

## June 1 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 45:14-28

**On the Eve of Jerusalem's Fall – A Secret Meeting: Jeremiah 45:14-28, especially vs. 24:** “Then the king said to him, ‘Let no one know of these words and you shall not die.’” King Zedekiah admits, “I am afraid of the Judeans who fled to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hands, and they mock me” (vs. 19). Furthermore, he is afraid of his own court officials, who are called “rulers” in the text (vss. 25, 27). Thus the king swears Jeremiah to silence regarding their secret meeting, lest his words be exposed publicly (vss. 24-26).

Although he is king, Zedekiah fears his own officials and the prospect of exile and mockery. Had the counsel of Saint John of Kronstadt (“Do not cling with your heart to anything, and do not make it the god of your heart; the sole God our heart must be the Lord God who created it” – *My Life in Christ*, p. 237) been available to him, how greatly might he have been blessed!

Truthfully, Zedekiah offers us a study of a man controlled by a worldly perspective. His focus is only on other people and their relations and interactions with him. He says he wishes to ask the prophet of God a question (vs. 14), but in other translations the inquiry is stated more biblically: “I wish to ask a *word* of you.” Yet we observe that the Lord’s word to Jeremiah (vss. 17-18) brings no terror into the king’s heart, only the fear of exposure (cf. vss. 14, 26). The spiritual dimension dominates the consciousness of Jeremiah, but remains only a shadow-possibility for Zedekiah. He may believe that Jeremiah has a valid point about surrendering, but what motivates the king is the political world with its viewpoints, actions, and coalitions of men.

How the world changes once we see God at work in the events of life and history! The Judeans arrest the prophet and beat him up (vss. 44:14-15) and throw him in a cistern up to his knees in the mire, and he calmly bears these assaults on his life. Jeremiah never varies in speaking the Lord’s word, for it is the single reality that consumes his life. When Saint Ephraim describes the person who has attained patience, he provides an apt portrait of Jeremiah: he “touches on every virtue . . . rejoices in sorrows, and is well-tryed in misfortunes, is joyful in danger, ready for obedience, filled with love, glories in vexation, is humbled in reproaches” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 94) and unwavering in misfortunes.

An example for every Orthodox Christian, Jeremiah stands in marked contrast to King Zedekiah. He embodies what it means to know and pursue the ways of salvation. God places Jeremiah under a weak-willed king, a man controlled by what others are saying and doing around him. Still, when this king begs Jeremiah not to divulge their conversation, the prophet graciously obeys his monarch as God’s servant for good, not bearing “the sword in vain” (Rom 13:4). He limits his reply to the state officials, violating neither the truth nor the king’s command to remain silent. He is accountable above all to God and thus obeys, as best he is able, the one whom God allows to rule over His chosen people.

King Zedekiah, on the other hand, shows us the sterility of a human perspective fixated only on this present existence. By abusing our God-given freedom, such a view leaves out the living God who ordained the mystery of our salvation “before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor 2:7). Let us struggle to free ourselves from the domination of the contemporary world, whose opinions control us as they did Zedekiah. Come what may, we are to turn to God as the one who helps us, remembering that He is always involved and active in our lives.

*Teach us to treat all that comes to us throughout the day with peace of soul and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all. In all our deeds and words, guide our thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let us not forget that all are sent by Thee.* – Saint Philaret of Moscow

## June 2 – Thursday – Feast of the Ascension – First Reading at Vespers for the Ascension – Isaiah 2:2-3

**The Ascension – Restoring Human Nature: Isaiah 2:2-3, especially vs. 3:** “For the law of the Lord shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord shall go forth from Jerusalem.” When the Lord ascended to the heavens, He did not divest Himself of His humanity. He raised “the likeness of Adam, cast into the vaults of Hades, lifting it with [His] Ascension to the heavens and making it equal in rank to Thy Father’s throne” (orthros verse for the Ascension). Christ’s raising of human nature to the right hand of the Father assures us that the way is now open to all who diligently seek the restoration of their humanity. The elevation of our nature gives everyone in every nation on earth the motivation “go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob [that] He [may] proclaim His way to us [so that] we [may] walk in it” (vs. 3).

We understand that when the prophet speaks of the “mountain of the Lord” or the “house of the God of Jacob,” he refers to the Church. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “The mountain or heights of the Lord’s house is indeed established. . . . in the heights of heaven – for the Church of Christ is primarily not of the earth but of heaven, and one part of the members of the Church (and that now the greater part) is in heaven, while the others are here on earth” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 163). Furthermore, the Church of Christ is “exalted above the hills” – that is, above all earthly or human dimensions. The great philosophies and art of the world’s cultures, all the *earthly heights*, are only foothills below the distant mountains of the Church of Christ, for, as Saint Nikolai continues, “the Church would have no difficulty in creating these ‘earthly heights,’ while not one of them. . . . would be able to create the Church.”

Once we understand that Isaiah speaks prophetically of the Church in this passage, it becomes obvious *who* invites us to “go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (vs. 3). As Saint Athanasios discerns, this is the voice the saints, of the holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church. The saints truly discovered the riches of God’s truth, for the Lord reveals to them “the way wherein [they] should walk” (Ps 142:10) as they lift up their souls to Him.

However, Saint Athanasios goes on to explain that the way revealed by these holy men and women is not “for the impure . . . nor is the ascent thereto for sinners; but it is for the virtuous and diligent, and for those who love according to the aim of the saints” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 29). This divine task is only possible because our humanity has been borne into the heavenly places by the Incarnate Lord Himself. Only through union with the Christ Jesus, who is both God and man, can deity penetrate our humanity, cleansing and restoring it to that “pristine beauty” that was ours from creation. The purifying mystery that begins at baptism is now accomplished in us by the Holy Spirit.

What does the prophet mean when he proclaims that “the law of the Lord shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is 2:3)? According to Theodoret of Cyrrihus, Isaiah “calls ‘word’ not God the Word, but the teaching of the divine word. For God the Word did not come *out of* Zion, but it was *in* Zion that He taught the truth” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 30). The point is that the Lord taught *in* Zion, in Jerusalem’s temple, when he cried, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (Jn 7:38). Further, “the word of the Lord” goes forth “from Zion” (vs. 3), i.e., from the Church. Many heard Jesus in the Temple but received His words merely in terms of the old Law, failing to see Him as Life itself. Today, He offers all men life through the Church.

*O Christ our God, enable those whom Thou hast illumined with the fire-breathing Spirit to attain purification, that our hearts may be enlightened and seen to be afire with Thy grace.* –Verse for the Ascension

**June 3 – Friday – Second Reading at Vespers for the Ascension – Isaiah 62:10-63:3,7-9**

**The Victor Returns: Isaiah 62:10-63:3, 7-9, especially 63:3 and 7,** “*I am full of the treading of grapes, and there is no man with Me among the nations. I trampled them in My anger, and crushed them like earth, and brought their blood to the ground. . . . I remembered the Lord’s mercy, the praises of the Lord in all things in which the Lord recompenses us. The Lord is a good judge to the house of Israel, and He deals with us according to His mercy, and according to the multitude of His righteousness.*” Even heavenly hosts ponder in amazement when God the Son descends from His heavenly throne and comes in the “likeness of men” (Phil 2:7). How wondrous is our God!

Saint John of Damascus expresses the Archangel Gabriel’s perplexity at the Incarnation: “How is it that He who is in the highest and incomprehensible shall be born of a Virgin? He whose throne is heaven, and the earth His footstool, how shall He be contained in a woman’s womb? How was He pleased to be incarnate of her by a word only, He whom the six-winged ones and those of many eyes cannot gaze upon?” (Vespersal hymn of the Annunciation).

Now, when the Lord makes His triumphant return on high, another marvel confronts the angels: Christ seats *human* nature eternally with the Father, forever joining man the creature to the Godhead. Although He was never separated from His eternal throne, the Lord now returns to heaven as a mighty man, fair in appearance. His garments are now stained red from trampling in the winepress of His Passion. All of this He bears to heaven as a sign of His victory at the Cross, for He trampled down sin and Satan, our great enemies, and destroyed death by death.

Isaiah assembles all of these images for us in this brief vespersal reading for the Feast of the Ascension. He unfolds a portrait of the returning “Warrior-Savior” in triumphant procession, taking His place again on His rightful heavenly throne. The prophet’s verbal icon includes this command from the Lord on behalf of His Church: “Make a way for My people” (Is 62:10). The reading also includes a further answer to the angel’s ponderings and concludes with a prophetic reflection on the Ascension itself (vss. 7-9).

Isaiah’s prophecy first reveals that the Lord’s earthly ministry, from the moment of His Incarnation from the Virgin, is for the Church, “the daughter of Zion” (vs. 11) whom the Lord calls *My people*. He will permit no obstruction to stand in our way to heaven: “Throw the stones off the road, and lift up a standard for the Gentiles” (vs. 10). Here is a standard to rally all peoples of the earth, not merely ancient Israel, which is why He commissions the apostles to “makes disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Note that the Church is here called “a holy people, the redeemed of the Lord . . . a City Sought for and Not Forsaken” (Is 62:12).

The Lord Jesus Himself answers the ponderings of the angels in this prophecy. No other man could have redeemed mankind, but Christ says, “I trampled them [Satan and his hosts] in My anger and crushed them like earth, and brought down their blood to the ground” (vs. 3).

Isaiah expresses his awe at God’s revelation: “I remembered the Lord’s mercy, the praises of the Lord in all things in which the Lord recompenses us” (vs. 7). Likewise, the faithful embrace their Savior, for we know that Christ Himself is *salvation* (vs. 8). “Not an elder or an angel, but the Lord Himself” saved us, because He loves us and spares us (vs. 9). “He redeemed and took [us] up, and lifted [us] up all the days of old” (vs. 9). Glory to Thee, O Christ!

*O Thou Who fulfilllest all, and didst appear of Thine own choice, and suffer in the flesh and didst rise from the dead, and didst tread down death, ascending in glory; send us Thy Spirit.* – Vespers for the Ascension

## June 4 – Saturday – Third Reading at Vespers for the Ascension – Zechariah 14:1, 4, 8-11

**He Shall Come Again: Zechariah 14:1, 4, 8-11, especially vs. 9:** “*And the Lord shall be king of all the earth, and in that day the Lord shall be one Lord and His name one name.*” The Ascension of our Lord Jesus initiated the age of the Church, the present era that shall continue until, once again, “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives” (vs. 4). Then indeed the “Lord shall be King of all the earth” (vs. 9), the sole monarch whose name shall be acknowledged by all peoples, for “every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him” (Rev 1:7).

The angels who appear to the apostles as the Lord Jesus is “taken up . . . out of their sight” (Acts 1:9), reveal that “this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (vs. 11). Prophet Zechariah, writing in the fifth century BC, discloses what will take place before that final day, at which time there “will no longer be a curse” and the Church, the true Jerusalem, “shall dwell securely” (Zec 14:11), protected under the gracious reign of Christ our God.

When Zechariah speaks of plunder in verse 1, he employs the image of valuables or treasures seized by victors in war. What, however, are the true spoils, the greatest treasure that is taken from us in this life? It is our very breath and being, our heart and soul. The priceless gift of life, of our very self, is taken from us by death, for here on earth mortality reigns. We are handed over to death as a result of sin that separates us from God. But when the Lord of Glory comes, He will apportion to us true life – eternal life without separation from God. We will share in the spoils of His victory and receive that which death now takes away. When the Lord comes, there “will no longer be a curse. Jerusalem shall dwell securely” (vs. 11).

Christ ascended *from* the Mount of Olives; thus, in Zechariah’s vision, the Lord will stand upon the same spot when He comes again. The prophet pictures the Mount of Olives “split in two,” with a great valley pushing through it on an east-west axis (vs. 4), thus allowing “living water [to] come forth out of Jerusalem” (vs. 8) to all the earth. History proves that the realization of this vision is already far advanced. The Living Waters of the Church have flowed forth from Her apostolic beginnings in Jerusalem to every continent across the face of the globe. Barren cultures once filled with death have been introduced to the Gospel. Life is flourishing where before there was a desert of superstition and death.

May God grant us eyes to see that, despite recurring repression and the killing of men’s bodies and souls, the Life-bearing water of the Church continues to flow. It cannot be stifled or restricted, even by the systematic efforts of nations, empires, and tyrants. As the Prophet Zechariah foresaw, the advance of life “will be in both summer and spring” of the Church’s efforts to bring life to the gardens of mankind (vs. 8).

Today the whole earth is finding truth in Christ, fed by the life-bearing water of the Gospel that flows from that true Jerusalem, the Church. When Zechariah speaks of the cities of Geba and Rimmon (vs. 10), he is using them as reference points to mark the northern and southern extremes of the land known to his readers in his day. The life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Lord Jesus offer us more than a broader geographic perspective – they illumine our hearts and minds so that we can see the point the prophet seeks to proclaim. God’s people, the ever-growing number within the Church, “will dwell in her, and it will no longer be a curse. Jerusalem shall dwell securely” (vs. 11).

*God hath ascended in songs of rejoicing. Save us, O Son of God, who didst rise from us in glory to the heavens, as we sing unto Thee. Alleluia!* – Little Entrance Hymn of the Ascension

**June 5 – Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council (Seventh Sunday of Pascha), Tone 6**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Deuteronomy 1:8-11, 15-17**

**Judge Righteously: Deuteronomy 1:8-11, 15-17, especially vs. 16:** “Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, ‘Hear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the resident alien with him.’” When we speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we stress the consistency of God’s revelation to His people throughout history. It is not surprising, then, that the command of the Prophet Moses quoted above not only guided the courts of ancient Israel, but also the later councils of the Church and the judicial proceedings of Orthodox Christian nations. Moses’ charge lays down what God expects from any finding called *just*.

Men can and do make travesties of judiciary proceedings. They bend and distort the judgments of the courts to conform to popular ideologies or to benefit the powerful and wealthy. God, however, sees and condemns all such sinful aberrations. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, all courts in all lands fall under the Mosaic command, for the great prophet gave God’s people a truth that applies to all peoples in all times and places.

In the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” the faithful are advised: “Do not cause division, but make peace between disputants. Judge justly. Do not show partiality in reproofing transgressions. Do not be of two minds whether or not something should be” (*The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 311). As we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Fathers of the First Council, we see that their deliberations likewise conform to the prophet’s charge.

First of all, Moses enlarges the command to “judge righteously” by stating the truth in both negative and positive terms, as well as supplying a specific application: “You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall judge the small and the great” (vs. 17). The First Ecumenical Council followed this very rule when it addressed the case of Arius. As a priest serving the large and wealthy parish of Baucalis, in the city of Alexandria, Arius’ views initially drew much interest and support. When he and the Bishop of Alexandria openly disagreed, local councils were called in support of both sides.

The matter was ultimately taken up at the first ecumenical (general) council of the Church, sponsored by the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea. Arius received *his day in court*, but a majority of the assembled Fathers roundly condemned his views. They strove to act impartially in resolving what began as a matter between a priest and his bishop: the small and the great in the Church were given equal hearing.

Likewise, despite strong support for Arius’ views from many in the Church, including the popular bishops of three influential dioceses (Nicomedia, Nicaea, and Chalcedon), the Holy Fathers of the First Council did “not shrink before any man’s presence, for the judgment is God’s” (vs. 17). They strove to be faithful to divine revelation as they had received it, for the life-giving and saving truth of God was at stake. Only after no suitable phrase from Holy Scripture could be found did they resort to the non-biblical term *homoousion* (“of one essence”) to express the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

Nicaea itself constituted the final court of appeal, after numerous smaller councils had been held in the east and west, as well as within Alexandria. When the “case [was] too hard” (vs. 17) for a regional council to settle definitively, they necessarily appealed, as Moses commands, to “wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men” (vs. 15). Thus, appeal was made to the highest authority, which in the Church required the calling of an ecumenical council.

*Ye have given all, O thrice-blessed Fathers, to know the Trinity clearly, He being the Cause of the creation of the world, for ye have appeared as champions of the Orthodox word.* –Feast of the Fathers of the Seventh Council

## June 6 – Monday – Reading for the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council – Genesis 14:14-20

**Recovery: Genesis 14:14-20, especially vs. 16:** “So he brought back all the cavalry of Sodom, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people.” The events that precede Abram’s recovery of the cavalry of Sodom and his brother Lot greatly illumine today’s brief account of a retaliatory strike against the coalition of kings in league with Chedorlaomer of Elam (vs. 17). Chedorlaomer was a regional overlord who controlled ancient Mesopotamia from his base in Elam, an ancient country east of the great river valleys in what today would be southern Iran. By means of war, this great king subjugated not only the vast territory of present-day Iraq and Syria, but also extended his effective suzerainty as far as the city-states below the Dead (Salt) Sea (Gn 14:1-3).

However, the vassal kings in the Dead Sea region were far away from Chedorlaomer’s center of power. After twelve years of paying tribute, they conspired to paying tribute to him, a rebellion he set out to quell (vss. 4-8). In reasserting control over the western region of his empire, the great overlord easily subdued the rebel alliance of the Dead Sea kings. To punish the rebels in Siddim, located in the southern plains below the Dead Sea, the great king took both men and women as slaves, stripping the people of their food stores and other possessions. Lot suffered enslavement along with the other citizens of Sodom. All of these events were reported to Abram (vss. 9-13).

Here is an all-too-familiar story of conquest, war, and power – yet another chapter in the history of sinful human affairs. However, Saint Ambrose of Milan encourages us to grasp “how harmful are the vices” so that we may learn from Abram, that great patriarch and spiritual warrior, how to become warriors ourselves in the struggle that takes place within our hearts and souls (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament vol. II, p. 21).

First, we note that Abram does not turn to worldly allies for help in recovering Lot and the others who had fallen prey to Chedorlaomer (vs. 13). Instead, he chooses – literally *numbers* – from those born in his own household a small band of only 318 servants. With these he sets out to pursue and strike an apparently an invincible army (vs. 14). In countering the rampage of sin and the passions, let us remember that outward assistance does not avail. Worldly friends, secular counselors, and advisors cannot help; we must turn to the household of God: the Church filled with servants of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the intercessions of the saints and angels and the all-wise counsel of the Holy Spirit, we gain help in recovering what we lose spiritually.

Abram’s tiny band overtakes the enemy in darkness, just as we must search out, smite, and destroy the enemy within our darkened souls. As Saint John Chrysostom reminds us, “the patriarch prevailed against [his enemies] not by physical strength but through faith in God. . . . not by wielding weapons and arrows and spears . . . but with a few retainers of his own household” (*ACCS*, OT vol. 2, p. 24)

What is more, by his faith and with resources from God, Abram recovers that which was lost – and he greatly benefits many others as well (vss. 16-17). What untold good God’s people can shower upon others through the actions of faith!

Most importantly, Abram is quick to give thanks to God. In a type of the Divine Liturgy, Melchizedek, as “priest of God Most High,” “brought out bread and wine” (vs. 18) to celebrate God’s triumph through Abram. Abram responds to this priestly blessing, for he “gave him a tithe of all” (vs. 20). A *tithe of all* is Abram’s humble way of offering thanks to God who gave the victory.

*Thou alone, O Lord our God, rulest over those in heaven and on earth; Who art Lord of the Seraphim and King of Israel; Who alone art holy and retest in Thy Holy Place.* – Priest prayer at the Cherubic Hymn

**June 7 – Tuesday – Reading for the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council – Deuteronomy 10:14-21**

**Lord of Lords: Deuteronomy 10:14-21, especially vs. 17:** “For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords. . . .” In the fourth century AD, Arius of Alexandria taught that our Lord Jesus was the Word, born before time, perfect “beyond all other creatures, but a creature nonetheless.” This heresy precipitated a crisis in the Church. Arius used syllogistic logic to focus on the absolute singleness of God’s Person. To gain popular support for his views, he even set his doctrines to the tune of popular songs. Worst of all, his teaching could not be refuted simply by using Scripture, for he explained his concepts using the Bible.

He loosed a raging debate within the Church despite the condemnation of his views by several councils of bishops, including an assembly called in his own see of Alexandria. Ultimately, under the auspices of the God-serving Emperor Constantine, the bishops convened an ecumenical council in Nicaea in 325 to address Arius’ teaching.

The vast majority of the bishops and laypeople were outraged by Arius’ error. The saintly Archbishop Nicholas of Myra, having suffered imprisonment under the pagan emperor Diocletian for affirming that Christ is God, was so offended by Arius that he slapped him in the face during the council meeting. Astonished by this action, his fellow bishops removed Nicholas from the council and from his rank as bishop. However, several hierarchs subsequently received a vision of the Lord and His Mother praising Nicholas. Asking the godly bishop’s forgiveness, the council granted his complete episcopal restoration.

The Holy Spirit led the council of bishops at Nicaea to repudiate Arius’ teaching. Later the Church Father would appoint today’s passage from Deuteronomy to be read at the celebration of this first great ecumenical council. Moses here speaks prophetically of the absolute deity that the apostles and the Holy Fathers would apply to Christ Jesus as the divine Son of God, teaching that He “is God of gods, and Lord of lords” (vs. 17) to whom “heaven and heaven of heaven belong . . . also the earth and everything in it” (vs. 14). He is a loving God who “chose your fathers . . . and . . . you above all nations” (vs. 15); “He administers justice” for the humble (vs. 18); He is truly “your boast and your God, who did these great and glorious things for you” (vs. 21).

The Church reads and applies Moses’ words to Christ, since He revealed Himself to His apostles as God the Word, who “was in the beginning with God. . . . and without [whom] nothing was made that was made” (Jn 1:2-3). Naturally “heaven and heaven of heaven belong to the Lord your God, also the earth” (Dt 10:14); for He is “the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His Person” (Heb 1:3).

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus reveals to Nicodemus early in His ministry that God “did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn 3:17). Never forget that the Lord Jesus, before He took flesh from the Virgin, “chose your fathers [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] to love them; and He chose their seed after them, you above all nations” (Dt 10:15). Now with Christ’s Incarnation all peoples of the world are “called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles” (Rom 9:24).

How compassionate is Christ our God, who manifests His great love and justice for the defenseless (Dt 10:18) and even raises a widow’s son from the dead (Lk 7:13-14)! Indeed, we are called to serve Him who is “[our] boast and [our] God, who did these great and glorious things for [us]” (Dt 10:21), culminating with His death on the Cross and His arising from the dead for our salvation.

*We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, O Lord King, heavenly God, Father Almighty; O Lord, the Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit. – The Doxology*

**June 8 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 46:1-8; 52:1-13**

**The Fall of Jerusalem – Judgment and Hope: Jeremiah 46:1-8; 52:1-13, especially 52:8-9, 10-11:** *“In Riblah, the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah and all the rulers of Judah before his eyes. He blinded the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in shackles; and the king of Babylon brought him to Babylon. . . . Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, . . . burned the house of the Lord and the king’s house, and all the houses of the city . . . with fire.”* With one stroke the Babylonians end Judah’s existence as a nation, discontinuing its institutions, destroying the Temple, and leaving only a “remnant of the people” to till the land (vs. 13).

The Lord God permits this calamity to befall His people, yet enables them to survive, chastened and humbled, and build a new way of life. When we read the Lamentations of Jeremiah, we see him grieving over Israel’s defeat and Jerusalem’s desolation. His words express the pain known to every defeated people. Let us compare his hopeful lament with the stark account of the defeat that led to destruction, captivity, humiliation, and derision.

When “the city was broken through” (vs. 52:5), Jeremiah laments: “Her oppressors have become the master, and her enemies prosper; for the Lord humbled her because of the multitude of her ungodliness” (Lam 1:5). The prophet declares and the Lord fulfills His word, allowing just retribution for transgressions committed without regret or shame.

“All the leaders of the king of Babylon went in and sat in the middle gate” (Jer 46:3). The prophet confesses that “the Lord has done what He purposed; He has carried out His words which He commanded in days of old. . . . and caused the enemy to rejoice over you” (Lam 2:17). The Lord permits pagans to rule over the holy city, having shattered her former splendor.

“All the men of war went out at night. . . . But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him” (Jer 52:5, 6). Jeremiah cries to the Lord: “You visited us in anger and drove us away. You have put us to death and not spared us. . . . My enemies hunted me down without cause, like a sparrow. . . . O Lord, You pleaded the case for my soul; You redeemed my life” (Lam 3: 39, 48, 54).

“They took [Zedekiah] and brought him to the king of Babylon at Riblah; and he pronounced judgment against him” (Jer 52:7). What horror befalls God’s people! “Her princes have become like rams that find no pasture, and they journey in weakness before the face of the pursuer. . . . When her enemies saw this, they laughed at her deportation” (Lam 1:6, 7).

“In Riblah, the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah and all the rulers of Judah before his eyes” (Jer 52:8). The prophet weeps over this fate: “There was no one who escaped, or were left in the day of the Lord’s wrath” (Lam 2:22).

“Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, . . . burned the house of the Lord and the king’s house, and all the houses of the city. . . . Then the army . . . pulled down every wall round about Jerusalem” (Jer 52:10-12). The greatest pain comes with the destruction of the Temple: “As in a forest of trees, with axes they cut down the doors thereof together. . . . With fire have they burned down Thy sanctuary, they have profaned . . . the habitation of Thy name” (Ps 73:7, 8).

“But the captain of the guard left the remnant of the people to be vinedressers and farmers” (Jer 52:13). Jeremiah completes his lamentation with these hopeful words: “But You, O Lord, shall dwell forever. . . . Turn us back to You, O Lord, and we shall be converted” (Lam 5:19, 21). Let us read Jeremiah’s lamentations and be humbled before the ways of the Lord with His people!

*Thy mercies, O Lord, never end, and Thy compassions fail not; they are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness, saith my soul, therefore shall I ever hope in Thee.* – From Lamentations 3:22-24

## June 9 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 47:1-6

**Release and Providence: Jeremiah 47:1-6, especially vss. 2, 5:** “*The captain of the guard took him and said to him . . . ‘Return to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon appointed over the land of Judah, and dwell with him among the people of Judah.’*” Concerning God’s governance, Saint John of Damascus observes: “That He provides, and that He provides excellently, one can most readily perceive. God alone is good and wise by nature” (*NPNF Second Series*, vol. 9, p. 82). The Prophet Jeremiah’s survival during the fall of Jerusalem fully illustrates Saint John’s point.

Despite the ardent desire of the hostile Judean rulers who would have put Jeremiah to death, God spares him for continuing ministry. His enemies first thrust him into a muddy cistern as terror and death stalks the streets of Jerusalem. Then Jeremiah endures the misery of being “bound in the court of the prison” (vs. 40:1). Swept up in the swirling violence that accompanies the fall of the city, he is nevertheless “sheltered in the shelter of [God’s] wings” (Ps 60:4). In the words of Saint Maximos the Confessor, the Lord in His providence cares for him, “showing . . . that divine help is stronger than anything else” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 279).

Calling the situation in Jerusalem “chaotic” when the walls were breached scarcely captures the terrifying experience of the survivors. The command staff of the king of Babylon sets up its headquarters “in the middle gate” (Jer 46:3), while King Zedekiah and his soldiers, in an effort to escape, “went out at night by way of the gate between the wall and outwork, next to the garden” (vs. 52:5). A detachment of Chaldeans pursues and captures them. People are starving (Lam 1:11) or lying dead in the streets, slaughtered without mercy (vs. 2:21), while others are rounded up, put in chains, and led north to the town of Ramah (Jer 47:1). From there, convoys of prisoners will be marched to slave settlements in the lower Mesopotamian valley (today’s southern Iraq). Fires burn everywhere amidst the destruction and looting (vs. 52:11).

Amidst this chaos, the Prophet Jeremiah is taken from prison along with a few others, possibly including his jailers. Their hands shackled, they are marched off to the dispatch center at Ramah (vs. 47:1). Yet there the captain of the guard identifies Jeremiah and, on orders from the highest Babylonian authority, releases him to “go wherever in your eyes it seems best to go” (vs. 5). No doubt the prophet’s reputation is well known among the Babylonians, and God uses that knowledge to work His providence through the power of King Nebuchadnezzar and effect the release of His servant.

Divine providence further allows Jeremiah to choose between exile with Ezekiel, Daniel, and others of God’s prophets or to stay “among the people who were left in the land” (vs. 6). Jeremiah elects to remain, staying with the remnant that is left to be “vinedressers and farmers” (vs. 52:13). Thus the Lord offers his prophet as a comfort to the survivors as they begin to sort out the limited options facing them in these stark, new conditions.

God even provides an agreeable authority under whom Jeremiah can minister, in the person of the Babylonian-appointed Jewish governor Gedaliah. (Gedaliah’s father, Ahikam, earlier had saved Jeremiah’s life - vs. 33:24.) May the Lord ever provide for us in our own necessities!

*Almighty God, our help and refuge, without whom I can do nothing, assist, direct and provide for me that I may live faithfully, according to Thy will and to the glory of Thy name.* – Prayer Before Commencing Any Task

## June 10 – Friday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 3:21-29

**Prayer Denied: Deuteronomy 3:21-29, especially vs. 27:** “Lift your eyes toward the sea, the north wind, the south wind, and the sunrise; behold it with your eyes, for you will not cross over this Jordan.” In Christ we are like children with God as our Father (Eph 4:6) – a loving Father. We who are made in His image (Gn 1:27) naturally beseech Him to permit us to have a share in His work in this fallen world. The Lord Jesus encourages us to pray always to our Father in Heaven: “I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mk 11:24). Despite such assurances there is no *carte blanche* to guarantee our prayer’s fulfillment – yet neither does a lack of response from God necessarily indicate that we are in His disfavor.

Who has not offered heartfelt prayer? King David besought the Lord for the child he conceived by Uriah’s wife. Even after the Lord’s prophetic word that “your son who is born to you shall surely die” (2 Kgs 12:14), David prayed and “fasted, went in and lay on the ground” for a week, opening his heart’s desire before the Lord (vs. 16). Yet “on the seventh day the child died” (vs. 18). How many of us have prayed as rigorously and been denied?

If we look at God’s message in refusing David, however, we understand why the great Moses, despite years of service to God, is likewise denied his heart’s petition. When God refuses our prayers, He does so graciously, continuing to assure us that our life in His service is neither wasted nor fruitless. We learn that whenever God denies a petition, He may yet reserve another portion for us in the future, in order to fulfill the vision He originally awakened within us.

Most of Moses’ prayers are heard and answered by God, even on occasions when positive answers seem unlikely. For example, the Lord announces His intention to strike the Israelites “with death and destroy them” at Kadesh Barnea for refusing to advance into the Promised Land (Nm 14:12). But when Moses beseeches the Lord to “remit the sin of this people according to Your great mercy, as You were merciful to them from Egypt even until now” (vs. 19), the Lord pardons them. Rest assured that even in discouraging circumstances we can place our heart’s desires before God. Our God is a compassionate, loving Father.

In the present case Moses’ request is denied, yet the Lord is not callous in his refusal. He instructs His prophet to ascend a mountain and survey the whole land from there (Dt 3:27). Next, he is to “command Joshua, strengthen him and encourage him; for he will go over before this people” (vs. 28). Thus, God affirms His promise that Israel will inherit the land and that Moses’ years of struggle were not in vain. The desire in Moses’ prayer “to see the land” is blessed, but the time has now come for leadership to pass to Joshua. And already, with the defeat of the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan (2:32-33; 3:3), the Lord has given Moses a foretaste of Israel’s success in the land to the west.

Most significantly, the Lord gives Moses a vital role in the conquest that lies ahead: to “command Joshua, strengthen him and encourage him” (3:28). Moses’ wisdom is to be handed on personally to the young leader of the next generation. Now it is Joshua’s turn to give Israel every “cause . . . to inherit the land you see” (vs. 28).

*O Compassionate God, Thou knowest our necessities before we ask: mercifully give us those things, which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot, ask.*

## June 11 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 4:1-9

**Finding Life: Deuteronomy 4:1-9, especially vs. 1:** “Now, O Israel, listen to the ordinances and judgments I teach you today to observe, that you may live. . . .” Before catechumens join the Body of Christ, the Church prays that they will be inscribed in God’s “Book of Life.” She begs God to remove all delusions so that they may know the Lord as “the only true God” and by His grace “walk in all [His] commandments.”

Note the correspondence between the latter phrases of this prayer for catechumens and today’s passage from Deuteronomy. According to the prayer, “if a man do these things, he shall find life in them.” The issue is to *find life*, and truly live.

In Deuteronomy, the Prophet Moses strives to impress on God’s people that the way to find life is to practice the way of the Lord. God’s teaching is as true for Orthodox Christians today as it was for His people under the Old Covenant. Spiritual death and destruction always remain a possibility. In order to “inherit the land the Lord God of your fathers is giving you” (Dt 4:1) we must never “add to the word I command you, nor take from it” (vs. 2). The holy faith delivered to us by the prophets and apostles demands a choice between life and death. Finding life, very plainly, demands obedience, constancy in prayer and worship and, above all, watchfulness over our hearts and souls and adherence to what is required of us.

Notice how Moses stresses obedience as the way to life. God has revealed how we are to walk – how we are to live. It is up to us to “listen to the ordinances and judgments” of God (vs. 1). Obedience begins with attention to what the Lord expects. There is no *adjusting* or *accommodating* because of fads, opinions, or moral trends in society. God’s revelation is not subject to tampering to suit ourselves. Let us be like those of old who “who held fast to the Lord your God” (vs. 4) and remained alive with hope of the Promised Land before them.

When a significant number of Israelites participated in the pagan worship of the Moabite idol (the “Baal of Peor”), Moses deemed their actions tantamount to *adding* to God’s statutes and ordinances (Nm 25:3). The people were invited to idolatrous sacrifices that included cultic “fornication with the daughters of Moab” (vs. 1), sacrifices, and idol worship (vs. 2). Succumbing to the allure of those debased fertility rites accordingly brought death, execution, and plague (vs. 8-9). We do not find life when we *add* forbidden activities that we find attractive, only by strictly obeying the word of God.

Moses now reminds the Israelites that those “who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today” (Dt 4:4). The obedient Christian “holds fast” through Orthodox prayer and worship. This is why the Church cautions us not to frequent “the meetings of heretics and schismatics” (*Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, p. 39), nor should we “[forsake] the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some” (Heb 10:25). We receive blessing from regular prayer and worship. “In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7).

Finally, the Prophet Moses teaches us to attend to our souls and never “forget all the things your eyes saw . . . lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life” (Dt 4:9). “Without watchfulness . . . ignorance is not recognized, it is camouflaged, it hides, it is full of conceit, especially in the contemporary technological, conceited, and arrogant man,” says Archimandrite Ioannikios Kotsanis (*Themes of the Philokalia Number 1*, p. 27). Let us post a guard within our heart, in order that the Lord may always abide there.

*From my youth up many passions have warred against me. But do Thou help and save me, O my Savior. Yea, let my humble heart be lighted by Thy fear, lest it rise and fall from Thee.* – Orthos verses

## June 12 – Sunday of Pentecost, Tone 7

### First Reading at Vespers for Pentecost – Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29

**The Holy Spirit: Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29, especially vs. 25:** “Then the Lord descended in the cloud and spoke to him and took of the Spirit upon him, and put Him upon the seventy men of the elders; and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, although they never did so again.” This passage, read at Vespers for Pentecost, illumines major aspects of the teaching embedded in that service: “The Holy Spirit provideth all; overfloweth with prophecy; fulfilleth the priesthood; and hath taught wisdom to the illiterate. He hath revealed the fishermen as theologians. He bringeth together all laws of the Church. Wherefore, O Comforter, equal to the Father in substance and the throne, glory to Thee!” (Vespers of Pentecost).

The reading draws from the experience of the ancient people of God, yet at the same time it reveals the Holy Spirit as the provider of every gift for the Church in her common life. In particular, the Spirit empowers the diversity of ministry among God’s people. He completes the ministry of the priesthood by imparting wisdom to all the faithful, even those lacking in formal education, thus enabling the Church to carry out its administrative tasks well.

The Prophet Moses, wilderness leader of ancient Israel, has become overwhelmed by the burdens of his office. He reaches a point of desperation and cries out to God, “If You treat me like this, kill me here and now – if I find mercy in Your sight – and do not let me see my maltreatment” (Nm 11:15). God responds by directing Moses to “gather to Me seventy men from the elders of Israel” upon whom the Lord would place His Spirit (vs. 16).

The Church clearly needs a diversity of gifts in order to carry on our Lord Jesus’ mission and worship. As the apostle teaches, many different ministries are required, but it is the *same Spirit* who provides the various skills and abilities (1 Cor 12:4-5, 11).

Observe how the Holy Spirit empowers the seventy with prophecy to assist in leading Israel (Nm 11:25). Prophecy is essential among the Spirit’s gifts – a capacity that Saint John Chrysostom describes as “not only the telling of things future but also of the present” (*Homily on First Timothy*, p. 423). It includes the power to speak forthrightly of conditions in both Church and society. In a time of widespread secularization, when the Church is becoming more and more alien to this world, this insightful gift of the Spirit is vital in preventing the faithful from being led away from the Gospel’s truth.

Moses was a member of the tribe of Levi (Ex 2:1-2), the clan of Israel that God set aside to serve in the tabernacle (Nm 1:53). Israel’s priestly caste traced its descent from Aaron, Moses’ brother (vss. 3:9-10), as did the Levites. Thus when the gift of the Spirit was bestowed upon elders from all twelve of Israel’s tribes, the Lord was revealing the intended relationship between God’s people and our bishops and priests. All members of the Body of Christ are to work with the clergy in carrying out the mission of the Church.

The case of Eldad and Medad is instructive. They did “not come to the tabernacle” for the induction of the seventy elders who serve on the Sanhedrin, the governing council of Israel, and yet the Holy Spirit also comes upon them (vs. 11:26). The holy wisdom imparted to the Church by the Spirit is not confined to our seminaries! Many among the faithful become well grounded in the faith through worship, prayer, and spiritual asceticism.

Finally, the Holy Spirit assists the Church in every administrative task, distributing light and wisdom to clergy and laity alike. Although the seventy elders did not become priests, they nevertheless helped Moses “bear the wrath of the people” in the other aspects of governance (vs. 17).

*O Christ our God, send upon Thy People the Comforter, who is Thy Spirit and the Spirit of the Father, that in Him we may be strengthened to serve Thee worthily before the world.* – Canon of Pentecost

**June 13 – Monday of the First Week after Pentecost**  
**Second Reading at Vespers for Pentecost – Joel 2:23-3:5**

**Recompense: Joel 2:23-3:5, especially vs. 2:** “*And in those days I shall pour out My Spirit on My servants and on My handmaids.*” The Prophet Joel foretells an outpouring of the Spirit of God. Centuries later, the Apostle Peter declares its arrival: “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). We are living in the days that Joel foresaw: days “which the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad therein” (Ps 117:24). God has endowed us “with the seal of the Spirit” (baptismal prayer of ablution). Indeed, “we have received the heavenly Spirit . . . for He hath saved us” (post-communion hymn). Consider the wonder of this fulfillment, which is cause for rejoicing and gladness as “children of Zion” (Joel 2:23)! “This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps 117:23).

Over the years of our lives, “the grasshopper and the locust . . . the blight and the caterpillar,” i.e., our sins, “have eaten” away at our spiritual vitality (Joel 2:25). Stripping life from our hearts and souls, this devouring horde comes upon us like a “great army,” eating up our joy, peace, and purity. The Lord allows these consequences to come upon us as a result of our wrongdoings and transgressions.

But let us be clear: we allow this swarm to eat up the spiritual food that God would give us. Yet at this very moment the Lord Jesus Christ, who fully assumed our humanity, has prepared a place for us at His heavenly banquet table. After all, we have potential to enjoy life as His own sons and daughters. He longs for us to come home to Him like awakened prodigals, as penitent children. Come, let us “eat abundantly and be satisfied and . . . praise the name of the Lord [our] God for what He has so wondrously done unto [us]” (vs. 26).

What has God done? In the Divine Liturgy, Saint John Chrysostom reminds us that He did not “cease to do all things until” He had “brought us up to heaven, and . . . endowed us with [His] Kingdom which is to come.” God Himself took flesh from the Virgin. The Son of God “Himself has suffered, being tempted . . . to aid those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). And what is more, He is “food indeed” to us, His People – the “bread which came down from heaven” that we may eat and “live forever” (Jn 6:55,58).

Consider the present condition of our life in Christ. As members of the Church of the Living God, when we confess our sins, the Lord removes our *shame forever* (Joel 2:26). Listen to Him: “Know that I am in the midst of Israel; that I am the Lord your God” (vs. 27). He showers us with “the early and the late rain” (vs. 23) of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we pray to a *good* God, asking Him during the anaphora to “send down Thy Holy Spirit upon *us* and upon these *gifts*.” Do we imagine that He does not honor the prayers of His beloved? The Holy Spirit indeed falls upon us to fulfill “the Kingdom of Heaven unto boldness” toward our God. The Lord truly means to “restore to [us] the years . . . the grasshopper and the locust have eaten” (vs. 25).

Children of Zion, let us “be glad and rejoice” (vs. 23), casting the shame of our sins into the oblivion of His mercy and forgiveness; let us “dream dreams, and . . . see visions” of what God can work among us (vs. 3:1). Let us never hesitate to “call upon the name of the Lord” that we may be saved, “for in Mount Zion and Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord Himself said” (vs. 5). Never forget that “He Who rose again from the dead, Christ our true God. . . [has] mercy on us and [saves] us, forasmuch as He is good and loveth mankind” (dismissal prayer).

*May the blessing of the Lord and His mercy come upon us through His grace and love toward mankind, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.* – Priest’s Prayer

**June 14 – Tuesday of the First Week after Pentecost**  
**Third Reading at Vespers for Pentecost – Ezekiel 36:24-28**

**Coming Home: Ezekiel 36:24-28, especially vs. 24:** “For I will take you from among the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your land.” The longing of Jews around the world for a permanent homeland is partly a result of the prophetic work of Ezekiel, who ended his life in exile in Babylon. The modern Zionist movement arose in the mid-nineteenth century and sought to secure land for Jewish settlers in Palestine. At first, Zionists did little more than establish a few isolated Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine. After the area became a British mandate, however, more land was purchased and immigration increased. From 1929 to 1936, protests by Palestinian Arabs – Christians and Muslims alike – led to the idea of partition. After World War II and two local wars, Israel gained full statehood. Large-scale immigration followed and ethnic tensions only increased.

How then do Orthodox Christians, who are the New Israel, the true people of God, understand Ezekiel’s prophecy? How do we interpret “bring you into your land” (vs. 24) when we are a worldwide people who in many lands? Although the first and last verses of this prophecy speak of *land*, the prophecy is primarily concerned with God’s promise to transform the hearts of His people by the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit in our hearts is what enables us to “walk in [His] requirements . . . keep [His] judgments and . . . be [His] People” (vss. 27-28).

The prayer “O Heavenly King” begins many of our Orthodox services, declaring that the Holy Spirit is “everywhere present and fillest all things.” Every land falls under the sovereignty of God; nothing lies beyond His rule and providence. Wherever we are *is* the Lord’s land, requiring us to seek the infilling of the Spirit and endeavor to follow and observe God’s gracious governance. Above all, we understand that all *land* lies within the Kingdom of God, which is “not of this world” (Jn 18:36). We enter its boundaries of this kingdom when we gather as Church.

When we are assembled as His people, the Spirit is known to “come and dwell in us and cleanse us of every stain of sin,” as the prayer further reveals. In fact, if He does not *cleanse us* and *dwell in us*, we are not the Church. His renewing and purifying work becomes most evident in the mystery of baptism, for thereby God bestows upon us “a new birth through water and the Spirit.” By His action we are enabled to cast off idols and false gods that pollute our hearts and separate us from God, leaving us to grope blindly in the kingdom of aliens.

The sacraments received in the Church are the means by which God gives us a heart of flesh and puts His Spirit within us (Ez 36:26-27). This is why, at every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, we pray the Lord to “send down Thy Holy Spirit” – not only on the “gifts here spread forth” but also “upon us. . . unto communion of the Thy Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven, unto boldness toward Thee, and not unto judgment or unto condemnation.” Only in this way can we “keep [Your] judgments and do them” (vs. 27).

While the Jews still seek to establish their “own land” here on earth by means of human strength, we are blessed to know the kingdom within our hearts where God rules, now and ever. We are enabled by the power of the Spirit to “dwell in the land [God] gave to [our] fathers,” for we are His people and He is our God (vs. 28).

*All-Holy Spirit, issuing from the Father and coming through the Son upon us, save and sanctify all those who know Thee as God, Life, and Life-giver. – Verses of Pentecost*

## June 5 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 4:15-24

**Idolatry: Deuteronomy 4:15-24, especially vss. 15-16:** “So be careful to guard your souls, for you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb on the mountain from the midst of the fire. Do not act lawlessly and make for yourselves a carved form of any image. . . .” A fine parallel exists between Moses’ teaching in the present reading and the doctrine of Saint Paul in his epistle to the Romans. We begin our study of this parallel with the following digest from Romans 1: “Since the creation of the world, [God’s] invisible attributes are clearly seen . . . by the things that are made” (vs. 20). “Men . . . suppress the truth in unrighteousness (vs. 18). . . . Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful (vs. 21). . . . [but] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (vs. 25).

Both prophet and apostle start with the invisible nature of God, then trace the emergence of idolatry to its source: the acceptance of the corrupting lie that one can serve and worship creatures (Dt 4:16; Rom 1:25). Each one lists various physical entities (Dt 4:16-19; Rom 1:23) that may become objects of devotion in place of “the Lord [who] spoke to you at Horeb” (Dt 4:15) and “brought you out of . . . Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day” (vs. 20), “for the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (vs. 24).

Reverence for material things is in itself a healthy and natural movement of the heart and mind. “How magnified are Thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is filled with Thy creation” (Ps 103:26). Trouble begins when we “exchange of the truth of God for the lie” (Rom 1:25). Men start to believe that *creation holds supreme value* and deserves our highest reverence and devotion. Here we find the source of idolatry, that dead-end into which the devil constantly invites us. We see precisely what is wrong with the secular culture around us: a supreme devotion to and worship of material things to the exclusion of all else.

Today many secularists pride themselves on being free of religion. They naturally reject any devotion to deities in “the likeness of any cattle on the earth, or the likeness of any winged bird that flies under heaven, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, or the likeness of any fish in the waters beneath the earth” (Dt 4:17-18). How could people “worship them, and serve them” (vs. 19)? Note, however, that the kernel of the problem lies in the service of “the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25), which is *the* central error of secularism.

The Apostle Paul continues his teaching by linking the service of things to mankind’s capture by “vile passions” (vs. 26). For example, “women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another” (vss. 26-27). There is a predictable connection between serving things, rather than God, and living a life of moral decadence. Moses cautions his people against troubles of this very sort by using examples of the debaucheries of the cult of the Baal Peor (Dt 4:3).

God’s prophet calls us to worship the unseen, invisible, and ever-present Lord and God who acts for His people in time and history, who takes us to be His own and brings us forth “out of the iron furnace [of our passions], from Egypt [the mindset of worshiping things], to be His people, an inheritance” (vs. 20). We must ask ourselves how it is that we have come to “despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering” (Rom 2:4) in order to serve material goals as our first love, so as to set even God aside?

*Receive me, a slave to pleasures, O Fountain of life that takest away the sin of the world.* – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

## June 16 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 4:25-31

**A Merciful God: Deuteronomy 4:25-31, especially vs. 31:** “For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not forsake you nor annihilate you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers, which He swore to them.” The Prophet Moses seeks to convince God’s people of the dangers of idolatry, continuing his emphasis on this theme in the following passage: “You will be utterly destroyed from the land you are crossing over the Jordan to inherit. You will not live long on it but will be utterly annihilated” (vs. 26). Let us follow the great prophet as he reviews this problem.

First Moses qualifies his pronouncement of God’s judgment: *if* the people “act lawlessly and make a carved form of anything and do evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke Him to anger” (vs. 25), then consequences will follow. He assumes that we enjoy the freedom to choose to serve material things, or to refrain from idolatry. The goal of possessing the land of our heart remains conditioned on obedience, i.e., being “utterly annihilated” (vs. 26).

Note, however, that the tenor of his speech changes in verse 27. If we read over the whole passage again, we see that the great Lawgiver departs from the conditional framework he invokes at the beginning, when he tentatively declares God’s judgment. Now he speaks prophetically, declaring what actually will take place: “The Lord will scatter you among all the nations, and you will be left few in number among the nations” (vs. 27), serving “different gods, the works of men’s hands, wood and stone” (vs. 28), until at last “you will seek the Lord your God” (vs. 29). What he first states as *possible*, he now declares as *prophecy*, for he knows our proclivity to sin and self-indulgence!

Now Moses once again speaks conditionally: “You will find Him when you seek Him with all your heart and with all soul in your tribulation” (vs. 29). God is near when we repent, and so Moses again reverts to prophecy: “All these words will find you at the end of days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey His voice” (vs. 30).

By shifting from conditional statements to prophecy, Moses encapsulates the future of the people of the Old Covenant. Human history is predictable, because we human beings are sinners who constantly provoke the wrath of God. At times ancient Israel indeed sought and found the God who is *merciful* (vs. 31). But a dismal forecast *includes* a proclamation of the Lord’s mercy.

Take careful note when Moses declares God’s mercy. We Orthodox Christians, as the successors of ancient Israel, cannot expect to escape God’s punishment when we sin. The Lord allows us to experience the consequences of our actions. Who can say with complete certainty that the fall of Byzantium did not come upon the Orthodox Christian empire, at least in some measure, as a judgment from God? Who can say with utter confidence that the terrible atheistic yoke that fell over many of the Orthodox countries of Europe did not contain within it an element of divine justice? Lord have mercy!

By all means we should hearken to the Prophet Moses, who tells us that when “all these words will find you at the end of days” (vs. 30), we are to “seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him” (vs. 29). We should definitely place our hope in finding God despite our terrible shortcomings and sins! Moses is a prophet for all generations. He assures us that we may expect to *find* God, “for the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not forsake you nor annihilate you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers” (vs. 31). His words resonate with the teaching of the apostles and the Church: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9).

*Have mercy on us, O God, according to Thy great goodness; hearken and have mercy.*

**June 17 – Friday – Kellia Reading - Deuteronomy 5:1-6, 16-33**

**Theophanies: Deuteronomy 5:1-6, 16-33, especially vs. 24:** “Surely the Lord our God showed us His glory and His greatness, and we heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We saw this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives.” In these verses from Deuteronomy, the Prophet Moses reminds the people of God of the lasting importance of their forefathers’ encounter with the Lord at Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai, cf. Ex 19). Since that time, as a result, God’s people have sung this verse: “God is the Lord, and hath appeared unto us” (Ps 117:26).

What the prophet records, especially concerning Sinai, is a true appearance of God: a *face to face* meeting that includes spoken words, covenanting actions, moral demands, and evocations of dread along with consuming fire. This encounter kindled a longing for divine guidance. Orthodox Christians call such divine events a *theophany* or “appearance of God.”

All true theophanies are meetings of created persons with God’s Person. In the ancient Hebrew version of this passage, the encounter between God and His people is clearly revealed as *face to face*. Not only is God’s attention directed toward them, but they find that God is present to them. It is a relationship of *I and thou*: God is the *I am* and they are *in* His image. The Israelites do not physically see God, for He is shrouded in fire, cloud, and thick darkness (Dt 5:4), yet without a doubt they indeed come *face to face* with the One who speaks and makes known His will, demands, and purposes: God as Person.

To meet God is to hear words that burn away and consume our puny objections, resistance, and confusion. Moses reminds the ancient people of God that “the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (vs. 4:24). Likewise, the Apostle Paul teaches us as persons pledged to the Christ our Lord that “our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

God indeed reveals Himself that He may covenant with us (Dt 5:2), establishing an eternally binding set of terms by which we shall be His people and He shall be our God. Moses emphasizes the personal nature of this bond: “The Lord did not make this covenant with your fathers, but with you, all of you alive here today” (vs. 3). Today, in the same manner, the Lord Jesus Christ says: “Drink of this, all of you. This is My Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins” (*Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*; see Mt 26:27, 28).

Every covenant lists terms to which the participating parties must commit – and God’s terms always come with moral content. In every true theophany, however, the ethical demands that apply to all men, at all times, and in all places. The six commandments included in this reading are universal social requirements that apply to all men in all the world (Dt 16-21). (The other four commandments – verses 6-15 – are included in the vesperal reading for the first Saturday of Great Lent).

Theophanies evoke reverential dread. The meeting at Sinai that Moses describes is marked by a holy fear deep within God’s people, who say: “If we continue to hear the voice of the Lord our God anymore, we shall die” (vs. 25).

A true theophany is *dread-full* and awe-inspiring. It evokes the desire for an intermediary between God and those to whom He appears. Peter, recognizing Christ as God, cries, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8). The people beg Moses, “You go near and hear whatever the Lord our God may say and tell us whatever the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it” (Dt 5:27).

Theophanies are appearances of the Life-giving God who reveals Himself to men as an infallible guide for living *well*, showing us how to possess “the land [we] are to inherit” (vs. 33) – the kingdom within that He offers to us.

*Today the darkness of the world vanisheth with the appearance of our God. Great art Thou, O Lord, and wondrous art Thy works, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders.* – Great Blessing of the Waters

## June 18 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 6:1-9

**With All Our Heart: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, especially vss. 4-5:** “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart, from your whole soul, and from your whole power.” The first ten words of this quotation are called the *Shema*, which is the best-known line of Scripture among devout Jews. They form a principal liturgical text of synagogue worship, and in Hebrew can be rendered using just five words: “Lord our God Lord *echad*.”

The final Hebrew word, *echad*, has at least three meanings: *one*, *alone*, and *unique*. Because of these multiple meanings (and because Hebrew has no present tense form of the verb “to be”), there are many possible translations of the *Shema*, all of which are implied in the Hebrew. A contemporary rabbinic scholar offers this translation: “The Lord is our God, and the Lord alone; the Lord is our God, one indivisible Lord; the Lord our God is a unique Lord; the Lord is our God, the Lord is unique” (Plaut, *The Torah*, p. 1369). This same scholar calls the *Shema* “a precious gem, in that the light of faith made its words sparkle with rich brilliance of varied colors.”

For Christians verse 5, the second half of the Deuteronomy passage quoted above, is even better known since it occurs in two Gospel passages in different forms (see Mt 22:37 and Lk 10:27). The important point, when comparing all of these versions, is this: love for God is enjoined on His people, Jew and Christian alike, and this love is to be actively expressed through *tangible behavior*. Hence when Saint Luke quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, the passage serves as the prelude to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) – a story that demonstrates how love for God is to be expressed to others in a tangible way.

Crucial to a correct application of the *Shema* and the great commandment to love is the verse that follows: “These words I command you today shall be in your heart and in your soul” (Dt 6:6). The logic of God’s word dictates that “the love of God without obedience is not love” (Wright, *Interpreter’s Bible* vol. 2, p. 373). God surely expects us to act upon His commands. Thus the Lord is requiring from us a *heart-centered*, continuous awareness of His commandments. If the love of God is truly established within our hearts and souls, it will surely lead us to obey God’s commandment to *love your neighbor as yourself* (Lv 19:18; Lk 10:27).

Consider these thoughts from another Jewish scholar, which are in the tradition of the Lord Jesus’ teaching: “Of course, love cannot be commanded. No third party can command it nor extort it. No third party can, but the Divine One is able. The commandment to love can only proceed from the mouth of the Lover. Only the Lover can and does say: Love Me! – and He really does so. In His mouth the commandment to love is not a strange, alien word or commandment; it is none other than the voice of Love Himself!” (*The Torah*, p. 1374-5). Yes, so Christ appeals to us with the voice of love.

Finally, how shall we Orthodox Christians fulfill the prophetic demand to teach the Lord’s commandments “to your sons, and . . . talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way” (Dt 6:7)? If these words are spoken from our hearts, then they will most certainly be communicated to our children in a manner that will make a difference, *heart to heart*. Only in this way can God’s commands be conveyed with pure and lasting result. Only words from the heart can enter another heart and become established there. Otherwise, our discussion of God’s commandments will be merely “head talk” and will not enable our children to embrace the words of life.

*May the saying of my mouth be unto Thy good pleasure, and the meditation of my heart be before Thee for ever, O Lord, my helper and redeemer. – Psalm 18:14*

## June 19 – First Reading at Vespers for the Sunday of All Saints – Isaiah 43:9-14, Tone 8

**God's Testimony: Isaiah 43:9-14, especially vs. 12:** “*I proclaimed, and I saved. I denounced foreign gods so there were none among you. You are My witnesses, and I am a witness,*’ says the Lord God.” Today’s passage from Isaiah begins with a universal statement that embraces all mankind: “All the nations are gathered together” (vs. 9). When in history was such a circumstance true? Is this a prophecy of a situation that will yet come to pass in the future? Close scrutiny suggests that this gathering of the nations is not a *future* condition, for the burden of the passage as a whole speaks of a *present* circumstance. This prophecy of Isaiah, in fact, is true in the present day.

First of all, God names us as His *witnesses*, calling us to testify that He alone is God and that “before Me there was no other” (vss. 10-11). If anyone doubts that God is speaking of a present situation, the Lord makes clear that what He did in the past – “I proclaimed, and I saved I denounced foreign gods” (vs. 12) – establishes a solid set of facts for all ages: He alone is God among all peoples, the Only Existing One. Then the Lord records His actions up to the present, actions carried to their conclusion despite every opposition (vs. 13). He *redeems* and liberates the captives, and even binds their captors (vs. 14).

Let us return now to the initial question: where, in this present, are *all the nations* gathered? Theodoret of Cyrillus explains that it is the Church that “has gathered all (the nations), and from these nations themselves also have come the heads of the Church. So we see . . . the fulfillment of this prophecy: for Syrians are the leaders of the Syrians, Cicilians of the Cicilians, Romans of the Romans, and barbarians of the barbarians” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 635). All nations are gathered in the Church, through all of time.

The beauty of this divine declaration is that God not only directs the Church to testify, but also offers Himself and His *Servant*, Christ our Savior, as fellow witnesses (vs. 10). How can we hesitate to stand up for God’s truth alongside such unimpeachable Witness? Theodoret notes that “in the course of a conversation with the Jews, Christ our Master declared: ‘It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who has sent Me bears witness of Me’ (Jn 8:17-18). This is true here likewise: ‘I am a witness,’ says the Lord God, and My Servant whom I chose” [Is 43:10] (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 636).

Hear God’s testimony then: “I am God, and besides Me there is no one who saves” (vs. 11). The Lord is Savior: salvation is inherent in the universe, in the process of history, and in your life and mine. This fact remains true despite the disruptions caused by sin, satanic interference, and even death – all the universal contradictions that trouble human activity. Hear Him, for God Himself embraced death and once and for all revealed Himself as Savior over death. All the malignancy that opposes God the Life-giver is despoiled and exposed as a fraud.

God’s testimony is urgently important for every human being, for the truth of His witness is attested by a long and historically validated record. He saved Joseph from an inescapable pit (Gn 37), Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex 1-15), the Jews from exile (2 Ez 1), and a small, helpless Infant from genocide in the city of Bethlehem (Mt 1:13-23). The crucified Savior Himself rose from the tomb.

If anyone detects a stirring, an awakening, an illumination of heart and soul when this testimony is considered, then let him acknowledge that its source is from God. God stirs men to flee the despair that weighs down so many in today’s world (Is 43:14).

*Stir up, O Lord, Thy faithful people to bring forth a true, life-giving witness unto Thee.*

## June 20 – Monday – Second Reading at Vespers for All Saints – Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

**The Saints' Appearance:** *Wisdom 3:1-9, especially vs. 7:* “In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and they will run about like sparks through straw.” At the time of their repose, the Lord visited the saints who now shine forth from the Kingdom of God. “Great kindness [was] shown them, for God tested them and found them worthy of Himself” (vs. 5). The Church merely acknowledges what God has already made apparent by glorifying His holy ones. Here on earth the faithful cease to pray *for* the saints, as we do for our other beloved departed, and instead honor them and seek their intercessions. Knowing that the saints are found worthy in God’s eyes, we turn to them in our necessity as to ones who enjoy privilege with Him. Their prayers run like *sparks* to the Lord, igniting His grace and kindling the stubble of our lives no matter how hopeless our situation may appear.

Outwardly the lives of the saints surely seemed wasted or frivolous to the torturers and scoffers of their day, but in truth their hearts and souls remained firmly “in the hand of God” (vs. 1). No torment ever touched them, although “in the eyes of the undiscerning they seemed to have died, and their departure was considered to be misfortune, and their passage from us to be their destruction” (vss. 2-3). The saints burned with the Lord’s love: they consumed the dried grass of arrogant error and “bridled the mouths of beasts with their own befitting supplications; and, being beheaded, they themselves beheaded all the hosts of the enemy” (Great Vespers for the Sunday of All Saints). The lives of the saints reveal that our present reality is nothing but smoke and vapor, “for though in man’s view they were punished, their hope is full of immortality” (vs. 4). Do not be deceived, but praise Christ’s victors!

Of eternal moment is the manner in which the saints appear to God. Behold, He sees them as His own sons and daughters. Although it may appear that they were “chastened in a few things, great kindness will be shown them” (vs. 5). Having learned the true path from the Son of God who “Himself has suffered, being tempted” as a man (Heb 2:18), they became pillars “of the Church and the fulfillment of the Gospel” (Vespers for All Saints). Ore dug from the earth often appears to have little worth, but after it is smelted the metal and dross separate, allowing pure gold to appear. Thus it is with the saints. As a keen, observant craftsman of precious hearts, God knows which ore is fool’s gold and which is ready for refining heat.

The saints are made known to the faithful in various ways. We read the accounts of their lives and marvel at their endurance. We study and observe their feats of asceticism, martyrdom, and diligence that nourish “the perfection of believers.” After their departure for the heavenly kingdom, the saints perform miracles and aid their brethren here on earth, acting like the pre-dawn light of the sun that will soon blaze and illumine everything.

When the Lord returns, the saints will sit as judges over nations and peoples in the Kingdom of God. Consider Nicholas of Myra, Herman of Alaska, or Innocent of Moscow, called the Enlightener of North America: “They will judge nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord shall reign over them unto the ages. Those who trust in Him will understand the truth” of their lives (vss. 8-9). Today, the saints constantly seek from the Lord the gifts of devotion, piety, and well being for the lands in which the faithful still struggle for Christ.

*To Thee, O Lord, the universe offereth as first-fruits the divinity-bearing martyrs.* – Kontakion of All Saints

**June 21 – Tuesday – Third Reading at Vespers for All Saints – Wisdom of Solomon 5:15-6:3**

**Grace for the Saints: Wisdom 5:15-6:3, especially vs. 15-16:** “*But the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; and their care is by the Most High. Therefore, they shall receive a kingly dwelling of dignity and a crown of beauty from the hand of the Lord, because He will shelter them with His right hand and protect them with His arm.*” Leonid Ouspensky asserts “that an icon is an external expression of the transfigured state of man, of his sanctification by the uncreated divine light.”

He adds, “Therefore, all the visible world represented in the icon changes, becomes the image of the future unity of the whole creation – the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit. In accordance with this, all that is depicted in the icon reflects not the disorder of our sinful world, but divine order, peace, a realm governed not by earthly logic . . . but by divine grace” (*The Meaning of Icons*, p. 38, 40).

Today’s reading likewise centers attention first on the *righteous* (vs. 15) – that is to say, it begins with the saints. Its primary message is that “their care is by the Most High” (vs. 15), meaning that His grace and favor is poured out upon the Church and also upon all mankind.

What does Holy Scripture mean by calling the saints the “righteous”? Clearly this term refers to Peter’s love for the Lord (Jn 21:17), the joy of the myrrh-bearing women (Lk 24:1-12), and the abounding peace in the heart of Thomas when he cries, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). Yes, every fruit of the Spirit – “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22) – is manifested by the saints. All the visible work of God the Holy Spirit leads beyond the witness of the saints, which itself is beautiful, to the grace of God working within and for all mankind. This message flows from Solomon’s wisdom: God cares for everyone and acts with zeal on our behalf to remind us that the powers we enjoy derive from Him.

God cares for us with the same outpouring of grace that He showers upon the saints. Let us never hesitate to pray for a “kingly dwelling” (Wis 5:16) whenever we say, “Thy Kingdom come!” Let us never forget that the Lord our God raised us up again when we fell away, taking our flesh upon Himself and embracing death that He might destroy death. In short, He did not “cease to do all things until [He had] brought us back to heaven, and . . . endowed us with [His] Kingdom which is to come” (preface of the anaphora). Therefore, the same Lord extends a “crown of beauty” (vs. 16) to all: a wreath, covering, and protection.

The central portion of this passage describes the zeal with which God showers favor upon His people. The Orthodox Study Bible rendering of verses 17-18 aptly captures the meaning of the word *zeal* (*zalos*): “He will take His zeal as His full armor and will turn His creation into weapons against His enemies. He will wear righteousness as a breastplate and put on impartial judgment as a helmet.” As a result, even “creation will fight with Him against the senseless” (vs. 20).

Let the entire world – “kings,” “judges,” nations, leagues, and every human enterprise – recognize that we cannot place our trust in power, glory, and sovereignty alone, as if these qualities resulted from our own efforts (vss. 6:1-3). Every earthly ability, including the capacity to control and manage others, comes from God: “Power was given to you from the Lord, and your lordship from the Most High” (vs. 3). The grace given to the saints is available to all – be aware that God will “make a careful search of [our] works and . . . examine closely [our] plans” (vs. 3). May we be humble, gratefully confessing the Source of all our abilities.

*Rejoice in the Lord, O ye just: Praise becometh the upright. Alleluia!* – Hymn for the Feast of All Saints

**June 22 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 6:10-16, 20-25**

**The People of God: Deuteronomy 6:10-16, 20-25, especially vss. 21-22:** “We were servants of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; and the Lord set great and evil signs affecting Egypt, Pharaoh and his house before us.” When we declare, “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” what do we mean by the “Church”? What distinguishes these “people of God” who say that they belong to the Lord? Meditating on this mystery, Saint Maximos the Confessor remarks on the astonishing diversity within the Church: “For numerous and of almost infinite number are the men, women, and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by nationality and language, by customs and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and habits, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics, and connections” (*The Church’s Mystagogy*, p. 187).

What is it, then, that distinguishes Christians as a people? Given the diversity described by Saint Maximos, how is it that we can say we are “set apart” as people of God? In the present reading, the Prophet Moses addresses the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob concerning their formation as the ancient people of God. However, his words apply to Christians as well, for we are the successors of Israel. We claim the name *people of God* for we are, as Saint Maximos says, “reborn and recreated in the Spirit.”

In our reading of these verses, it is the physical Promised Land that at first appears to distinguish ancient Israel as the people of God: “The Lord your God brings you into the land He swore to your fathers ” (vs. 10). Moses emphasizes the cities, houses, household effects, cisterns, vineyards, and orchards that Israel is about to take by conquest – a vast property they did not develop (vs. 11). However, he is clear that these physical possessions are not what will constitute them as a people, in contrast to other conquering nations that immediately speak of any territory they invade as their “fatherland” or motherland.

The true distinguishing mark of Israel is the same mark that identifies the Church: We hold in remembrance the Lord our God “among” us (vs. 15) and “cling to Him and take oaths in His name” (vs. 13). The second-century *Letter to Diognetos* notes that “Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle. . . . They live in their own native land, but as aliens” (*Handbook to the History of Christianity*, p. 69).

The prophet stresses this fact concerning the people of Israel: “We were servants of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty arm” (vs. 21). Like ancient Israel, the Church gained its freedom by God’s hand, for He delivered us out of the hand of the enemy by “trampling down death by death.” What distinguishes both Israel and the Church as the people of God is the *freedom* created for and revealed in us by God, for “the Lord set great and evil signs” (vs. 22) against the sin and death (“Egypt”) that formerly enslaved us.

Like ancient Israel, we have a liberation to embrace and enjoy as the people of God. We have the freedom to serve the Lord our God because His service is perfect freedom. The Lord our God gives us His divine statutes and commandments, according to Moses, “that it may be well with us all our days, and we may live as today” (vs. 24). God’s commands are not oppressive, but for good. “Then we shall have mercy, if we are careful to do all these commandments ” (vs. 25).

*We pray Thee, O Lord, be mindful of Thy Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church to the ends of earth; and give peace unto Her whom Thou hast purchased with the Blood of Thy Christ.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

**June 23 – Thursday – Genesis 17:15-17, 19; 18:11-14; 21:1-8**  
**First Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Forerunner**

**Discerning God’s Presence: Genesis 17:15-17, 19; 18:11-14; 21:1-8, especially vs. 19:** “Then God said, ‘No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. . . .’” To hear the voice of God accurately, one must discern the Lord’s presence, recognize His hand in events, and thus receive great blessings. This passage from Genesis summarizes an intervention of God in the life of Abraham and Sarah. He changes her name to Sarah (vs. 15) and announces that the couple will have a son many years after the natural time of childbearing (vs. 19; 18:11-14). God brings about the birth of Isaac (vss. 21:1-3) and makes the godly couple a type of Zacharias and Elizabeth, parents of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John.

Through struggle, aided by grace from God, men and women can attain the state of the Fathers of the Church and live with God face to face. Although we are created for relationship with God, such intimacy is uncommon. Discernment is a lost capacity, for our lives are corrupted by sin and pride. Our noetic faculties are darkened and a direct encounter with God remains beyond our experience.

However, God manifests Himself to Abraham and Sarah, revealing that divine breakthroughs occur by His grace. Recall what happened to Saul: when the Lord Jesus met him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18), he was transformed into the Apostle Paul. He withdrew into seclusion, struggled to purify his heart, and emerged as one on fire in the Lord (Gal 1:17).

In truth, discernment comes from God as we struggle to purify our nous. Only then, according to Saint Maximos the Confessor, is the nous “divorced from ignorance and illumined by divine light.” As we act with the Lord for cleansing, our noetic faculty may be restored to its natural state.

Let us look closely at Abraham and Sarah, for important preconditions are present in the ancient couple. In them we observe a trust in God, obedience to His will, and a commitment to Him precede the discernment of God’s active presence in their lives.

Abraham’s *trust* in God is unquestioning. As the Church Fathers explain, when “Abraham fell on his face and laughed” (vs. 17), “he was not laughing because he did *not* take God at His word, but rejoicing *because he did*.” He is obedient (vs. 21:4) and humble in the joyful conviction that God will aid him in conceiving a child, an event that had never occurred during many years of married life. He “laughed, and said in his mind, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old?’” (vs. 18:17).

Saint John Climacus observes that “a believer is not one who thinks that God can do everything, but one who believes that he will obtain all things” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 27.68, p. 208). God overcomes doubt concerning His capacity to overcome barrenness of every kind, saying to Abraham “Is anything impossible with God? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son” (vs. 18:14).

From his earliest contact with God, Abraham remains obedient. “Now Lord once said to Abram, ‘Get out of your country. . . . I will bless you and make your name great’. . . . Then Abram departed as the Lord said to him” (vs. 12:1-2,4). A like obedience is evident when “Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as *God commanded him*” (vs. 21:4).

Indeed, Abraham and Sarah exemplify Saint John Climacus’ words: “Holy humility obtains from God the power to bear fruit thirty-fold, sixty-fold and a hundredfold” (*Ladder* 25.49, p. 158). “And Sarah said, ‘God has made me laugh; all who hear will laugh with me’” (vs. 21:6).

*Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory, to Thy great glory.* – Psalm 113:9

**June 24 – Friday – Judges 13:2-8, 13-14, 17-18, 21**

**Second Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Forerunner**

**Child of the Light: Judges 13:2-8, 13-14, 17-18, 21, especially vs. 5:** “For behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” The conception and birth of Samson foreshadow the nativity of the Forerunner and Baptist John. This is evident in the nearly identical commands received from the angel of the Lord by the wife of Manoah and by Zacharias, the father of the Forerunner: “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15).

However, there is yet another foreshadowing in the Judges account that challenges every baptized Christian to “prove himself a child of the Light.” In all three instances – with Manoah’s wife, with Zacharias, and with each of us – godly *caution* is central. Sampson’s mother is told “be careful,” for she is carrying a child dedicated to God (Jgs 13:13-14). Likewise, Zacharias must ensure that the child John should “drink neither wine nor strong drink . . . even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15). And when a person is baptized, the Church prays “that he may prove himself a child of the Light” (Service of Baptism).

This image of proving oneself a *child of the Light* draws attention to the process by which the members of the Church engage in a common work. The Body of Christ labors with its new member and aids each one in realizing the potential of holy baptism. The baptismal waters are like a birth, after which nurture, training, growth, correction, and guidance must occur to form us into what we are meant to be: children of the Light. Christ is the Light; God is our Father; the Church is our mother. Baptism opens the door to becoming a healthy member of Christ’s kingdom. Each of us receives a trust – light and life are implanted within to be actualized. As God is not stingy with His grace, let us never squander His inheritance “with prodigal living” (Lk 15:13).

“The Angel of the Lord appeared to the woman” (Jgs 13:3) and to Manoah *at prayer* (vss. 8, 13). How much more are we blessed, for God yokes “a radiant angel” to each of us as a guardian, guide, and deliverer “from every snare of the adversary, from encounter with evil, from the demon of the noonday, and from evil visions” (Prayer to the Guardian Angel). Our guardian angel does not leave us like the angel who “appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife” (vs. 21). God gives us our guardian angel for life; we ought not make him weep over our failures in realizing the life in Christ that is ours. We pray to our guardian angel for protection from “all influence of the evil one” and “for the grace of the All-holy Trinity.”

The angel gives Manoah and his wife a strict commandment not to “eat anything unclean” (vss. 4, 14). Have we received any less of a commandment? Let us avoid the pollutions of this world, refusing to swallow a host of foul teachings hook, line, and sinker. Study what the Lord Jesus counsels and the Church Fathers teach. Then Christ Himself will “have [us] sit down to eat, and will come and serve [us]” (Lk 12:37) the very Bread of heaven!

The child Sampson matures to great strength because his parents obey all that the angel told them (Jgs 13:23). Every day we are lured away from Christ and tempted to wallow in the mindless pleasures of this age. No! Like Christ, let us grow perfect through obedience and suffering, for He gives salvation “to all who obey him” (Heb 5:9).

*Establish me in the path of Thy commandments unto my last breath, and let me not stray from the light of Thine ordinances as the law of my being, O Christ, Thou Giver of Life.* –Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*

**June 25 – Saturday – Isaiah 40:1-5, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1**

**Third Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Forerunner**

**Doing Our Part: Isaiah 40:1-3, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1, especially vs. 48:20:** “Go forth from Babylon, you who are fleeing from the Chaldeans.” Commenting on these verses, Theodoret of Cyrrhus says “it is worthwhile to admire the kindness of the Master . . . because He is good and His compassion is unfathomable, and. . . because He tempers His justice with infinite mercy” (Manley, *Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 571). Isaiah’s verses are rich with imagery that reminds us of God’s active love for His people. He comforts, brings glad tidings, hears and does not forsake, slakes thirst, pours out righteousness, and showers with fruitfulness. All these blessings come from the Lord’s bountiful grace and goodness, showered on Israel, on His People – on us, His Church!

When we meditate on these verses, we discover three layers in God’s blessings: 1) His love in action reaches our troubled condition; 2) He puts away our sins despite the array of our unworthy, shameful deeds (vs. 40:2); and 3) He permits degradation to come upon us for our sins, even as He responds with mercy and forgiveness. He requires us to do our part to actualize His abundant love within us and through us. His divine acts are truly remarkable and encouraging, especially when we heed them and respond diligently to Him!

Our many sins, along with the dreadful consequences that follow from them, impoverish our hearts. Observe, however, the promise of the God who loves us: “The poor and needy shall rejoice exceedingly” (vs. 41:17). Jesus likewise teaches us that the poor in spirit are blessed, that the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs (Mt 5:3)! Isaiah understands that God provides what His people need, and lavishly (vss. 17-18). However, God expects that those who sin will be left “parched with thirst” to “seek water” even when none is apparent (vs. 17). Yet the Lord Jesus teaches us to seek until we find (Mt 7:7). Saint Seraphim instructs us that “to receive and behold in the heart the light of Christ, [we] must, as far as possible, divert [our] attention away from visible objects” so that we may repent (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 50).

Truly we are in “bondage to the elements of the world” (Gal 4:3) and exiled from paradise. Our passions are the “Babylon” and “Chaldeans” that hold us captive, and yet “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The Prophet Isaiah prepares us for the grace that we know in Christ, for “the Lord delivered His servant Jacob” (Is 48:20).

The sacrament of chrismation proclaims that we “are illumined. [We] have received anointment with Holy Chrism. [We] are sanctified. [We] are washed: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” “Proclaim a voice of gladness and let it become well known. . . . to the end of the earth” (vs. 48:20). Even as He encourages us, God also commands: “Go forth from Babylon, you who are fleeing from the Chaldeans” (vs. 20). We are to flee slavery as Saint Antioch urges: “If we live in an alien city and our city is far from this city, and if we know our city: then why do we tarry in an alien city?” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 53). Let us turn and seek what is above (Col 3:1)!

Barrenness and sterility of body, soul, and spirit are all results of sin. However, God took our human flesh upon Himself in order to grapple with death, defeat it, and give us life. Theodoret of Cyrrhus says it plainly: “The true consolation, the genuine comfort, and the real deliverance from the iniquities of men is the Incarnation of our God and Savior.” Let us “break forth and cry out” (Is 54:1). God aids us in Christ, and we are to heed His command. “Spread out further to the right and the left, and your seed shall inherit the Gentiles” (vs. 54:3).

*I am encompassed in the deep of sins, O Savior, and drowned in the tempest of this life. But as Thou raised Jonah from the belly of the whale, so draw me out of passion and save me.* – Canon of the Prodigal Son

**June 26 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 16-26, Tone 1**

**Precept and Promise: Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 16-26, especially vs. 1-2:** “Now if the Lord your God brings you into the land you go to inherit and casts out great nations before your face . . . seven nations greater and mightier than you, and . . . delivers them into your hands, you shall strike and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy.” In light of this passage, might we not be moved to enlarge our vesperal petition to read: “O Holy One, enlighten me with thy statutes *and promises*.” For even as the Lord our God obligates us with precepts – expecting us, as His covenant people, to act upon His commands – even so He promises to give us “all the spoils of the nations” (Dt 7:16).

For our present age, stained with the cruel horrors of genocide across the globe, this portion of Moses’ last will and testament conjures up images that make us hesitate to read these divine words, let alone seek out a foreshadowing of the glorious gospel of Christ our God. Nevertheless, the pattern of divine precept and promise that dominates these verses calls the careful reader to obedient action – to become a true partner with God in salvation of his soul and of the whole world. Remember that the land we are going to possess is the vast battlefield *of our hearts*, where God has promised to cast “out great nations before your face” (vs. 1).

If we seriously delve into the inner *zone of danger*, of battle and promise, we discover that the spiritual space which “[our] eyes saw” (vs. 19) is guided by “the mighty hand and outstretched arm by which the Lord your God brought you out” (vs. 19) of spiritual death. Yes, there are deadly foes there but more importantly our living God, who promises the faithful that He “will consume those nations before you” (vs. 22). Be not dismayed, O people of God, for steadfast and able is He who laid these precepts upon us and made unchangeable promises that He will fulfill.

What does He promise? He assures us that He will bring His Church “into the land” and remove great nations of enemies “before your face” (vs. 1), then “deliver them into your hands” (vs. 23). Where is this land? As He has said, “the Kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:21). We recoil at the enemies we encounter within us, fiends who would tear us away from the Lord, but we heed His promises: “The Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left, who hide themselves from you, are destroyed” (Dt 7:20). The nests of evils within us can be destroyed.

Naturally we hesitate to join the battle out of fear being wounded in combat. We know our frailty, having been stricken in prior skirmishes. We have seen loved ones fall. God understands this, but He assures us: “You shall not be terrified of their face; for the Lord your God is among you, a great and powerful God” (vs. 21). God is with us! Yes, we would prefer a quick, easy victory, but when He promises us that we shall prevail, the Lord also tells us honestly how *He* plans to destroy those enemies: “The Lord your God will consume those nations before you little by little; you will be unable to destroy them at once” (vs. 22). The victory belongs to Christ, not to us.

God’s precepts are key to this victory. As we turn inward in prayer, we strike our foes and “make no covenant with them” (vs. 2). Let us rather “destroy them” (vs. 24), burning up every image that intrudes into our hearts and minds (vs. 25). We are called to resist the temptation to give these abominations of the enemy a place in our minds and hearts. Dethrone these rulers, refuse their sovereignty over your soul (vs. 26)! Christ is Lord and Victor over all.

*Be Thou exalted above the heavens, O God, and Thy glory above all the earth. That Thy beloved ones may be delivered, save Thou with Thy right hand and hearken unto us. – Ps 107:5-6.*

## June 27 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 7:6-13

**God's Love: Deuteronomy 7:6-13, especially vs. 9:** “Therefore know, the Lord your God, this God, is a faithful God, who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.” The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals an amazing God to our bewildered hearts, for He is ever offering light and love to us in place of the darkness of human thought.

According to Staretz Silouan, “Man of himself is powerless to fulfill God’s commandments, wherefore it is said, ‘Ask, and it shall be given you’ (Mt. 7:7). And we if we do not ask, we torment ourselves and deprive ourselves of the grace of the Holy Spirit; and without grace many things perplex the soul because she does not comprehend the will of God” (*Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 325).

God bears with us, giving us time to think through our choices, to look into His great well of kindness and consider His merciful heart. He wants us to think over our options in order that we may incline toward His way – the way we lost as a result of thoughts clouded by sin.

This present passage from Deuteronomy reveals God’s care in laying a rich foundation for His people, that they might readily receive His love. The Prophet Moses discerns and teaches that God’s love is freely given, conditioned neither by our worthiness nor by any claim we might make on the Lord. Moses further identifies a number of ways in which God has manifested His love to Israel over the generations. Yet the prophet also makes clear that, although God is loving to those who “keep His commandments” (vs. 9), He is “not . . . slack with those who hate Him” (vs. 10).

Moses plainly states that “the Lord your God chose you to be a people for Himself, special above all the nations on the face of the earth” (vs. 6). Lest any of God’s people conclude that their numbers were enough to command God’s love, the prophet clarifies that the nation’s size meant nothing in the eye of the Lord. After all, “the eyes of the Lord look over the whole earth” (2 Chr 16:9) and Israel is “the least of all the nations” (Dt 7:7). Very simply, according to Moses, “The Lord loves you, and . . . would keep the oath He swore to your fathers” (vs. 8). This declaration applies to the Church and to the present-day people of God as well. Therefore, as the Lord Jesus says to us, “*freely* you have received, *freely* give” (Mt 10:8).

Note how Moses recalls the long history during which God’s love was manifested before the eyes of ancient Israel. The Lord swore an *oath* to Abraham (Gn 15:13-16) that in a time to come He would bring his descendants out of bondage, and indeed Israel was redeemed from slavery under Pharaoh (Dt 7:8). The love of God is an expression of divine faithfulness: God keeps the vows He makes in covenant with His People (vs. 9). More significantly for the Church, God also promised a savior (Is 53:4-5). Christ, our Suffering Servant, came and dwelt among us and covered our sins with His precious Blood.

Finally, while God loves His people and is always ready to forgive them, Moses reveals that His steadfast love comes only to “those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Dt 7:9). The love of God never is detached from the expectation of obedience, hence the prophet’s reminder: “When you listen to all these ordinances and keep and do them” (vs. 12), then you shall know His mercy. God “repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them” (vs. 10), but “a faithful God . . . keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations” (vs. 9). “He will love you and bless and multiply you; He will also bless the offspring of your womb, and the fruit of your land” (vs. 13).

*O Lord, save Thy People, and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy People victory over all their enemies, and by the power of Thy Cross preserving Thine Estate.* – Feast of the Holy Cross

## June 28 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 8:1-10

**Expect Only Good From God: Deuteronomy 8:1-10, especially vs. 3:** “So He dealt harshly with you and weakened you with hunger, and fed you with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God man shall live.” Dionysios the Areopagite, reflecting on the nature of God, says, “Tis the whole Being of the Supernal Godhead (saith the Scripture) that the Absolute Goodness hath defined and revealed. For in what other sense may we take the words of Holy Writ when it tells us how the Godhead spake concerning Himself, and said: ‘Why asketh thou Me concerning the good? None is good save One, that is, God [Mk 10:18]’” (*The Divine Names* 2:1). Let us expect only the good from God and, at the same time, let us understand that He alone defines the good even as He gives what is best for us.

In this passage from Deuteronomy, the Prophet Moses reveals four things that the people of God may expect from the Lord: 1) He will humble us; 2) He will test us; 3) He will discipline us; and 4) He will bring us “into a good and great land” (vs. 7). Moses further reminds us that God gives us these gifts with the intention of evoking right thinking and wholesome actions from us.

The successful man of the world may object to the prophet’s proposal that humbling is God’s *good* gift to His beloved children. Yes, there is a painful, bitter side to being humbled, but notice what Moses reveals as God’s purpose in humbling us: “to know what was in [our] heart” (vs. 2). The Lord, of course, already knows what is in a man’s heart (Jn 2:25). He humbles us that He might help us find out what is inside our own heart. Once we determine whether or not we are inclined to keep His commandments, we can use this knowledge to cleanse everything that is unworthy of our Creator.

God tests us also, according to Moses (Dt 8:2) – and the prophet closely associates God’s testing of His people with His humbling of us. God does test and humble us not only that we might discern what is going on in our hearts, but also to teach us that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God” (vs. 3).

God tested ancient Israel by leading them into a desert devoid of food and shelter. In the barren Sinai wilderness, the Lord provided an unexpected food called manna, a source of nourishment Israel had never experienced before. Furthermore, He took care that the people’s clothing did not wear out (vs. 4). Testing and humbling are divinely provided as educational experiences that rouse our hearts to dependence on God. They heighten the acuity of our spiritual ears so that we become attentive to the word of God in all situations, in every temptation (Mt 4:3-4), and in every choice and decision.

We ought to expect discipline from the Lord as well if we are to grow in the capacity to walk in His ways and fear Him (Dt 8:6). We may experience discipline as punishment, but as long as it is received from the hand of the Lord – and we are not bitter or angry toward Him – it will guide us through the “narrow gate” and onto that “difficult . . . way which leads to life” (Mt 7:13-14).

Finally, God’s humbling, testing, and disciplining awaken us to the truth that He is bringing us into a “good land” (Dt 8:7). Moses spells out for Israel the evidence of the goodness of the Promised Land, so that they might remember (as we should also) to “bless the Lord [our] God for the good land He gave [us]” (vs. 10). The “good land” we expect in Christ, of course, is “not of this world” – a Kingdom rich in life.

*Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name: Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.* – Matthew 6:9-10

**June 29 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 9:7-17, 25-29**

**Intercession: Deuteronomy 9:7-17, 25-29, especially vs. 26:** “Therefore I prayed to God and said, ‘O Lord, O Lord, O King of the gods, do not destroy Your people and Your portion You redeemed through Your great strength . . . Your mighty hand, and Your outstretched arm.’” At the dismissal of Vespers or the Divine Liturgy, the priest prays: “May Christ our true God . . . have mercy on us and save us, forasmuch as He is good and loveth mankind.” We qualify this simple, basic petition with phrases such as “through the intercessions of His all-immaculate and all-blameless holy Mother; by the might of the precious and life-giving Cross; by the protection of the honorable bodiless powers of heaven; at the supplications of the honorable, glorious Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist John; of the holy, glorious and all-laudable apostles; of the holy, glorious and right-victorious martyrs; of our venerable and God-bearing fathers; of [the patron saint of the Church]; of the holy and righteous ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna; of [the saint of the day] whose memory we celebrate and of all the saints: have mercy on us and save us.”

The Church, as God’s people, relies on the saints to intercede with the Lord on our behalf for His mercy and salvation. Intercession can be traced back through history for thousands of years. The righteous Noah intercedes for all living things upon leaving the ark, for he “built an altar to God . . . and offered whole burnt offerings on the altar” (Gn 8:20). God responds to Noah with this promise, “I will never again curse the earth because of man’s works, although the mind of man is diligently involved with evil things from his youth, nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and spring shall not cease by day or by night” (Gn 8:21-22).

When God reveals to the Prophet Moses the sins of His people, the state of their souls, and their many needs, Moses becomes an intercessor. First the Lord directs Moses to “arise, go down quickly from here, for your people you have brought out of Egypt have acted lawlessly” (Dt 9:12). God alerts him to an evil situation that demands earnest prayer. When the prophet hastens down to see for himself, he finds that the people have “turned aside quickly from the way I commanded them” (vs. 12). Indeed, Moses discovers evidence the grievous sin of idolatry, for the Israelites have cast a “molten image” and are worshiping it (vs. 16). He turns directly to intercession and pleads for the people before the Lord (vs. 18).

Note that, when the Lord informs the prophet of this idolatry, He refers the Israelites as “*your* people” (vs. 12) instead of “*My* people.” The bond between God, ourselves, and the saints results from our union in Christ. Because they are joined to us in Christ, the saints know our needs and care for our welfare far more than we imagine. Nevertheless, we cut ourselves off from them – and from God – by our sins.

After Moses observes what is happening, he knows exactly what is required. He does not *think* what to do but rather, by a godly movement of his heart, he “prayed before the Lord; forty days and forty nights . . . because the Lord said He would destroy [them], therefore [he] prayed to God, and said, ‘O Lord, O Lord, O King of the gods, do not destroy Your people and Your portion You redeemed’” (vss. 25-26). The saints willingly and eagerly pray for us in our needs before the throne of God. Let us humbly, thankfully, and earnestly seek their aid.

*O protection of Christians, mediation unto the Creator most constant: be thou quick, O good one, to hasten to intercession and speed thou to make supplications, O Theotokos. – Prayer to the Theotokos*

## June 30 – Kellia Reading – Deuteronomy 10:1-5

**The Commandments: Deuteronomy 10:1-5, especially vs. 4:** “Then He wrote the Ten Commandments on the tablets according to the first writing which the Lord spoke to you in the mountain, from the midst of the fire; and the Lord gave them to me.” In this passage Moses recalls the Lord’s giving of the commandments on Mount Sinai, reminding us that we are blessed to possess “such ordinances and righteous judgments as are in all this law” (Dt 4:8). He urges each of us to “take heed to yourself and diligently guard your soul, lest you forget all the things your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart” (Dt 4:9). God puts His commandments before us in writing, in permanent physical form, as a blessing. He “speaks” to us in the commandments, and then, with the coming of Christ, He speaks by “the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart” (2 Cor 3:3).

God’s commandments are not an alien, external authority that enslaves us. As Saint Peter of Damascus explains, they are “natural knowledge given us by God, whether this comes through the Scriptures by human agency, or by means of the angel that is given in divine baptism to guard the soul of every believer, to act as his conscience and to remind him of the divine commandments of Christ” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 76). According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, the purpose of the commandments is to free “the intellect [nous] from dissipation and hatred, and to lead it to the love of Him and one’s neighbor” (*Phil.* vol. 2, p. 107).

Loving God is not simply “the first and great commandment” (Dt 6:5; Mt 22:36-37). It is the life-giving response of the believing heart, and thus transforms the commandments from burden to grace. Hence, as Saint Makarios of Egypt says, the “highest elements of our constitution – the intellect, the conscience, the loving power of the soul – must initially be offered to God as a holy sacrifice” (*Phil.* vol. 3, p. 290). “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word,” says the Lord Jesus, “and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (Jn 14:23). Loving God is the first and great *opportunity*.

When we love God above all else, His commandments become weapons that aid us in our unseen warfare, those incessant battles fought in and for the soul of every Christian. God’s statutes are lifelines from the Lord. Our merciful God foresees the demons’ intentions and the weakness of our flesh. He gives His embattled children the commandments in order to expose the demons and allow us to gain control over our passions. Saint Philotheos of Sinai assures us of the commandments’ effectiveness: “If with the Lord’s help through careful watchfulness you guard your nous from error and observe the attacks of the demons and their snares woven in fantasy, you will see from experience that this is the case” (*Phil.* vol. 3, p. 18).

We must keep in mind that there is a direct link between the commandments and our passions. Each commandment has a corresponding passion against which that commandment ensures defense and victory. The first four help us to oppose self-esteem, vainglory, and pride, so that we may take up our cross and be buried with Christ. The commandment against murder restrains anger (Mt 5:21-24), while that against adultery controls lust (vss. 5:27-28). We check avarice by obeying the commandment against stealing and covetousness, and avoid lying and the other evil impulses of the tongue by not giving false witness. May we, like Moses, take up these sacred commandments and, with the fear of God, place them in the holy ark of our hearts!

*Blessed art Thou, O Lord; teach me Thy statutes. Blessed art Thou, O Master; make me to understand Thy statutes. Blessed art Thou, O Holy One; enlighten me with Thy statutes.* – Doxology