

August 1 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Job 3:1-20

Anguish: Job 3:1-20, especially vs. 1-3: “After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed his day, saying: ‘May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which they said, “Behold a male child.”’” The first two chapters of the Book of Job are read during Holy Week. They introduce the character of the prophet, who is repeatedly called “true, blameless, righteous, and God-fearing” (Job 1:1). Now, as the third chapter opens, we confront the startling words quoted above.

Knowing what befell Job, we understand the anguished cries of his soul. And yet what he says seems out of character, for we have learned that “Job did not sin with his lips against God” (vs. 2:15). Now, he curses the day of his birth and his God-given life. Saint John Chrysostom raises the question: “What, then does this signify: ‘saying let the day perish in which I was born’?”

He continues: “It is also in his grief that Job spoke. Do you not see, beloved, that those who are injured pour out great cries? Do you blame them? Not at all; but we pardon them” (Manley, *Wisdom: Let Us Attend*, p. 75-77). A different interpretation is offered by Saint Hesychios of Jerusalem (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 78-86): “‘Let the day perish in which I was born’ . . . not the day on which he was made, but that on which he was born. . . . For God formed me (Gn 2:7) for the good, but Eve, who transgressed, has delivered me into trouble (Gn 3:16).”

What the two Fathers share is knowledge of humanity’s fallen state. Hence Saint John exclaims on behalf of the grievously tormented, including Job: “If they had not expressed themselves in this way, it would seem as if they do not participate in human nature.” One discerns in these words the voice of Paul the Apostle: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

Indeed, we may see Job as a partaker of this fallen world, corrupted like ourselves by a tragic ailment. But note that Saint Hesychios’ imagination is captured by the disclosure of the prophet as a true holy man, one swift to “trample underfoot the appetites of the passions and occupy [himself] fully with [the] soul.” What God made is good, but it is “an evil world . . . we have made for ourselves . . . which Job excoriated in his time, as he was godly and true and abstaining from evil.” Job is correct: “May *that* day and night be cursed” (Job 3:6).

For Saint Hesychios, Job addresses the sad state of all our affairs and the world that we make. Even as Job speaks of “day and night,” he prays, “May the Lord not regard it from above; nor may the light come upon it” (vs. 4). Were God to regard this day *from above*, His righteousness would necessarily bring destruction on all men. The night that Job terms *darkness* is “our enemy,” according to Hesychios, “and Christ is Light.” In this passage, Job is urging us to receive the Lord so as not to grope in the night.

According to Hesychios, when Job pleads “may it not come into the days of the year” (vs. 6), he is referring to “the evangelical time, during which the preaching of salvation is accomplished,” so that “the day of transgression should not be counted among the benefits given to us by the Savior. . . . Let the curse not spoil, even in part, the blessings which the Savior has vouchsafed us.” Rather, may every anguish we experience “be the cause of [our] conveyance into the [Kingdom] which has been prepared for [us].”

How then do we answer Job’s question, “Why is light given to those in bitterness, and life to souls in pain” (vs. 20)? Saint Hesychios answers: “To receive the image of God is happiness, but to linger in this impure life . . . is not desirable to the righteous.”

Grant me reverence, estrangement from evil, and perfect discipline, who am now drowned in the passions of the flesh, estranged from Thee, O Jesus, Savior of our souls. – Vespers of the First Sunday of Lent

August 2 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Job 4:1, 12-21

False Spirituality: Job 4:1, 12-21, especially vs. 12: “But if there had been any truth in your words, none of these evil would have befallen you. Shall not my ear receive extraordinary things from him?” When Job’s three friends “heard of all the evil things that had come upon him, each one came to him. . . . with one accord, to visit and comfort him” (Job 2:16). With due propriety, they perform all the formal gestures of grief: “They cried with a loud voice, and wept. Each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head” (Job 2:17). However, rather than consoling their friend with warmth and kind words, they sit with him in silence with him until, with profound prophetic insight, he “cursed his day” (3:1).

Saint John Chrysostom points out that these friends lack all natural human instincts required for consolation – Job is right to call them “dishonest physicians” (13:4). “Notice how their words are not only void of consolation, but ever cause profound discouragement and develop accusatory discourse at length” (Manley, *Wisdom: Let Us Attend*, p. 96). In this chapter and the next, Eliphaz the Temanite responds to Job after the prophet’s outpouring of pain. He thus exposes both the false nature of his spirituality and of his *friendship*.

First of all, Eliphaz addresses Job in an argumentative manner – and this to one in obvious pain and grief! The tenor of his speech is combative, evincing no sympathy for one he terms a friend. Where is his empathy and the warmth? Saint Hesychios notes that Eliphaz speaks “as if he wanted to topple this unshakable, strong, and firm tower,” rather than comforting a man battered by horrendous storms from the enemy. Hesychios notes that Job “simply . . . opened his mouth” (Job 3:1) while Eliphaz replies “in order to provoke a clash of words, in the same way as the Traitor replied to the Lord” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 97-8).

Eliphaz discloses his false spirituality by extolling his own intimacy with God: “Shall not my ear receive extraordinary things from him?” (vs. 4:12). Saint Hesychios asks: “Why does Eliphaz say these things? Perhaps he is recounting imaginations as visions that he has had in a dream. But for myself, fundamentally, I do not accept imaginations, but I protest so vehemently against such happenings that, with all my soul and all my body I am seized with fright, but I do not believe I have been affected by anything that has been said or that has happened” (*Wisdom*, p. 101). Saint Gregory the Great dismisses Eliphaz’ boasting, calling him one of those false holy men who “desire to appear objects of wonder for the loftiness of their instruction, so they pretend to be awed at the accounts which they make up” (*Wisdom*, p. 103).

Saint Hesychios continues, “Where is Eliphaz’ capacity to set aside his visions, revelations, and superior spirituality to embrace a flesh and blood brother in his pain and misery?” (*Wisdom*, p. 78) Is he not able to “weep with those who weep,” to “be of the same mind one toward another,” to “not set [the] mind on high things, but associate with the humble,” and to “be not wise in [his] own opinion” as the Apostle Paul would have us do?

Eliphaz’ spirituality is suspect because he favors speculation over compassion. Thus he dwells on the potential perversity of angels (vs. 18) and declares God so unfeeling toward men in their sins as to “smite them like a moth” (vs. 19) until “they no longer exist” (vs. 20). Where is the mercy that says to a friend in torment: “The Lord hear thee in the day of affliction; the name of the God of Jacob defend thee. Let Him send forth unto thee help from His sanctuary, and out of Zion let Him help thee” (Ps 19:1-2)?

O Lord, lead us deeper into the knowledge of ourselves, our world and of Thee, that we may be true interpreters of Thee to our fellow men, being ever humble in our own conceits.

August 3 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Job 5:8-18

False Spirituality, continued: Job 5:8-18, especially vs. 17: “But blessed is the man whom God corrects; therefore, do not reject the chastisement of the Almighty.” When we read the first part of Eliphaz’ speech (Job 4:1, 12-21), we heard some argumentative, self-confident advice that this *friend* of Job now offers. Today’s passage contains the second half of his counsel to Job; it shows him still aloof, lacking in comfort and heart-felt love. He exhibits the same false spirituality laced with insincerity that we have already observed.

In this fifth chapter of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite reveals smug self-assurance in his own godliness, a readiness to degrade Job’s spiritual life, and a blind confidence in his capacity to give advice – to a prophet of God! His comments bear the mark of one who has absorbed much from his religious culture and community, but who nevertheless does not know the living God. Unlike Job, Eliphaz knows nothing of what it means to struggle against the adversary through pain of heart and soul. Note that Eliphaz’ words sound *nearly* true, but his pious assertions are incongruent with the barbed comments aimed at the suffering Job.

His statement at the beginning of the reading is full of pride: “But surely as for me, I will beseech the Lord, and call upon the Lord and Master of all” (vs. 8). Compare this confident assertion with his degrading challenge to Job in verse 5:1: “But call out, if there is anyone who will obey you, or if you shall see any of the holy angels.” Stripped of the flowery verbiage, the two remarks express this sentiment: “Your prayer to God is futile, while I know He will hear my prayer.” Clearly, Eliphaz is akin to the Pharisee who “stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men’” (Lk 18:11).

Observe the self-glorification embedded throughout Eliphaz’ speech. He laces his verbal poison into many of the subsequent verses. Referring to God, he says, “He sets the lowly on high and raises up the lost” (vs. 11), implying that there is obviously something the matter with Job. He drives this point home repeatedly – God, he insists, “frustrates the counsels of the crafty so their hands cannot carry out their plans” (vs. 12), implying that Job needs to examine his frustration carefully for darker, personal motives! Speaking again of God, he says: “He catches the wise in their craftiness and subverts the counsel of the cunning” (vs. 13). In short, he argues that Job is neither wise nor spiritually mature.

Eliphaz’ entire speech debases Job’s spiritual life. He uses the age-old device of promoting his own spiritual stock even as he belittles the heart of the other. As with the Pharisee, smugness blends seamlessly with disparagement: “I thank You that I am not like other men . . . even as this tax collector” (Lk 18:11). Eliphaz’ approach illustrates Saint Ilias the Presbyter’s observation that “the higher a man ascends in humility, the lower he appears in his own eyes, but if he lacks humility, the higher he appears” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 38).

Only if one is self-assured in his spiritual life does he readily give advice to others whom he imagines are “not so well instructed” in the ways of God. We are not surprised, then, to find the Temanite concluding his censure of Job with this charge to the suffering prophet: “Do not reject the chastisement of the Almighty” (vs. 17). Wise advice – but what gall!

Saint Hesychios observes that Eliphaz “goes so far as to heap contempt on Job – himself deceived by the . . . duper” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 109). We do well to recall the Apostle Paul’s words: “Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor 1:20).

Deliver us, O Lord, Who didst humble Thyself for our sake, from every snare of the adversary, from encounter with evil, from the demon of the noonday, and from evil visions. – Baptismal prayer

August 4 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Job 10:1-18

Great Questions: Job 10:1-18, especially vss. 2-3: *“I will say to the Lord, ‘Do not teach me to be ungodly, why have You thus judged me? Is it good before You if I do wrong, and that you renounce the work of Your hands, and give heed to the counsel of the ungodly?’”* At times we humans playfully indulge in deep questions or dawdle in idle speculation. Some of us devote weeks and months to profound soul-searching, reading and discussing the great issues. However, it is suffering which forces us to meditate on issues of ultimate meaning. Pain thrusts questions into our consciousness concerning the purpose of life, the nature of God, and our relationship with Him. Often, pain does this when we, like Job, are distressed at heart and “weary and groaning in . . . soul” (vs. 1).

We find Job asking four great questions that confront us all. When he speaks “in the bitterness of my soul” (vs. 1), he has entered the arena of pain that each of us must face, and which forces us to ask what life is all about. These looming “whys” always are present, but they bide their time as long as we can push them into the background. We focus on our marriage, family, career, social life, parish or civic activities, amusements, and friends to keep these gnawing questions at bay. We think we are free to enjoy what pleases us and thus evade the inquiries born of pain. But our diversions prove to be temporary.

Job pleads with the Lord, “Why have You thus judged me?” (vs. 2). This question arises in our hearts whenever injustice, grave illness, or calamity thrusts us into the quandary of doubt. We ask, “Why has this evil befallen me? What did I do to deserve this?” Being a devout man, Job mindfully places the question before God, reminding Him, “You fashioned me as clay” (vs. 9) and “You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews” (vs. 11).

Often those who seek to live righteously before God – who honor Him, serving the good, the true and the beautiful – long to be faithful and to overcome the onslaughts of suffering. But like Job they may be driven to ask, “Is it good before You if I do wrong?” (vs. 3). The most wicked perversities and dark temptations arise in the mind, and threaten to sweep away our facade of propriety and goodness. We ask what faith refuses: “Has God put this upon me?” We reflect on the prayer “do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Mt 6:13) and wonder if God is indifferent to our pain.

Job asks God, “Do you see as the mortal sees? Do You see as man sees? (vs. 4). The question echoes the inquiry of the Prophet David: “What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that Thou visitest him?” (Ps 8:4). We furtively entertain the idea that perhaps God doesn’t care at all. Perhaps He remains far above this petty existence, detached from human pain. And yet we cannot shake off the awareness that He *does* care, for we know that He took on our flesh for all eternity and suffered the shame, the spitting, the nails, the Cross, and death!

In the end Job wonders, “Why then did You bring me out of the womb? Why did I not die, and no eye see me?” (vs. 18). In the depths of the Soviet slave labor camps, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn learned that “the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but . . . in the development of the soul. From that point of view our torturers have been punished most horribly of all: they are turning into swine, they are departing downward from humanity” (*Gulag Archipelago* II, p. 613). Truly, we must never assume that God excludes suffering and that it can be nothing but evil.

Have mercy upon us, O God, by Thy grace, granting pardon and forgiveness of our sins and transgressions, and all things good and profitable for our souls. – Litany before the Lord’s Prayer

August 5 – Friday – Exodus 24:12-18
First Reading at Vespers for the Transfiguration

Beholding God: Exodus 24:12-18, especially vs. 16: “Now the glory of God descended on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. Then on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.” Saint John the Theologian declares, “No one has seen God at any time” (1 Jn 4:12). Yet in another place the evangelist records Christ’s words to Philip: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Somehow both statements are true, despite the fact that they seem contradictory. Taken together, the two expressions balance the truth concerning vision of God.

On the one hand, the vision of God in glory has to be terrifying for fallen, sinful humanity – an unbearable sight. As we say at Vespers for the Transfiguration, it is a “sight . . . that may not be looked upon.” On the other hand, we must not overlook Saint John the Theologian’s assertion concerning Christ, who existed before time and yet became incarnate as a man whom “we have seen with our eyes . . . we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life [who] was manifested, and we . . . bear witness” (1 Jn 1:1-2).

Christ our God became man in order to reveal to us a complete vision of God in a manner apprehensible to human sight. Perceiving the Lord as the God-Man opens the way for us to see Him truly. The three disciples with Christ on Mount Tabor, where He “didst shine forth in glory,” perceived His divinity as much as they were able. As a result, they fell prostrate before His radiance. The sight of the transfigured God-Man was so overwhelming that they fell “down on their faces kneeling . . . overcome with astonishment.” Hence the present passage from Exodus truly is a window that allows us to see what it is implied in beholding the glory of God.

Peter, James, and John went “up on a high mountain” at the Lord’s behest (Mt 17:1). Likewise, “Moses arose with his assistant Joshua, and they went up to the mountain of God” (Ex 24:13). Moses and Joshua go as they are commanded: “Come up to Me” (vs. 12). We are not told how Moses hears the voice of God although the Lord is not present in the *flesh* (Jn 1:14), but we understand that the prophet listens with the ear of his heart – his spiritual ear (1 Kgs 9:15). Jesus’ disciples heard the Lord with their physical ears and yet, in their hearts, they heard more – for unlike his other followers they did not wish to leave Him (Jn 6:66-68). Those who *heard* followed Him faithfully.

When Moses “went up to the mountain” of God (Ex 24:13), he leaves the community of Israel below. Thus he is separated from the company of his fellow Israelites, except for Joshua. Likewise, when the three disciples go up with the Lord, it is “by themselves” (Mt 17:1). The sight of God is not revealed to the common throng. God shields His meeting with Moses, for He “covered the mountain” with a cloud (vs. 15). Furthermore, the prophet does not continue up the mountain toward God but waits on the slope for a full six days, until the Lord should call him higher within the cloud covering the summit (vs. 16).

Note the parallel here. When Moses meets God in the cloud, “the sight of the Lord’s glory was like a burning fire on the top of the mountain before the children of Israel” (Ex 24:17). Likewise, while the three disciples are on top of Mount Tabor with the Lord, “a bright cloud overshadowed them” (Mt. 17:5). The sight of the transfigured Lord greatly affects Jesus’ disciples, for they become “heavy with sleep” at seeing the Master in glory (Lk 9:32) “as far as they could bear it” (kontakion of the Transfiguration). They are simply overwhelmed.

Let us go up to the mount of the Lord and to the house of our God, ascending by the Spirit to behold His glory as of an only Son of the Father, in praise of the Life-giving Trinity.

August 6 – Saturday – Exodus 33:11-23, 34:4-6, 8
Second Reading at Vespers for the Transfiguration

God Manifests Himself: Exodus 33:11-23, 34:4-6, 8, especially vss. 19-20: “Then God said, ‘I will pass before you in My glory, and I will proclaim My name, the Lord, before you. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.’ But He said, ‘You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live.’” On Mount Sinai, through His servant Moses, the Lord God gives the Law to His ancient people, including moral commandments and instructions for worship. He chooses to deliver these prescriptions through “Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (vs. 11).

The Lord our God is ever free to have “mercy on whom [He] will have mercy, and . . . compassion on whom [He] will have compassion” (vs. 19), but Moses *found grace* (vs. 17) before Him. Thus God permits the Seer to behold His back, but His face does not appear to him (vs. 23). God manifests Himself with certainty to the servant who finds grace in His eyes.

Moses’ experience teaches us that no mortal may see the face of God, which remains beyond perception. Still, Moses is granted the great privilege of having God manifest Himself in a limited yet sure manner. Gregory of Nyssa observes, “Scripture does not indicate that Moses’ [beholding of God] causes the death of those who look, for how would the face of life ever be the cause of death to those who approach it. On the contrary, the divine is by its nature life-giving.” He adds: “Yet it is the characteristic of the divine nature to transcend all characteristics. Therefore he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life, because he has turned from True Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being” (*Life of Moses*, ACCS OT vol. 3, p. 150). In other words, God manifests Himself to Moses in a noetic manner.

What does God allow Moses to behold when God puts him “in the cleft of the rock” (vs. 22) and covers him with His hand until He passes by? What are we to make of the term *back* (vs. 23)? What sort of divine manifestation is implied by this word? Saint Augustine of Hippo reframes the matter: “As regards this life, Moses is told, ‘Nobody has seen the face of God and lived.’ You see, in this life we are not meant to live in order to see that Face; we are meant to die to the world in order to live forever in God” (*Sermon 170*, ACCS OT vol. 3, p. 151).

Misdeeds and all corrupt desires will end “when we see that Face which beats and surpasses all desires.” Saint Augustine continues: “Because it is so lovely [the face of God], my brothers and sisters, so beautiful, that once you have seen it, nothing else can give you pleasure. It will give insatiable satisfaction of which we will never tire. We will always be hungry and always have our fill.” This filling takes places in the age and life to come, however. In this present life, sin is rife in us – and everywhere around us. Evil distorts the perceptions of the heart, blinds the eyes of the soul, and withholds from us the manifestation of God.

Let us strive earnestly to rid ourselves of sin. It is our urgent priority. We must ever seek to please the Lord whom we serve “in every deed and word.” In this way we show our true desire to be children and heirs of His heavenly Kingdom, where we will see God’s face.

Saint Augustine notes that Moses saw the second Person of the Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ, *prefigured*: “Thus the back parts are taken to be His flesh, in which he was born of the Virgin and rose again.” Christ reveals His divinity on Tabor to three mortals like us, as much as they can bear it. By His grace, may we see Him *face to face* in the age to come and be fully purified!

In Thy mercy, make us all victors, even unto the end, through Thy crown incorruptible. – baptismal prayer

August 7 – Sunday – Third Kingdoms 19:3-9, 11-13, 15-16; Tone 7

Third Reading at Vespers for the Transfiguration

What Are You Doing Here? 3 Kingdoms [1 Kings] 19:3-9, 11-13, 15-16, especially vs. 13: “So when Elijah heard this, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a Voice came to him and said, ‘Elijah, what are you doing here?’” Let the experience of Jesus’ disciples on Mount Tabor and of Elijah on Mount Horeb heighten our awareness and put an end to our faltering. We need only reflect on the question God poses to His prophet: “What are you doing here?” (vs. 9, 13).

Asked the same question twice, Elijah’s answer is the same. So the Lord probes him (vss. 10, 14). Notice that the Lord’s question implies a related query: “Now that you are here, My beloved, what are you going to do hereafter?” In all truth, wherever we may be in life at this very moment, we may be sure that God is posing this question to us. Will we heed Him?

God knows perfectly well what brought Elijah to Mount Horeb. The prophet’s motivation for traveling so far into the Sinai wilderness is plainly a fear for his life. Elijah is driven by mortal dread of Queen Jezebel’s threats (see vss. 1-3). But God has a greater end in mind than merely scolding Elijah for his fright or having the prophet confess his fear. The Lord’s concern is to awaken him to finer, higher, and cleansing goals, to true prophetic action aimed at the disastrous spiritual state of the Kingdom of Israel. He is calling Elijah back to the work for which He long ago endowed him with grace.

At the same time, the Lord is certainly using His question to probe the heart of each of one of us in our present state. He is calling us to embrace His will and to act upon it. The question – “What are you doing here?” – is ever addressed to you and me. God knows how we came to this present circumstance and place. He helped us reach this moment in which we stand before Him. And here and now, in the desert of modern life, we must ask what tasks He is blessing us to undertake.

God’s goal is openly revealed in the Gospels. Speaking to the disciples awed by the transfigured Christ, whose appearance shines “like the sun” and makes His clothes appear “white as the light” (Mt 17:2), God has two points. First, He tells them that this Jesus, whom they now see transfigured, is God the Son, the Lord of life. Second, they are to hear Him! The transfigured God-Man has an absolute, pure, and life-giving claim on what we do – now, and at every moment hereafter.

God is speaking to us. He is awakening us, raising our awareness, setting us on the path He chooses for our salvation. And we will reach that goal, if we are attentive. Moses and Elijah conversed with Christ who “made manifest that He was the Lord of the quick and the dead, and that He is the God Who spake of old in the Law and the Prophets” (Vespers sticheron). Both on Mount Tabor and on Mount Horeb, God quiets the fear of His beloved ones. The Lord bypasses the frailty and dread that clings to us, calling us, as His people, to greater works.

Elijah must leave Mount Horeb, just as the Lord Jesus’ disciples must come down from the mountain where God met them. Both must return to the turmoil of the world, laboring for Him so that others might find God’s Kingdom. Let us also accept the cost of discipleship, embracing the Lord’s Cross and taking up our own. Just as Elijah anoints Jehu to assume the throne of Israel and purge corruption from the lives of the God’s people, so we are to trust the Lord and purge our lives according to the Lord’s will.

As Thou, O Lord, dost awaken our hearts with the light of Thy Holy Spirit, grant unto us a right judgment to hear Thy counsel, fulfill Thy will, and glorify Thee, the only true God. – based on the *Lutheran Book of Worship*

August 8 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Job 11:1, 7-20

Divine Traces: Job 11:1, 7-20, especially vs. 7: “Will you find the traces of the Lord? Have you reached the outer extremities of what the Almighty has made?” Saint Nikolai of Zicha asserts that “God’s trail in this world is well-blazed,” yet many are nevertheless filled doubt and despair as they observe humanity’s savagery and widespread suffering. If anyone ever had reason to despair, it is Job. He knows and endures terrible suffering, yet He asserts that we can indeed find “the traces of the Lord” (vs. 7) everywhere in this darkened world. Saint Nikolai explains the basis for this trust: “He who does not sin sees God’s trail blazed in the world” (*Prologue from Ochrid* vol. 2, p. 72-3).

We can choose to fight the enemy’s suggestion that we should fall into gloom, for in Christ we are blessed to see the evidence of God’s activity. The Lord’s presence shapes the actions of mankind today more than it ever did in Job’s day. Against every slander that invites us to doubt Christ we can place the shining testimony of countless first-hand witnesses (2 Pt 1:16). The questions posed by Zophar can be answered firmly – we do find traces of the Lord, for He has deliberately revealed Himself to us.”

It is true that we cannot reach “the outer extremities of what the Almighty has made” (Job 11:7). Still, we affirm Saint Paul’s teaching that heaven precludes our ability to “bring Christ down from above” (Rom 10:6). We need not fret over Zophar’s remark that “heaven is high” (vs. 8). Christ our God humbled Himself by taking on our flesh, and He is present in His Church and in the Holy Mysteries. “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Rom 10:8). The very Christ who descended into hades is infinitely *deeper* than its bars (Job 11:8), for He is now “revealed to His saints” (Col 1:26).

Christ our God “overthrow[s] everything” (Job 11:10). We may know Him directly; He teaches us what we can and ought to say to the Father: “Glory to Thy might, O Lord, Who doest all things well.” Knowing our wicked transgressions, Christ did “not overlook” our sins (vs. 11). Rather, He suffered on the Cross and forgave all who would receive Him. We can leave all vain buoying up to Zophar and others who believe that men are simply “equal to a donkey in the desert” (vs. 12). Our gracious Savior confirmed our worth when He took “the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. . . . became obedient to the point of death Therefore God also has highly exalted Him” (Phil 2:7-9).

Zophar, like many under the Older Covenant, senses the importance of purity of heart (Job 11:13-14). Accordingly, he counsels Job not to “let any wrongdoing lodge in your dwelling” (vs. 14). However, Saint Hesychios notes that “the Old Testament did not perfect or fulfill the relationship of the inner self to God – ‘the law made no one perfect,’ as the Apostle says.” But our hope is secure, for our “face will shine forth like pure water” (vs. 15). The traces of God blaze out of “the Holy Gospel . . . an icon of attentiveness, that is, of purity of heart,” aiding anyone who cuts off “evil thoughts from the heart, as the Gospel commands” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 181).

The Light of the World illumined the apostles and shone on them like “midday” (vs. 17). Like Job, the more men trust God in the midst of suffering, “the more and certain is their hope of the rewards of eternity,” affirms Saint Gregory the Great (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 228). We find ample traces of God around us. Peace has dawned to bring us “out of anxiety and care” (vs. 18). Cast out the worms of doubt and despair – open the eyes of your heart, set Christ before you, and hold onto Him through whatever pain you encounter.

O risen Lord, strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may not sin and so be blind to Thy trail in the world and to the light of Thy holy Resurrection. – St. Nikolai of Zicha

August 9 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Job 12:1-10

Prophetic Counsel, part I – Humble Yourselves: Job 12:1-10, especially vs. 3-4: “*But I also have a heart as well as you. A righteous and blameless man has become an object of mockery.*” The early chapters of the Book of Job highlight the spiritual gulf between Job and his friends. Now, in Chapter 12, the suffering prophet counsels his friends concerning their errors, stressing the importance of humbling oneself before the Lord and of accepting the boundless sovereignty of God. Next Job will plead for God’s mercy on himself, modeling a prayer that will bless anyone who follows his example.

The holy ascetic Hesychius of Jerusalem captures the pride and arrogance of Job’s friends: “While Job is sitting on a dung heap, you are on royal thrones. He is covered with disease, and you are in good health. He is an object of scorn, and you of honor. His friends have abandoned Job; his servants have left; his kinsman has disowned him. But you . . . take delight in enjoying what is nothing but grass. Why, then, are you involved with Job? Is it perhaps that, in recoiling from him, you are fleeing from righteousness?” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 216). But see, Job is kind to his advisers. He offers life-giving counsel, calling them – and us – to the exaltation that lies in true humility.

Job first searches the hearts of his friends: “Moreover you are men. Surely wisdom will die with you?” (vs. 2). Then he directs them to humility. “But I also have a heart as well as you. A righteous and blameless man has become an object of mockery” (vss. 3-4). And he shares this insight concerning humility: “For it had been ordained that he should fall under the power of others at the appointed time, and his houses should be plundered by the lawless” (vs. 5).

His point is simple – humbling events and afflicting circumstances do not necessarily indicate that a man is evil or sinful. In God’s good-but-fallen world, our present state – whether we are enjoying the good things in life, or whether we are afflicted and deprived of worldly pleasures – cannot be directly attributed either to sin or to blameless living.

The prophet continues speaking about humility in order to draw out this solemn warning: “Let not, however, any one be persuaded that, if he is evil, he will be held innocent” (vs. 6). We should tread with great care, never testing God frivolously, for “let not those who provoke the Lord be persuaded there will be no trial for them” (vs. 6).

Self-confidence before God on the basis of one’s *material* status is disastrous and misguided. We fail to perceive that “the riches of [God’s] goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering” are meant to lead everyone to repentance (Rom 2:4). Our Heavenly Father sent our Lord Jesus as a “propitiation by His Blood, through faith” (vs. 3:25) for the remission of sins, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (vs. 23). Indeed, we must travel this life before God with the greatest care!

The Prophet Job reminds us what the created world so eloquently declares: that “in His hand is the life of every living thing,” including “the breath of every man” (Job 12:10). With beautiful images, Job urges us to learn humble obedience from the animals, birds, “the fish of the sea” (vs. 8) and even the mute earth which we boldly trample every day. As Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk suggests, “Let us . . . examine ourselves as to how we live, how we behave, how we think, how we speak, how we act, with what heart we address others before God Who sees all things, and how we treat each other. And . . . let us correct ourselves . . . in truth” (*Journey to Heaven*, p. 57).

Who shall extinguish the flames of fire for me? Who shall lighten my darkness if Thou have not mercy upon me, O Lord, since Thou art the Lover of mankind? – Great Compline

August 10 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Job 12:12-22

Prophetic Counsel, continued – God’s Sovereignty: Job 12:12-22, especially vs. 13: “*With Him are wisdom and power; with Him are counsel and understanding.*” In the godly teachings of the long-suffering Prophet Job, all men are urged to consider the Lord’s unconditional sovereignty. Having advised humility as the appropriate virtue before God (Job 12:7-9), the prophet progresses naturally to God’s unqualified dominion. The Lord’s rule governs all things according to wisdom, power, counsel, and understanding (vs. 13).

Christ our God likewise elevates humility as a necessary condition for considering God’s sovereignty. He declares that the blessedness of the poor in spirit and of the meek enables them to see God and inherit the earth (Mt 5:3,5). Basil the Great expresses the same sentiment in this liturgical prayer: “It is truly meet and right and befitting the majesty of Thy holiness that we should praise Thee, bless Thee, worship Thee, give thanks unto Thee and glorify Thee, the only truly existing God, and offer unto Thee with contrite heart and spirit of humility this our rational worship.”

In today’s passage Job addresses three aspects of God’s nature: sovereignty over creation (vss. 13-15); governance of human affairs (vss. 16-21); and the revelation of truths that penetrate into the darkest shadows of death (vs. 22). As we hear in the Divine Liturgy according to Saint John Chrysostom, God “didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do all things until [He] hadst brought us back to heaven.”

Job observes a commonly accepted truth: “In length of time is wisdom, and in long life, knowledge” (vs. 12). However, he adds a significant caveat – God is the soul source of all wisdom and power inherent in human knowledge, for He *is* Wisdom and Knowledge. Therefore with Him begin “counsel and understanding” (vs. 13). With these comments Job undercuts any attempt to evade his earlier advice on humility. The sovereign God of all may tear down, withhold, or destroy as He chooses (vss. 14-15). Let all men tremble.

Recall God’s swift response against the arrogance of the king of Babylon when he declared, in great delusion and presumption, “Is not this the great Babylon, which I built as a home for my kingdom by my mighty power for honor of my glory?” (Dan 4:30). We learn that “while the word was still in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, your kingdom has passed from you. . . . Seven years shall bring this change upon you, until you know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of men, and He will give it to whomever He will’” (vs. 31-32).

Job reveals that God leads counselors away captive, seats kings upon thrones, overthrows the mighty ones of the earth, and “changes the lips of the faithful” (Job 12:20). Gregory the Great notes that here Job demonstrates that God “gives the word of truth to those who do it, and takes it away from those who do not do it” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 245). Surely we should set aside our habit of taking credit for personal accomplishments and eliciting praise for the products of our work.

Finally, Job reminds us that from the incomprehensibility and darkness of His being the Lord discloses many of the “deep things” of His counsel in order to raise us up again. Foremost is God’s illumination of “the shadow of death” (vs. 22). He exposes sin, not allowing its outcome – death – to be hidden. As Saint Hesychius notes, since Christ came the terrible “harmfulness of sin has been well-known ever since” (*Wisdom*, p. 246).

O Thou unseen Judge, Who wast seen in the flesh and camest to be killed in the body and judge our case by Thy Passion, we offer glory to Thee in Thine ineffable power and wisdom. – Bridegroom Orthros, Palm Sunday evening

August 11 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Job 14:1-14

Prophetic Counsel, part III – A Plea for God’s Mercy: Job 14:1-14, especially vss. 12-13: “So too, when man falls asleep in death, he will not rise, for the dead will not awake until heaven is dissolved. For would that You had kept me in the grave, that You had hidden me until Your wrath ceases, and that You would appoint me a set time in which You would remember me.” In chapter 12 Job counsels humility before the sovereignty of God, a truth he knows from sore affliction and deep, all-encompassing suffering. Still, in his humility he pleads for mercy from God, for himself and all men, ever maintaining his hope and trust in the Lord.

The prophet’s plea is like that of Saint John of Damascus, who writes, “All mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. Riches endure not, neither doth glory accompany on the way: for when death cometh, all these things vanish utterly. Wherefore, let us cry unto Christ the Immortal King: Give rest, in the dwelling-place of all those who rejoice, to them who are departed from among us” (Orthodox Funeral Service). Indeed, may each of us recognize our vanity during the few days remaining to us in this life and plead that the Immortal King grant us godly rest.

First, we must agree with Job that everyone “born of woman is short-lived and full of wrath” (vs. 1). The suffering prophet eschews the modern tendency to prettify dead bodies and gloss over death’s ugliness. He does not hide from the dark power that hovers over us and over our civilization. And if we not heed Job’s voice, let the Stalinist gulag, the Nazi death camps, terrorist attacks, genocide, and ethnic cleansing awaken a God-pleasing humility in us concerning this brief, uncertain life.

Second, Job shares Saint Paul’s conclusion that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The prophet says, “Even if . . . life is but one day upon the earth” (Job 14:5), there remains the truth of our “uncleanness” (vs. 4). David reminds us: “I was conceived in iniquities, and in sins did my mother bear me” (Ps 50:5). Everyone will stand before the dread judgment seat of Christ.

Third, Job notes the truth that God “appointed a time for [each man], and he cannot exceed it” (Job 14:5). Saint Methodios rejoices in this very fact, since “man might not be an . . . ever-living evil, as would have been the case if sin were dominant within him, as it had sprung up in an immortal body . . . God for this cause pronounced him mortal” (*Discourse on the Resurrection* 1.4, ANF vol. 6, p. 364). There is blessing to be found in death.

The prophet ends with a quick plea to God appropriate to our present existence – let the Lord allow each man rest and “be pleased with his life as a hired laborer” (vs. 6). While not avoiding the inexorability and certainty of death, Job offers a petition for a holy repose (vss. 7-14).

Job speaks of death with finality, comparing the repose of man to the withering of persistent trees. They “may die in the rocky ground, yet at the scent of water . . . bud and bring forth a crop like one newly planted” (vss. 8-10). Saint Hesychius of Jerusalem notes that “in calling death ‘sleep’ (vs. 12) Job asserts his firm hope in the resurrection” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 276). Death remains “repose” only “until heaven is dissolved” and then the dead will “awake” (vs. 12).

Finally, Job requests that his repose be placed in God’s keeping, with the Lord protecting him from ultimate wrath. Thus he pleads that “You would appoint me a set time in which You would remember me” (vs. 13). In Saint Hesychius’ words, Job weighs “the glory of the future and eternal life as well as the great degradation that stalks this present, ephemeral life.”

O Lord, Thou hast condemned us to return again unto the earth whence we were taken, and to entreat a godly repose: may we rest with Thy servants in the habitation of the just. – Orthodox Funeral Service

August 12 – Friday – Kellia Reading – Job 18:1-7, 14-21

Bildad The Tragic: Job 18:1-7, 14-21, especially vss. 1-2: “Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said: ‘How long will you keep talking? Pay close attention so we may also speak.’” Bildad is among the friends of the Prophet Job who purportedly “came to him with one accord: to visit and comfort him” (Job 2:16). What is your conclusion about this Shuhite ruler and friend of Job? Read the passage and consider whether he seems to be a genuine, comforting friend. His words expose him as arrogant, indulging in ego satisfaction at the expense of a friend rendered defenseless by affliction and suffering. Bildad truly evinces himself as callous, harsh, and cruel – a profoundly tragic figure.

As already noted, Bildad does *not* comfort – he scolds (vss. 2-3), condemns (vs. 4), and does not examine himself. Saint John Chrysostom says of him: “Look at the ones who are busy judging [Job]. Look at the ones who want to close his mouth. This is not the attitude of people who are seeking to console, but on the contrary, people who seek to provoke and to mock. . . . Do you see their jealousy? They consider being silent a shame and the ultimate in stupidity – certainly not the attitude of people want to console” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 324). And we add, not even those who might, in honest good will, wish kindly to help or correct a friend.

Bildad not only scolds Job for speaking against him and his fellows as “bad comforters” (vs. 16:2), but lacks even the courtesy to explain how he arrived at his conclusion. He makes no reference to Job’s prior comments. Instead he abruptly condemns him by saying, “Wrath possesses you” (vs. 18:4). Presuming to make God’s judgment for Him, he *writes off* the suffering prophet. The burden of what Bildad says after passing sentence (vss. 4-21) forgoes any attempt at convincing Job of the truth of what he says; instead, he indulges in imprecatory reviling. Only in the latter portion of verse 4 does Bildad speak to Job directly using the personal “you.” His attack is full of impersonal invocations of evil of the sort found in Psalm 108, or like those of the Jewish elders who sought and obtained Christ’s death.

Bildad passes over God’s first requirement of anyone who would judge another: begin with self-examination. As our Lord Jesus teaches: “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? . . . Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Mt 7:3,5). Saint Arsenios reiterates this need, urging that we “practice self-observation. And if you want to benefit yourself and your fellow men, look at your own faults and not those of others” (Cavarnos, *Saint Arsenios of Paros*, p. 104). Saint John Chrysostom adds this caution: “For on this point, that thine own doings must be strictly inquired into, thou thyself hast first made the law, by thus sentencing those of thy neighbor. Account it not then to be a grievous thing, if thou art also thyself to undergo the same kind of trial” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew 23.2*, NPNF 10, First Series, p. 158).

Here Saint John touches directly on the tragedy of Bildad the Shuhite. In his invective, Bildad fails to realize that he is describing himself. As Saint Mark the Ascetic puts it, if one “condemns another he seals his own wickedness” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 119). Has not the light of this ungodly man gone out even as he speaks (Job 18:5)? Indeed his very appearance, which is not *goodly*, foretells that he “shall be sown with brimstone” (vs. 15), for he has already moved “from light into darkness” (vs. 18). What then is the true problem of this tragic ruler who fails as a friend? Is it not that he has made his “dwellings [with] wrongdoers, and . . . those who do not know the Lord” (vs. 21)? Let us strive to keep ourselves from such profound, tragic separation from God and our fellows!

By Thy grace, O Lord, may I examine myself and how I address others before Thee. – based on Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, *Journey to Heaven*

August 13 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Job 21:1-2, 7-20, 29-34

Prophetic Declarations, Part I – Recompense: Job 21:1-2, 7-20, 29-33, especially vss. 17, 19: “Nevertheless, the lamp of the ungodly will be put out. Destruction shall come upon them, and the sorrows of wrath will seize them. . . . God will recompense him, and he will not know it.” The attacks of Bildad against the Prophet Job in chapter 18 reveal much of the blind and confused nature of the human soul. Of greater interest, however, is the response of God’s prophet to Bildad’s error.

In the present chapter (and later in chapter 24), Job addresses the faulty assumption that underlies Bildad’s remarks – that God acts in a straightforward and predictable way, bestowing material well-being on the righteous and destitution and suffering on the wicked. Bildad alleges that the Lord rewards and punishes men within the bounds of temporal existence. The Prophet Job repudiates such shallow theology, offering far greater insight.

Job begins his remarks by stating that Bildad’s attack on him lacks genuine “consolation” (vs. 2). He points out that Bildad actually adds to his burdens without providing helpful “comfort” or “rest” (vs. 34). Then he delves into Bildad’s concept of recompense by asking, “Why do the ungodly live and become old, even in wealth?” (vs. 7). The prophet unmasks the weakness of Bildad’s simplistic, cause-and-effect theory of God’s providence (vss. 8-16) by addressing the issue of God’s justice in judgment (vss. 17-20). In verses 29-33, he suggests seeking the wisdom of the saints in the matter, which leads him to speak of eternal judgment.

Yes, one is deluded if one does not notice that many ungodly people live well all of their lives. This basic spiritual truth forecloses any simplistic, reward-based theology. The Prophet Job carefully describes what we might call the good life in order to show that many godless people indeed have it all: children, home, success in business, pleasures, wealth, and a tolerable repose (vss. 8-13). Worse, in living thus they “do not wish to know [God’s] ways” (vs. 14) and see no “reason . . . to serve Him” or benefit in meeting Him (vs. 15). After all, apparently “good things are in their power” (vs. 16) – and that brings up the rub!

The sensitive mind naturally questions why the godless prosper, if God is a righteous judge. The prophet declares that, despite the seemingly ideal life enjoyed by some bad people, “the lamp of the ungodly will be put out” (vs. 17) and they will be “like chaff before the wind” (vs. 18). “God will recompense him, and he will not know it” (vs. 19). Here Job is foreseeing a more final annihilation. He begs God that the eyes of the wicked may “see his own slaughter, and may he not be saved by the Lord” (vs. 20). He exclaims against those who remain unrepentant at life’s end, spurning God’s mercy as well as His sure judgment.

In his suffering, Job is able to see that his friend is unlikely to accept his words. So now he challenges him: even if you do not heed me, “ask those who travel the road, and do not overlook their signs” (vs. 29). Saint Gregory the Great identifies these “travelers” as the holy men and women “who bear in mind that the present life is . . . a way, not a native land.” In particular he mentions Moses who, “when he was seeking the glory of heavenly contemplation said, ‘I will now turn aside, and see this great sight’” – the burning bush (Ex 3:3) – for unless one “withdraws the heart from the love of the world, he [will] never . . . understand things above” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 377). Cause-and-effect theology can mislead us most dangerously.

O Lord, Who hast destroyed the wisdom of the wise and brought to nothing the understanding of the prudent, help us to complete our lives in peace and repentance. – Litany of Supplication

August 14 – Sunday – Genesis 28:10-17, Tone 8
First Reading at Vespers for the Dormition of the Theotokos

Beth-el – The House of God: Genesis 28:10-17, especially vs. 17: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” When the future apostle Nathanael meets the Lord Jesus, he is awestruck by the Lord’s ability to “see” him under the fig tree “before Philip called” him (Jn 1:48). As a result, he blurts out a confession of Jesus as messiah: “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (Jn 1:49). The Lord Jesus then confirms Nathanael’s intuition by associating the ladder in the Patriarch Jacob’s dream (Gn 28:12) with Himself: “Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (Jn 1:51).

No devout Jew would miss this reference. By connecting the ladder to Himself, Christ reveals that He is God’s link uniting heaven and earth. As the Genesis account says, the “ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven” (Gn 28:12).

This portion of Genesis also reports that when Jacob awakens from the dream of the ladder, he recognizes the sanctity of the place where he has been sleeping (vs. 17). Note that the divine ladder the patriarch sees in his dream is “set up on the earth” but “reached to heaven.” God does not merely speak out of heaven, but across the earth (vs. 13). In recognition of God’s descent, the earthborn Jacob names the location *Bethel* (vs. 19) or *Beth-el*, which in Hebrew simply means *house of God* (vs. 17).

As we begin the celebration of the falling asleep of the All-holy Theotokos, we learn from Holy Tradition that the apostles gathered from across the earth at her deathbed. After her death and the belated arrival of the Apostle Thomas, it was discovered that her body was absent from the tomb. From her hallowed body the incarnate humanity of the Lord Jesus “was set up on the earth” (vs. 12). Thus she herself is identified as “the house of God, and . . . the gate of heaven” (vs. 17). Indeed the Theotokos, who contained the Uncontainable in her womb, is the ultimate Beth-el!

This account of the ladder, appointed as the first vespereal reading for the feast, explains why we sing, “All we the generations ever call thee blessed, the only Theotokos,” to the Virgin Lady and Mother. By cooperating with God and becoming the handmaid of the Almighty, she enabled the Lord Jesus to become fully human while remaining fully divine. Through her the eternal Son of God – according to the will of God the Father and by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit – became the true God-Man “set up on the earth” (vs. 12). She offered herself as the house of God for our salvation, chosen by the Lord precisely for her holiness and purity of life.

Note that the Patriarch Jacob, ancestor of our God in the flesh, received a promise from God at Bethel: “Also, your seed shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and your seed all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed” (vs. 14). The angels ascend and descend upon the Lord Jesus because He fixed Himself upon earth through the Theotokos, uniting heaven and earth by the Incarnation. The fulfillment of the promise began in her.

Today the Incarnate God is blessing men, women, and children on every continent because the Theotokos, the *house of God*, joined in setting Him among us. She is the awesome, unique Beth-el, and by her prayers we earth-bound forever receive His divine blessing.

O Virgin, I see thee lying here outstretched, and I am astonished; for in thee hath He dwelt who is the joy of the life to come. Entreat thy Son and God to keep thy flock from harm. – Orthros verse for the Dormition

August 15 – Monday – Ezekiel 43:27-44:4
Second Reading at Vespers for the Dormition

Uncrossed Gate: Ezekiel 43:26-44:4, especially vs. 2: “*This gate shall be shut. It shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it, because the Lord God of Israel will enter by it; therefore, it shall be shut.*” These verses from Ezekiel, read at Vespers for the Dormition, are a small part of an extended vision received by the prophet during his exile in Babylon (Ezk 40-46). The complete vision describes in detail a new cleansed and holy temple.

Like portions of the revelation given to Saint John the Theologian, Ezekiel’s vision provides a glimpse into the age to come – thus its reference to the “eighth day” (vs. 43:27). We learn the significance of the eighth day from the Church Fathers. According to the Epistle of Barnabas, God says, “It is not the sabbaths now celebrated that please Me, but the sabbath which I make and on which, after bringing all things to their rest, I will begin an eighth day, that is a new world” (Martimort, *The Liturgy and Time*, p. 19).

The temple of the age to come is further revealed when God declares: “The priests shall offer your whole burnt offerings and your peace offerings on the altar, and I shall accept you” (vs. 27). Note that Ezekiel receives God’s declaration at a time when the people of God are suffering crushing defeats because of their flagrant iniquities. Many prophetic utterances warn that the Lord will accept neither the people nor their burnt offerings because of their abuse of justice and disdain for righteousness (e.g. Jer 7:22-24). Nevertheless, God speaks of a new creation – one in which His people *will* be accepted by Him.

Looking further, we observe that God allows Ezekiel to foresee the glory of the Lord dwelling again in the Temple, as His glory had dwelt in Israel’s earlier sanctuaries (Ex 40:34; 2 Chr 5:14). Of what other temple can the prophet be speaking when he says, “I looked, and behold, the house of the Lord was full of glory” (Ezk 44:4)? Let us understand that the Lord shows the Prophet Ezekiel His glorious indwelling in the womb of the Virgin! Christ’s Incarnation initiates the new creation, as the words of the Annunciation troparion reveal: “Today is the beginning of our salvation, and the manifestation of the mystery from the ages, for the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin.”

Note that in Ezekiel’s vision this glorious future temple has an east-facing gate – a gate that is shut. “It shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it, because the Lord God of Israel will enter by it” (vs. 2). See how our good God discloses to the prophet the virginal womb of the Theotokos: “Rejoice! O uncrossed gate . . . who hast given birth in the flesh to thy Creator and God” (festal dogmatikon).

We who are united to Christ are most blessed among men, for we are shown openly those things disclosed only in part to Ezekiel: “The prince . . . will sit in it to eat bread before the Lord. He will go in by way of the gate chamber and go out the same way” (vs. 3). The prince, of course, is our Lord Jesus Christ, “the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15). He alone entered and dwelt in the Virgin’s womb, and she who bore Him was “a virgin giving birth, and after remaining virgin.”

In the mystery of our redemption, God granted the most pure Theotokos to hold within herself the Lord of glory. Furthermore, by the indwelling of God, “Mary gained a special victory over death. . . . she was glorified in her body. . . . For in Mary, human nature reached its goal” (Gillet, *The Year of Grace of the Lord*, p. 244). As the Prince of Life came to us from the “east of easts” to the virginal sanctuary through the uncrossed gate, so now God’s goal for us is revealed in her death.

As thy birth-giving was a seedless conception; so thy falling-asleep was death without corruption: by thine intercessions, O Theotokos, deliver our souls from death. – Orthros verse and troparion of the Dormition

August 16 – Tuesday – Proverbs 9:1-11
Third Reading at Vespers for the Dormition

Turning Aside: Proverbs 9:1-11, especially vss. 4-5: “‘He who is without discernment, let him turn aside to me,’ and to those in need of discernment, [Wisdom] says, ‘Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I mixed for you.’” The faithful are reminded of the intimate bond between mother and child on those feast days directly related to both the Virgin Mary and Christ – the Annunciation, the Lord’s Nativity, the Presentation in the Temple – but also on the feasts of her own Nativity, Entrance into the Temple, and Dormition. During the latter feast all Christ-loving servants of God are urged to “praise the all-holy, undefiled Virgin” who gave birth to God the Incarnate Word of the Father, and to cry out, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is thy womb which did contain Christ” (aposticha verses of the Dormition).

The present verses, read on the eve of the Dormition, personify Christ as Wisdom. Since the name for Wisdom is feminine in both Hebrew (*hokma*) and Greek (*sophia*), we might be tempted to conclude that these passages in Proverbs actually refer to a female person or entity. However, Orthodox tradition understands Wisdom to be the eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ our Savior. For example, the title of the great church in Constantinople – the famous Hagia Sophia, or Holy Wisdom – refers to the Lord. Thus when the title *Wisdom* appears in this reading, it does not apply to the Theotokos but rather to her Son.

Take note of the important allusion in verse 1: “Wisdom built her house, and she supported it with *seven* pillars.” These pillars, seven in number, direct us to the divine aspect of Wisdom, just as the “seven lampstands” in the Book of Revelation draw our attention to the One with “seven stars in His right hand,” Who is “the First and the Last, the Living One” (see Rv 1:12-18).

Still, we find an important connection between this feast of the Theotokos and Wisdom. First of all, the Virgin Mary possesses human wisdom, for when Archangel presents the incalculable to her, she *turns aside* to Wisdom Himself (Prv 9:4). She is not *without discernment* (vs. 4), but rather evinces a true spiritual sensitivity that allows her to refrain from the path of the *ungodly* (vs. 7). Thus she is superbly prepared to heed the heavenly messenger, and she fully accepts the angel’s words. Her heart ignores every temptation to pursue the selfish interests that many of us embrace in this present life, turning us away from Christ who is the true divine Wisdom.

The Theotokos spurned worldly success and devoted herself entirely to receiving the Bread of Wisdom and drinking deeply from the cup of wine that He mingled for her (vs. 5). In her answer to the question that her Son posed to his disciples – “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” (Mt 20:22) – she showed simple wisdom. She walked the path of motherly duty with her Son, even to the point of allowing “a sword [to] pierce through [her] own soul” (Lk 2:35) as she took her place at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:25).

Having drunk deeply of Wisdom’s cup, the Theotokos forever rebukes the evil and the undiscerning among us (Prv 9:8). Let us all show our great love for the Theotokos, that we may find godly instruction and *fear of the Lord* through her (vs. 10). We should seek out her motherly intercessions at every opportunity and diligently apply the counsel she offers at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (Jn 2:5).

Let us believers shout to her with Gabriel the chief of angels, saying, Hail, O full of grace. The Lord is with thee, granting the world, through thee, wisdom and the great Mercy. – Vespers sticheron for the Dormition

August 17 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Job 24:1-4, 12-20

Prophetic Declarations, part II – Darkness: Job 24:1-4, 12-20, especially vs. 14,17: “*But He knows their works and delivered them into darkness. . . . For in due time, the shadow of death will be the same to them . . . they shall know the troubles of the shadow of death.*” In this chapter, Job prophesies divine recompense against the godless as he answers the question: “Why have the times escaped the Lord’s notice? Why have the ungodly stepped over the boundary, snatching away the flock with the shepherd?” (vss. 1-2). Study Job’s catalog of the evils of the ungodly as he identifies the sort of persons he means: those who lack respect for God-ordained boundaries and seek to control God’s people and usurp their true Shepherd (vs. 2).

The Lord forms human beings in such a way that we can recognize evil ways. Yes, there are clinically sociopathic personalities and those who are morally cauterized by repeatedly overriding their consciences. Job has already described the *good life* of the “nice” people who are godless in chapter 21. Now, in these verses, he surveys their sins and their preference for darkness out of fear of exposure. Against such sinners he calls for God’s judgment, both in this present life and the life hereafter.

Wicked people take the goods of others: “the donkey of the orphans and . . . the widow’s ox” (vs. 3). Whether thug, white-collar criminal, or a callous manipulator, the godless lack respect for the decent. They are ready to seize, by whatever means, that which they desire. The predatory acts of the godless aim most often at the vulnerable, such as the fatherless and the widows. Such acts reveal a profound cowardliness of heart and a perverted sense of right and wrong.

These wicked ones lure the weak, having themselves “turned aside from the right way” (vs. 4). In the drug trade, the poor grow the illegal crops only to be exploited by the drug barons. At the point of sale the addict, crippled by dependency, is forced into prostitution, petty theft, or made to snare new victims, all to benefit of the primary traffickers.

Those who disdain God are apt to terrorize the meek in the world so that “The gentle of the land have hidden themselves” (vs. 4). Indeed, the old, the frail, the impoverished, and the unsuspecting are targets for the godless, while the wealthy and powerful can defend themselves.

These cruel users take advantage of those without means when they callously “cast the weak out” (vs. 12). Verses 5 through 11 remind us of how evil-doers remain heedless of the pain they inflict: “the soul of the infants sighed greatly” (vs. 12). Remember to pray for the good efforts of victim and witness services that assuage the wounded and grieved.

The Prophet Job also identifies the deadly growths that fester in the hearts of the ungodly, finally consuming these wicked and pitiful souls. They avoid scrutiny, perfect covert ways, and conceal their schemes (vs. 16). Their consuming fear is to be caught (vs. 15). Yet death looms as their inescapable and final terror (vs. 17). Their tragic lives witness to the God-fearing who long for righteousness and *do* seek to “know the light” (vs. 16)

Job concludes with imprecatory prayer, asking that the portion of the wicked “be cursed on earth” (vs. 18). He prays that God *wither* their prospects and success (vs. 19). He hopes that the experience of defeat will enable their sins to be “recalled to memory” (vs. 20) so that they might turn from the darkness, weeping before God, and seeking His forgiveness. Let us also pray that the godless complete the remaining time of this life in peace and repentance, attaining a good defense before Christ like the thief on his cross. And let us ask this same grace for ourselves.

O Lord, who healest every malady and every infirmity, look upon us Thy children in all the ways we go astray; give us victory over Satan, making us partakers of Thy Holy Mysteries. – Baptismal prayer

August 18 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Job 25:1-6

Missing Elements: Job 25:1-6, especially vs. 4: “How shall a mortal be righteous before the Lord? Or how may he who is born of a woman purify himself?” The Church Fathers find little fault in Bildad’s response – except, as Saint John Chrysostom notes, Bildad bluntly contradicts what God’s prophet has already declared: that in this life the ungodly often *apparently* escape judgment. Still, in asserting that no mortal is “righteous before the Lord” (vs. 4), he actually repeats a truth declared earlier by Job (vs. 9:2).

Bildad the Shuhite mainly exaggerates, and his thinking lacks important elements. His theology is unbalanced; he clings to a simplistic belief in a divine cause-and-effect in response to men’s morality or immorality. He fails to understand Job’s distinction between the *ungodly* and the *righteous*. Finally, Bildad is so obsessed with the corruption of all men that, in an effort to force Job to confess his “secret” sins, he errs by saying that God created a universe that is impure.

Let us explore Bildad’s assertion that “man is putrid” (vs. 25:6). He persists in pressing Job to acknowledge that God will give no rest in this life to anyone who abuses others (vs. 3). Saint John Chrysostom argues that Bildad emphasizes this mistaken belief as a way “to make room for Job” – to invite the prophet to confess the hidden sin that has brought him great affliction. Saint John notes that Bildad is actually asking, “Will it be possible for a single just person ever to exist?” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 407). Bildad vainly desires Job to be judged and examined, for in his view “the son of man [is] a worm” (vs. 6). However, his argument unravels in light of the fact that God permits success in this life to many of the ungodly. The righteous, like Job, undergo horrendous suffering and affliction quite undeservedly, but are blessed before God.

Next we come to another of the Shuhite’s misunderstandings: he cannot grasp that Job’s repeated declarations of his righteousness before God might possibly be true. Saint Gregory the Great readily clarifies the difference between Job’s and Bildad’s concept of righteousness. His answer to Bildad’s question – “How shall a mortal be righteous before the Lord?” (vs. 4) – is simple: “Every just man is just by illumination from God, not by comparison with God.” Saint Gregory continues, “There are those who, when by the gift of the Spirit they are aided against the frailty of their flesh, are made to erect themselves, gleam forth in virtues, yes, and flash out in the marvels of miraculous signs as well” (*Wisdom*, p. 409). There are truly saints who are *righteous* by God’s grace.

Finally Bildad, in his intense desire to convict Job of sin and fit him into his simplistic theology, asserts that “the stars are not pure in His sight” (vs. 5). Unquestionably the entire creation is governed by the Lord of all; naturally, “if He orders the moon, then it does not shine” (vs. 5). But calling the stars impure distorts the goodness of God’s creation – it is absurd to assign sin to inanimate creatures!

Saint Paul perceives “that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom 8:22), for man’s sin disrupted the relationship between the created order and mankind. Yet as we know from the creation account, “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gn 1:31). Man’s sin did not destroy the inherent goodness of creation, although even the ground became cursed for our sake (vs. 3:17). Why? So that we might begin the long journey back to our original pristine beauty, aided by the grace and love of God.

Assist us mercifully, O Thou that takest away the sin of the world, and cleanse Thou me from every stain of flesh and spirit and teach me to fulfill holiness in Thy fear. – Pre-communion prayer of Saint Basil the Great

August 19 – Friday – Kellia Reading – Job 26:1, 4-14

God the Lord, part I – Almighty: Job 26:1, 4-14, especially vs. 11-12: “*The pillars of heaven were spread all over and stood amazed at His rebuke. He checked the sea with His power, and by His understanding He wounded the sea-monster.*” Job’s friends speak of God, displaying some understanding, but they reveal that they lack a full theological knowledge. Now Job in turn shares his understanding of the Lord, providing the God-given insights that have strengthened him to endure his afflictions. The prophet speaks of God’s strengths, focusing attention on His limitless energies. Verses 4 through 14 present a beautifully reasoned teaching concerning divine might and power.

“To whom have you spoken words?” asks Job (vs. 4). Speech itself is a gift from the Almighty. In the creation account, God brings the world into being by speaking, “and it was so” (Gn 1:9, etc.). When the Lord creates man “in Our image, according to Our likeness” (vs. 1:26), He speaks humanity into existence, giving us the dual capacities of speech and invention. Language facility is an innate gift of God, from which men develop many languages and words.

“Will giants be born under the water?” Job asks (Job 26:5), declaring that nothing can oppose God’s power. He continues, “Hades is naked before Him” (vs. 6). The dead as well as the living are subject to God, as demonstrated in Christ’s raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:25).

“He stretches out the north wind upon nothing; He hangs the earth on nothing” (Job 26:7). Men and women may fashion marvels, but human work derives from that which already exists – from the materials God places at our disposal. God discloses His infinite power by creating out of nothing. As we are reminded on Great and Holy Friday, “the One who was suspended on a tree, suspended the earth above the waters.”

“He grasps the face of His throne and spreads His cloud over it” (vs. 9). As Saint John of Damascus says, “The God-head . . . is . . . incomprehensible. . . . He has revealed to us what it was expedient for us to know, whereas that which we were unable to bear He has withheld” (Chase, *The Orthodox Faith*, p. 165-6).

“He encompassed the face of the water by an ordinance until the end of light and darkness” (vs. 10). The creation will endure only as long as God wills it to be. As in the beginning God said, “Let there be light; and there was light” (Gn 1:3), so also at the end “they will perish . . . and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak [He] will fold them up” (Heb 1:11-12).

“The pillars of heaven were spread all over. . . . He checked the sea with His power” (Job 26:11-12). The Nicene Creed calls Him “Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” It is meet and right, then, that He be worshiped both in heaven and on earth (Rv 5:13-14), for He stilled the waters before the very eyes of His disciples (Mk 4:39). Let all peoples and nations worship and honor Him.

“For the bars of heaven fear Him, because He put to death the rebellious dragon by a command” (Job 26:13). Righteous Job teaches us that God overturns any who oppose His will, even “trampling down death by death” and defeating Satan, the lord of death.

“We will hearken to the least of His words” (vs. 14) is Job’s personal confession of faith. The true prophet speaks the word of God, proclaiming the God he knows. “But who knows when He will bring about the strength of His thunder?” (vs. 14). Here Job invites us to confess that our power and our knowledge are limited before that of the Almighty.

It is meet and right to hymn Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks unto Thee, and to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion: for Thou art God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same. – Preface to the Anaphora, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 20 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Job 28:12-28

God the Lord, Source of Wisdom: Job 28:12-28, especially vs. 23: “*God has well established [Wisdom’s] way, and He knows its place.*” In chapter 26, Job corrects the flimsy theological speculations of his friends with a well-ordered description of God’s omnipotence. In this present chapter, the prophet encourages his friends – and we ourselves – to remember that God is the source of all true wisdom. The Lord has *well established* genuine wisdom and is constantly extending it to those who pursue godliness and strive to “abstain from evils” (vs. 28).

In reflecting on Job’s logic, Saint John Chrysostom offers this summary: “God is omnipotent; He does all things with wisdom.” He continues, “There is nothing like that practice” of abstaining from evil as declared by Job, for “nothing is more powerful than that wisdom. . . . Reverence for God is the supreme wisdom” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 429). Note that Saint John emphasizes the close relationship drawn by Job between God’s power and the wisdom that can be gained from the practice of goodness and godliness. Job leads us away from false knowledge toward the true wisdom that God declares: “Behold, the fear of God is wisdom” (vs. 28).

Job’s words are blunt: “Mortal man has not known [Wisdom’s] way, nor is it found among men” (vs. 13). How often is this prophetic declaration ignored today! So many believe they will find wisdom only by acquiring vast stores of the world’s ever-expanding body of applied knowledge. But let us listen to God’s prophet, for we are baptized into Christ. Ever since the so-called Age of Enlightenment, scientific discoveries have flourished in astonishing and wonderful ways. But has the majority of mankind found true wisdom as a result?

Who can deny that universities and research centers are producing a dazzling array of inventions and ever finding new ways to describe and control the elements of God’s creation? It would seem at first glance that science and technology have indeed uncovered the path to wisdom. However, despite all the wonders pouring from the cornucopia of man’s organized pursuit of knowledge, our race has produced countless nightmares at the same time: ecological devastation, war, cruelty, violence, genocidal death, and degradation of human life. Where is Wisdom?

The Prophet Job is quite correct: godless human beings cannot find the way to true wisdom when they focus on secular knowledge alone. God proclaims that fullness of Wisdom is not “found among men” (vs. 13). We must listen to the destitute prophet on a dung heap and to the God-man Jesus on the Cross to learn that true wisdom is divine and God-given.

We may be entranced by the glitter of gold, silver, securities, and worldly knowledge. Perhaps we devote ourselves to the acquisition of wealth through technical know-how, but let us heed God’s prophet when he reminds us that earthly wealth cannot be compared to true wisdom (vss. 15-16). As we hear in the Orthodox funeral service, “All mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. . . . for when death cometh, all these things vanish utterly.”

Listen carefully to Job’s admonition: “You must hold up wisdom above the most valued things (vs. 18). . . . God has well established its way, and He knows its place” (vs. 23). “He said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of God is wisdom, and to abstain from evils is understanding’” (vs. 28).

Him who hath no beginning, the Father, I worship; Him who is the Only-begotten Son, I glorify; and unto the Holy Spirit who shineth with the Father and the Son, I sing praises. – Orthodox funeral service

August 21 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – Job 38:1-11, 16-18, Tone 1

God the Lord, continued – Who Creates: Job 38:1-11, 16-18, especially vs. 4: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.” According to an adage with a long, noble history, “Man proposes, but God disposes.” The proverb first appeared in the English-speaking world in the fourteenth century in William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Ploughman*, written when the language was first emerging as distinct from Anglo-Saxon and Norman French. Certainly the thought behind the saying is not exclusively English property – Langland’s work reveals a solid familiarity with the prophets of Israel and biblical literature in general. A kindred bit of wisdom from the New King James translation of Proverbs is thus in order: “A man’s heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Prv 16:9 NKJV).

In the last portion of the Book of Job, we encounter another set of conversations between Job and his friends. Each friend expresses a lack of feeling for – or lack of understanding of – Job’s afflictions. Yet Job stands out as a true prophet of God, faithful in the tradition of ancient Israel that is found in Moses, the major prophets, and the other wisdom literature. The twist is that, from the present reading forward, God joins the conversation. First He addresses Job, then He forcefully establishes an honest relationship with each of his friends. God identifies Himself as the Creator and Job as His creature. Subsequently, the Lord will disclose Himself in yet other roles – as the One who governs, forgives, and restores.

In the Lord’s opening statements, He puts Job in his place by describing His work as Creator. His questions cut through all theory and speculation, including Job’s insights offered to correct his friends’ faulty vision of God. Neither Job nor his friends – nor any one of us – is able to respond to God’s central question: “Who is this who hides counsel from Me, and hold words in his heart and thinks to conceal them from Me?” (Job 38:2). There is only one answer to this question, and to those in verses 4-6 and 16-18: “It is beyond my capacity to say.”

As Creator, the Lord confronts us with the limitations of being human. Our knowledge is finite, not infinite (vs. 4). After the fall from our original pure state, our justifications are wide open to Him – yet just like Adam and Eve, we imagine that we can *hide* our words in our hearts and somehow “conceal them from [God]” (vs. 2). The span of each person’s life is brief and fixed within a tiny segment of history (vss. 4, 18). Like everything else in creation, we are fashioned out of nothing. No one can exceed the limits set for him, not even the earth (vss. 4-6), the planets and the stars (vs. 7), or the sea (vss. 8-11).

God invites us to consider how He exists from before all time. At a certain moment and in a manner of His choosing, He founded the earth, laid its cornerstone, and clothed the seas in cloud and mist (vss. 4, 6, 9). His account leads us to contemplate both the fact of creation arising out of nothing and the infinity of the Creator.

Observe, in these verses, how the Lord illuminates the inherent controls and boundaries that He has fixed in His universe. All things hold together so that the world constantly renews itself and provides for our needs, if we will practice good stewardship of the earth. We may take gravity, the land and the atmosphere for granted, but without them all life would die. Likewise, if the land mass and the sea were equally distributed, water would cover everything. Even death is limited before the Life-giver (vs. 17).

Verily, O Christ, into the deepest abyss of earth Thou didst descend, and break the unyielding everlasting bars which held men prisoner; and on the third day Thou didst arise. – Sixth Ode of Pascha

August 22 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Job 38:31-41

God the Lord, continued – Who Governs: Job 38:31-41, especially vs. 35: “*Can you send out lightnings, and they shall go? They shall say to you, ‘What do you want?’*” An Orthodox Christian will probably recognize similarities between this passage and Psalm 103, read every evening at Vespers: “How magnified are Thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is filled with Thy creation” (Ps 103:26). Both passages from Scripture speak of the array of heaven stretched across the sky “as it were a curtain,” moving in precision with the seasons of earth (Ps 103:3, 21; Job 38:31-33). Both describe the mantle of clouds that satisfies all life on earth with water (Ps 103:7-14; Job 38:34-35, 37). Likewise, both emphasize that the Lord, in His good governance, cares even for the wild beasts that “fear in their dens” (Job 38:40), “seeking their food from God” (Ps 103:23). And both passages reflect on God’s gift of creativity to mankind (Ps 103:15-17; Job 38:36).

The finely tuned mechanisms of our solar system manifest the divine governance of the entire universe. Whether one gazes into the skies as the ancients did, in order to mark the progress of seasons and years, or peers through great telescopes on mountaintops or via satellite, as do our astronomers today, the order of the universe is unquestionably awesome and wonderful. A major task of Holy Scripture is to proclaim the Governor who directs the whole universe, teaching all who will listen to say, “Bless the Lord, O my soul. . . . Who establisheth the earth in the sureness thereof” (Ps 103:1, 6).

Look closely as the Lord calls to Job in the present verses, directing his attention to the constellations of the night sky. Ancient men wondered at the seven stars of the Pleiades (Job 38:31) and told stories to explain this cluster. The Greeks called them the seven maidens, although one is nearly invisible to the naked eye and was said to hide her light because of her shame for marrying a mortal. Greek seamen would set sail only when the Pleiades were visible, for otherwise they were liable to encounter storms. Ancient farmers knew that the appearance of the Pleiades marked the planting season.

The reference to the Mazzaroth (zodiac) in verse 32 indicates the seasonal alterations of storms and good weather that guide agricultural life. Over the centuries mankind has mapped and identified many of the stars, but this cumulative work continues to this day. We still have not learned all “the movements of heaven or the events which take place together under heaven” (vs. 33). We certainly cannot call up a single cloud nor make one obey us “with a violent shower of much rain” (vss. 34). Our meteorological science consists by and large of good statistical estimates.

God is indeed Governor of earth and sky, and of all that lies across the vast reaches of space. It is also He “who has given to women wisdom in weaving [and] knowledge of embroidery” (vs. 36), and who assigns all artistic ability. “Mark it,” says Saint John Chrysostom, “He is also speaking of the practical. He mingles the small with the grand. . . . But would the works of this craft be as remarkable if they were not a gift?” Saint Gregory the Great adds that God is “the Cause of causes, and as He is the Life of the living, so is He the Reason of reasonable creatures” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 601). He provides for all the earth, this tiny jewel spinning around the sun. He never fails to govern what He made, bringing the seasons to encourage growth, planting, and harvesting. Let us be faithful witnesses to His governance over the ineffable world He provides.

For healthful seasons, for the abundance of the fruits of earth and for peaceful times, and for our deliverance from all dangers and necessities, receive our humble thanks, O Lord. – Litany of Peace, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 23 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Job 42:1-9

God the Lord, continued – Who Forgives: Job 42:1-9, especially vss. 8, 9: “*My servant Job shall pray for you. For I will only accept him, but for his sake, I would have destroyed you’ . . . And He redeemed their sin for Job’s sake.*” During the time of God’s pronouncements in Job 38-41, the Prophet Job seems overwhelmed by the judgments of the living God and responds just once, and briefly (vss. 40:3-5), for he was loath to speak brashly. Words seem pointless, perhaps offensive or at the very least presumptuous. Finally, however, Job does struggle once more to respond to what God had revealed. His reply divulges to us some of what he gleaned from the Lord’s declarations.

First of all, Job acknowledges the unique and utterly superior nature of God. He confesses the Lord’s unlimited power: “I know You can do all things, and nothing is impossible for You” (vs. 42:2). He admits that nothing may be hidden or *kept back* from God, whether it be speech, actions, or the smallest ill-formed thoughts buried deep in the psyche: “For who is he who hides counsel from You?” (vs. 3). At every moment we live nakedly before God, with every aspect of our being visible to Him. How much there is to confess!

Job also frankly admits the deficiency of his knowledge. He stands in utter awe, wondering that God has shared so many truths with him, things undreamed of before that are “too great and wonderful, which I did not know” (vs. 3). His admission gives us a tiny glimpse into the heart of a true prophet. We see how a man who is genuinely humble before God may be transformed and deified by divine grace through suffering!

What is more, we become witnesses to a conversation between a true saint and God. Here is a man humbled but never stripped of the capacity to speak to the Lord. Rather, God enables him to grow in relationship to Himself. See what Job says: he pleads that God will hear him, will permit him to speak creature-to-Creator, and will crown their relationship by teaching him that which God alone can impart (vs. 4). Most remarkable is Job’s statement that “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You” (vs. 5).

Concerning this last remark of Job, Saint Gregory the Great notes that Job’s sufferings caused “him to differ from what he was before. And because he had seen more plainly the light of truth with the eye within, he more clearly discerned and beheld the darkness of his humanity.” This point is likewise set before us by Saint Isaac the Syrian. When a man like Job “perceives these invisible and by far more excellent things . . . then there is begotten by the perception proper to this knowledge another faith, not one which is opposed to the first faith, but one which confirms it. And this is called ‘the faith of divine vision’” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 641).

In every interaction between the Lord and Job and his friends, the forgiveness and healing power of God overflows. God grants a divine vision that is greater and more certain than anything Job knew formerly. When God says to Job’s friends “my servant Job shall pray for you” (vs. 8), we behold how greatly the forgiveness and healing of God renews a person who truly is humble and repentant.

God discloses the boundlessness of His mercy in the way in which He deals with men’s thoughtlessness, insensitivity, and arrogance. Furthermore, He teaches us to turn to His saints for their intercessions, for in the case of Job’s friends, “He redeemed their sin for Job’s sake” (vs. 9). Indeed, God encourages all of us to seek the prayers of the saints.

May Christ, our true God, through the intercessions of His most Holy Mother, and of all the Saints, have mercy upon us and save us, forasmuch as He is good and loveth mankind. – Prayer of absolution after confession

August 24 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Job 42:10-17

God the Lord, continued – Who Restores: Job 42:10-18, especially vs. 10: “Then the Lord restored Job’s losses when he prayed for his friends, and He forgave their sin. But the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.” In the restoration of Job, we are blessed with a type of the salvation found in Christ. As the elements of life are stripped from Job by successive blights, we behold a foreshadowing of the Lord’s Passion.

The devil takes pleasure in removing every protection and comfort from Job’s existence: home, goods, servants. Satan thoroughly shatters the “hedge around him . . . on every side” (Job 1:10) that seemed to indicate he was favored by God. Next the evil one assaults Job’s beloved family, through the catastrophic deaths of his children. Finally, the enemy strikes the prophet’s own “bones and his flesh” (vs. 2:5), reducing his skin to boils and leaving him broken with nowhere to dwell except on a dung heap – surely a type of death, our old enemy!

As Job on the dung heap prefigures Christ on the Cross, so the holy prophet reveals “that the freedom of mankind came about, that the form and the beauty were created” through our Lord Jesus’ rising from the dead, in the words of Nicholas Cabasilas (*The Life in Christ*, p. 78). Job foreshadows what Christ our God will achieve: the liberation “of human nature . . . from enmity toward God and from enslavement to the devil” (Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, p. 112). The devil does his utmost but Job, as a type of our Savior, stoutly refuses to “say a word against the Lord and die” (vs. 2:14). Job suffers and is restored to life by trusting in the never-failing grace of God, long centuries before the saving work of God came to light in Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Do you see the parallels? In ascending the dung heap – and refusing to curse God – Job defeats Satan’s scheme to destroy his faith. He stands as a suffering servant of God, an “innocent, true, blameless, and God-fearing man” (vs. 2:3). He resolutely holds onto truth, defeating the dark powers that would destroy us all. How profoundly Job models Christ, the great Suffering Servant! By His descent “to death, the Logos renewed humanity in general and made it incorrupt along with the human nature which He had assumed” (*Deification in Christ*, p. 112). When Job honors God from a dung heap, he foreshadows all that the Lord Jesus accomplishes on the Cross – laying down His life in suffering and yet rising from death in a glorious, eternal, and undying body.

Christ recasts our nature, raising it in an imperishable spiritual body. He discloses the true humanity (1 Cor 15:44), free from the limitations of time and space and endowed with new spiritual senses. The Lord Jesus extends what Nellas calls “the resurrected, blessed flesh of the Lord” in which the faithful may partake. Hence Christ creates “a new and holy place for [men and women] to live, that place being His body.”

The “new place” and condition is the one in which Job lives through faith and by which the Lord prospers him once again. Job makes himself a house of prayer for his friends, that they might receive divine forgiveness (Job 42:10). Thus, as Saint Gregory the Great notes, the Prophet Job further typifies Christ by making “his prayers more powerful in his own behalf [by offering] them also in behalf of others” (Manley, *Wisdom*, p. 646).

When the Lord gives Job “twice as much as he had before” (vs. 10), this doubling typifies the new life in Christ as well. His three daughters are Day, the new day of the Gospel that has now dawned; Cassia, whose sweet scent comes from the Lord Jesus’ pure offering; and Amalthia, a cornucopia or limitless horn whose grace pours out on the faithful (vs. 14). Truly, Job himself also is raised in Christ “with those whom the Lord resurrects” (vs. 18).

Grant, O Christ, that we who read of Job, may imitate his courage, learn his patience, and nobly oppose the ambushes of the devil, obtaining thereby the new life that Thou dost give. – based on a prayer of Saint John Chrysostom

August 25 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Joel 1:1-14

Judgment Foreshadowed: Joel 1:1-14, especially vss. 12-13: “The vine is shriveled up, and the fig trees are scarce in number. The pomegranate and the palm tree, the apple tree and all the trees of the field are withered, for they put to shame the delight of the sons of men. Gird yourself with sackcloth and wail, you priests. Mourn, you who serve at the altar. Go in, sleep in sackcloth, you who minister unto God. . . .” Degradation and butchery continue to stalk the earth in our time. Brutal men unleash savage wars, terror, and bloody revolutions, some in the name of religion. At the same time, violent upheavals of nature wreak their own calamities.

Such scourges can stagger the heart. How do we understand such evils taking place in the creation of the God who loves – and whose providence bestows many blessings stemming from nature, from the artistry of men and women, and from the findings of science? The prophets teach us to heed God’s judgment in time of calamity and, at the same time, to “be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God” (Joel 2:23).

Joel, in particular, focuses on the Lord’s activity within the fabric of history, from “the blood and fire and vapor of smoke” (vs. 3:3) to “the sweetness and milk . . . from the hills” (vs. 4:18). In this opening passage, Joel describes a natural disaster – swarming locusts – that sweeps through the land of Judah, withering life and consuming everything before it (vs. 1:4). Hordes of insects devour the grain in the fields, stripping the vineyards and fruit trees bare. The invaders are fierce in their destructiveness.

Joel urges his listeners to “tell your children about this, and your children to their children to the next generation” (vs. 3), for he cannot remember anything like it occurring during or before his lifetime (vs. 2). We come to understand nature’s destructiveness only by living in, through, and near the disasters in this world.

The prophet instructs every man to wake up, receive “the word of the Lord” (vs. 1), and be blessed. We should allow catastrophes to arouse us, much as the locust plague awakens Joel. Learn authentic history from him and do not reduce tragic events to mere “news stories.” Perceive what happens with more than fleshly eyes – let us “hear what the Spirit says” (Rv 2:7)! “Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all of you inhabiting the land” (Joel 1:2).

Let us attend from the heart to what the Lord is saying and open our inner eye to the deeper spiritual levels of existence, to a vision of history, nations, and peoples as seen through God’s eyes. If we become deadened by routine and by the constant enjoyment of life’s good things, we may find that we lack all interior blessing. We become virtual dead souls walking about in dying bodies. If so, heed Joel’s words: “Get sober, you who are drunk” (vs. 5)!

The conditions of life often change overnight and catch us unaware. Locusts devastate a whole region; HIV infects half the population of a nation. A routine annual physical exposes cancer raging in the body; a Friday afternoon brings a pink slip with our final paycheck. A note on the kitchen table announces, “I have left you and gone away. I will not be back. Hug the kids for me.” Oh, yes, how easily can “joy and gladness [be] removed from your mouth” (vs. 5) when we least expect it! We may not be ready to accept dreadful things after dwelling in momentary pleasures. It is well to read Joel thoughtfully and heed his warning.

The prophet’s admonitions derive from experience. He offers a wakeup call so that we will not despair over downturns and calamities. We would do well to *mourn* (vs. 8), “gird [ourselves] with sackcloth and wail” (vs. 13) as we sanctify the Church’s seasons of fasting and the Wednesdays and Fridays of abstinence. A balanced spiritual diet must include healing times of self-examination, repentance, and confession as part of our disciplines for spiritual growth.

Grant, O Lord Jesus Christ, that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance, ending this present life with a good defense before Thy dread judgment seat. –Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 26 – Friday – Kellia Reading – Joel 1:14-2:11

The Call to Repentance: Joel 1:14-2:11, especially vs. 11: *“The Lord shall utter His voice before the face of His army, for His army is numberless and the works of His words are mighty. Who shall resist?”* The Prophet Joel first describes how a plague of locusts awakened him to hear “the word of the Lord” (vss. 1:1-14). What he hears from God impels him to cry out to his countrymen, “Give ear, all of you inhabiting the land” (vs. 1:2). In the course of his prophesying it becomes clear that his message is not merely a plea to listen, but to respond and change (see vss. 5, 11). Since Joel receives the word from God, he knows it as a command from the Lord. God’s ancient people are to wail, lament, and gird on sackcloth, to “sanctify a fast [and] call a solemn assembly” – to “gather all the elders and the people of the land into the house of the Lord . . . and cry out fervently” (vs. 14). Thus God’s judgment, made known through a natural disaster, is actually a divine command that elicits the peoples’ obedience.

Today’s verses continue this message. Verse 14 is a command from God to gather before Him for fasting and prayer in His temple. The pattern of Joel’s prophecy moves from natural disaster to divine judgment, and finally to a command to God’s People to respond to His will. This pattern reveals how God speaks to his people – including us – down to the present day.

Taken together, the first two sections of Chapter 1 form a complete message from which three truths emerge. First, the word of every true prophet is indeed the word of the Lord. Second, disasters are windows that reveal God’s judgment, present and eternal. Third, those who hear the Lord’s command know that they will face Him at the final judgment. The words of Joel place us squarely under God’s judgment, now and for eternity.

As a prophet, Joel “teaches” and calls upon us to react in certain ways – yet in fact his prophetic forms of speech express God’s own claims. Joel, as a true prophet, is neither a mindless recording device nor a soulless pen in the divine hand. His appeals and teachings are a heavenly requirement to which God’s people are to attend. As a Spirit-filled man of prayer, Joel is what the Church Fathers call a “true theologian” – that is, one who speaks with divine authority.

Purity of heart enables Joel to serve as a clarion voice for God, a man through whom the Spirit of the Lord calls out to everyone. Joel’s personal biases and needs do not interfere with his message. The prophet moves easily from describing a local natural disaster to a declaration of “the day of the Lord” (vs. 15) and the proclamation that divine judgment is near.

If we read the present passage thoughtfully, it directs us to seek the eternal within the temporal. Joel calls on the people of God in every age to fast – and not solely for the purpose of ameliorating the consequences of natural disasters, such as a swarm of locusts stripping the countryside. He instructs God’s people to tremble, for “the day of the Lord is near, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of cloud and dense fog” (vss. 2:1-2). Historic events become transparent on the prophet’s lips, revealing the eternal ways and will of God.

Let us be sure to heed Joel’s call from God, for it is directed to us as well to the people of his own generation. Hear the Lord’s voice: “Go in, sleep in sackcloth. . . . Sanctify a fast. . . . and cry out fervently to the Lord” (vss. 1:13-14). God appoints repentance as our way of life.

If I think upon the multitude of my evil deeds, I tremble for the terrible day of judgment. But trusting the compassion of Thy mercy, I shout to Thee, Have mercy upon me, O God. – Hymn of Triodion

August 27 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Joel 3:1-4:8

Judgment and Restoration: Joel 3:1-4:8, especially vss. 4:1-2: “For behold, in those days and in that time, when I bring back the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I shall also gather all the nations together and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, and there I will enter into judgment against them on account of My people and My inheritance Israel, who were dispersed among the nations. . . .” In these verses the Lord God delivers a judgment of retribution and of restoration. He is jealous for, yet sparing of, His people: “And the Lord answered His people and said, ‘Behold, I send you wheat, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied with them’” (vs. 2:19). In this passage, the scope of God’s message expands to include *all flesh* (vs. 3:1) and even “the heavens and . . . the earth” (vs. 3:3). The prophecy comes directly from God, no longer focused on the disaster of the locusts, but speaking of what God will do in the “great and glorious day of the Lord” (vs. 3:4).

The time of the Lord’s action comes *after this* (vs. 3:1), i.e., the recent locust plague. On that day, the Lord declares, “I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh” (vs. 3:1). The conviction of ethnic superiority that mars the life of God’s ancient people is now transformed in the prophecy. The message from God foreshadows that which the Church receives from the Lord Jesus when He commands that *all* nations be baptized (Mt 28:19). Joel’s prophecy explains why the Apostle Peter quotes these very verses when he proclaims the Christian message on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). The gifts of the Spirit are not limited to one ethnic group, but extend to the Gentiles – even the hated Samaritans (vs. 8:14-17) – and “whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord” (Joel 3:5).

When this time comes, according to Joel, not only will the gift of the Holy Spirit extend to all peoples, but God will “give wonders in the heavens and upon the earth, blood and fire and vapor of smoke” (vs. 3:4). For the Magi, the “star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was” (Mt 2:9). When Christ our God died, signs indeed marked the heaven and the earth: “There was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour” because “the sun was darkened” during the Crucifixion (Lk 23:44-5). The sign of the Cross appeared over Jerusalem in AD 351 at nine in the morning; it was “brighter than the sun and more beautiful than the loveliest rainbow” and visible to believers and unbelievers alike (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 2, p. 151). The Lord promises that His return will be like lightning filling the heavens (Lk 17:24), and signs in heaven and earth will continue until then.

Most significantly, the Lord reveals through Joel the universal salvation of all peoples through Christ and His Church, as well as God’s universal judgment. He “shall also gather all the nations together and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, and there . . . enter into judgment against them on account of My people and My inheritance” (Joel 4:2). The divine promise embraces people of every race and nation.

Many deluded persecutors have assaulted God’s people through the ages. Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod, Nero, Diocletian, Hitler, Stalin, and others vainly believed that they could blot out God’s presence. The Lord asks them: “Are you paying Me back for a grudge you hold against Me? If so, I shall return your retaliation swiftly and immediately upon your own head” (vs. 4:4). The Lord makes this firm promise to every ruler who seeks to hold His beloved disciples captive in this dark, sinful world: “Behold, I shall raise them up from the place where you sold them” (vs. 4:7).

The whole creation, O Christ, hath been transfigured by fear beholding Thee suspended on the Cross, and the sun was darkened when Thou didst endure all for us. Glory to Thee. – Aposticha of Great and Holy Thursday

August 28 – Sunday – Isaiah 40:1-3, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1, Tone 2
First Reading at Vespers for the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist

Who Is This John? *Isaiah 40:1-3, 9; 41:17-18; 45:8; 48:20-21; 54:1, especially vs. 3:* “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God.’” Christians have every reason to “crown with songs of praise the Forerunner, known to be greater than the prophets, and become foremost of the apostles; for his head was cut off for the law of the Lord” (exapostelation of the feast). John becomes a glorious martyr for God’s law, witnessing on behalf of the sanctity of marriage and crying urgently to all for repentance.

Who is this man whom we call Forerunner of Christ and Baptist of the Lord? Christ Jesus teaches us that “among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Mt 11:11). The Church, the Body of Christ, provides us with a carefully selected set of instructive verses from Isaiah on the eve of the commemoration of John’s beheading. These verses teach, first of all, that John is a priest, one who ministers to God’s people (Is 40:2). He is described as a *voice in the wilderness* of our fallen, cruel, and sinful world (vs. 3). We also learn that he is a messenger “who [brings] good tidings to Zion” – that is, to the Church of God – for upon seeing Christ Jesus he exclaims, “Behold your God!” (vs. 9).

In pointing to the Lord Jesus, the Prophet and Baptist John indicates that the God-Man will cause “the poor and needy [to] rejoice exceedingly; for when they shall seek water, but there is none and their tongues are parched with thirst, I, the Lord God, will hear them; I, the Lord God of Israel, will not forsake them” (vs. 41:17). Christ confirms this prophecy when He says, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (Jn 4:14).

The Baptizer thus uniquely prepares human hearts to see Christ Jesus as the very God who transforms men’s lives by opening “rivers in the mountain and fountains in the midst of the plains. I will make the desert into marsh-meadows, and the dry land into aqueducts” (Is 41:18). He teaches us to turn to Christ as the One who truly quenches thirsting hearts, if only we would unite ourselves to Him and abandon our frenzied and futile efforts to make this world satisfy our thirst.

Our world craves true righteousness and an outpouring of blessed mercy. Surely we have had enough of self-serving deceit, violence, and immorality. What a kind service Saint John the Baptist performs for our benighted race as he points toward the Lord Jesus! The Forerunner knows that the clouds in the heavens can “sprinkle righteousness” and the earth find the repentance that will “bring forth mercy and righteousness together” (vs. 45:8) for mankind’s salvation.

We remain slaves in the Babylons of this world as long as we accept bondage as our natural state. The Forerunner, however, urges us to “go forth from Babylon” and flee “from the Chaldeans.” We are to “proclaim a voice of gladness and let it become well know. Proclaim it to the end of the earth, and say, ‘The Lord delivered His servant’” (vs. 48:20). He discloses to us that only Christ can lead us through life’s *desert* and cause “water [to] flow from the rock. . . . He will split the rock [and] the water shall flow” (vs. 21) so that our unquenchable thirst will be slaked. We have a Savior to deliver us from our deepest pain, Saint John reveals.

Let us examine ourselves and ask, “Why do I not rejoice? Why am I barren, bearing no fruit in life?” Saint John tells us: “Cry out, you who are not in travail, for more are the children of the desolate than the children” of those who possess everything in this world (vs. 54:1).

Since thou art a practical teacher of purity, and a saving guide to repentance, O Baptizer, implore thou Christ, to deliver us from the humiliation of passions. – Litiya verse for the Feast

August 29 – Monday – Malachi 3:1-7, 12, 18, 22-24

Second Reading at Vespers for the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist

God and Prophet: Malachi 3:1-3, 1-7, 12, 18, 24, 22, 23, especially vs. 1: “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come into His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. Behold, He is coming. . . .” Identifying the person (or persons) to whom Malachi refers in these verses presents some difficulties. Most careful readers agree that the phrase “My messenger” (quoted above) refers to Saint John the Forerunner, but not all. Most of the Church Fathers read the third phrase as a reference to Christ, yet Saint Cyril of Jerusalem understands the entire sentence as concerning only the Lord and His two appearances.

He says, “Of the two comings the Prophet Malachi says, ‘And suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord Whom you seek;’ that is one coming. Of the second coming he says, ‘And the Messenger of the covenant Whom you desire, yes, He is coming,’ says the Lord of hosts” (*Catechetical Lecture 15*, NPNF Second Series, vol. 12, p. 104).

We note that in the original Greek the word *angelos* appears twice within verse 3:1. The first use is suggestive of John the Forerunner: “I send forth My messenger” (lower case). The second time it appears, it is capitalized: “even the Messenger of the covenant.” In other words, the translators of the Orthodox Study Bible do not follow Saint Cyril, but rather interpret the first *angelos* as the Forerunner John, and the second *Angelos* as a reference to Jesus Christ and His Second Coming. This interpretation is reinforced by the subsequent verses.

We may recall that the angel Gabriel was God’s messenger to the Theotokos (Lk 1:26) as well as to Zacharias, the father of John (Lk 1:19). As a divinely appointed messenger, Saint John the Baptist is much like an angel who accurately represents God when he speaks. In his purity, otherness, and righteousness, John bears a resemblance to God Himself. Thus we should not be surprised that we find disagreements over the identity of the “messengers” who appear in Malachi’s prophecy. In both word and action we find many similarities between the God-Man and His Prophet and Baptist, John. We can easily consider both Christ and John as *angelos*, or messengers of God.

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus speak words aflame with judgment against “the sons of Levi” (vs. 3) and the Sadducees of the temple elite (see Mt 3:7 and 21:23). Likewise, both John and Jesus condemn sin and wickedness (see Lk 3:3 and 13:1-5), including some of the specific evils mentioned in Malachi’s prophecy (Mal 3:5). Likewise, both the Forerunner and our Lord Jesus Christ proclaim compassion for the oppressed and the foreigner, which Malachi also foretells (vs. 5). Saint John does not hesitate to baptize anyone who confesses his sins and repents (Mk 1:4). The Lord Jesus calls sinners to repentance and also purifies them; He then sends them out to continue His ministry of repentance (Mk 2:13-17).

May we who are united to the Lord Jesus as our King and God embrace this commonality in mission and ministry that is shared by the Prophet John and his cousin, our Savior and Lord. Then we shall be able follow Christ as Saint John directs, for as he says, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master” (Mt 10:24-25). Like John the Forerunner, may we become true followers!

O Christ our God, forasmuch as without Thee we are not able to please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may in all things ever direct and rule our hearts, words, and deeds. – Orthodox Missal for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 30 – Tuesday – Wisdom of Solomon 4:7, 16-17, 19-20; 5:1-7
Third Reading at Vespers for the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist

Sin's Other Dimension: Wisdom 4:7, 16-17, 19-20; 5:1-7, especially vss. 1-2: “Then the righteous man will stand with confidence in the presence of those who afflict him; and those who reject his labors, when they see him, will be shaken with dreadful fear; and they shall be amazed at his unexpected salvation.” We affirm in the Nicene Creed that our Lord Jesus Christ “shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.” That declaration, like the verses from Wisdom quoted above, carries us far beyond the realm of day-to-day life. To think in this way takes us into a dimension unbounded by time and space, a dimension that cuts across every moment, blesses all good deeds, and weeps at every sin. Foolish are those who live only for now and fail to see how their actions resound with eternal consequence.

Herod Antipas, who was accountable for the vile murder of the Forerunner, exhibits this very foolishness. That benighted man could not see the realm of the holy present all around him, for he was blinded by the clouds of lust and pride, the sensuality in which he indulged, and the craftiness he pursued. Ultimately, these passions became “impassable deserts” for him (vs. 5:7).

Men of the first century were familiar with the crimes of Herod Antipas and his wife Herodias, whose violations of God’s laws included the execution of the holy Prophet and Baptist John. A few years later, Herod started a disastrous war with his former father-in-law, King Aretas, and his own army was virtually annihilated. He then asked for the title of king from the Roman emperor, which spurred an imperial investigation. Herod and Herodias were summarily removed from court and banished from Palestine to the far interior of Roman Gaul. The two died in exile near Lyons.

Perhaps their deportation led Herod and Herodias to acknowledge that they had defiled themselves on “the paths of lawlessness” (vs. 5:7), but it seems unlikely. Their pious contemporaries saw the hand of God in the bitter reversal that befell them. All those who confess Christ as Lord and venerate the Baptist as a holy man of God understand that in eternity a far worse exile awaited Herod and Herodias. If we try to imagine someone on whose lips the lament of this reading is appropriate, Herod and Herodias come readily to mind.

Herod’s flagrant sins should call us to repentance. Through the grace of God, we know that every man who walks through life commits sin. What we fail to realize is that our sin is not confined to the realm of time, but also takes place in the dimension of eternity! Saint John the Baptist and Forerunner may have died “before his time” (vs. 4:7), yet he is alive and shall be with the Lord for eternity. As Saint John Chrysostom notes, “In our own day and through all future time, throughout all the world, John continues to refute Herod, both through himself and through others” (*On the Providence of God*, ACCS New Testament 2, p. 87).

Yes, sin has consequences that reverberate through history, but even more sobering is the fact that sin defiles eternity. The eternal dimension gives urgency to human life, especially with respect to sin. God shall rend the wicked and “dash them headlong and speechless to the ground and shake them from the foundations. They shall be left dry and barren to the very end; they shall be in pain, and their memory shall perish” (vs. 4:19). By contrast, the righteous man who is known to the Lord shall be “numbered among the sons of God . . . and . . . his portion among the saints” (vs. 5:5). May God grant us the grace to always choose repentance in fear and trembling!

O John, preacher of repentance, thou didst sanctify the earth when thy head was cut off. And since thou hast favor with the Lord, beseech Him ceaselessly for the salvation of our souls. – Hymn from the Feast of the Beheading of Saint John

August 31 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Joel 4:9-21

The Last Judgment and Restoration: Joel 4:9-21, especially vs. 12: *“Let all the nations rouse themselves and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I shall sit to judge all the nations round about.”* The earliest people of God (Israel and Judah) and the Church share a continuous history, with each generation resisting or embracing God’s call to communion. Assaults against us are constant and peaceful times rare. The ferocity of the attack varies, for the warfare is experienced inside our souls as well as externally in the form of battles and all-out war. The underlying cause of this unending conflict is evil and sin, the first and continuing plague.

We know with certainty that God never stands apart from the ongoing warfare waged against us. He acts by judging, correcting, defending, and saving, as He reveals to us by His Cross and Resurrection. Let us pray that He will deliver us who are “under judgment . . . in exile, in bitter servitude, in every tribulation, necessity and danger, and . . . those who love us and those who hate us” (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil).

As a prophet, Joel declares that God “shall sit to judge all the nations round about” (vs. 12) at specific times and, finally, on “the day of the Lord . . . in the valley of judgment” (vs. 14). The Lord ever acts to “keep His people safe and . . . strengthen the sons of Israel” (vs. 16).

Joel also records this promise: “You shall know that I am the Lord your God, the one dwelling in Zion on My holy mountain” (vs. 17). Make no mistake, the Lord “is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand” (Ps 94:7). Amidst the shocks and trials of our own day, and at every time in history, the Lord is the true refuge to whom we cling. Tribulations have existed “since the beginning of the world until this time [and] ever shall be” (Mt 24:21). In fact, the Lord Jesus tells us that “unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved” (vs. 22).

Because of the great wickedness perpetrated against God’s people, Joel foretells that desolation will come to whole nations “because of the wrongdoings against the people of Judah [and the Church], because of the innocent blood shed in their land” (Joel 4:19). The Lord “shall avenge their blood and shall not let it go unpunished” (vs. 21). The saints of the Lord will be justified and the Church shall see “no more . . . strangers pass through her” (vs. 17). The blood of the martyrs will be reckoned to those who killed them. “Therefore you also be ready,” the Lord counsels us, “for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Mt 24:44).

Enemies of the people of God and every oppressor of the Church “shall become a desolation” (Joel 4:19). But let us rejoice, for all is not battle and pain. The Lord assures us that conflict will come to an end and His saints will receive their recompense: “The mountains shall drip sweetness and milk shall flow from the hills, and all the brooks of Judah shall flow with water. And a fountain shall flow out from the house of the Lord, and it will supply water” (vs. 18). Christ, our eternal fountain, now pours out His restoration. The Church “shall be inhabited forever . . . unto generations of generations” (vs. 20).

The Life-giving Christ is risen like the sun, exactly as the Prophet Joel promised. We need not come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat for judgment as His enemies. We may repent, be cleansed at His fountain – our only refuge – and partake of true salvation in Him.

O Christ our God, glorified in Thy saints, in Thy mercy, save us by their beseechings! – Vespers of Clean Monday