

September 1 – Thursday – Isaiah 61:1-10
First Reading at Vespers for the Indiction

Greetings from the Lord: *Isaiah 61:1-9, especially vs. 1:* “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because of which He anointed Me. He sent Me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. . . .*” The first day of September is the official New Year of the Church. Called the Indiction, this feast day is explained by Saint Nikolai of Zicha as follows: “The First Ecumenical Council [AD 325] decreed that the Church’s year should begin on September first. The month . . . was, for the Jews, the beginning of the civil year (see Ex 12:2). . . . It was at the time of this feast that the Lord Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth, opened the book of the Prophet Isaiah and read the words” of this very lesson we read today (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 3, p. 275).

It is also noteworthy that during the month of September, in the year AD 312, Constantine the Great advanced his army south through Italy toward battle with Valerius Maxentius, an avowed enemy of Christ and a claimant of the Roman imperial throne. It was Constantine’s eventual victory on October 28, at Milvian Bridge, that led to the confession “of the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire.” Thus, for centuries, “the civil year in the Christian world was reckoned in same way as the Church’s year.”

Let us listen carefully, for Christ our God is sending greetings today to remind us that the coming year is *acceptable* in His eyes. He is Lord of what is to be, as He is of all time. In the months ahead, His evangelical outreach to every man, woman, and child – at every moment and in every place – is the most important truth for each person. Are you impoverished in spirit? Take heart! The Lord’s message, declared in these verses, is wonderful news: the Kingdom of heaven is ours (Mt 5:3).

Was your heart broken in the last year by a death, a lost friendship, lost income, a crippling illness, or perhaps by your own moral failure or that of someone close to you? Christ can heal us and strengthen us. We need only enter our hearts to find Him and ask that He touch us (Is 61:1).

Christ our Savior *liberates* (vs. 1). There are many forms of bondage: fear; addictions to drugs, alcohol, food, and lust; cravings for success, popularity, and good looks. Give your passion over to Him, whatever it may be. Confess it, and He will release you from chains on your soul. It begins when you say, “I have sinned, O Lord; forgive me, O God.” Then, after confession, we hear the priest say, “Now having no further care for the sins which thou hast declared, depart in peace.”

Many of us grope in the dark, wondering what life is all about. In Baptism we were united to Him who is Light. He opens the eye of the heart for anyone who will cry, “Illumine my heart, O Master Who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge” (liturgical prayer before the Gospel). We need only ask Him to open us to the way that we may live and grow.

Last year is past, gone, finished. It is over. In the heart and mind of God, the year ahead is intended to be a fruitful season, advantageous, beneficial, auspicious. It is a time of fulfillment at the hand of Him who keeps promises (vs. 2). Maybe the problem in the past was that we were looking for advantages and benefits in the wrong place. Christ our God yearns to comfort and recompense us for all that we have lost because of our sins or the sins of another (vs. 2). “Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of Thy servants as may be most expedient for us, granting us in this world, the knowledge of Thy truth, and in the age to come, life everlasting” (third antiphon).

Let us put off our cumbersome and ill-fitting spiritual garments and put on *the garment of glory* from the true King and God, Jesus Christ (vs. 3). He will help us rebuild whatever was “laid waste” (vs. 4) and know that we are “blessed by God” (vs. 9). Indeed, we have received the best of all New Year’s salutations directly from the Lord of Life!

O God of all, Creator and Master of the ages, bless the crown of this year, saving all who worship Thee, and who cry unto Thee in fear: Grant to all, O Redeemer, an acceptable year. – Kontakion of the Indiction

September 2 – Friday – Leviticus 26:3-12, 14-17, 19-24
Second Reading at Vespers for the Indiction

To Walk Before God: Leviticus 26:3-12, 14-17, 19-24, especially vs. 23-24: “Then if by these things you are not corrected by Me, but walk contrary to Me, then I also will walk in hostility to you, and I will strike you yet seven times for your sins.” In Scripture the expression “to walk” indicates a characteristic mark of personal behavior. Thus Adam and Eve hear the voice of God *walking* in the garden and hide themselves, knowing by the voice and footstep that it is He (Gn 3:8). They are afraid, because they had *shattered His covenant* (Lv 26:15).

How they differ from the Psalmist David, who says, “I have thought on Thy ways, and I have turned my feet back to Thy testimonies. I made ready, and I was not troubled that I might keep Thy commandments” (Ps 118:59-60). Adam and Eve hide, but the Psalmist openly confesses, “It is good for me that Thou hast humbled me that I might learn Thy statutes” (vs. 72). Death loses its stranglehold on us when we seek to walk “worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).

Judas Iscariot enjoyed the incalculable blessing of covering many miles in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea in the company of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet he never *walked* with Him in his heart. He chose rather to walk “in the counsel of the ungodly [and stand] in the way of the sinner [and] . . . in the seat of the pestilent. And his will [was] rather [against] the law of the Lord” (Ps 1:1-2). His life ended “like the chaff which the wind doth hurl away from the face of the earth, [and] for this reason [he] shall . . . not stand up in judgment” (vss. 4-5).

The two sets of images serve to heighten the contrast between the blessed, who “walk in [God’s] ordinances and keep [His] commandments, and do them” (Lv 26:3), and those persons who will “not obey [God], neither do all these ordinances” (vs. 14). As two portions of a single message, these verses encourage us to scan what lies ahead, making sure that we always walk with Christ, “the way, the truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). As Saint Paul reminds us, “We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

Indeed, God sets before us two contrasting ways of life – His blessings (Lv 26:3-12) vs. “the withering away of . . . life” (vs. 16). We learn what is essential for us mortals who depend daily on God’s good earth: the increase of seed sown, yield from the vine and the fruit tree (vs. 4), and peace from attacks by foreign invaders and wild animals (vs. 6). Should we abhor God’s ordinances and break covenant with Him (vs. 15), an opposite outcome befalls us (vs. 16). Although few in our contemporary society find themselves in direct contact with the earth and the elemental acts of sowing, threshing, and harvesting, we know in our bones what it means to “eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely” (vs. 5).

The challenge is the same for the farmer, the professional, and the scientist: to walk with the Lord that by His grace the *wild animals* in our hearts may be driven out. These include revelry, lewdness, lust, strife, and envy, which take the place of a true, fruitful, and pleasing walk before God (Rom 13:13). Hear the Apostle Paul: “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). “As you . . . have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (Col 2:6). When dark enemies approach our heart and mind, let us drive them from us with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication.” (Eph 6:17-18).

O Master Who lovest mankind, and dost feed us with Thy heavenly mysteries, make also our path straight before Thee, establish us in Thy fear, and keep firm our steps in Thy ways. – Prayer of Thanksgiving, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 3 – Saturday – Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15
Third Reading at Vespers for the Indiction

Understanding: Wisdom 4:7-15, especially vss. 13-14: “He was made perfect, for in a short time he fulfilled long years, for his soul was pleasing to the Lord. . . .” The year comes to a close and a cycle of twelve months recedes forever into the past. Today yet another parade of weeks begins. May we, as Christ’s own, recognize that the start of the new year prompts us to consider how to live during this incessant unfolding of our days. How are we to know true *rest* (vs. 7), completion, and fulfillment as we busy ourselves on the relentless conveyor belt called life?

At the start of each fiscal year, accountants check the balance sheet to see if income and expenses reveal a profit or a loss. At the beginning of the civil year, many of us assess whether we have attained the personal or secular goals we set. Today, however, is different. It is the New Year of the people of God, of the Orthodox Church, of those men and women whom God has called out of this world and its many attractions that would “undermine an innocent heart” (vs. 12), bewitching us and absorbing our time and energy.

By calling this day the Ecclesiastical New Year, the Church bids us lift ourselves above the flow of time and consider for a moment whether we are moving toward the high and eternal understanding “that the Lord’s grace and mercy are with His elect and that He watches over His holy ones” (vs. 15). There lies before us another Year of Our Lord, an *Anno Domini*, in which we may devote ourselves to Christ’s glory and our greater good – or choose to live as if it were merely an *anno mundi*, one more revolution of the earth around the sun, during which we waste our time indulging in pleasures and selfish wants. Today is also the Feast of Joshua, son of Nun, who challenges us to “choose . . . for yourselves today whom you will serve” (Jos 24:15).

Our New Year’s resolutions should be godly in nature, strengthening us in what is “pleasing to God” (Wis 4:10) for as long as we live in this fallen world. Let us glean wisdom from Solomon that we may better pursue God-pleasing *understanding* during the coming year of temporal life, and never lose sight of the things of eternity. To accomplish this goal we must be rooted in *what is good*, unmoved by temptations or guile and firmly opposed to every *whirling desire* (vss. 11-12).

The “understanding” spoken of in this passage is not just any type of discernment (vs. 9). We humans do err and resist, as the Lord declares through Isaiah: “These people draw near to Me and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. . . . Therefore . . . I shall remove them. I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and hide the understanding of the intelligent” (Is 29:13-14). How crucial it is for us to seek out true understanding, sustaining that godly discernment which Saint Paul links to the Lord’s will “in all . . . spiritual understanding” (Col 1:9).

The Lord Jesus loves those who, like the scribe in Mark 12, inquire about the foremost of His commandments. When Christ quotes the commandments that we love God wholeheartedly and our neighbor as our self, the scribe is delighted. He hastens to say that to love God “with all the heart, with all the understanding . . . is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mk 12:33). And “when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the Kingdom of God’” (vs. 34).

Right understanding leads to God-pleasing action that keeps one *spotless* (Wis 4:9), able to discern “between good and evil” (3 Kgs 3:9) and choosing the good. Thus we can walk amidst sin and still please the Lord in all things through His *grace and mercy* (Wis 4:10, 15).

Ever assist me, O Lord, and direct me to divine wisdom and understanding, that I may accomplish whatever I undertake according to Thy will and to the profit of myself and others. – Prayer Before Commencing Any Task

September 4 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 47:1-6, Tone 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

September 5 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 47:11-48:10

Trust and Treachery: Jeremiah 47:11-48:10, especially vs. 48:1-2: *“Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten men to Gedaliah at Mizpah. There they ate bread together. Then Ishmael and the ten men with him arose and struck Gedaliah, whom the king of Babylon appointed over the land. . . .”* If we wish to guard our conscience, we would do well to heed the words of Saint Isaiah the Solitary: “In the fear of God let us keep our attention fixed within ourselves, until our conscience achieves its freedom. Then there will be a union between it and us, and thereafter it will be our guardian, showing us each thing that we must uproot. But if we do not obey our conscience, it will abandon us and we shall fall into the hands of our enemies, who will never let us go” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 22-3).

In the present reading Jeremiah describes two men: Gedaliah, a trustworthy servant of God who guards well his conscience, and Ishmael, who disdains the fear of God, disobeys any promptings of conscience, and falls into the hands of Satan, becoming a master of treachery and a child of eternal darkness. The contrast between the lives of these two men underscores the importance of heeding one’s conscience. As Abbot Nazarius of Valaam reminds us, “And there will come a time when we shall be judged not according to the book of knowledge and understanding, but according to the book of conscience” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 92). We shall all stand before the dread judgment seat of Christ.

“The king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah to govern over the land, and . . . entrusted to him their men and women whom he had not carried away captive to Babylon” (Jer 47:7). Gedaliah consistently fulfills this trust. Jeremiah, freed to remain in the land of Judah (vs. 5), chooses to live at Mizpah under Gedaliah’s oversight (vs. 6). So greatly trusted is this new governor among the remnant of Judah that “all the leaders of the army in the field, they and their men” come to him confidently (vs. 7). He swears to them to “stand before the Chaldeans” (vs. 10). The units of these men, former officers of the army of Judah, ranged over the country during the time the Chaldeans sought to subdue the land. Even Jews who had fled into neighboring kingdoms during the war trusted Gedaliah, for they returned to Judah and to their farms (vss. 11-12).

People do not readily place great trust in their leaders. To earn trust, one must demonstrate that he is worthy of confidence, a man of conscience whose word is reliable and whose moral judgment is balanced and fair. The record reveals that Gedaliah’s conscience led him to keep the commandments scrupulously. For example, although he is warned of Ishmael’s plan to murder him, he forbids preemptive action against the man (vs. 16). Being of a pure conscience, the new governor imagines the report of Ishmael’s treachery to be a false accusation. He thus extends hospitality to his neighbor (vs. 48:1), for as Saint Maximos the Confessor says, “A clear conscience cannot be charged with the breaking of a commandment” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 251).

Ishmael’s conscience, on the other hand, appears to have been darkened by reliance on his ties to the royal family (vs. 1). He violates the holy covenant of hospitality by murdering his host and others present at the dinner (vs. 2-3). He feigns grief over the loss of the Temple and pretends welcome to pilgrims in the name of the murdered Gedaliah (vs. 6), but then slaughters seventy while allowing ten to live, seemingly in order to gain their supplies (vss. 7-8). He takes others captive, apparently planning to sell them into slavery (vs. 10). Later, when intercepted, Ishmael runs from justice (vs. 48:15). God save us from such death of soul!

Grant unto us, O God, fear of turning to evil as a slave or of being a hireling in hope of reward, but aid us in acquiring the habit of good, with its taste of joy and the gladness of peace. – Abba Dorotheos of Gaza

September 6 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 48:11-49:17

A Word From the Lord: Jeremiah 48:11-49:17, especially vss. 2-3: “Let our supplication now come before your face, and pray to the Lord your God concerning those who remain. . . . Let the Lord your God proclaim to us the way wherein we should walk and the thing we should do.” The writings of Jeremiah, produced during the collapse of Judah’s national life, disclose raw chaos. The remnant of God’s people struggle to pick up their lives while undergoing violence, fear, and uncertainty. The desire for peace and an end to hunger consume their thoughts and actions.

Initially God’s people settle in refugee camps near the newly appointed governor, Gedaliah. After his murder they are taken captive, but soldiers from their own army appear and free them (vs. 48:11-13). The group then flees “into Egypt, away from the presence of the Chaldeans (vss. 17-18),” fearing reprisal for Gedaliah’s murder.

While at a caravan station near Bethlehem (vs. 17), the group approaches Jeremiah with a request. Since the prophet has shared in the horrors and the forced marches, they ask if he will seek a word from the Lord on their behalf: “Let the Lord your God proclaim to us the way wherein we should walk and the thing we should do” (vs. 49:3). Today’s reading offers us a straightforward yet arresting study in how to seek guidance from the Lord and how to open ourselves to His will for our direction in life.

First, these refugees of God’s people recognize that words from the Lord come in their most pure form through one who prays and has demonstrated an ability to discern the Lord’s mind (vss. 49:2-3). They begin by carefully asking him to consider their “supplication. . . and pray to the Lord *your* God” (vs. 2). After Jeremiah says, “I will pray to the Lord *our* God” (vs. 4), they adopt his expression and promise twice to “heed the voice of the Lord our God” (vs. 6).

Second, any word of God received by a prophet is not private property. The Lord gives His counsel to His people for their benefit; it is meant to be shared. Therefore, God’s whole word is to be transmitted. Jeremiah promises, “I will not conceal any word from you” (vs. 4).

The people clearly understand their own responsibility. If they ask for a word from the Lord through His prophet, then they must obey that word: “Whether it be good or evil, we will heed the voice of the Lord our God” (vs. 6). They neither waver nor qualify their response.

Additionally, we note that the word of the Lord does not come automatically. Jeremiah agrees to pray about the matter, to set it before the Lord, and to wait upon Him. This is the implication of his statement, “I will pray to the Lord our God according to your words” (vs. 4).

When in grace God does give a word, He forthrightly reveals His will; He does not speak ambiguously to His own. In this instance, the Lord sets forth two alternatives: to go into Egypt or to remain in the land. He then makes clear which choice is for life and which leads to the sword, famine, and death (vss. 10-16).

Knowing His people’s fears and weaknesses, the Lord encourages them when He gives a word. He assures the people, “I am with you to deliver you, and to save you” (vs. 11). However, He warns them as well: “All. . . who set their faces to the land of Egypt . . . shall die” (vs. 17). If we are to walk in spaciousness, we must seek after the commandments of God (Ps 118:45).

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with Thy most gracious favor, that all our works, begun, continued, and ended in Thy word, may bring glory to Thy name and true life upon us. – Collect for Guidance, Episcopal Book of Common Prayer

September 7 – Wednesday – Genesis 28:10-17
First Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Theotokos

Along the Way: Genesis 28: 10-17, especially vs. 15: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken.” In times of grief, terror, and dejection we may reach “the end of our rope” – and yet God is present, most noticeably in our extremities. He tells us that He is preserving us along the way and promises to bring us home after He accomplishes all things. Many circumstances can lead us to fear that we will be cut off from the safety of Beersheba (vs. 10). They stand between us and the distant land of Haran toward which we trudge in search of earthly safety and a time of haven. *Along the way* God meets us, especially when we find sleep fitful and only a stone for a pillow.

Today we consider the nativity of Mary, the Birthgiver of God. Here is a wonder that illumines the mystery of the God-who-condescends. The fulfillment of one promise comes to pass, but it is wrapped up in a further promise – a solemn vow within an oath. The birth of the Pure One fulfills the promise made to Joachim and Anna: they will suffer neither reproach nor barrenness! Yet within the promise of the infant-maiden Mary comes a greater promise: the birth of the God-man who is the promise for all ages, who fulfills all things. Mary’s birth initiates the trampling down of the ancient curse, the beginning of the end of the condemnation inscribed on each and every child of Adam and Eve.

First a child is born beyond all expectation, fulfilling God’s promise to a righteous old couple. In time that infant girl becomes the Birthgiver of Life, the mother of the eternal God-is-with-us. Note the connections to this passage from Genesis: the Promised Land is a tough journey, with only fitful sleep and a “dread” place along the way. And yet it is “none other than the house of God, and . . . the gate of heaven” (vs. 17). It is *Bethel*, where the Lord reveals the Ladder who will descend from heaven to earth, reaffirming His promise.

Many years before Jacob’s journey to Haran, Jacob’s father Isaac settled at Beersheba, that place which in the Septuagint is translated as the “Well of Oath” (vs. 10). There God appeared to Isaac and made him an oath, promising His continual presence and His blessing (Gn 26:24). Isaac dug a well at this spot and made an oath of peace with his long-standing enemy (vss. 25-33).

See what we are taught to expect of God! He comes even when His beloved are dislocated and in search of life’s truth. We often lose hope in the face of worldly troubles. However, it is precisely while on such tough journeys that God calls us to move forward confidently. Here is the land where God reiterates His promises. Isaac’s experience, his son Jacob’s trial, and the barrenness of Joachim and Anna offer us three types of the promise along the way that every member of the people of God discovers while journeying through this existence where extremity, promise, and fulfillment are known.

Are you at your wits’ end, tired on the way? Rest on a stone and wait! Above all, do not despair over life’s stresses. Heed the words of Saint Basil the Great: “To him who believes, a promise is given by God: ‘I will give hidden treasures, unseen ones’ (Is 45:3)” (*Exegetical Homilies*, Homily 15). Having glimpsed the Lord’s *unseen* riches, we shall find assurance that we are headed the right way. With only a stone for a pillow we will find a blessed if fitful moment. Even in the midst of our uneasy rest, God will show us that we are headed along the correct way toward a great Promised Land.

Be renewed, O Adam, and be magnified, O Eve, and ye prophets exchange glad tidings; for there is universal joy in the world for angels and men, for God is faithful to His promises. – Hymn for the Nativity of the Theotokos

September 8 – Thursday, Nativity of the Theotokos – Ezekiel 43:27-44:4
Second Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Theotokos

The Perfect Temple: Ezekiel 43:27-44:4, especially vs. 27: “‘On the eighth day, the priests shall offer your whole burnt offerings and your peace offerings on the altar, and I shall accept you,’ says the Lord.” The Prophet Ezekiel was born into a priestly lineage, destined to serve in the ancient Temple at Jerusalem. But when that holy place was destroyed by the Babylonians, the Chaldean army forced Ezekiel and many of his countrymen to return with them to Babylon as slaves. God, however, gave the exiled Ezekiel a vision of a glorious, divinely restored Temple, a holy place where the Lord would dwell once again and receive the worship of His people. The present passage contains the main portion of that vision.

The Church understands Ezekiel’s vision as a prophecy of the Holy Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary, who became the living temple for Christ our God. The Lord thus fulfilled the vision of Ezekiel some five hundred years after the prophecy was first received. Even before the birth of Christ – indeed, from the time of the Virgin Mary’s birth until her Annunciation – there were years of maturation and preparation, like the early hours that precede the dawn. The approach of “the true Light which gives light to every man” (Jn 1:9) was already manifest in the early life of the Theotokos. The sacred writings of Holy Tradition detail that time in her life, which was also previewed by prophets such as Ezekiel.

The present reading reveals exactly what Ezekiel foretells concerning the Birthgiver of God. It is clear to God’s prophet that the restored Temple of his vision will be pure and consecrated (Ezk 43:26). We are able to see that God accomplishes this through the miraculous birth of Mary to a barren couple, well past childbearing age. The Lord provides grace for this daughter to live a pure life as a consecrated vessel from birth. At the feast of her Entrance into the Temple (November 21), the Church reminds us again that Mary, “the fruit of Joachim and Anne the righteous, [was] offered to God in His holy Temple as a babe in the flesh whom the noble Zachariah blessed” (festal Orthros verse).

May we, like Ezekiel, come to understand that God accepts our worship whenever we offer ourselves to Him as *burnt offerings* (vs. 27) to be presented and wholly consumed, as in the ancient Temple. God accepts His people when we give ourselves as holocausts – as a total offering, holding nothing back. At every juncture of her life the Theotokos offers herself in this way, placing herself fully in the Lord’s hands to carry out His will. At the Annunciation we hear Mary say, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

In receiving the vision of the perfect Temple, Ezekiel understands that outer gate of the Temple, which faces east, will be used only by “the Lord God of Israel” (Ezk 44:2). Thereafter it will remain shut, since only “the prince . . . will sit in it to eat bread before the Lord . . . [and] go in by way of the gate chamber and go out by the same way” (vs. 3). Here Ezekiel speaks of the ever-virginity of the All-pure Theotokos, who “remained incorruptible after giving birth to Immanuel.”

Ezekiel also sees “the house of the Lord . . . full of glory; and [he] fell on [his] face” (vs. 4). Likewise in our iconography the Theotokos is shown filled with the glory of the Lord. May we, therefore, offer her praise in hymns and songs in her glory.

Thou didst hold in thy womb, O Virgin, Christ the King; beseech Him to save our souls. – Canon of the Nativity of the Theotokos

September 9 – Friday – Proverbs 9:1-11
Second Reading at Vespers for the Nativity of the Theotokos

The Perfect Servant: Proverbs 9:1-11, especially vs. 6: “Seek discernment so you may live, and keep straight your understanding with knowledge.” The Church understands that the “Wisdom” in this reading is none other than Christ our King and God; it is His “servants [who are] inviting people . . . with a lofty proclamation” (vs. 3). The pronouns associated with the Hebrew and Greek words for wisdom (*hokma, sophia*) take the feminine gender – “she,” “her,” “herself” – but the theologians of the Church have never been troubled by this confusing aspect of the ancient biblical languages, for they know Wisdom as the servants of true prayer.

The Prophet Solomon, by whose blessing we have received this passage, rightly perceives the true divinity of Wisdom, feminine pronouns aside. Notice that the proclamation of Wisdom’s servants (vss. 4-6) urges all who hear the invitation to leave folly and seek Wisdom that they “may live, and keep straight [their] understanding with knowledge” (vs. 6). Is it not God Himself who gives us life and understanding? That, certainly, is the proclamation of the Church.

As we read the passage in this light, we take note of the house that Wisdom builds (vs. 1). The number of its pillars is seven, the divine number. What is this house, if not the Body of Christ, the Wisdom incarnate of the Virgin – and the Wisdom known and available in His Body, the Holy Church (vs. 1)? The *sacrifices* and *wine* that Wisdom spreads for the faithful (vs. 2) are the Eucharistic banquet. Wisdom’s servants going forth with His proclamation (vs. 3) are “every righteous spirit made perfect in faith, especially our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary” (prayer of the anaphora). She is indeed a model servant, for she would not touch folly but rather seeks Wisdom in her Son; she reigns forever to intercede for us before His throne (vs. 6).

The concluding verses 7-11 are Wisdom’s instructions for inviting all mankind to the feast of the Divine Liturgy. First, Holy Wisdom warns us who would herald this proclamation that *dishonor* and hatred may be our lot if *evil* and *ungodly* men hear this invitation. History attests to this fact! On the other hand, Wisdom’s servants have the joy of seeing others find, grow, and continue to receive the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). How numerous are the faithful who have heard the message of Wisdom’s servants and thereby attained “the fear of the Lord,” embracing with joy “the counsel of saints,” and through struggle have acquired the “good mind” that He gives (Prv 9:10).

Our Lady the Holy Theotokos was born to serve Wisdom. Scorn and public contempt would certainly have been her lot, had not God intervened with Joseph the Betrothed “when she was found with child of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). Joseph, “being a just man” and imbued with Wisdom, did not want “to make her a public example” (vs. 19). Hence when he was “aroused from sleep, [he] did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (vss. 24-25).

Through her inexplicable birth-giving the Theotokos reveals herself as the perfect servant of God. From the time of the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement, she remains the unblemished handmaid of the Lord, accepting the prospect of the Holy Spirit overshadowing her so that the “Holy One” might be born of her, the very “Son of God” (Lk 1:35). After Christ’s Ascension “the years of [her] life [were] increased” (Prv 9:11), and she continues to offer eternal service to Him as our loving intercessor.

In thy womb, O virgin Mother, thou didst hold the Holy Wisdom whom all creation doth praise and before whom the celestials tremble. Wherefore, beseech Him to save our souls. – Canon of the Nativity of the Theotokos

September 10 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 50:1-13

Jeremiah's Later Ministry, continued – Self-Will: Jeremiah 50:1-13, especially vs. 2: “Azariah the son of Mahseiah, Johanan the son of Kareah, and all the men who spoke to Jeremiah said, ‘That is a lie. The Lord did not send you to us saying, “Do not enter Egypt to dwell there.”’” The men named in this verse ask Jeremiah for a word from the Lord “wherein we should walk” (vs. 49:3). However, after they receive God’s word, they reject Jeremiah and the Lord’s counsel to refrain from going into Egypt (vs. 49:19). What a contradiction! First ask a prophet for a word from the Lord, then reject God’s counsel and call His messenger a liar!

This reaction may seem amazing to us but consider how common such a response is among God’s people to this day. It exposes a dark perversity that takes control of the heart and flies in the face of the proven ways of the Lord. He then brings down upon His beloved “the blow of your enemy, even firm correction” (vs. 37:12).

Note that “all the leaders of the army” (vs. 50:4) appear to believe that Jeremiah shares their personal uncertainty. They accuse him of having no will of his own, but instead allowing “Baruch the son of Neriah [to] set you against us” (vs. 3). And yet these same men declared emphatically, “Let the Lord be between us as a righteous and faithful witness, if we will do every word the Lord sends us, and whether it be good or evil, we will heed the voice of the Lord our God” (vss. 49:5-6).

Let us consider ourselves for a moment. Is our will always truly set on doing what accords with the will of God? Do we ever detect any hint of self-will within ourselves? I know how easily my will asserts itself!

Next, let us take note of the contradiction in the logic of Azariah, Johanan, “and all the men” (vs. 50:2). They reject Jeremiah’s prophecy because they are convinced that, if they follow the word of the Lord, they will be delivered “into the hand of the Chaldeans, to kill us or send us as captives to Babylon” (vs. 3). It appears that these men fear death and long to remain free to go where they choose, and yet they choose exile in Egypt. These sons of Abraham elect return to that country where they were once held in bondage!

Self-will obscures our limited human reasoning. As the Apostle Paul asks, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor 1:20). Are we above the temptation to think ourselves wiser than God? Does His will seem too extreme at times? Let us bear in mind that we are better off when we obey first, rather than discovering later that we missed the wisdom of God’s path.

As is so often the case, self-will prevails. The men flee to Egypt, dragging along “the mighty men, the women and children, the daughters of the king, and the souls whom Nebuzaradan left with Gedaliah” (Jer 50:6) including Jeremiah and Baruch! Sin enjoys company. However, once the group arrives in Egypt, the Lord gives them another word. Their worst fears will soon be realized, for Nebuchadnezzar “shall enter in and strike the land of Egypt. He shall deliver some for death, and those for captivity to captivity, and those for the sword to the sword” (vs. 11). History indeed reveals Jeremiah to be a true prophet of God, for the Chaldeans successfully invaded Egypt in 568 BC.

Let us reflect before the Lord on how self-will governs our lives. Whenever we defy the will of God, the consequences inevitably expose the futility of following our own judgment. Saint John Climacus indicates a better path, calling “obedience . . . the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility.” Whenever we take the risk of setting God’s will above our own, obedience becomes the “abandonment of discernment in a wealth of discernment” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.3, p. 21). By God’s grace, let us obey Him!

O Lord, cleanse my soul, and hallow Thou my thoughts. Enlighten as one my five senses. Establish me wholly in Thy fear. Show me to be a dwelling place of Thy Spirit. – Postcommunion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

September 11 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 51:1-14, Tone 4

The God of History: Jeremiah 51:1-14, especially vs. 7: “So now, thus says the Lord Almighty: ‘Why do you commit great evils against your souls to cut off your man and woman, and your child and infant, from the midst of Judah? Your evils did not leave one of you as a remnant because you provoked Me. . . .’” The German philosopher Hegel observed rather cynically, although with much truth, “Peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.” The prophetic record of Jeremiah adds credence to this observation. The great prophet spent his life pleading with God’s people to avoid disaster by following His word as revealed in their history, with little result.

The generations that came after the godly King Josiah seemed determined to defy the Lord’s will despite ongoing appeals from His prophets. At no time during Jeremiah’s ministry were the people of Judah open to God’s truth, despite their harsh experiences. Even the refugees of the Babylonian invasion fled to Egypt against God’s counsel after the shattering of their nation.

Those who sought safety in Egypt gravitated toward existing centers of Egyptian culture and religion (vs. 1). There they daily immersed themselves in idolatry and non-historical views of life in this world. According to Egyptian cosmology, life was determined by the cyclic forces of nature. Invented deities such as the sun god and the gods of the sky, earth, air, water, and fertility were honored and worshiped by the populace. The Egyptians devoutly burned incense to these supposed gods in an effort to placate and influence the powers of nature to act in their favor. Concepts of truth, morality, and justice derived solely from patterns observed in the repetitive course of natural processes. God’s people believed that the Lord discloses His purposes by means of historical events, but such a concept was entirely unknown to the Egyptians.

Under these circumstances Jeremiah feared for the tiny remnant of God’s people left in Judah. By moving to Egypt, they had chosen a society based on a seductive faith in nature and the imagination. Egyptian culture would surely destroy their consciousness of the Lord God who speaks with wisdom. Furthermore, the refugees were losing their unique heritage of obedience to God’s will as disclosed in history. The results would be terrible (vs. 49:18).

The whole nation of Judah had fallen into idolatrous worship before, especially after allying itself with Egypt against Babylon (vs. 7:16-19). Drawing on his historical outlook based on divine revelation, Jeremiah knows the result of thrusting aside obedience to the Lord in favor of charming idolatrous cults: wrath will be “poured out . . . on men and cattle, on every tree of their field and on the fruits of the land” (vs. 19).

In the modern world we are daily invited to adopt alien ways of life. The Roman Catholic cardinal of Great Britain, Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, recently declared, “Christ [is] being replaced by music, New Age beliefs, the environmental movement, the occult and the free-market economy.” These and other movements flourishing today are based on naturalism and ahistorical assumptions about life.

Be cautious, Christ lovers, for the adoption of man-made forms of worship invariably suppresses our fear of the Lord as proclaimed by the prophets and apostles. In the end, such false worship erodes our commitment to the living God and to the truth that our holy faith proclaims to all men in all ages (vs. 51:10).

O Lord who rulest all men, and by grace hast made us reason-endowed sheep in the holy flock of Thy Christ, help us to live unto Thee in accordance with Thy saving commandments. – Baptismal Prayer

September 12 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 51:15-23

Interpreting History: Jeremiah 51:15-23, especially vs. 17: *“For we will certainly do every word which proceeds from our mouth, to burn incense to the queen of heaven and to pour out drink offerings to her, as we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, have done in the cities of Judah and outside Jerusalem. For we were full of bread; and we were well-off and saw no calamities.”* How fiercely the refugees in Egypt reject the word of the Lord! They call Jeremiah a liar, rationalizing their worship of a pagan goddess and misrepresenting their flight into Egypt.

People deceive themselves not only by means of statistics, as we often see today, but also by distorting the facts of history to support their own desires and lifestyles. Today’s reading asks us to consider *how* we are to interpret historical events. How should we read such actions as they unfold in order to draw sound conclusions?

The Book of Chronicles states plainly that Scripture provides us with the basis for interpreting history. Several of its accounts parallel Jeremiah’s rebuttal of pagan practices and speaks to the idol worship of today. For example, Chronicles compares the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah (716-687 BC) with that of Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, who followed him on the throne (687-643 BC). Of Hezekiah, Chronicles states, “He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to everything his father David had done” (2 Chr 29:2). Manasseh, however, “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the Gentiles” (vs. 33:2).

We must always ask, “What is right in the eyes of the Lord?” when we evaluate the epochs and turning points of history, as well as our individual approach to life. Jeremiah’s basis for discerning what is right in God’s eyes is grounded in “the voice of the Lord . . . His ordinances, His law, and His testimonies” (Jer 51:23). As a servant of God, he stands squarely in an unbroken tradition received from the patriarchs, Moses, and the earlier prophets of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ taught and defended this same tradition. Let us consider well what Christ our Lord says: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17-19).

Those who offer incense and libations to the goddess Astarte (“the queen of heaven”) make a superficial case in defense of their worship: our fathers worshiped her in Judah, and “we were full of bread . . . and saw no calamities” (Jer 51:17). Yet they did see calamity! Note that they fail to mention God’s law, the will of the Lord, or His statutes which they flouted by worshiping this nature goddess of fertility and love associated with Baal.

Jeremiah points to history as a source for discerning the consequences of disobeying God: “The Lord could no longer bear with your evil deeds and with the abominations you committed. Thus your land became as a desolation, as impassable, and as a curse, as it is this day” (vs. 22). Our lives and the very future of our families and nation depend on our doing what is right in eyes of the Lord. When we flout God’s will, consequences follow. As Jeremiah says, “Because you . . . sinned against the Lord . . . therefore, these calamities came upon you” (vs. 23).

O Lord, we thank Thee that Thou didst not forget the work of Thy hands, but didst speak to us by Thy prophets: release us from delusions, and bring us to a true knowledge of Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

September 13 – Tuesday – Exodus 15:22-16:1
First Reading at Vespers for the Exaltation of the Cross

The Cross Removes Bitterness: *Exodus 15:22-16:2, especially vs. 25:* “So he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.” Three days after their memorable crossing of the Red Sea, God’s people can find no water in the vast and arid Sinai peninsula, a region virtually devoid of water. When they finally come upon some waters, they discover them to be “bitter” (vs. 23), most likely poisoned. With death by either thirst or poison confronting them, God reveals how these waters can be changed: “The Lord showed [Moses] a tree (vs. 25), physically visible, and then illumined to the eye of the great Seer’s heart: a tree to sweeten the water” (hymn of the feast).

Because of the Cross “all the trees of the wood, planted from the beginning of time, rejoice; for their nature hath been sanctified by the stretching of Christ on the Tree” (festal hymn). Every tree becomes worthy of our reverence, since a tree was used for God’s glory in the saga of our salvation. The Lord discloses a tree to Moses and orders him to throw it into the waters of Marah, which means “bitter.” That particular tree at Marah is forever revered as a type of the Cross, that wondrous Tree whereon our Lord sweetened the bitterness of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gn 2:17).

In fact we embitter ourselves, but Christ our God has removed that poison by the Cross. The tree of God’s choosing “made the waters of Marah sweet, anticipating the act of the Cross.” Glory to Him who by His saving powers showers ineffable mercy upon us! Our merciful Lord has given the Tree of the Cross to us to illumine our hearts and end our bitter thirst from sin and death. In the parching desert of this arid world, the Cross saves!

Many addicts imagine that thirst can only be assuaged by elixir in a bottle. Others struggle vainly against insatiable hunger for food. The honeyed kisses of illicit love seem to promise lasting sweetness. But Christ our God reveals to us the Cross, for on its wood He takes away the unrelieved burning of the heart, “having nailed it to the cross” (Col 2:14).

God alone sweetens the tenacious bitterness of our sin. No inherent property of the tree at Marah makes the waters potable – God Himself works through a little desert tree. He directs Moses to cast the tree into the poison and thus “the waters were made sweet” (Ex 15:25). No earthly chemistry could remove the bitterness from Marah’s dangerous waters. Yet for us Christ’s Cross transforms the poison of this existence into life.

Christ wrests life from the Tree, “for the message of the Cross . . . to us who are being saved . . . is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). Let us be encouraged and worship the Lord Jesus, who promises that “he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35).

Having quenched our forefathers’ thirst, God now has “made a statute and an ordinance for them” (Ex 15:25). “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is pleasing in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His ordinances, I will put none of the diseases on you that I brought on the Egyptians; for I am the Lord your God who heals you” (vs. 26). God leads us on toward our own Elim with its “twelve fountains of water” (vs. 27).

The Cross is life for all. Let us bow down before the saving Tree, embracing its wood with joy and fear: “With fear because of sin, for we are unworthy; with joy because of the salvation which Christ, who was nailed thereon . . . granted to the world” (hymn of the feast).

O Thou who was raised up on the Cross of Thine own will, O Christ our God, do Thou bestow Thy compassions upon Thy people named after Thee from all afflictions and death. – Kontakion of the Exaltation of the Cross

September 14 – Wednesday, Exaltation of the Cross– Proverbs 3:11-18
Second Reading at Vespers for the Exaltation of the Cross

The Wisdom of the Cross: Proverbs 3:11-18, especially vs. 18: “*Righteousness proceeds from her mouth, and she carries law and mercy upon her tongue.*” In Paradise “God caused every tree beautiful to the sight and good for food to grow,” and also “the tree of life and the tree of learning the knowledge of good and evil” (Gn 2:9). The Lord made one proviso for Adam and Eve that applies, by extension, to all men: “You may eat food from every tree in the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat; for in whatever day that you eat from it, you shall die by death” (vss. 2:16-17).

Sin and death came, and we are enmeshed in them still. The enemy dangles a lie before the woman: “You shall not die by death” (vss. 3:4). As Saint John Chrysostom points out, “she not only failed to turn away” from Satan, but proceeded to disclose to him “the whole secret of the Lord’s direction, thus casting pearls before swine. . . . She exposed to swine, to that evil beast, that is, to the demon acting through it, the divine pearls” of God’s mysteries (Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 22-3).

Since “evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor 15:33), Eve sees that which she has not perceived up until now: “the tree was good for food, was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree beautiful to contemplate.” Thus deluded, “she took its fruit and ate” (Gn 3:6).

Is it wise to take what is forbidden by our Creator? What wisdom can be found by esteeming the advice of the enemy over the cautions of God? As Eve’s accomplice, Adam is no wiser than she. He takes what he knows to be forbidden, and he also eats. Listen to the word of the Lord: “Then the eyes of both were opened” (vss. 3:7). Who opened them?

Saint John Chrysostom states clearly that God “saw to it that they would now experience their nakedness and the loss of the glory they enjoyed before eating. . . . From that event knowledge of sin then entered the scene, and shame as well” (*Lament of Eve*) with death not far behind. Truly, we gain no wisdom from disobedience!

Is wisdom perhaps available from the other tree in Eden? Proverbs 3:20 might seem to imply this (“She is a tree of life for all who cleave to her”). Or is wisdom hopelessly beyond us, excluded as we are from Paradise where God has “stationed the cherubim and the fiery sword which turns every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gn 3:24)? Are we consigned to amass knowledge without ever finding wisdom? Such an idea is contrary to what the text says! The word of the Lord declares: “Blessed is a man who finds wisdom” (Prv 3:13).

How, then, do we go about finding wisdom? Let us begin with the apostle’s words: “Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). God became Wisdom Incarnate – that is, He made Himself tangibly available to us, so that we can learn from Him and gain understanding person to person. Thus God’s advice in Proverbs includes the insight that we are to *gain profits* from wisdom (Prv 3:14). To *gain* in Hebrew means “to engage in trade.” The Lord Jesus underscores the nature of this exchange when He says: “Sell all that you have . . . and come, follow Me” (Lk 18:22). He is the Pearl of Great Price; He is Wisdom; He is greater than any earthly “deal” ever offered, for He is God.

Everything we read about wisdom in these verses from Proverbs applies to Christ’s crucifixion. His Cross is “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24) and life itself! We are excluded from Paradise, yet He joins Himself to our weariness and vexation of spirit that we may find wisdom, life, righteousness, and peace through Him.

O most venerable Cross, surrounded in joy by the ranks of angels, raise ye up Christ God, exceeding in goodness, and we shall fall down in faith before thee, His divine footstool. – Sticheron for the Exaltation of the Cross

September 15 – Thursday – Isaiah 60:11-16
Third Reading at Vespers for the Exaltation of the Cross

The Cross as Zion: Isaiah 60:11-16, especially vs. 15: “Because you were forsaken and hated, and there was no one to help you, therefore I will make you an eternal joy, the gladness of generations to generations.” In older translations of Scripture we find archaic personal pronouns such as “thee,” “thou,” and “ye” that are often omitted from more recent translations such as our Orthodox Study Bible. The disappearance of these forms sometimes impairs our ability to discern whether a given text designates an individual or two or more persons. (In everyday speech, of course, we compensate for this loss of precision by saying “all of you” or “both of you.”)

In reading this passage from Isaiah we must consider, in every verse, the question of who is speaking and who is being addressed. Verses 13 and 15 lead to verse 16, where we find the first question answered: “Know I am the Lord who saves you and the God of Israel who delivers you.” But the second question remains – to *whom* is God speaking? In verse 14 we find another of God’s declarations: “You shall be called City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.” When Isaiah penned these words he was referring to Israel, the ancient people of God, and to the capital city Jerusalem, built around Mount Zion.

In Hebrew the word *zion* or *tsiyon* means, variously, “a bare height, a bald spot, a waterless land, or the specific location called Mount Zion,” depending upon how the vowels are marked. Hence Zion, in Isaiah’s time, refers to the vicinity of the Temple, to the city of Jerusalem where the Temple is located, and to the entire covenant community of God’s people. (For other examples, see 2 Kgs 5:7; Is 1:27; and Ps 96:8.)

In Orthodox Christian practice the name Zion refers to the Church and to the present-day People of God. In the Ninth Ode of the Paschal Canon we hear: “Shine, shine, O new Jerusalem; for the glory of the Lord hath risen upon thee. Rejoice and exult now, O Zion.” This jubilant shout, which arises during the celebration of Christ’s Holy Resurrection, is directed to ourselves as the new people of God. We are the Zion that rejoices and exalts that Life has been showered upon us, that Christ is risen. Indeed, He is risen!

As the faithful of the risen Christ, we understand the present passage from Isaiah as addressed to *us*. We are His Church, His very Body. We have died with Him and are alive again in Him, and we worship the Life-giving Trinity. In Isaiah our God speaks directly to us, to His beloved in Christ. His manner is tender, personal, and loving.

If we look again at the passage, we recognize that we are the community whose gates are open *continually* “day or night” for all mankind, so that the nations of the earth may be brought to Christ (Is 60:11). Their rulers, captivated by His truth and love, are to serve Him. Sadly, some will not do so and they “shall perish” (vs. 12). From Lebanon comes “the cypress, the pine, and the cedar” (vs. 13). These trees – and the trees of every land – are esteemed because wood formed the Cross, the throne where Christ our King gives salvation. We thus speak of the Tree of the Cross as “[His] holy place” (vs. 13).

Church history supports the prophecy that “those who humbled and provoked [us] shall go to [us] in fear” (vs. 14) and reverently enter the life of the Church. Christ was “forsaken and hated” (vs. 15), yet His Body lives and proclaims salvation for all peoples. Our glory and destiny is “an eternal joy, the gladness of generations to generations” (vs. 15). The gifts and riches of the nations nourish the people of God. We know Him who is among us, for He says, “I am the Lord Who saves you and the God of Israel Who delivers you” (vs. 16).

I have heard, O Lord, the mystery of Thy dispensation, and have contemplated Thy works. Wherefore, have I glorified Thy Godhead. – Canon of the Exaltation of the Cross

September 16 – Friday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 2:12-26

Disdaining and Honoring: 1 Kg 2:12-26, especially vs. 26: “*But the child Samuel led his life and he grew and matured and found favor both with the Lord and with men.*” Be sure to note that this quoted verse stands in contrast to most of the reading that is about the evil sons of the priest, Eli. The author, to distinguish Samuel, uses the word ‘but,’ a conjunction that begs us revisit what we have just read: “...the boy Samuel grew and matured before the Lord” (vs. 21). Though living in Eli’s household and directly attached to the shrine at Shiloh, Samuel was not corrupted by the sons of Eli, who “...were sons of scoundrels, not knowing the Lord” (vs. 12).

In addition, we learn that as Samuel matured, he “...found favor both with the Lord and with men” (vs. 26), even as we learn about the racket which the sons of Eli were working by fraud and intimidation on those who came to worship at the shrine. We may be certain that Eli's sons were *not* favored by men (vs. 16). They had trained their servants to take a portion for them whether or not those who came to worship wished to cooperate: taking “...by force...” and thus nullifying “...the sacrifice of the Lord” (vs. 17). For what are true offerings made to the Lord if not freewill, given from the heart, not forced from the pious?

Why, then, was Samuel not corrupted by the artifice Eli’s sons were running? Perhaps because, thought from the time he was a lad, he was a servant in Eli's household (vs. 18) yet his contacts with his family of origin remained in place: his parents were pious people who came “...to offer the yearly sacrifice” (vs. 19), and his mother provided him with robes, cementing the family tie (vs. 19). Unquestionably, young Samuel saw the old Priest, Eli “...bless Elkanah and his wife...” and he came to know the reason for his separation to the Lord from his natural family (vs. 20). He grew up understanding that “...the Lord watched over Hannah...” and his father, Elkanah (vs. 21).

Sadly, it was not until “...Eli was very, very old...” that the Priest finally “...heard what his sons were doing to the sons of Israel” (vs. 22). Only then did he speak up. Eli understood the grave seriousness of the racket his sons were operating, that foremost it was an affront to God and that also it was “...causing the people not to serve the Lord” (vs. 24). But Eli could not muster the strength needed to control his sons and stop their schemes, for the younger men “...did not heed their father’s voice, so the Lord desired to destroy them” (vs. 25). Here is a solemn warning to those who abuse their positions to satisfy themselves. God allows such behavior to run its course, all the while preparing judgment for those who abuse sacred position and trust.

There also is a caution here for parents who provide no corrective training to their children as they grow into maturity. Alexander Pope reminds us that “Tis education forms the common mind: just as the twig is bent the tree’s inclined.” Observe Eli’s parental approach to reports concerning the serious evils his sons were imposing on all of Israel. He merely talked (vss. 23-25). He gave them a little lecture about their misdeeds, based on what he heard, urging them “...not [to] act in this manner” (vs. 24), pointing out twice that deeds of this sort “...are not good” (vs. 24). Note that he does not hold them accountable. He lectures on the basis of reports.

Eli failed to restrain his sons. The man was the head Priest of the shrine at Shiloh. He lived in a society operating under the mosaic plan of “...able men...made rulers...who judged the people at all time” (Ex. 18:25,26). But he made no tangible effort to “bend his twigs” in the right direction, or to rely on Israel's judges to correct the wrongs. Eli as parent and Priest habitually failed to check his sons, therefore “...they did not heed their father’s voice” (vs. 1 Kg. 2:25). Hence, the Lord desired to end these wrongs (vs. 25).

Take from us our iniquities, and kindle the fire of Thy Holy Spirit within us, O Lord.

September 17 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 2:27-36

The Lord's Judgment: 1Kg 2:27-36, especially vs. 30: “But now the Lord says, “Far be it from Me, for I will honor those who honor Me, and the one who despises Me shall be dishonored.” This judgment of the Lord was issued against the house of Eli the priest, because he failed to correct his sons and to stop them from abusing the people of Israel when they came to worship. Notice also that this Divine judgment was *mediated*, unlike the Lord's judgment by flood in the days of Noah. At that time, God Himself acted to “...blot out man whom I created from the face of the earth...” along with “...cattle, and ...the creeping things to the birds of heaven...” (Gn. 6:7). But the Lord's judgment on the evils at Shiloh was declared *on His behalf* by a messenger who came to Eli and said to him, “Thus says the Lord...” (1Kg 2:27).

Note that this messenger delivered the word of the Lord to Eli, but is not otherwise identified in the text except by the phrase describing him as *a man of God* (vs. 27). And see how similar his actions were to the style of most Old Testament prophets. He simply took full authority to declare God's judgment, an act implied by or imbedded in his opening phrase, “...Thus says the Lord...” (vs. 27). (Compare with Am 1:2; Mic 1, 2 or Jer 1, et al). Clearly, he was not giving his opinion concerning what the Lord would do. He voiced God's indictment.

What were the Lord's charges against Eli? They are summarized in verses 27 through 29, in which God states 1) that He “...clearly revealed...” Himself long ago (in the age of Moses) when the tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe), along with the other Hebrew tribes, were but slaves in Egypt (vs. 27); 2) that the Lord Himself provided the Levites with the privilege to be His priests and ministers for the sacred rituals, to be vested for service, and to receive food from the sacrifices of the other tribes of Israel (vs. 28); and 3) that God perceived plainly enough that Eli and his household were arrogantly abusing this sacred role to enhance their lives from “...all the first-fruits of Israel...” (vs. 29) that God's people brought as offerings to the Lord.

The longer second portion of this passage moves from the Lord's indictment to His actual sentence, signaled by the word *therefore* (vs, 30). Even though God had promised the tribe of Levi to be priests and ministers in perpetuity, He now states that this will apply only to those who honor Him, and that those who dishonor Him will surely know dishonor. The Lord's promise to the Levites was good only as long as their ministry was faithful and not abused.

Hence, God decreed the end of the house of Eli; for, turning the worship of God into a racket, they would be destroyed (vs. 31). They could not continue to serve at the Lord's altar nor in His house of worship (vs. 32). Particularly, this included the corrupt sons of Eli who “...shall fall by men's swords” (vss. 33-34). It is significant at this point in God's judgment that passive parenting - guidance that only talks about being good and does not shape children's behavior - will likewise feel the Lord's dishonor, so that Eli is included in the sentence of his evil children.

Not only did the Lord God decree destruction for Eli and his sons, but also He made a positive promise: “I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who shall do all that is in My heart and My soul” (vs. 35). God promises a minister who “...shall walk before My Christ forever” (vs. 35). In the near run, God's declaration was to be fulfilled in the person of Zadok, who served as priest under the anointed King David (see 2 Kg 8:17 & 2 Kg 19:10-16). But God's promise also foretold the priesthood established by the Apostles of the Lord Jesus, the priesthood of the Church. Of course, apostolic priests are liable to the same divine standards as the Levitical priests: those of a good heart would flourish; and those who abused priesthood would perish and be cut off.

Grant Thy priests the great grace of the Holy Spirit, and make them wholly Thy servants.

September 18 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 3:1-41, Tone 5

A Faithful Prophet: 1 Kg 3:1-4:1, especially vs.20: “And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, knew that Samuel was faithful as a prophet of the Lord.” At the beginning of chapter three, the narrative of First Kingdoms focuses on “the boy Samuel...” (vs. 1). Simultaneously, it reveals as a backdrop the spiritual condition of the society in which Samuel lived: “And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no discerning vision” (vs. 1). Note that the word “precious” traces its translation to the King James Version, but the Greek clearly conveys the idea of “rare” or “scarce,” as the final clause shows: “...there was no discerning vision” (vs. 1).

Observe how the process took shape. Three times the Lord called Samuel (vss. 4,6,8), and the text explains, “Now this all happened before Samuel knew the Lord, and before the word of the Lord was revealed to him” (vs. 7). Samuel’s initial failure to recognize that it was the Lord Who called him ought not to surprise us. Compare this to our contemporary social order with its materialist orientation and its lack of sensitivity to spiritual reality. Yet God can and does raise up servants who are able to discern His Word, and the Church in every generation has been blessed with spiritual elders who have been able to plumb the depths of circumstances and, with apparent clairvoyance and confidence, guide the faithful in the specifics of the ways of the Lord.

There are several clues in the present account that help us understand how Samuel finally was able to direct himself to the Lord when God called him to receive His message. First, God’s call was made *three times* to Samuel, the number three signaling a Hebraism that enabled Eli to perceive “...that the Lord had called the boy” (vs. 8). Here is how this grammatical structure functions: in Hebrew, adjectives express comparatives and superlatives by doubling and tripling. Thus, “holy, holy, holy” may only be applied to God, Who is the Holiest, the Mightiest, and the Highest, etc. This grammatical feature was extended in other ways within Scripture, as in the case of Eli the priest: after three nighttime visits from Samuel, the old man “...perceived that the Lord had called the boy” (vs. 8). Eli then instructed Samuel how to respond (vs. 9).

Sure enough, Eli’s perception proved accurate. When next the Lord called to Samuel, the boy responded appropriately: “Speak, for your servant hears” (vs. 10). God then summarizes for Samuel the judgment which He gave more fully by an unidentified “man of God” in the previous chapter (compare 1 Kg 2:27-35 and 1 Kg 3:11-14). Note that the Lord leaves no doubt: “This I will begin, and I will finish it” (1 Kg 2:12). The Lord put His own veracity on the line: “I swore to the house of Eli that the iniquity of the house of Eli shall never be atoned for with incense or with sacrifice” (vs. 14).

We are told that this visitation of the Lord to Samuel was the beginning of Samuel’s career “...as a prophet of the Lord” (vs. 20). For after the encounter, “...Samuel grew and matured, and the Lord was with him, and not one of his words fell to the ground” (vs. 19).

The report of the young Samuel did not change Eli’s stance with his sons, nor correct their behavior; for the old priest and his sons continued as they had before, “and their way was evil before the Lord” (vs. 21). The mustering of the Philistines later in the chapter lead to the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to Samuel.

We pray for visitation and pardon and forgiveness of sins for all Orthodox Christians.

September 19 – Monday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 4:1-11

Mystery, Not Magic: 1st Kg 4:1-11, especially vs. 3: *“Let us take the ark of our God out from Shiloh and let it proceed from the midst of us, and it will save us from the hand of our enemies.”*

The ark was a receptacle fashioned at God’s command, “according to all I show...” (Ex 25: 9), a furnishing for the national sanctuary where the Lord might appear among His People (Ex 25:8). Bezalel crafted the ark (Ex 38:1), being an artisan in whom “...the Lord put wisdom and knowledge to know how to do all manner of work for the...holy place...” (Ex 36:1).

The ark was box-shaped and overlaid with gold, fixed with two gold rings on opposite sides through which glided poles were inserted to aid in its portability during the desert march (Ex 25:10-15). Its principle function was to hold the “testimonies” provided by God (Ex 25:16). On its top was a gold “Mercy Seat,” of two golden cherubim (Ex 25:17-20), further signaling the presence of the Lord (see also, Dt 10:1-5 and Dt 31: 24).

Because of the highly sacred role of the ark, it was separated from general view within the most holy place, or the “Holy of Holies” (Ex 26: 33-34). Even the priests did not approach the ark without due preparation - washing, sin offerings, and vestments - and it was moved only at divine command (Nm 4:5-17). Two important occasions involving its movement occurred at the crossing of the Jordan River when Israel entered the promised land, and shortly afterward, during the siege and conquest of the fortress city of Jericho (Jos 3:3-14; 6:1-19).

The significance of the careful construction, ornamentation, and placement of the ark illumine the confrontation between the Philistines and Israel recorded in the present reading. The Philistines came to Aphek with “...prepared battle plans...” (1Kg 4:2), with the result that “...the men of Israel fell before the Philistines” (vs. 2). This perplexed the elders of Israel, who then thought to “...take the ark of our God out from Shiloh and let it proceed from the midst of us, and it will save us...” (vs. 3). Note that previously in the desert years, when crossing the Jordan, and in the attack on Jericho, it was the Lord Who directed the role of the ark. Clearly God's leadership, not the peoples, was the determining factor in Israel's success.

The principal teaching of Scripture surely is that “the Lord became my helper and the shield of my salvation” (Ex 15:2) and “...according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus...” (Acts 13:23). However, a problem arose when, at the battle of Aphek, the people said of the Ark “...it will save us.” (vs. 3). To pin hopes on the ark that served as an icon to aid worshipers in the ancient tabernacles was to embrace idolatry. There is little difference between the hopes of the elders of Israel (1 Kg 4:3) and the outlook of the Philistines when they said, “These are the gods that have come into the camp!” (vs. 7).

Had Israel’s elders grasped the iconic nature of the ark, they would not have trusted a gold-plated box to save them magically, but rather Him Who mystically spoke through that holy artifact. Archimandrite Vasileios reveals the role of the ark as icon, for it provides “...a simple peaceful and life-giving message coming down from above. It speaks...of something which has gone beyond the categories of yesterday and today, here and there, mine and thine....” Through the ancient Ark (or the Church's Icons), the everlasting and unchanging God speaks without words.

When the elders of Israel trusted in the ark rather than in God, the boundary between the mystery of the Lord’s presence and the realm of magic was violated. As a result, the ark was worshiped as an idol, and reverence, obedience and true worship were abandoned. God’s judgment wreaked death and defeat to Eli’s family and all of Israel. Let us worship God alone!

Come let us worship and fall down before Christ; save us who sing unto Thee. Alleluia!

September 20 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 4:12-22

Gone the Glory: 1Kg 4:12-22, especially vs.22: “*The glory of Israel is exiled from its home, for the ark of God is taken.*” The judgment of God came upon Israel because of idolatry and lack of trust in the Lord (1Kg 4:3, 4). Judgment came to them in war with the Philistines who were bent on enslaving them (1Kg 4:9). Afterwards, the judgment was reported by a survivor “...from the battle line... [who] came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head” (1Kg 4:12). This is the judgment he reported: “The men of Israel fled before the Philistines, and there was a great slaughter among the people . . . And the ark of God was captured” (vs. 17).

The present passage describes how this report from the battle-front was received in Shiloh as the people learned of the defeat of their army: first the response of the citizenry, then the reaction of the old priest, Eli, and finally, Phineas’ wife (Eli’s daughter-in-law) going into labor. Plainly the news of the loss had a powerful and painful impact on those who remained in Shiloh after their men were lost defending them against Philistine aggression.

When the man who had been in the battle line “. . . entered the city and reported . . .” the defeat, “. . . the city cried out” (vs. 13). The noise of those grieving in Shiloh is described as a “roaring sound” (vs. 15). G. M. Mackie illumines these customs more fully: learning of the death of loved-ones prompted the uttering of “...a loud shrill wail... raised by those present. Its meaning is understood only too well. As the piercing, tremulous shrieks are repeated, a few inquiries are made as to the locality and circumstances, and the rapidly increasing cry is accepted as an invitation and claim to proceed to the house of mourning.” But at Shiloh, this included numerous homes, for that day Israel had many fallen warriors (1Kg 4:2, 10).

All this occurred before the Lord Jesus came to save us. Hence, Saint John of San Francisco points out that as Christ’s servants, “Our grief over the death of our close ones would be inconsolable and boundless if the Lord had not given us eternal life. But man was created for immortality, and by His Resurrection Christ opened the gates of the Heavenly Kingdom, of eternal blessedness, to those who believe in Him and who live righteously.”

For the old priest, Eli, the news from the battle was especially poignant, for his “...two sons died. And the ark of God was captured” (1Kg 4:17). The bewilderment in his heart concerning the ark became focused (vs. 13). How could he have been at peace about the elders’ decision to “...take the ark of our God out from Shiloh and let it proceed from the midst of us, and . . . save us from the hand our enemies” (1 Kg 4:3)? The Lord did not direct such a use for the ark at Aphek; the elders acted unilaterally and contrary to God’s appointed role for the ark. Further, the elders invested the ark with divinity, treating it like a god or an idol. No wonder that Eli was bewildered and that the battle went against Israel and its deluded elders. All this was too much for the old man: “. . . as Eli remembered the ark of God, he fell backward . . . and broke his back and died, for the man was old and heavy” (1Kg 4:18).

The prime cause of the defeat at Aphek was the abuse of the people’s offerings by the sons of Eli, “...scoundrels, not knowing the Lord” (1Kg 2:12). These young men abused their position as priests, caused the servants at the shrine to sin before the Lord, and nullified “...the sacrifice of the Lord” (1Kg 2:17). As we have seen (1Kg 4:18), Eli himself suffered the cost of his failure as a parent and as the leader of the priests at Shiloh (1Kg 2:23-25). And the judgment reverberated through Eli’s family, so that his daughter-in-law went into labor, came to the point of death as she delivered, and left Ichabod (“gone the glory”), an orphaned infant (1Kg 4:19-22).

Mine eyes are weighed down by my transgressions. Receive me in repentance, O Christ.

September 21 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 5:1-12

A Bear By the Tail: 1Kg 5:1-12, especially vs. 7: “And when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, ‘The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh upon us and upon Dagon our god.’” It has been observed that if you have a bear by the tail, what is the choice? If you hold on to the tail, you are in grave danger; but to let go might be even more dangerous. Doubtless, the Philistines would heartily agree with the truth in this aphorism. When they brought the sacred ark of the Hebrew hill-people back to their cities in triumph from the battle at Aphek-Ebenezer, they placed it in the house of their god Dagon, even setting it up beside Dagon (vs. 2). Locating the ark next to Dagon expressed their appreciation for the perceived help of their god.

However, Holy Scripture cautions against that elation which sweeps in with victory: “Take care...for there is no wrongdoing with the Lord our God” (2 Ch 19:7). Events can quickly deflate the joy of winning as circumstances change, and change they did at Ashdod: “...when the people... arose early in the morning, they entered into the house of Dagon, and they looked, and beheld Dagon falling on its face in the presence of the ark of God” (1 Kg 5: 3). But the mind does not linger with perplexity; it prompts us to make right what is out of kilter. “So, they raised Dagon, and returned it to its place” (vs. 4).

But something dire swept over the Philistines, “and the hand of the Lord was heavy upon Ashdod. He tormented all within her borders; He smote them in their private parts” (1 Kg 5:3). Something dire swept over the city. In addition, the Lord repeated His warning: for again Dagon was found “...fallen on his face before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. And the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were broken off, each in front of the threshold, and both the wrists of his hands were leaning on the doorway; only the torso of Dagon was left” (vs. 4). More was taking place in Ashdod than its people first imagined. For we know, “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).

If this was not enough, the conditions in the Philistine city worsened: “...the hand of the Lord was heavy upon Ashdod. He came upon them in their ships. He brought forth disease among them. He infested their country with mice, and there was a great calamity of death in the city” (1 Kg 5:6). The specter of dark plague, of massive, aggressive death swept into the consciousness of the population. As Saint Peter of Damaskos says, “The more a man struggles to do good the more fear grows in him, until it shows him his slightest faults, those which he thought of as nothing while he was still in the darkness of ignorance.”

Then, “...when the men of Ashdod saw how it was, they said, ‘The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh upon us and upon Dagon our god’” (vs. 7).

Then the lords of the Philistines took counsel to determine what could be done, and “the people of Gath said, ‘Let the ark of the God of Israel come to us.’ And so, the ark of God came to Gath” (vs. 8). How little we learn from others' mistakes! The people of Gath soon understood their error and tried to pass the ark off to the city of Ashkelon, but the people of Ashkelon would not have it. Ultimately, the Philistines were forced to the right decision: “Send away the ark of the God of Israel and let it return to its own place, so it does not kill us and our people” (vs. 11).

Take from us our iniquities, and graciously kindle the fire of Thy Holy Spirit within us. Take away the heart of stone from our flesh, and give us a heart of flesh, to love Thee, choose Thee, please Thee, follow Thee, enjoy Thee. We pray Thy mercy, O Lord, that Thou wouldest vouchsafe that none of our prayers may be in vain.

September 22 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 6:1-16

Discernment and Revelation: 1Kg 6:1-16, especially vs. 3: *“If you send away the ark of the covenant of the God of Israel, do not send it away empty. Instead, give it as an offering for the plague. Then you shall be healed and be atoned for. Otherwise His hand may never be removed from you.”* The judgment which their spiritual authorities rendered for the Philistine leadership was remarkably astute. The pagan priests, prophets, and enchanters (vs.2) showed an insightful spiritual capacity for assessment, discernment, and judgment. Despite being an idolatrous people “who knew not God” (1Jn 4:8), their conclusions disclosed an innate ability that the Holy Fathers perceive as present in all human beings, a prerequisite for the gift of faith.

The discernment of those without divine revelation is explained by Saint Theophan the Recluse: “We will assume that within each person is a spirit, the highest aspect of human life. It is the force that draws that person from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal, from the creation to the Creator; it is the characteristic of man that distinguishes him from all the other living creatures on earth. It is possible to weaken this force to varying degrees or to pervert its requirements, but it is not possible to utterly suppress it or annihilate it.”

No doubt the seven months of plague that befell the Philistines while the ark of the Lord was in their possession enabled the entire populace to recognize that the ark had to return “...to its place” (1 Kg 6:2). Enough spiritual discernment had developed among the Philistine lords that the question they put to their spiritual advisors focused on the issue of how this was to be done (vs. 2). It is urgent to learn (even if the hard way) that spiritual objects are “hot” and can “burn” if handled improperly. The Philistines discerned how to handle the Ark so the hand of the Lord might “...be removed...” (vs. 3).

The counsel provided to the Philistine lords by their spiritual guides included seven elements. First, it must be given as an offering to God. Only then shall you “...be healed and be atoned for” (vs. 3). Second, what is offered must be of lasting value, hence made of gold: “Five golden emerods for each of the number of lords...on your leaders and the people” (vs. 4). Here “emerods” appear to have been tumors of the sort associated with bubonic plague, made over as offerings. Third, the number five fit the number of Philistine lords as well as for the citizens of their five cities. Fourth, these were to be given to glorify the Lord God of Israel (vs. 5).

The final items had to do with transport of the offerings. Fifth, a new wagon must be made, to be pulled by two young heifers - but not their calves (vs. 7). Sixth, a chest would also be needed to carry the gold items - the emerods and mice (vss. 8,11). Seventh, for the actual dispatch of the offerings - the assembled troupe were released with the expectation that if the gifts drawn by the cows went without guidance toward Israel, this would be a sign that the hand of the Lord would be withdrawn from the Philistines (vs. 9). Otherwise, it would be simple a matter that the plague was not from God at all, but only “...mere chance” (vs. 9).

“The cows went straight ahead, by way of Beth-Shemesh, on the only beaten path” (vs. 12). There the offering for the Lord was received by the men of that community, “...and they rejoiced to greet it” (vs. 13); but more, they prepared an offering of thanksgiving to the Lord: “...next to the wagon they set a large stone. They split the wood of the wagon and offered the cows as a whole burnt offering to the Lord” (vs. 14). Then the Levites took responsibility for the protection of the Ark of the Lord (vs. 15). Thus, ended the loss of the sacred Ark for the people of Israel and the Philistine lords returned “...on the same day to Ashkelon” (vs. 16). May our offerings to the Lord our God always please Him and renew us in heart, mind, and body!

O God, receive our offerings on Thy most heavenly altar, for sanctified art Thou, O Lord.

September 23 – Friday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 7:2-17

Samuel Judges Israel: 1Kg 7:2-17, especially vs.15: “*And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.*” Our time-lapse view of Israel in the days of Samuel flashes forward twenty years from that day when the ark of God was moved from Beth-shemesh to Kirjath Jearim (1Kg 6:20-7:1). During those years Samuel came of age and began to serve the Lord as a judge among the people, as one raised up by God (the Source of all true justice), as one who labored to bring the people to righteousness. We have a snap-shot of the mature Samuel as a judge, in his remarks to the people of Israel, “If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, if you put away the foreign gods and the sacred groves from among you, and if you prepare your hearts for the Lord and serve Him alone, He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines” (1Kg 7:3). Samuel was clear: it was well to “watch for the Lord,” (vs. 2), but there was a process the people must follow for deliverance and avoiding further defeats from their pagan neighbors.

By the grace of God, the people actually sought to implement Samuel’s godly agenda and to put away the worship of false gods such as the Baals and Ashtoreths, and idolatry in sacred groves of trees (vs. 4). Hence, Samuel called all Israel together at Mizpah that he might pray for them (vs. 5). In our struggle for a true spiritual life, like the ancients of Israel, we must act *together* to change the negative social and cultural environment around us, to stop activities contrary to the Gospel, and to cleanse the thoughts and inclinations of our own hearts. We must gather with the People of God for worship, instruction, support, and grace.

The ancients poured libations of water out to God on the earth. They fasted and they confessed their sins to the Lord (vs. 6). Likewise, we are baptized in water, we fast and confess, and we partake of the Lord’s cleansing and saving Body and Blood. All this is done that we may be holy and sanctified before the Lord, acceptable to Him, and worthy of salvation. We, too, discover that we are engaged in a spiritual war, wherein “...the lords of the Philistines (who) marched...against Israel...” are also advancing against us, attacking our hearts and souls. But heed Samuel: “Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God...and He will save us...” (vs. 8). We have “The Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29) as our holocaust offering, and not a nursling lamb. And note, out of heaven, righteous Samuel is crying out to the Lord for Christ’s flock in this age (1 Kg 7:9)!

The Lord our God knows that the enemies of mankind are on the march against us today. Never fear that He will aid us against the unseen Philistines. His lightning, thunder and rainbow are assurance to us that He will confuse them and give us victory against these hosts of evil. Arise and let us advance! Christ is among us. Let us strike down the dark foes with prayer and devotion. They will flee before our psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (vss. 10,11).

At the encampment at Ebenezer (1 Kg 4:1), ancient Israel was defeated because they were spiritually stale - and worse, they were corrupt. Let us follow Samuel’s godly agenda, that by God’s grace we may overcome the fiends attacking our hearts and souls at this second Ebenezer (1 Kg 7:12), for we have the true “Stone of Help,” Christ the Rock of salvation (see 1 Cor 10:4). If we will truly embrace the life in Christ as spiritual warfare, then we shall find that our minds and hearts taken from us by the “Philistines” of modern culture, will be returned to us by our Savior. We shall have peace with all the warlike tribes, even the Amorites (vs. 14). And the Holy Prophet Samuel himself will pray to God for us, all the days of our life (vs. 15).

By the prayers and preaching of Thy Holy Servant and Prophet Samuel, O Lord, help us to cast out any foreign idols that have invaded our hearts and minds and stolen our delight in Thee, that we may repent, prepare our hearts for Thee, and serve Thee always to our life’s end.

September 24 – Saturday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 8:1-22

Self Will: 1st Kg 8:1-22, especially vss. 19, 20: “No, rather it is that we want a king to be over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, and our king will judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” The message to us in this reading comes with several examples that caution against heedlessness following our own desires. For how very often we run exactly counter to the Lord Jesus' clear directions: “But when you pray go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father Who is in the secret place....For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. In this manner...pray, ‘Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven.’” (Mt. 6: 6,9,10). Here is the straight path free of failure, error, and disaster: to check our impulsive, self-confident ideas and urgent desires directly with the Lord as we face wants, problems, or needs. This is true whether the issues arise at home or from society. It is wise to turn to God in prayer and welcome His challenges to our will, desires and needs, His will to be done in us.

Samuel was dedicated to God and raised in the household of Eli, the priest at Shiloh (1Kg. 1,2). There, and directly from the Lord, he learned the cost of that priest's failure to correct his sons (1Kg 3,4). Now in his own old age, as a recognized judge in Israel, Samuel appears to have made the same mistakes as Eli with his own sons, making them judges at Beersheba. Did God direct him to do this? There's no sign that he sought God's will, a fact revealed in their turning “...aside after dishonest gain...bribes, and perverted justice” (1Kg 8:1-3).

“Then all the men of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel...” (vs. 4). Given his age and that they had relied on his leadership for years but could not look forward to his advice much longer, nor gain trustworthy counsel from his profligate sons, they hit upon a great idea: they asked Samuel to “...establish a king for us to judge us like all the rest of the nations” (vs. 5). The old man's instincts, training, and experience led him to perceive that there was evil in their request. “So Samuel prayed to the Lord” (vs. 6), since he trusted God for true, reliable, and worthy counsel. Then, in prayer he learned the nexus of what was wrong with the men's request.

God tells His servant in prayer: “...they have not rejected you, but rather they have rejected Me, to bring to naught My reign over them” (vs. 7). The evil that Samuel sensed before he prayed is now illumined by God. The men's idea was one more example of the sin they and their fathers had followed for years - forsaking God and serving other gods (vs. 8). Where can one find a plea from these men to seek God's will? Where was “...Thy will be done...” (Mt 6:10)?

As parents we have found the hard way that our common, fallen, human nature often has to learn what ‘hot’ means by getting ‘burned;’ and even then, pain does not always work. Advice does not save us! So, the Lord tells Samuel, “...announce to them the custom of the king who will reign over them” (1Kg 8:9). Notice prediction: “...the king who will rule over them” (vs. 9). “So, Samuel spoke all the words of the Lord to the people who asked him for a king” (vs. 10). He gave them the full story of the power of kings, revealed in verses 11-18. It's chillingly familiar.

See how self-will prevails: “No, rather, it is that we want a king to be over us” (vs. 19). And see the arrogance of it: “...the people were unwilling to listen...our king will judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (vs. 20). Before all this, Samuel makes no further appeals, but repeats “...all the words of the people in the hearing of the Lord” (vs. 21). The Lord knew that the people would have to be “burned” by their self-will, so He said, “heed their voice and make them a king” (vs. 22). Then Samuel dismissed the men of Israel, each “...to his city” (vs. 22).

O Lord, hear my prayer, give ear to my supplication in Thy truth and Thy righteousness.

September 25 – Sunday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 9:1-3, 5-6, 10-22, 25-10:1, Tone 6

The Hearing Ear: 1st Kg 9:1-3, 5-6, 10-22, 25-10:1, especially vss. 15, 16: “Now the day before Saul arrived, the Lord revealed to the ear of Samuel, saying, ‘Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander over My people Israel. He will save My people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have looked upon the humiliation of My people, because their cry has come to Me.’” In reading this chapter from First Kingdoms, let us pay special attention to the two verses quoted above. The chief persons who act are Kish, Saul, the family’s servant, the women going to draw water, Samuel, and the Lord.

Samuel is the significant and leading character in this present account, for the Lord is able to speak into his ear be heard by him (vs. 15). Samuel's acuity in spiritual hearing came because he was a man prayerfully attuned to the Lord. Likewise, his actions were marked by what the Lord told him. Therefore, Samuel declared to Saul rhetorically, “Has not the Lord anointed you as ruler to His people...” (vs. 10:1). Thus, he takes no credit for being the instigator of Saul’s anointing (vs. 10:1). To speak this way places the old seer in the same role as the psalmist who says, “My mouth shall speak wisdom and the meditation of my heart shall be understanding...yet God shall redeem my soul out of the hand of hades, when He receiveth me” (Ps. 48:3, 16).

Saint Jerome observed that the eyes of some Church leaders, both under the Old Covenant and under the New as well, see manifestly “...in holy Writ the mysteries of God, and to them applies the scriptural appellation of ‘seer.’ It is correct then to call these seers the eyes of the church.” The saints of all ages are persons whose sight-in-God was true, and they were also hearers of God on our behalf. Saint Augustine points us toward the source of such hearing and seeing: “...the holy Scriptures are not accustomed to speak thus; they attribute vision not only to the body but also to the spirit, and more to the spirit than to the body.” A like attribute belongs to all those whose spiritual ears hear the Lord.

Of course, the Source of the hearing ear or the perceptive eye wells up from God Himself; He gives to those who undertake the arduous path of prayer and ascetic discipline the capacity to know His heart and mind. Again from the Psalm above: “I will incline mine ear unto a parable, I will unfold my problem on the psaltery” (Ps. 48:4). If the only times we resort to God in prayer are when stress drives us to our knees, we cannot expect that what we may hear from the Lord truly comes to us from Him and not from the chatter inside our distraught minds.

See how the Lord and Samuel were as one when the old judge met Saul coming into a city of Zuph with his servant. Samuel the godly hearer already was alert, having been warned: “When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said to him, ‘There he is the man of whom I spoke to you. This one shall rule over My people’” (1Kg 9:17). We can appreciate how puzzled Saul was at what Samuel shared with him concerning their visit, the return of the missing donkeys, and of the “beauty of Israel” coming on him and on his father’s house (vss. 19, 20). So Saul replies, “Why then do you speak like this to me?” (vs. 21). It is all very puzzling, even for us; but note the counsel of the monks Callistus and Ignatius: we should listen to the spiritually wise “...with reverence until, for the sake of [our] faith, [we] are granted the same.”

Samuel arranges honors and comforts for Saul (vss. 22, 25). Then he wakens his guest in the morning, taking him aside that he may speak to the young man in private, cautioning him: “...give heed to the word of God” (vs. 27). This wise counsel was given for that moment and for his entire reign.

O Lord, on prayer hangs life and death; grant us the grace of attention and pure prayer.

September 26 – Monday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 12:1-15

To Obey or Rebel: 1st Kg 12:1-15 SAAS, especially vs. 14, *“If you fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not resist the words of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue to follow the Lord.”* Samuel anointed Saul before God to be ruler (1Kg 10:1), then brought him to an assembly of the people at Mizpah where they acclaimed the man king (1Kg 10:24). Soon, an outrageous demand on the community of Jabesh-Gilead by Nahash the Ammonite (1Kg 11:3), which aroused Saul. He called Israel to resist and defeat Nahash and his insult (1Kg: 11:4-14). After that, Samuel anointed Saul before the people, and all Israel rejoiced (1Kg 11:15).

The present reading is Samuel’s speech at that victory celebration, during which Samuel again repeats his concerns for the people’s apostasy from the Lord as King in favor of a human king. He establishes apostasy as the basis for pleading against God’s chosen people (vss. 1-5). He lays out the evidence of their infidelity, even as he acknowledges their actual status as a monarchy. He concludes by summarizing the possibilities of hope and tragedy before them.

Samuel documents his charge of apostasy: the prime witness being God Himself (vs. 6). The Lord saved their forebears, brought them out of slavery, and made them dwell in their own land (vss. 6, 8). Numerous times, when the people brought themselves into dire circumstances through idolatry but cried out to the Lord, He delivered them and made them dwell in safety (vss. 9-11). Ironically, when they were confronted with a single assault by Nahash the Ammonite against one of their border towns, they abandoned all confidence in God, despite godly warning, and demanded the human solution of a monarchy instead of their proven theocracy (vs. 12). So, for better or for worse, they would have to live under a human king as they demanded.

God, Who changes not, ever desires that His People, ancient and modern, should receive blessings, rather than have “...the hand of the Lord...against...” them and their rulers (vs. 15). Taking His People in whatever state they may create (vs. 13), the Lord provides a three-stage process by which they can “continue following the Lord” (vs. 14). But examine the nature of the three elements in God’s design for blessing His People. These apply to the Church today.

The first is to “...fear the Lord...” (vs. 14). As Saint Symeon the New Theologian makes clear, godly fear is the blessed interior state closely related to faith or trust in God: “He [who] has the fear of God within him...wears the invincible armor of faith.” Understanding the necessity of having the fear of God within, the Prophet David begs God: “Guide me, O Lord, in Thy way, and I will walk in Thy truth; let my heart rejoice that I may fear Thy name.” (Ps. 85:10). Fear of the Lord begins in the heart and guides infallibly along the Lord’s way of blessing, teaching one to hate every sign of evil, pride, or arrogance that may arise within one’s self (see Pr. 8:13).

On the basis of fear of the Lord, a man chooses readily and naturally to serve Him. Holy Scripture reveals that Samuel yearns for God’s People to understand that “serving” God is preceded by submission to Him in all things. Hear the Prophet Malachi: “For those who fear the Lord, and who meditate on His Name, ‘They shall be Mine,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:16-17). While servitude to earthly masters crushes the human spirit, the service of God liberates and gives joy along with God’s gift of Himself (Jn. 3:16).

Of course, those who serve the Lord in response to His love obey joyfully. They do not rebel and say, “It is useless to serve God” (Mal. 3:14). Samuel notes that either following or resisting are possible. If they follow the Lord, (vs. 14), that is, walk after the Lord and obey Him, then God will strengthen them to hear His voice and to receive eternal life (Jn. 10:27).

O Lord Jesus, Thou true and living Way, open our souls and abide in us unto eternal life.

September 27 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 12:16-25

The Prophet Samuel ~ The Wise Pastor: 1st Kingdoms 12:16-25 SAAS, especially vs. 23: *“Far be it from me to sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will serve the Lord and show you the good and the right way.”* When the elders of God’s People sought to have a king (1Kg 8:4, 5), Samuel sought to dissuade them, understanding their request as a rejection of the Lord as the people’s true King (1Kg 8:6-21). The Lord agreed with Samuel, yet told him to accept the elders’ request, directing him to “Heed their voice, and make them a king” (1Kg 8:22). The Prophet obediently submitted to the Lord’s direction, but he never ceased in his efforts to impress on the people the wicked nature of their choice. Even on the day of the public revelation and acceptance of Saul as king, he reminded them, “But today you rejected God, Who Himself is your Savior from all your adversities and tribulations” (1Kg 10:19).

The triumph of Israel over Nahash the Ammonite under Saul’s sudden leadership (1 Kg 11:11) appears only to have reinforced the people’s conviction that they were correct in asking for a king. Worse, the victory revealed a serious hardening of their self-confidence as the interaction among Samuel, King Saul, and the people reveals: “Bring the men [who repudiated Saul’s reign] so we may put them to death,” the people said (1Kg 11:12). Except for the wisdom of the new king, the people would have compounded their wickedness (1Kg 11:13). Samuel, ever the wise pastor, called the people to Gilgal to make “Saul king before the Lord” there (vs. 14). The depth of Samuel’s pastoral wisdom was fully manifested at Gilgal, for, observe: he used the occasion to make one further effort to bring the people to compunction.

The burden of Samuel’s speech was a pleading of his case against them (1Kg 12:6-15). Notice how he began his review of the evidence, adjuring them to “...stand still, that I may judge you before the Lord” (1Kg 12:7). But when he finished outlining his case, the people gave no outcry of remorse or godly sorrow for their wickedness, only silence.

Therefore, since they would not hear him, he again commanded them to “...stand...” (1Kg 12:16), but now with a difference: “...stand and see...” (vs. 16). He continued, “...that you may know and see that you have done great wickedness before the Lord in asking a king for yourselves” (vs. 17). With trust in the Lord, Samuel announced, “I will call to the Lord, and He will send thunder and rain” (vs. 17). He was confident “...that God should hear the voice of a man...” (Jos. 10:14) and bring a thunderstorm at the summer harvest. Saint Jerome, who spent many years in Palestine, reports that he never saw such a phenomenon at that season.

That unexpected and unseasonable thunderstorm evoked fear within the assembly of Israel, for the people understood its message: damage to the crops, God’s judgment, and a divine affirmation of Samuel’s charge: “Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, so that we do not die; for we have added to all our sins in asking for ourselves a king” (1Kg 12:19).

Despite his disappointment at their disobedience, Samuel endeavored to lead the people to full repentance and joyful compunction, owning their sinfulness, and the people knew that Samuel would pray for them (vs. 23). Forgiveness was extended to them by God, in the manner Saint John of Sinai describes: “When I consider the actual nature of compunction, I am amazed at how that which is called mourning and grief should contain joy and gladness interwoven within it...” So Samuel assured the people, “Only fear the Lord and serve Him in truth with all your heart, for you know what great things He has done for you” (vs. 24).

Open to me the doors of repentance, O Life-giver; for my soul goeth early to the temple of Thy holiness. In Thy tender lovingkindness, purify me by the compassion of Thy mercies.

September 28 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 13:1-18

The Prophet Samuel ~ Presumption: 1 Kg 13:1-18, especially vs. 11, 12: “*And Saul said, ‘When I saw the people scatter from me, and you did not come within the days of testimony as you arranged, and the Philistine gathered at Michmash, then I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not prayed in the presence of the Lord.’ Therefore, I forced myself, and I offered a burnt offering.’*” The sin of presumption came to light in King Saul when he made a burnt offering contrary to Samuel’s and the Lord’s command, thereby assuring that his “...kingdom shall not stand” (vs.13) - i.e., his lineage. Lest we sympathize with Saul’s vain actions (vs. 12), and lest we find ourselves wondering why Samuel did not try to correct him for his indiscretion, consider the words of Saint Theophan the Recluse concerning self-reliance: “this spiritual disease of ours, so hard to perceive and acknowledge, is more abhorrent to God than all else in us, as being the first offspring of our self-hood and self-love, and the source, root and cause of all passions and of all our downfalls and wrong doing.”

Consider this fact: all through Holy Scripture, the Lord teaches us that “evil-doers shall utterly perish, but they that wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth” (Ps. 36:9). Notice in this statement of the Psalmist David, that he contrasts doing and waiting. In the modern world, so intensely focused on doing, achieving and accomplishing, David’s warning begs our close attention. No one can fault Saul for a failure to act. His problem was that he acted presumptuously, without the Lord’s direction or blessing, which he was obliged to have.

To grasp the depth of Saul’s self-reliance, it is important to reflect on vs 9-13, the encounter between Saul and Samuel at Gilgal, the national holy site located on the plains of the Jordan River valley near Jericho. Foremost was Saul’s defensive remark to Samuel: “...you did not come within the days...as you arranged...” (vs. 11). Herein is the evidence of a prior agreement concerning the meeting between God’s judge and the King.

At the heart of the plan to meet at Gilgal was the godly practice of sacrificing to the Lord in order to receive His blessing and direction, a necessity before going into combat in a holy war (see 1 Kg 7:5-11). So, even though we are not told explicitly in this case who called the people out to join “...Saul at Gilgal” (vs. 3), the standing protocol would necessarily have included Samuel presiding at the sacrifice. This solemn rite was a prophetic function, not an offering that could be performed by the king. Rather, it was done *for* the king. Had Samuel never appeared, Saul should simply have waited, not performed the sacrifice himself.

True, the stationing of Philistine garrisons in the middle of the highland territory of the Israelites was an indication of a strong Philistine hegemony over God’s People. One can appreciate how galling it was to have occupying garrisons controlling daily life. Now, at last, there was a king who had been anointed to “...go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Kg 8:20). The Philistines were very odious to the people, and especially for Saul, for his home territory of Gibeah of Benjamin was immediately adjacent to a Philistine military outpost (1 Kg. 13:2, 3).

Here, however, one finds additional evidence of presumption. Given that Saul felt the need to engage in a war for liberation from the Philistines, should not he first have sought the proven, godly counsel of Samuel and before starting the conflict?

Attend carefully to Saint John of Sinai’s caution concerning presumption: “there is only one erring path, and it is called self-rule. But he who has renounced this entirely, even in things that seem to be good and . . . pleasing to God, has reached the end before setting out . . .”

Lord, I have fled unto Thee; teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God.

September 29 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 13:18-14:15

The Prophet Samuel ~ Warriors Invincible: 1st Kg 13:18-14:15, especially vs 12: “Then the men of the garrison called to Jonathan and his armor-bearer, ‘Come against us and we will show you something.’ Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, ‘Come up after I do, for the Lord has delivered them into the hands of Israel.’” In the opening chapter of Unseen Warfare, that classic manual for those who yearn in heart “to come near to God and dwell in union with Him,” Saint Theophan the Recluse teaches that “to reach your desired aim, it is first of all necessary to stifle your own wills and finally to extinguish and kill them altogether. And in order to succeed in this, you must constantly oppose all evil in yourself and urge yourself toward the good. In other words you must ceaselessly fight against yourself and against everything that panders to your own wills, that incites and supports them.” To this end Bishop Theophan exhorts each striver to “prepare yourself for this struggle and this warfare and know that the crown....is given to none except to the valiant among warriors and wrestlers.”

In the example of Jonathan, from today’s Old Testament reading, we find a type or foreshadowing of “a warrior invincible” (to quote the phrase from the Chrismation Mystery). The Lord supplies this particular portrait of Jonathan and his armor-bearer defeating a Philistine outpost, among the many accounts of military actions by the ancient People of God, to show us how we may be invincible warriors and “fulfill those things which are well pleasing” to Him: we must seek to be filled “with the faith, hope, and love which are” in the Lord. We must depend solely upon the Savior’s “trenchant might speedily [to] crush down Satan under our feet” and so give us victory over the evil one.

Consider these two warriors: “Jonathan, the son of Saul [and] the young servant carrying his armor” (vs 1). Outward circumstances had caused the majority of their contemporaries to seek safe havens away from the predatory attacks of the troops who “came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies” (1 Kg 13:17). Moving to the north, the west and the east, plundering and destroying as they went, they were a mighty force. “There was not a sword or spear found in the hand of all the people that were with Saul and Jonathan” (1 Kg 13:22). Still, this pair of young, godly warriors ventured to “cross over to that other side, into the outpost of the Philistine garrison” (vs 14:1). In the same manner, we must face into the clamoring of our wills for safety, comfort, and ease in this life, and we must overcome the constant temptations to avoid taking up our cross and following after the Lord (Mt 16:24).

See how Jonathan and the young man went filled with faith, hope and love (1 Th 5:8). They had faith that “the Lord is not constrained to deliver by many or by few” (vs 6). They hoped that “the Lord will do something for us” (vs 6); and they loved each other as the text states: “I am with you as your heart is my heart” (vs 7). In our spiritual warfare, we must follow the Lord Jesus’ admonition to love those joined with us in combat (Jn 13:34).

Behold the wonder of God in action! By His trenchant might, He speedily crushed “the troops in the garrison, and those being utterly destroyed,” sending them into shock that they did not defend themselves, for astonishment “and bewilderment came from the Lord” (1 Kg 14:15). Two warriors of God dared to face their enemies in faith, hope and love. Reflect on this evidence: the Lord is ready to fight for us, deliver us “from the bondage of the enemy,” and receive us into His heavenly kingdom, delivered “from every snare of the adversary.”

O Lord, our God, confirm us in the Orthodox faith; deliver us from the Evil One, and from the machinations of the same; and preserve our souls through the saving fear of Thee.

September 30 – Friday – Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 14:16-30

The Prophet Samuel ~ Godly Example: 1st Kingdoms 14:16-30, especially vs 23: “On that day, the Lord saved Israel.” The battle against the Philistine army at Michmash divides into three periods with their events and results: 1) Jonathan’s successful, initial assault against the guards on the enemy’s perimeter (1 Kg 13:18-14:15), 2), the ensuing chaos within the Philistine camp that mobilized the Israelite troops (1 Kg 14:16-30), and 3) two actions that occurred in the immediate aftermath of that engagement (1 Kg 14:31-35 and 1 Kg 14:36-46).

A review of the battle of Michmash reveals what the Lord accomplished (1 Kg 14:23). God provided two vastly outnumbered warriors as a model, by whose actions He mobilized all His people. It is especially worthy to note that the repercussions of Jonathan’s bold display of faith stirred Israel’s forces into earnest combat despite Saul’s repeated, inept actions as the commander of the armies of God. Also, observe in the present account how the Lord continues encouraging us to dare risking in faith. He demonstrates that He will strengthen the resolve of those who act boldly for Him and use their daring to enliven others of the faithful to act as well.

Israel’s lookouts, while keeping watch for their king-in-hiding, realized that a major disruption was occurring in the Philistine ranks. The “opposing army was having trouble” (vs 16) among the enemy within their own garrison. This change brought Saul out of his passive mode. He began assessing the immediate situation. Who is present? He instituted a count to see “who has gone out from us” (vs 17). Further, he directed the priest Ahijah, ““Bring the ephod here.’ For on that day the ephod was raised up in the presence of Israel” (vs 18).

What the king thought to do by his directions to the priest was to consult God through priestly divination for directions in how to respond to the disturbance among the Philistines. Meanwhile, mounting evidence revealed that serious chaos was building within the enemy encampment: “every man’s sword was against the enemy next to him. There was great confusion” (vs 20). The Lord used plain evidence to rouse the fumbling Saul from his lethargy. Hence, King Saul told the priest to stop the divination: “Withdraw your hands” (vs 19).

Finally, Saul was stirred into action by the plain results of Jonathan’s attack, for even the Hebrew slaves in the enemy camp turned on their Philistine masters (vs 21). Furthermore, “all the Israelites who were hidden in mount Ephraim heard also that the Philistines fled; and they also gather themselves after them to battle” (vs 22). God used a skirmish to move His people into action and thus achieved a major rout.

Remember that when Saul took up a defensive position at Geba of Benjamin, he had only 600 men with him (1 Kg 13:15). The text reports that as the battle ranged downhill toward Beth-aven, “all the people with Saul were about ten thousand men” (vs 23). Do not overlook the power of God acting through *two* men!

This present account concludes with yet another inept action of King Saul: the issuing of a general order: “Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies” (vs 24). Rather than direct his troops not to divert from battle to feast on plundered food from the Philistines, the king issued a foolish command against all food, and included an extreme penalty for eating. Ironically, his own son - the heroic warrior of the day - was the one who inadvertently broke the rule. Still, Jonathan benefited by his act: “his eyes became bright” (vs 27), and he saw that even a greater victory could have been gained (vss 29,30).

Grant us, O Lord, knowledge, both of what we should do and of how to set about it, that we may acquire only Thee rather than all transient possessions.