raises grave concerns about “false teachers” (vs. 2:1), including “those who walk according to the flesh” (vs. 10), the “slaves of corruption” (vs. 19), “scoffers” (vs. 3:3), and “unstable people [who] twist . . . the Scriptures” (vs. 3:16).

By God’s providence, however, these deviant teachers who aggressively promote false ideas actually play a role in illuminating our Orthodox faith. The painful thorns of wrong doctrines moved the Fathers of the Church to articulate and uphold correct teachings, by God’s grace. As a result, Orthodox Christianity remains robust today after centuries of struggle against falsehood. The Church upholds the integrity of “the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of . . . the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (vs. 3:2).

We must always be attentive to this ongoing struggle against sin and error, since “God did not spare the angels who sinned” (vs. 2:4). Rather, He “reserve[s] the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment” (vs. 9).

In matters of heresy our salvation is indeed at stake, for the common human denominator of sin infests every false teaching and fills the heretics with deadly pride. The two-thousand-year history of heresy reveals that arrogant faith in our own ideas invariably draws us away from the very “grace and truth” that our Lord “declared” (Jn 1:17-18).

According to the Apostle Peter, any “private interpretation” of Scripture has roots in the “will of man” (2 Pt 1:20-21). Such interpretations underlie every heretical teaching. For example, the early fourth-century priest Arius, an earnest pastor and skillful preacher, refused to accept his bishop’s counsel about the errors of his teaching. Instead, he persisted in explaining the nature of the Lord Jesus in his own clever way, declaring Christ Jesus to be a special creature, but not fully God.

“Now when Arius and his fellows made these assertions and shamelessly avowed them,” writes the Patriarch Alexander, “we being assembled with the bishops of Egypt and Libya, nearly a hundred in number, anathematized both them and their followers” (*ANF*, vol. 6, p. 297). Arius remained unbending. The famous First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea was forced to convene in AD 325 to repudiate his false teachings.

Let us take careful note of how history both affirms the case against Arius and illustrates the Apostle Peter’s point. Without fail, the crux of heresy is the denial of the nature and essence of the Lord Jesus (vs. 2:1). Saint Athanasios, observing the spread of the Arian heresy, notes that “the Fathers . . . were forced to express more distinctly the sense of the words ‘from God.’ As a result, they wrote ‘from the essence of God . . . that all others might be acknowledged as creatures and the Word alone as from the Father’” (*NPNF*, vol. 4, p. 162).

If we examine the proceedings of the local synods of bishops prior to the First Ecumenical Council (and that of subsequent councils), we discover that Arianism’s advance was fueled by prerogative, status, and political advantage as much as by the marginal appeal of the heresy itself. Saint Peter’s point is thus affirmed: “By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words” (vs. 2:3). Greed for power and position follow naturally in the footsteps of arrogant self-will and pride. Let us be attentive to these pitfalls!

*Thou, O Christ, art our God of exceeding praise, who didst establish our holy Fathers as luminous stars upon earth, and through them didst guide us unto the true faith.* – Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

**January 30 – Tuesday of the Third Week before Lent**

**2 Peter 2:9-22**

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Heresy’s Allure: 2 Peter 2:9-22, especially vs. 18:** “For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error.” Earlier in his epistle, Saint Peter teaches us that heresy originates from the sins of pride and greed for power and position. False teachers are always charmed by their own ideas about truth. Worse, because they willfully attract others to adopt their ideas, they become further deluded by the admiration of their followers.

While such men may think they are free, they are in fact “slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage” (vs. 19). Such is the tragic state of those who embrace heresy, “for it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (vs. 21).

Having spoken about the sinful desires that motivate heretics, the Apostle Peter identifies the factors that attract others to follow heretics and their ideas. Based on his insights, let us consider the steps we ought to follow if we wish to keep our Orthodox faith pure. None of us is free from sin, nor have we entirely “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (vs. 20). We pray God that we may remain alert, never becoming “entangled in them and overcome” (vs. 20)!

Saint Peter first speaks of people who “walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” (vs. 10), who “count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime” (vs. 13), and who have “eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin” (vs. 14). Such people are captivated “through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness” (vs. 18). We see a clear association between erroneous theology and corrupt living, with its constant indulgence of the appetites.

One popular heresy of the early centuries was Gnosticism. Many leaders of this false variant of Christianity encouraged their believers to indulge in whatever pleasures they desired, so long as they were initiated into the secret *gnosis* (knowledge) of the “real” Christianity which they invented. These deluded teachers lived debased and immoral lives while hypocritically speaking the language of piety.

Such teachings are still prevalent today, with their adherents suggesting a host of rationalizations for lewd, perverse, and indulgent behaviors plainly condemned by Holy Scripture. Such a permissive approach attracts the unwary by demanding neither purity nor ascetic struggle. True faith teaches otherwise, for the Fathers assert that “the keeping of God’s commandments generates dispassion. The soul’s dispassion preserves spiritual knowledge” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 314).

In addition to blatant self-indulgence, heresy appeals to our self-will by promising freedom from authority (see vs. 10). If we choose to ignore direction from rightful authority, then we remove the spiritual and moral safety net of the Church from our lives. Instead of questioning authority, as the bumper sticker suggests, let us affirm and seek godly protection and shelter from wise pastoral leadership. Only then will we be able to follow in the footsteps of the Church Fathers.

Finally, Saint Peter addresses those “who have actually escaped from those living in error” (vs. 18). He refers here to neophytes who fail to grasp the basics of the faith, never struggling to “put off . . . the old man . . . and . . . put on the new man” (Eph 4:22). Such people are forever vulnerable to being drawn into heresy. Let us commit ourselves to knowing our faith and laboring to be transformed into the Lord Jesus’ likeness.

*Adorn me, O Christ, as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise the abode of sin.* Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

## January 31 – Wednesday of the Third Week before Lent

### 2 Peter 3:1-18

**The Struggle for Orthodoxy, continued – Prepare for Judgment: 2 Peter 3:1-18, especially vs. 11-12:** “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . ?” In today’s portion of Saint Peter’s second epistle, he focuses on the terrible day of the Lord’s judgment, which “will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (vs. 10).

Divine judgment is surely coming, when the *ungodly* who promote false religion will face a solemn “day of judgment and perdition” (vs. 7). How should we, as members of Christ’s flock, prepare to give an account of our lives?

Two thousand years have passed since the apostle wrote this epistle, but the Day of Judgment has not yet arrived. We sense its approach, however, for “the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (vs. 9).

If we do not wish to perish with the “scoffers . . . walking according to their own lusts” (vs. 3), let us heed Saint Peter’s counsel. Our desire, like his, is to meet the Lord “in peace, without spot and blameless” (vs. 14).

First, then, let us struggle to be “mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of . . . the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (vs. 2). All of Scripture attests to the coming of Divine Judgment, teaching that “the heavens and the earth while now preserved by the same word [of God] are reserved for fire” (vs. 7).

God reveals Himself as patient, compassionate, and merciful, yet we also know that He is righteous and just. For example, when God establishes His covenant with Abraham, He warns him of what will happen: “Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land not their own” (Gn 15:13). Indeed, Abraham’s family went into Egypt and was enslaved by the Pharaohs.

Yet God fulfilled His prophecy, for after serving the Egyptians for four hundred years, the people were freed. God keeps His word! The Lord allowed Israel to taste slavery in Egypt, but He also looked after His people. Thus they flourished in Egypt, despite their servitude.

In revealing these events to Abraham, the Lord offers words we should consider in our hearts: “Then, in the fourth generation they [Abraham’s descendants] shall return here, for the sin of the Amorites is not yet filled up” (Gn 15:16). God puts His people through times of trial in order to free us from sin, for His judgment is sure.

Indeed, God tolerates iniquity only for a time. His judgment eventually comes to nations and individuals alike. Let us be wise and prepare our hearts now, so that we may face the Lord in hope. May He stir up our hearts “by way of reminder” (2 Pt 3:1), so that we may keep the apostle’s teachings reverently.

In particular, let us never indulge in idle questioning. Speculation only opens the door to evil and leads us into moral and spiritual confusion. Only the Lord Jesus conversed successfully with Satan, since He alone is sinless. Now, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (vs. 4).

Finally, let us strive to live pure and godly lives, even if it requires painful struggle at times. Christ has promised to help us and save us. May we grow “in holy conduct and godliness” (vs. 11) as we prepare ourselves ever more fully for the coming Day of Judgment.

*Grant me repentance and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment Seat, O Christ.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

