

January 1 – Friday, 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 – Saturday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:1-8

Walk in Love: Ephesians 5:1-8, especially vs. 1: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.” In the original Greek, the word translated as imitators is *mimitei*, a cognate of the English word “mimic.” As Orthodox Christians, we are God’s beloved children. We are intended to imitate our Father, who formed us from the dust as living souls and blew His spirit of life into us (Gn 2:7). To mimic God is to control our inner life and to direct our bodies as He wills.

Hence, the Apostle Paul begs us to “walk in love, *like* Christ” (Eph 5:2). Not just any kind of love will do, only love “as Christ . . . loved” (vs. 2). The “walk in love” of our Lord Jesus Christ was truly the self-sacrifice of God, an outpouring on our behalf (vs. 2).

For this reason, Saint Paul uses imagery from ancient Jewish worship in the Temple. The holocaust offerings, totally consumed, symbolize a complete surrender to God by the worshipers. Our Lord’s death on the Cross is the prototype of such sacrifices (see Phil 2:7-8).

Our Savior, pure Himself, stepped into the waters of the baptism of repentance and thereby assumed the sins of the world. He walked in the desert of temptation to defeat the devil, by whom we are so often snared.

By the Sea of Galilee, He called the fishermen, the tax collectors, and sinners like us, loving all He met with His sacrificial love. Among the crowds, He healed, taught, and disputed day after day, until the time came for Him to go to Jerusalem and complete His sacrifice (Lk 13:33). Our Lord’s every step was a walk in love.

We live in a world that reduces love to mere physical satisfaction. Many people get their way by hook or by crook, never seeking to quiet the desires swirling inside them. The tide of the coarse, the crude, and the cruel encroaches on us all, pushing away the sacred and the pure.

And yet Saint Paul calls us saints (Eph 5:3), united to Christ. In the Lord we find the grace to love truly, to defeat temptation, to acquire pure motives by continence, to become worthy of His blessing. We are people of thanksgiving, for our Eucharist of praise (vs. 4) has “in remembrance . . . all those things which have come to pass for us” through the mercy of our gracious Savior, who still walks among us in love.

How shall we enjoy “any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (vs. 5)? It will not be through lust, nor impurity, nor coveting (vs. 5). Such impulses are signs of the materialistic personality. In cultures where idolatry is openly embraced, religion is usually coupled with immorality and debauchery. In the growth of Satanism and witchcraft in modern society are signs of a resurgence of corrupt religion but let us not be deceived.

Around us are “empty words” (vs. 6) full of deceit uttered by politicians, advertisers, entertainers, broadcasters, even televangelists. But we are guarded by the mysteries of Christ, for “[we are] baptized. [We are] illumined. [We have] received anointment with holy chrism. [We are] sanctified [and] washed: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The door has been opened wide for us to “be sheltered in the shelter of [God’s] wings” (Ps 60:4). Social decline afflicts every nation. However, the dread judgment seat of Christ is a certainty, when “the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (vs. 6).

Perhaps we are surrounded by nonbelievers who are unaware of their debasement. The Apostle Paul counsels us, “Do not be partakers with them” (vs. 7). It is never easy for us to walk “as children of light” (vs. 8). Perhaps we too “were once darkness” (vs. 8), as Saint Paul puts it. And yet it is not too late to “put off the old man” (vs. 4:22); for “now you are light in the Lord” (vs. 8). We have God’s grace to walk in love, as Christ’s own saints.

Adorn me, teach and enlighten me. Show me to be a dwelling place of Thy Spirit. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 3 – Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 5
Colossians 3:12-16

Put on Christ: Colossians 3:12-16, especially vss. 12-13: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” On the great feasts, we replace the trisagion hymn “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” with the baptismal antiphon: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). Writing to the Christians at Colossae, Saint Paul lists the virtues we are called upon to acquire as “the elect of God” (Col 3:12) – as those who have “put on” Christ.

It is one thing for us to receive an invitation to the heavenly banquet (Mt 22:2-10), but quite another for us to be properly attired in a wedding garment (vss. 11-12). Saint Paul lays out the design of this garment so that we may weave it, wear it, and prove ourselves worthy.

We already have before us the true model, clothed in every virtue: Christ our God. What He did, we “also must do” (Col 3:13). We are united to Him, and yet we spend our lives endeavoring to “put on Christ.” He reveals the form of the garment, but who does not require some major tailoring in his life – letting out a great deal there, taking in a little bit here?

Getting the right fit is what this life is about. If we are to put on Christ, we must lay the fabric of our souls on the cutting table, measure it against the divine pattern we have been given, and go to work snipping and sewing.

Note how every virtue in this passage, from tender mercies (vs. 12) to *love* (vs. 14), are intended to be translated into action. First, however, we must affirm them in our heart as qualities. This is why the Church Fathers insist we begin with purification of the heart. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “For someone who desires spiritual rebirth, the first step toward the light is to curtail the passions, that is to say, to guard the heart; for it is impossible otherwise to curtail the passions” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 74).

Psalmody, of which Saint Paul speaks (vs. 16), can help warm our hearts. Attentiveness and prayer ward off “all distractive thoughts that encircle the heart” through “the invocation of the Lord Jesus Christ,” says Saint Symeon.

If we desire to show a modicum of compassion and *tender mercy* toward others, then we must use every appropriate means the Master makes available to us. We take risks, like the Good Samaritan, and strive to meet the most basic needs of those God places in our path.

Kindness is expressed naturally when we exercise the tenderness our Lord displayed when He met the widow of Nain. Following the funeral bier of her only son, “He had compassion on her” (Lk 7:13). Then He spoke to her, came to the coffin, and touched it.

Humility, says Saint John Chrysostom, “is the basis of all virtue. . . . [do] not [be] lowly toward one, and rude toward another; be lowly toward all men, be he friend or foe, be he great or small. This is lowliness” (“Homily 9 on Ephesians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 13, p. 96). *Meekness*, according to Saint John Climacus, “is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected, whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 8.3, p. 81).

To “put on Christ” means that we endure loss, insult, and wounds, and yet still forgive. Only then are we truly *longsuffering*. With each virtue, let us “put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Col 3: 14). Such is the way of Christ, our Master and our model.

I have put Thee on, O Christ our God; in Thy mercy make me a victor, even unto the end. – Chrismation Prayer

January 4 – Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:17-31

Promise and Faith: *Hebrews 11:17-31, especially vss. 17-18: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’”* The actions that lead Abraham toward the sacrifice of his son Isaac are neither blind nor irrational. Indeed, logical choice leads Abraham to pursue a deliberate plan to sacrifice his only son.

Although on the face of it the sacrifice of Isaac seems contradictory and irrational, the underlying cause of the patriarch’s actions is his absolute trust in God’s word. He fully accepts the trustworthiness of what God has promised him. This trust is possible because the patriarch is certain that God is able to keep His promises.

Today’s epistle reading highlights the essential connection between promise and faith. As illustrations, Saint Paul offers us a series of faith-based actions by various Old Testament saints who trusted God’s promises. Each of them anchored his faith on the reliability of God. Their examples are especially important for us Christians struggling to live by faith in the strange land of contemporary materialist and secular culture.

The apostle continues his discussion of what it means to act on faith in verse 20, jumping ahead to the time when Abraham’s son Isaac is himself an old man. When Isaac blesses his sons Jacob and Esau, he, like his father, cites a promise from God (see Gn 26:2-4; 27:1-40).

In the apostle’s next example, we see Jacob, now an old man, blessing his grandsons by Joseph (Heb 11:21). Again, there is reference to a promise from God (Gn 48:3, 15-16). And on Joseph’s deathbed (Heb 11:22) many ancient promises, including those involving Joseph’s brothers, are once again reviewed (Gn 50:22-26).

Saint Paul next reminds us of the birth of the great Moses. His parents refused to obey Pharaoh’s command of infanticide (Heb 11:23) because of a promise (Ex 2:1-10). Indeed, the book of Hebrews continually reminds us of God’s zeal and dedication toward releasing His enslaved people from bondage.

When Moses comes of age, he “by faith forsook Egypt” (vs. 27). (Note how, in verse 26, the Apostle Paul refers to Christ in His pre-incarnate divinity. A similar reference to Christ appears in First Corinthians 10:1-4.) Each verse of today’s passage continues the refrain “by faith.” Saint Paul makes sure that each verse also contains one or more of the Lord’s promises, upon which vital faith forever depends.

The apostle then reviews the first Passover (Heb 11:28), taking us to the shores of the Red Sea to witness Israel’s deliverance (vs. 29) and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. These events became the basis for Passover feast celebrated by the Israelites (Ex 12:13-16, 26-28) and also the basis for the Evangelist John’s theme of the lamb (Jn 1:29, 36).

When the Lord says to Moses, “Tell the children of Israel to go forward” (Ex 14:15), this promise gives them the necessary faith to make the passage. Skipping over their years in the desert, the apostle again shows us promise evoking faith, in this instance before the fortifications of Jericho (Heb 11:30, Jos 6:2). Note that the “harlot Rahab did not perish” with the other citizens in the fortress because she helped the Israelite spies before the battle (Heb 11:31, Jos 6:20-21).

Saint Basil the Great says of God’s promises, “To him who believes, a promise is given by God: ‘I will give you hidden treasures, unseen ones’ (Is 45:3). When we have been deemed worthy of knowledge face to face, we shall see also the depths in the storehouses of God.”

O Lord, remember Thy holy promises, and bring forth Thy people with joy. – Based on Psalm 104

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
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 – Friday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

James 2:1-13

Partiality: James 2:1-13, especially vs. 1: “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.” The Apostle James is intensely concerned with the vice of partiality (see verses 1, 4, and 9). But what, exactly, is this partiality he warns against? The New Testament Greek word translated into English as partiality is formed from the word *lambano* – “to take in hand,” “receive,” or “recognize” – combined with the word *prosopon*, which means “person.”

According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, in Greek culture *prosopon* came “to be identified . . . quickly with the mask, *prosopeion*, which was used in the theater.” So close was the association between the two words that they became synonyms. Thus, “in the ancient Hellenic world for someone to ‘be a person’ meant that he had something added to his being.”

Prosopon thus implies a person’s outward features or characteristics. The New Testament writers, including Saint James, were drawn to this word when expressing the vice of showing “favoritism with respect to distinguishing features or external appearance” – that is, *partiality*.

The use of this word by the epistle writer expresses the idea of giving special attention to, or favoring, someone more than another. Clearly, the emphasis in the original is on the outward features and characteristics that draw us to a person or group of people.

Drawing upon this understanding, let us turn to Saint James’ illustration of partiality. He identifies this practice, into which his readers obviously have fallen, as one of paying “attention to the one wearing the fine clothes” (vs. 3) as opposed to recognizing the “poor man in filthy clothes” (vs. 2).

When we look at partiality this way, we surely recognize the impulse to favoritism which is common to us all. As Christians, however, we face a stern apostolic warning against showing any type of partiality or favor. Saint James commands us to “show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (tr of vs. 1 in RSV). We are to guard against the pervasive and sinful inclinations of our souls that prefer certain classes of persons over others.

When we meet a person of a certain ethnic background, we may be drawn instantly to like or dislike that person just because of these distinguishing features. In American culture, we have a strong bias in favor of youthful dress and youthfulness. We are suspicious of people who speak with certain accents.

Regardless of the fact that bias is repudiated and even sometimes made illegal, we are still partial. We divide up people into classes of those we like and those we do not. We do exactly what the Apostle cautions us to avoid, for “if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (vs. 9). It is not enough to mask our tastes and inclinations – we must be prepared to confess these sinful tendencies of our hearts to God.

Saint James suggests that the way out of the snare of this nearly universal sin can be found by fulfilling “the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vs. 8). This rule he calls “the law of liberty” (vs. 12).

Yes, it is one thing when God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves; it is another to actually do it. Saint James reminds us that “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” to which we hold is our commitment to “the Lord of glory” (vs. 1). May we discover through His grace that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (vs. 13), for Christ yearns to free us to experience impartial love for everyone.

O Lord Jesus, cleanse me from all inclination and showing of favor, so that I may treat all others as my brethren, hold the faith without partiality, and love others as myself.

January 9 – 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 10 – Sunday after Theophany, Tone 6
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 11 – Saint Theodosios 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 – Tuesday of the Thirty-Second 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 13 – Wednesday of the Thirty-second 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 14 – Thursday of the Thirty-second Week Week after Pentecost

James 4:7-5:9

Ten Commandments for Disciples: James 4:7-5:9, especially vs. 17: “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.” Our life in Christ never conflicts with the Ten Commandments given by God to His people in ancient times (see Dt 5:7-21; Ex 20:1-17). At the same time, our life in Christ differs from existence under the Law of Moses, for the Lord requires us to do good not out of obedience alone, but from our hearts. In today’s verses, Saint James enumerates ten commandments for Christ’s disciples, showing us how the impetus “to do good” (vs. 4:17) flowers from a pure heart.

1. *Submit to God* (vs. 4:7): The Lord teaches us that “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). To submit to God requires surrendering the spiritual aspect of our being to Him, so that we may be united with God “in spirit and truth.” This spiritual aspect is called the heart, which must be the basis of all true discipleship.

2. *Resist the devil* (vs. 4:7): The mystery of baptism begins with an exorcism, which expels every spirit “which operateth through the prompting of the devil.” Such foul spirits must be driven from our hearts during this life, so that we continue to “renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride.”

3. *Draw near to God* (vs. 4:8): Having received baptism and chrismation, we strive to draw steadily nearer to God. Christ’s grace acts in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. *Cleanse your hands* (vs. 4:8): Our actions and words can sully our hands and corrupt our hearts. For this reason, we must invest constant effort in ending all sinful activity.

5. *Purify your hearts* (vs. 4:8): The central concern of every Christian should be the condition of our heart. Our life’s work is to purify our hearts of every impure desire that invites improper actions.

6. *Let your laughter be turned to mourning* (vs. 4:9): Christ teaches, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Godly mourners grieve for their own sins, and for others caught by Satan’s lies. They turn naturally to repentance, which is essential to the life in Christ. Saint James commands us to “weep and howl” (Jas 5:1).

7. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord* (vs. 4:10): Humility accords with our Lord’s command to open the pitiful condition of our hearts before Him. At the same time, we anoint our head, wash our face, and refuse the appearance of false piety.

8. *Do not speak evil of one another* (vs. 4:11): Having already warned us of the dangers of an unruly tongue (vss. 1:18; 3:1-12), Saint James instructs us specifically, “Do not grumble against one another” (vs. 5:9).

9. *Live humbly in the will of God*: We are to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that” (vs. 4:15). Our life in Christ is one of quiet, heartfelt acceptance of God’s providence and grace. We attribute everything that befalls us as coming from the Lord. Whether God is the cause or allows something to happen for our correction, we accept it as a blessing.

10. *Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand* (vs. 5:8). Saint James ends as he begins – by directing us to the condition of our hearts. We are to cultivate *patience* and thus be well-established in Christ: “Wait on the Lord, be thou manful, and let thy heart be strengthened, and wait on the Lord” (Ps 26:16).

Turn Thy face away from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. – Psalm 50:9-10

January 15 – Friday of the Thirty-second 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 16 – Saturday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 5:14-23

Complete Sanctification: 1 Thessalonians 5:14-23, especially vs. 23: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Reading through today’s passage, we discover how greatly the Apostle Paul desires our complete sanctification in Christ. Although he is exhorting the faithful of first-century Thessalonica, his words extend to us as well, for the apostle’s love embraces us from the eternity of heaven!

What exactly does Saint Paul desire when he prays, “May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely” (vs. 23)? He wants us to know that God yearns for us to be *whole* and holy. When we are purified in heart, mind, body, and will, we are restored to the divine image the Lord implanted in us at creation.

A wise man does not exhort people to exert themselves beyond their capabilities, and the apostle speaks wisely in these verses. Let us consider his admonition to “rejoice always” (vs. 16). Perhaps Saint John Chrysostom appears extreme when he challenges us to rejoice even when evil is done to us, expressing joy and thanking God for “him that has done [us] evil.”

Anticipating our discomfort with this advice, he asks, “And how, you say, is this possible? It is possible if we will” (*NPN Fathers First Series*, vol. 13, p. 367). In Christ we receive the grace to return good for evil, if we so choose (vs. 15). We may differ from the world’s ways and be sanctified entirely if we are willing to cooperate with God’s wisdom. In Christ we can *rejoice always*, even when we face the worst.

The Church Fathers also discuss at length Saint Paul’s charge to “pray without ceasing” (vs. 17). Saint Augustine insists that we must not reject this advice as something far beyond our abilities. Does Saint Paul ask us “to be . . . bending the knee and prostrating the body and lifting up our hands . . . ‘without ceasing’”? Surely not, says Saint Augustine, for “if that is what ‘without ceasing’ means, then I do not believe it is possible.

“[But] there is another kind of inward prayer without ceasing,” he continues. “For it is your heart’s desire that is your prayer. If your desire continues uninterrupted, your prayer continues also” (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament vol. 9, p. 98).

Here, Saint Augustine refers to the inner truth expressed by the well-known Jesus Prayer. The goal of this inner prayer is to cleanse away everything that hinders us from fulfilling God’s will, and thereby allowing us to pray without ceasing.

If with the Holy Spirit’s help, we reach the point where we can “in everything give thanks” (vs. 18), then we shall indeed fulfill “the will of God in Christ Jesus” (vs. 18). In Christ we receive the potential to peel away all darkness and sin inside us, until we no longer “quench the Spirit” (vs. 19).

Let us never despise the labors of our pastors as they preach and teach (vs. 20). Do not disdain the Holy Tradition they convey to us. We do well to heed the apostle’s advice: “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (vs. 21).

We engage in the work of complete sanctification that Saint Paul encourages if we “abstain from every form of evil” (vs. 22). We put aside hateful attitudes, vile thoughts, cruel speech, and – God forbid – immoral actions and activities. Then, when the Master asks us to give an account of our lives, we shall “be preserved blameless” (vs. 23) before Him, having come much closer to being completely sanctified.

O God, be a defender of my soul, for I walk in the midst of many snares. Rescue me therefrom and save me, O good One, since Thou art the lover of mankind. – Great Compline

January 17 – Saint Anthony the Great, Tone 7

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 – Tuesday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 4:1-13

God's Promise of Rest: *Hebrews 4:1-13, especially vs. 1:* “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His [God's] rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.” Saint Paul encourages us to hold fast to our confidence in Christ (vs. 3:6) so that we will not be like the children of ancient Israel, our predecessors in God's household, who lost the Promised Land through unbelief. He does not wish us to lose our way amidst the distractions of this impermanent world. For this reason, the apostle now expands on the nature and meaning of eternal rest of God.

Most especially, Saint Paul reminds us that the promise of entering God's rest still “remains” (vs. 1). Let us be clear, however: the *rest* he outlines is not a time-bound territory like the Promised Land. That land was the principal objective of the sons of Israel, who left Egypt and sojourned for decades in the wilderness, and yet very few of them ever entered it

The apostle, speaking of a *greater* rest, cautions us to “fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it” (vs 1). He recognizes that God's promised rest is contained in the gospel, which “was preached to us as well as to them” (vs. 2). God's rest has to do with His eternal kingdom, which will only be revealed fully at the end of the age, although we may anticipate it now by faith. Our trust in God is required if we are to attain this true, eternal rest – something that ancient Israel failed to risk at Kadesh (Nm 13:1-14:23).

Saint Paul's major goal in today's passage is to encourage us never to lose heart! We are members of God's household through faith, “for we who have believed do enter that rest” (Heb 4:3). He refers three times in the lesson to a prophecy given through David in Psalm 94 (see Heb 4:3, 5, 7). The apostle's point is that God would not have given us King David's prophecy, were not the eternal promise of rest always in force and available to us even now.

Note especially how the apostle underscores the ongoing nature of the promise by referring to God's rest after the creation of the world. “For He [God] has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’” (vs. 4:4; Gn 2:2).

Saint Paul actually has us consider three relate “rests:” the rest of the Promised Land, the Sabbath rest, and the promised rest of the age to come. The land is a type, while the eternal antitype is God's true rest, since the Lord our God is eternal.

The apostle brings together his various points about God's rest with a remark that hearkens back to the beginning of the passage: “There remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (vs. 9). The following verses are full of encouragement.

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest” (vs. 11). We must not overlook Israel's failure to enter that rest, nor its disobedience (vs. 11), for God is “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (vs. 12). He sees all and knows all, “and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (vs. 13). We are attentive, if we would hope to attain rest.

Orthodox life and worship offer us the opportunity to anticipate the eternal, promised rest that Saint Paul describes. To share in the liturgy is to join the assembly where true and right belief is upheld. We are in the presence of the Lord Jesus, the great High Priest (see vs. 14), and stand with those “who have ceased from [their] works” (vs. 10), and enjoy rest with the Creator of all.

Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! – Opening prayer of the Divine Liturgy

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 – Thursday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:1-6

Resembling: Hebrews 7:1-6, especially vss. 1, 3: “Melchizedek, king of Salem . . . without father, without mother, without genealogy, and having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.” In today’s reading, Saint Paul interprets two passages from the Old Testament, Genesis 14:17-20 and Psalm 109:4. Both describe the shadowy personage of Melchizedek, king of Salem, and proclaim the wonder and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and eternal High Priest (Heb 3:1).

Saint Paul focuses on seven ways that Melchizedek resembles Christ, inviting us to consider how the Lord Jesus fulfills this prophecy of David: “From the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee. The Lord hath sworn and will not repent: Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 109:4).

If Melchizedek was a great priest (Heb 7:1), the Lord Jesus is even greater. He is both the One who makes the offering *and* the sacrifice offered for sin. Later in this chapter, Saint Paul calls the Lord Jesus “a High Priest . . . who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners and has become higher than the heavens . . . who . . . offered up Himself” (vss. 26-27).

The Lord Jesus, like Melchizedek, receives tithes from the faithful (vs. 7:2). As Saint Paul notes, tithes in this world are presented to mortal kings, while Christ our High Priest eternally presents the offerings of our hearts “upon His holy, most heavenly, and ideal altar” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Melchizedek is called “king of righteousness,” for he resembles “the Lord our righteousness” (Jer 23:6) through whom grace reigns to eternal life (Rom 5:21). For God says to the only-begotten Son: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness” (Heb 1:8-9).

Melchizedek’s title is king of Salem (*shalom*, “peace”), but Christ is the true King of Peace (Heb 7:2), and not in a finite physical manner, like Melchizedek. He is the One who comes to earth bringing God’s peace and good will, as the angels sing (Lk 2:14).

Saint Paul notes that Melchizedek emerges on the stage of human history “without genealogy,” being “without father, without mother” (Heb 7:3). Similarly, the Lord, as the Church proclaims, is born “in the flesh . . . without father . . . who before eternity was begotten of the Father without mother” (Vespers, tone 3).

Melchizedek appeared without a genealogy, with no mention of his birth. Therefore, he seems to be one who has no “beginning of days” (vs. 3). The Lord Jesus can truly be said to have no beginning, for as God He is outside of time and was present when time began. Of course, within time, the Lord was born of the Virgin Mary, so He has a temporal beginning. His birth divides history into two periods, BC and AD.

Similarly, it may be said of the Lord Jesus that He, like Melchizedek, has no “end of life” (vs. 3). Yet here the difference between the two is ineffable. We can believe that Melchizedek died and was buried, as befalls all men. But when our Lord Jesus died and was buried, He trampled down death by death and rose from the dead.

Now He reigns in the heavenly places (Eph 1:20) – a deed that Melchizedek could never accomplish. Melchizedek the king was great (Heb 7:4), yet primarily his greatness is as a type, in his resemblance to Christ Jesus.

Behold, the King hath appeared; the Hope of Israel hath come. Rejoice, O nations; for the Light appeareth. The divine Light hath been manifest in the flesh. Receive us, O Holy One. – Orthros for the Sunday before Theophany

January 22 – Friday of the Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:18-25

Our Surety: *Hebrews 7:18-25, especially vs. 22:* “*Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.*” The term “surety” means a guarantee against possible default. Bail bondsmen provide a *surety* that a suspect will appear in court by putting up money against the possibility of his flight from prosecution. When a judge denies bail, it means that no imaginable surety can guarantee that the accused will appear for trial – and thus his continued custody is ordered by the court.

A banker loans money to a prospective home buyer only so long as the bank has surety by retaining the deed to the property in question. Sometimes, money lenders demand further collateral for greater surety. Title companies give surety to buyers when they issue title insurance, which gives the new owner the comfort of knowing that there are no outstanding liens or notes against the property.

In today’s epistle, the apostle declares that the Lord Jesus stands as “surety of a better covenant” (vs. 22). He is the guarantor of a solemn agreement between God and His people, i.e., the Church. Jesus is *surety* that the former covenant between God and Israel, which was subject to human limitations, is replaced by a divine one (vss. 18-19).

Christ God is our *surety* because He has solemnly sworn that He is our priest forever (vss. 20-21). As divine Guarantor, He “continues forever . . . since He always lives” as our Intercessor (vss. 24-25). So long as He is surety, there can be no change in the covenant that He has inaugurated (vs. 25).

At the Last Supper, referring to the Eucharist in which we share, the Lord Jesus clearly states, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood” (1 Cor 11:25; Lk 22:20). Let us pay close attention to the word “new” in the Lord’s declaration. This *new* signals a superseding of the Old Covenant, which was sealed with the blood of calves and goats (Heb 9:19-20). Christ Jesus sealed the New Covenant with His own blood once and for all (vs. 12). The Old Covenant is replaced, utterly superseded by God’s ultimate covenant (vs. 7:18).

God’s New Covenant, of which the Lord Jesus is our surety, provides us with certain hope of being able to “draw near to God” (vs. 9:19). He has drawn near to us in an irrevocable manner, becoming one of us while remaining fully God. When we meet God in Christ, we discover “that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, [so that] He is able to aid those who are tempted” (vs. 2:18), having tasted “death for everyone” (vs. 2:9).

One expects a surety to have integrity, reliability, and the capacity to deliver what is promised. The Lord Jesus Himself guarantees His agreement with us. We need not fear that the covenant which God has made with us will lapse or lose its validity. So many people are looking for a “sure deal” – and here before them is Jesus, our surety of God’s promise. “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (vs. 7:21).

People often smirk at commercial guarantees because they are often unreliable, not worth the paper on which they are written. Of course, paper fades, flakes apart, and finally disintegrates. The Lord Jesus, our *surety*, is eternal. “He continues forever” (vs. 24), “since He always lives to make intercession” for us (vs. 25).

Christ’s Resurrection has assured us that His priesthood and His Covenant with us is unchangeable (vs. 24).

O God, Thou dost not change; save us as Thou has promised in our Savior, Jesus Christ. – Based on Malachi 3:6

January 23 – Saturday of Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 2:11-13

Remember When: *Ephesians 2:11-13, especially vs. 11-12:* “Therefore remember . . . that time you were without Christ . . .” Saint Mark the Ascetic writes, “When the soul has been overlaid by pernicious forgetfulness, by destructive laziness, and by ignorance, the mother and nurse of every vice, the afflicted intellect [*nous*] in its blindness is readily enchained by everything that is seen, thought or heard” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 157).

Our *nous* is a place deep within us: a quiet, inner temple where we may encounter God. Yet before such a meeting can take place, we must turn our heart, mind and will solely to the Christ, without distraction or false remembrance.

We enjoy an abundant freedom to allow our memory to wander aimlessly. If we apply no bridle to it, then we are likely to recall “what we have seen, heard, or touched with impassioned pleasure in the past, and so our memory forms sinful images within us.”

What then ensues? According to Saint Mark, our memories can defile the center of our being and corrupt that deep meeting place within us, for it “is still impassioned and afflicted through the activity of the demons . . . Then the flesh, too, if it is well fed, full of youthful spirit, or flabby, is easily roused to passion by such memories, and moved to lust; and it performs acts of uncleanness either in sleep or awake.”

If we do not wish this to happen, let us remember “that time [we] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (vs. 12). Such a recollection will arouse in us the fear of God, chilling every trace of the passions within. We recall what our life was like when we were driven by the activity of the demons, and we receive a bitter foretaste of hell with its desolation.

It is as if God were asking us, “Is this what you want, to be an alien from the fellowship that is yours in the commonwealth of Israel, ‘for you have prevailed with God and with men’ (Gn 32:28)? Will you throw all that away?”

Truly, if we desire to gain life in abundance in place of death, we must remember that Christ Himself made this promise to us: “It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him” (Mt 13:11-12).

We need not be alienated from God, for we have true hope “as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence” of God (Heb 6:19). Let us remember that we are no longer “without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus we who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:12-13).

We recall how bleak life was without God as the center of our inner world. Then we ask ourselves: “Why, my soul, are you dejected, and why do you trouble me? Put your hope in God, for I will give thanks to Him; for my salvation lies not in my actions but in God.

“Who will be vindicated by actions done according to the law? No living person will be vindicated before God. Yet by virtue of my faith in God I hope that in His ineffable mercy He will give me salvation . . . I worship the Lord my God . . . for He is able to save me simply through His mercy” (Saint Symeon the Theologian, *Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 33-34).

Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 24 – Thirty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 8
Colossian 3:12-16

The Robe of the Chosen: *Colossians 3:12-16, especially vs. 12:* “*Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering . . .*” As the newly baptized Christian emerges from the waters and is clothed in a white robe, a prayer of encouragement is read: “Vouchsafe unto me, a robe of light, O Thou who clothest Thyself with light as with a garment.” What is this robe of God’s chosen, in which we pray to be clothed? In today’s epistle reading, Saint Paul identifies both the substance of the robe – its most essential element – and the way it is to be woven.

Like the Patriarch Joseph of old, the faithful in Christ are holy and beloved to our Father in heaven. In the baptismal mystery, God gives us a wondrous garment to put on (Gn. 37:3), like the Lord who is clothed in light. This robe is woven of seven radiant virtues that form the warp, the basic threads, of our life in Christ.

These virtues are “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, and long-suffering” (Col. 3:12), all named by Saint Paul at the start of today’s passage. Together with the virtues of “bearing . . . and forgiving” (vs. 13) that are named subsequently, these constitute the essential strands that make up the fabric our Christian life.

Note how the baptismal hymn associates the robe we pray for with God’s own divine vesture of uncreated light, which cloaks His essence from the eyes of His creatures. The virtues that compose our baptismal garment derive from God’s nature and are revealed fully through the humanity of the Lord Jesus. In His tender mercy, Jesus gave Himself up for us in kindness, humility, and meekness, *bearing* our sins and *forgiving* us even unto death on the Cross. He thus reveals the garment we are to weave if we are to be truly clothed with undying light.

While the seven virtues form the warp of the garment of light, love constitutes the essential strand of the woof “which binds together and completes the whole” (vs. 14), as one translation puts it. A weaver first sets up the threads of the warp, through which he will then pass the shuttle back and forth to lay down the woof strands.

In a similar manner, we the faithful fulfill the life in Christ by making the characteristic Christian virtues into a robe of light, weaving love through the virtues to bind them in a complete whole. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “It is possible for one to be kind and meek, and humble-minded, and longsuffering, and yet not affectionate . . . for all these things fall asunder, except they be done with love; this is what clenches them all together” (“Homily 8 on Colossians,” *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 8, p. 295).

The robe of light we wear is woven by five actions. First, we allow “the peace of God [to] rule in (our) hearts” (vs. 15). As Saint John Chrysostom says, “As God made peace with you, so do ye also make it” (p. 296). Second, we are called to be a Eucharistic people, for being “called in one body” we are to “be thankful” (vs. 15).

Third, we let “the word of God dwell in [us] richly” (vs. 16), so that, in the words of Saint Isaac the Syrian, “we may see in ourselves that likeness and that true image which belong to the divine nature and divine essence.” Fourth, we strive to teach and admonish “one another” (vs. 16).

And lastly, we sing “with grace in [our] hearts to the Lord” (vs. 16). If there is no joy rising from the heart and resounding from the lips, then the robe of the chosen of God yet lacks its finishing touch of grace.

O Master, preserve pure and unpolluted the garment of incorruption, wherewith Thou hast endowed us, upholding inviolate in us by Thy grace the seal of the Spirit. – Chrismation Prayer

January 25 – Monday of the Thirty-fourth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 8:7-13

The New Covenant: *Hebrews 8:7-13, especially vs. 12:* “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” The Lord Jesus’ ministry instigated a crisis for ancient Israel. God offered Israel a new covenant in Christ, fulfilling the original covenant they had received through Moses at Mount Sinai. That former covenant was “becoming obsolete and growing old” (vs. 13). The resulting crisis divided the Church from its roots in Judaism, with each group affirming itself as the people of God.

The majority of the Jews chose to continue living under the Mosaic covenant. Those who experienced the great mercy of God under the New Covenant encountered true life in the Lord Jesus. God remembered no more “their unrighteousness, and their sins and lawless deeds” (vs. 12). In the light of Jesus Christ, the Old Covenant truly became obsolete.

For centuries, this sacred covenant had provided a unique identity to the people of ancient Israel. Jesus’ ministry created a disjunction comparable to that caused by a major technological innovation. Suddenly, the older model becomes obsolete, although many people go on using it. The new model, of course, often incorporates elements from the older technology. The automobile, for example, incorporates the frame, axle, and wheels of the horse-drawn carriage, although its “horsepower” comes from an internal combustion engine.

With the dawn of the New Covenant, many essentials of the Old Covenant took on new forms. Blood sacrifice remained central, but its previous forms were assumed under the Lord Jesus’ single, perfect sacrifice of Himself upon the Cross, once and for all time.

The morality of the Old Covenant was likewise transformed. That covenant included many ethical commandments, given by God to indicate to His people how they should behave. The principles of these laws continue fully under the New Covenant, but they are summarized in two commandments reflecting the Law’s essence: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.” (Mt 22:37; Dt 10:12), and “you shalt love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39; Lv 19:18).

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we observe that what was lacking under the Old Covenant (Heb 8:7) was a result of a defect in the people, not a weakness in the covenant per se (vs. 8). The people fell short and “did not continue in” (vs. 9) God’s commandments. Rather, they disregarded them (vs. 9).

The New Covenant, which focuses on the heart instead of an external set of rules (vs. 10), anoints with God’s people with His Spirit. All “know the Lord” (vs. 11) and find Him “merciful to their unrighteousness,” ready to forgive and to “remember no more” their lawlessness (vs. 12).

Note that Saint Paul does not mention the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, nor the triumphant Resurrection in these verses. His focus is on the work of the Holy Spirit; he speaks of God putting His “laws in their mind” and writing “them on their hearts” (vs. 10).

He also alludes to the intimacy of holy communion when he says, “For all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (vs. 11).

We may wish to compare the blessings of the New Covenant, as described here by the apostle, with the words of the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer 38:31-34). Although they were delivered centuries before the coming of the Lord Jesus in the flesh, their full meaning now becomes clear.

Let us rejoice with the Apostle Paul that God “has made the first obsolete” (vs. 13). He has blessed us to live under a new and greater covenant, wherein the Holy Spirit speaks the divine laws within our hearts and minds!

O Christ, we magnify Moses and Jeremiah who prepare us for Thy great mercy. – Orthros for the Sunday before the Nativity

January 26 – Tuesday of the Thirty-fourth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 9:8-10, 15-23

Blood Sacrifice: *Hebrews 9:8-10, 15-23, especially vss. 22, 23:* “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission. Therefore, it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.” The very idea that we humans can have intimate friendship with God seems questionable for several reasons. There is God’s “otherness” and His incalculable power to create and sustain the universe, which dwarfs even the greatest of man’s collective powers. God’s knowledge overshadows all that our race has learned, for there are infinite questions that none of us can answer. Above all, our sinful lives are a scandal before the absolute purity and holiness of God.

And yet, in order to have fellowship with us, the Lord of creation allowed Himself to be judged by a Roman procurator. He was delivered up to crucifixion of His own free will, saying to His heavenly Father, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34).

The gospel strains our every sense of proportion, and yet it offers us the unquestionable witness of the word. God not only wishes to be in communion with us, but He has gone out of His way to initiate that rich, intimate fellowship into which He now calls us.

In the beginning, God expressed His desire for communion with mankind through symbols. He commanded an earthly place of worship, in the form of the Mosaic tabernacle. Next, He defined the need for blood sacrifice to purify men wishing to enter into communion with Him. Finally, He offered His own blood in sacrifice, removing the final barrier to relationship with Him by cleansing our sins.

In today’s epistle passage, the Apostle Paul draws attention to the connection between the ancient tabernacle, where God’s people first worshiped Him, and the heavenly courts where God is worshiped perfectly and eternally. That first earthly tabernacle had an inner room, often called the Holy of Holies or “Holiest of All.”

Of that room, Saint Paul says that “it was symbolic” (Heb 9:9) of the heavenly courts that are the true Holiest of All (vs. 8). In the earthly tabernacle, “both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (vs. 9).

In the earthly tabernacle, God foreshadowed a reality in which a sacrifice offered to Him would make a worshiper “perfect in regard to the conscience” (vs. 9). Thus, early in history, God planted a promise that would come to fruition in the Lord Jesus. However, the first stage of that promise was a symbolic representation of God’s intention to enjoy communion with mankind.

During this stage of symbols, God established blood sacrifice for achieving fellowship with man. Animals were slain and their blood collected in bowls. Moses “took the blood of calves and goats . . . and sprinkled both the book [of the Law] itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.’ Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry” (vss. 19-21).

With these tangible symbols, God established blood sacrifice as the basis for mankind’s fellowship with Him. As the Apostle Paul explains, “Almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission” (vs. 22).

Herein the truth of the gospel is symbolized, in that offerings to heaven should be purified “with *better* sacrifices than these” (vs. 23): by the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. For Christ Jesus declares, “This . . . is the New Covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Lk 22:20). His divine blood enables us to enter into communion with the living God.

Make me worthy to receive Thine immaculate Mysteries unto the life to come. – Service of Preparation for Holy Communion

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 – Thursday of the Thirty-fourth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 10:35-11:7**

Therefore: *Hebrews 10:35-11:7, especially vs. 6:* “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Note how today’s passage begins with the word “therefore” (vs. 35), declaring that we have now reached the conclusion of Saint Paul’s line of thought presented in chapters 8-11 of Hebrews. This series of passages meditates on the ineffable, unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ our God on the Cross for our salvation – His gift to us as the incarnate God-man.

The apostle’s use of *therefore* is intended to prompt our response to God’s actions. The Lord God has extended His amazing favor to mankind. Have we heard the message of the angels at Bethlehem, and the word of the angel at the empty tomb? “*Therefore*, do not cast away your confidence” (vs. 35). Let us not be frivolous but allow the apostle to guide us to “receive the promise” (vs. 36) as well as the “great reward” (vs. 35).

When Saint Paul directs us to receive this *great reward*, his first instruction is that we not draw back (vss. 38-39). In confidence, we refuse to retreat. Indeed, we will need “endurance” (vs. 36), for how else will we counter the weakness of our flesh and the covert actions of the enemy? The demons know our desire for immediate gratification, and they play upon these weaknesses to divert us from our goal.

Without endurance for “a little while” (vs. 37), we are at risk of “[drawing] back to perdition” (vs. 39). However, we take God at His word: eternal destruction will not be our lot. The Apostle Paul affirms that those who trust God do endure. Knowing that God is absolutely faithful, they do not draw back, and in this way, they save their souls.

Therefore, we trust in God, the One in whom we may place all our confidence. “He . . . is coming [and] will come and will not tarry” (vs. 37).

Then, the Apostle Paul reviews for us what it means to “live by faith” (vs. 38). “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for” (vs. 11:1). It is the essence of our hope, even though it cannot be proven by means of our physical senses. If we touch, taste, see, hear, and smell what we hope for, we have information, but not faith.

Apostolic faith does not depend upon the senses, although we can find “evidence of things not seen” (vs. 1), of what is yet realized. We have trustworthy representatives of Christ who report that He whom we expect “is coming . . . and will not tarry” (vs. 37). Based on the evidence of these witnesses, we prepare for His coming. We keep alert.

In this earthly life we live on the basis of trust. We accept the fact that “the worlds were framed by the Word of God” (vs. 3), although we did not see creation occur. We perceive, rather, that the world is orderly, reliable, and consistent; we infer from things seen the “unseen” hand of God who made the world. The apostle’s assertion thus rings true: “that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (vs. 3). They were created by the invisible God out of nothing. God brought everything into being by His Word. He spoke, and it came to be.

God created all things and holds everything in existence. How else does Abel offer an acceptable sacrifice to God (vs. 4)? What of Enoch, “taken away so that he did not see death” (vs. 5)? He pleased God by his faith (vs. 5)! What God asks is not beyond our ability.

God is the *rewarder* of “those who diligently seek Him” (vs. 6). *Therefore*, we embrace the message of God’s creation and Christ’s victory in the flesh. We prepare now for the day of salvation – a salvation far greater than Noah received (vs. 7)!

Grant me to know Thy love, and make me like unto Thee, O Lord, my God. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

January 29 – Friday of the Thirty-fourth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:8, 11-16

Desire What is Worthy: Hebrews 11:8, 11-16, especially vs. 16: “*But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.*” Saint John Chrysostom urges us to “make our souls a heaven.” This may seem like a worthy desire but let us first take care that we understand what the saint means by making our souls “a heaven.” If we study today’s passage from Hebrews, we may search out his meaning so as to direct our labors toward their true end.

First and foremost, the making of the soul into a heaven depends on our trust in God (vss. 8, 11). We must act like Abraham and obey God; we choose to obey Christ our Savior. Faith is only slightly concerned with our mind and emotions. Mostly it is a matter of *complying*, even if we do not understand and entertain doubts, even if we do not especially feel like doing what the Lord asks.

Faith definitely entails risks and uncertainty. Nevertheless, trusting and obeying God is the essence of faith. Imagine Sarah’s doubts! She gives her maid Hagar to Abraham so that he will have an heir (see Gn 16:1-4). She has resigned herself to childlessness because of her age (Heb 11:11). Thus, she laughs at God’s promise of a son (Gn 18:12). However, when like Abraham she is challenged, Sarah takes strength from the Lord who promised, and “received strength to conceive seed” (Heb 11:11).

In Abraham’s case, God calls him to leave the familiar, withdrawing from the place where he is comfortably settled, and “[go] out, not knowing where he was going” (vs. 8). Often, obedience means leaving our place of comfort, as it did for Abraham. We admit that we are a strangers and pilgrims on the earth (vs. 13), who must sever our ties with the familiar.

If we decide to obey God above all else, then we know to expect some interruptions to our comfort. Concerning such spiritual disruptions, Saint John Chrysostom says, “Let us no longer continue on the earth . . . For to be and not to be on the earth is the effect of moral disposition and choice” (“Homily 16 on Hebrews,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 14. p. 445).

Now we begin to understand that to “make the soul a heaven” means advancing into the unknown (Lk 9:62). Choosing an unknown future may entail leaving behind familiar creature-comforts and stepping onto an unexplored path. Trusting and obeying often demands that we fast, persevere in prayer, read the Scriptures, receive the Holy Mysteries, confess our sins, block anger and jealousy, set aside greed, and take up the practice of virtue. These acts resemble a mountain range that the stranger and pilgrim must cross (vs. 13).

Still, we are encouraged to trust God with determination. We accept moments of discomfort and refuse to give up (vs. 15). In those difficult moments when we face the choices that come with faith. when we struggle to go forward, we “declare plainly that [we] seek a homeland” (vs. 14).

What *homeland* lies beyond the rugged hills, beyond the present struggle of obedience? It is that worthy, heavenly country, a *city* God has prepared (v. 16) for us. If we step out, we come nearer to God and to joy. God is with us when we begin our journey and while we are in the midst of the struggle – and He is waiting on the other side.

Let us undertake this journey so that we may discover that He is the destination we desire. He is the motivation for our struggles, and the heaven we truly seek in our hearts. “The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon Him, to all that call on Him in truth” (Ps 144:19).

O Lord our God, sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house, glorify them in recompense by Thy divine power, and forsake us not who hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 30 – Saturday of the Thirty-fourth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:1-8

Walk in Love: Ephesians 5:1-8, especially vs. 1: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.” In the original Greek, the word translated as imitators is *mimitei*, a cognate of the English word “mimic.” As Orthodox Christians, we are God’s beloved children. We are intended to imitate our Father, who formed us from the dust as living souls and blew His spirit of life into us (Gn 2:7). To mimic God is to control our inner life and to direct our bodies as He wills.

Hence, the Apostle Paul begs us to “walk in love, *like* Christ” (Eph 5:2). Not just any kind of love will do, only love “as Christ . . . loved” (vs. 2). The “walk in love” of our Lord Jesus Christ was truly the self-sacrifice of God, an outpouring on our behalf (vs. 2).

For this reason, Saint Paul uses imagery from ancient Jewish worship in the Temple. The holocaust offerings, totally consumed, symbolize a complete surrender to God by the worshipers. Our Lord’s death on the Cross is the prototype of such sacrifices (see Phil 2:7-8).

Our Savior, pure Himself, stepped into the waters of the baptism of repentance and thereby assumed the sins of the world. He walked in the desert of temptation to defeat the devil, by whom we are so often snared.

By the Sea of Galilee, He called the fishermen, the tax collectors, and sinners like us, loving all He met with His sacrificial love. Among the crowds, He healed, taught, and disputed day after day, until the time came for Him to go to Jerusalem and complete His sacrifice (Lk 13:33). Our Lord’s every step was a walk in love.

We live in a world that reduces love to mere physical satisfaction. Many people get their way by hook or by crook, never seeking to quiet the desires swirling inside them. The tide of the coarse, the crude, and the cruel encroaches on us all, pushing away the sacred and the pure.

And yet Saint Paul calls us saints (Eph 5:3), united to Christ. In the Lord we find the grace to love truly, to defeat temptation, to acquire pure motives by continence, to become worthy of His blessing. We are people of thanksgiving, for our Eucharist of praise (vs. 4) has “in remembrance . . . all those things which have come to pass for us” through the mercy of our gracious Savior, who still walks among us in love.

How shall we enjoy “any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (vs. 5)? It will not be through lust, nor impurity, nor coveting (vs. 5). Such impulses are signs of the materialistic personality. In cultures where idolatry is openly embraced, religion is usually coupled with immorality and debauchery. In the growth of Satanism and witchcraft in modern society are signs of a resurgence of corrupt religion but let us not be deceived.

Around us are “empty words” (vs. 6) full of deceit uttered by politicians, advertisers, entertainers, broadcasters, even televangelists. But we are guarded by the mysteries of Christ, for “[we are] baptized. [We are] illumined. [We have] received anointment with holy chrism. [We are] sanctified [and] washed: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The door has been opened wide for us to “be sheltered in the shelter of [God’s] wings” (Ps 60:4). Social decline afflicts every nation. However, the dread judgment seat of Christ is a certainty, when “the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (vs. 6).

Perhaps we are surrounded by nonbelievers who are unaware of their debasement. The Apostle Paul counsels us, “Do not be partakers with them” (vs. 7). It is never easy for us to walk “as children of light” (vs. 8). Perhaps we too “were once darkness” (vs. 8), as Saint Paul puts it. And yet it is not too late to “put off the old man” (vs. 4:22); for “now you are light in the Lord” (vs. 8). We have God’s grace to walk in love, as Christ’s own saints.

Adorn me, teach and enlighten me. Show me to be a dwelling place of Thy Spirit. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 31 – Thirty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 1
Colossians 3:12-16

Put on Christ: Colossians 3:12-16, especially vss. 12-13: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” On the great feasts, we replace the trisagion hymn “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” with the baptismal antiphon: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). Writing to the Christians at Colossae, Saint Paul lists the virtues we are called upon to acquire as “the elect of God” (Col 3:12) – as those who have “put on” Christ.

It is one thing for us to receive an invitation to the heavenly banquet (Mt 22:2-10), but quite another for us to be properly attired in a wedding garment (vss. 11-12). Saint Paul lays out the design of this garment so that we may weave it, wear it, and prove ourselves worthy.

We already have before us the true model, clothed in every virtue: Christ our God. What He did, we “also must do” (Col 3:13). We are united to Him, and yet we spend our lives endeavoring to “put on Christ.” He reveals the form of the garment, but who does not require some major tailoring in his life – letting out a great deal there, taking in a little bit here?

Getting the right fit is what this life is about. If we are to put on Christ, we must lay the fabric of our souls on the cutting table, measure it against the divine pattern we have been given, and go to work snipping and sewing.

Note how every virtue in this passage, from tender mercies (vs. 12) to *love* (vs. 14), are intended to be translated into action. First, however, we must affirm them in our heart as qualities. This is why the Church Fathers insist we begin with purification of the heart. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “For someone who desires spiritual rebirth, the first step toward the light is to curtail the passions, that is to say, to guard the heart; for it is impossible otherwise to curtail the passions” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 74).

Psalmody, of which Saint Paul speaks (vs. 16), can help warm our hearts. Attentiveness and prayer ward off “all distractive thoughts that encircle the heart” through “the invocation of the Lord Jesus Christ,” says Saint Symeon.

If we desire to show a modicum of compassion and *tender mercy* toward others, then we must use every appropriate means the Master makes available to us. We take risks, like the Good Samaritan, and strive to meet the most basic needs of those God places in our path.

Kindness is expressed naturally when we exercise the tenderness our Lord displayed when He met the widow of Nain. Following the funeral bier of her only son, “He had compassion on her” (Lk 7:13). Then He spoke to her, came to the coffin, and touched it.

Humility, says Saint John Chrysostom, “is the basis of all virtue . . . [do] not [be] lowly toward one, and rude toward another; be lowly toward all men, be he friend or foe, be he great or small. This is lowliness” (“Homily 9 on Ephesians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 13, p. 96). *Meekness*, according to Saint John Climacus, “is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected, whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 8.3, p. 81).

To “put on Christ” means that we endure loss, insult, and wounds, and yet still forgive. Only then are we truly *longsuffering*. With each virtue, let us “put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Col 3: 14). Such is the way of Christ, our Master and our model.

I have put Thee on, O Christ our God; in Thy mercy make me a victor, even unto the end. – Chrismation Prayer