

January 7th – Sunday after Theophany
Ephesians 4:7-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 8th – Monday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
James 2:14-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 9th – Monday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
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January 10th - Wednesday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
James 3:11-4:6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 11th – Saint Theodosios the Great
Hebrews 13:7-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 12th - Friday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; 2:6-10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 13th - Saturday of the Thirty-second/ Thirty-Third Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 5:14-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 14th - Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 6:10-17

Stand Firm: *Ephesians 6:10-17, especially vs. 10:* “*Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.*” Three times in this passage, the translators use the word *stand* (vss. 11, 13, 14) to convey the apostle’s counsel concerning our struggles (vs. 12) as Christ’s warriors. That same verb, with an added prefix, is used in verse 13 to mean *withstand*. All of these are combat terms, telling us to hold our position. In other words, the apostle urges us to oppose whatever dark forces arise against us.

Of utmost importance in reading this passage is an understanding of the apostle’s underlying assumptions. First, we must know that we are in a fight. Second, it is possible for us to lose the battle. Third, we have the capability to oppose the enemy’s tactics – to resist, stand, and extinguish everything thrown at us.

The last of these counsels contains Saint Paul’s primary message. He is utterly confident that victory is sure “in the Lord, and in the power of His might” (vs. 10). Our battle gear in Christ, both defensive and offensive, turns the advantage in our favor against whatever “schemes,” “forces,” “wicked temptations,” or “flaming missiles” Satan may hurl at us.

If we lose the struggle, it will not be because the Lord our God has abandoned us! We will lose only if we fail to recognize the strategic nature of the engagement. We are not dealing with human beings, mere “flesh and blood” (vs. 12). While other people may seem to be our active opponents, they are merely pawns.

In fact, we are pitted against “principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (vs. 12). Therefore we cannot use weaponry appropriate to fighting people. What we face daily is *spiritual* warfare. We must use entirely different defensive and offensive implements – armaments suited to the nature of the strife.

Twice, the Apostle Paul uses the phrase “the armor of God.” In spiritual warfare, if we would be “strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might” (vs. 10), then we must rely on “the whole armor of God” (vss. 11, 13). If we rely on what our physical senses alone commend, we will lose. Let us examine briefly the weapons God gives from His armory.

Our primary defense is truth (vs. 14) – not just any truth, but the Truth that is God, who enables us to become gods, as the Fathers say. Christ is our only reliable Truth against satanic lies, half-truths, or the pitting of one truth against another.

Righteousness (vs. 14) is the ultimate guardian of the heart, and thus Saint Paul speaks of it as a *breastplate*. If we vacillate neither left nor right but hold to what is good and just, then our thoughts and actions will recognize every distorted and attractive delusion.

The Apostle relates the gospel to our feet (vs. 15): how we walk, how we live, how we interact with others. The Good News must be presented to others through a convincing life, not by words and gestures alone.

The hardest part of our life in Christ is trusting God in all circumstances (vs. 16). “Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all,” says Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow. This kind of faith shields against every assault on our hearts and minds. Let us keep our minds fixed on the salvation that is to come (vs. 17), for the word of God (vs. 17) cuts through the web of lies and dispels the darkness that would overtake us.

Grant me grace to take up the armor Thou dost provide, meet every evil and to stand. –
Chrismation Prayer

January 15th - Monday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
2 Timothy 2:20-26

Servants of Honor – Good Works: 2 Timothy 2:20-26, especially vs. 21: “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself . . . he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.” As we approach Christ’s Nativity, we hear the words of the Apostl Paul to Timothy, his fellow worker for the Savior. Like Paul and Timothy, every believer is a servant of one Master – our Lord Jesus Christ. If we read with close attention, we may receive instruction from one of the Lord’s finest trainers, so that we may become honorable servants “in a great house” (vs. 20), with the prospect of becoming blessed vessels for honor (see vs 21).

Saint Paul teaches us to cleanse ourselves (vs. 21), for until we are purified we will not be useful to the Master for good works. Cleansing is the primary effort required if we are to be “prepared for every good work” (vs. 21). It is the basic regimen of the entry-level servant.

This cleansing effort has both negative and positive aspects, both of which must be carried out simultaneously. We must flee from “youthful lusts” and at the same time pursue “righteousness, faith, love, peace . . . out of a pure heart” (vs. 22).

What does it mean to flee from “youthful lusts” (vs. 22)? The Fathers of the Church echo Saint Paul in stressing the necessity to struggle against lust (in Greek *epithymia*, a strong desire arising from the soul). According to Saint Gregory of Sinai, “The soul by virtue of its creation as a deiform . . . entity possesses an intrinsic power of desire and an intrinsic incessive power, and these lead it to manifest both courage and divine love.”

However, he cautions, “The soul has acquired the qualities of the passions or, rather, of the demons; and the powers of the body and the soul have . . . produced a single animal driven impulsively by anger and desire” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, pp. 227-28). And so we find in ourselves licentiousness, a love of material things, and a desire for glory, wealth, and the pleasures of the flesh. Are we not familiar with the lust for such things in ourselves?

Indeed, no one is free from all traces of unlawful desire; there are many lusts after every kind of thing, even beyond those mentioned by Saint Gregory. We flee from them to begin to cleanse ourselves. If we pray and fast, the Holy Spirit will identify our most troublesome sins and strengthen us in this flight (see vs. 22). To flee is a most appropriate term, for it suggests earnestly running from the first sight or hint of sinful desires as they awaken within us.

The Apostle Paul includes two other activities as part of *cleansing* (vs. 21): avoiding “foolish and ignorant disputes” (vs. 23) so as not to fall into quarrels (vs. 24), and seeking from God the gift of repentance (vs. 25). He places greatest emphasis on this latter gift, which is attained by our striving to change the heart. By repentance alone will we “know the truth, and . . . come to [our] senses and escape the snare of the devil” (vss. 25-26).

Cleansing from sin cannot be separated from pursuing virtue (vs. 22), for the two activities must be carried on together, which is why Saint Paul interweaves them in his teaching. We read in the *Philokalia*, “Strive to love every man equally, and you will simultaneously expel all the passions.” Pursuing virtue is an active, purposeful acquisition of righteousness, faith, love and peace.

Saint Paul mentions other positive actions that are to be included in our overall pursuit of righteousness. We are to be gentle, understanding, and patient to all (vs. 24), and to correct others with humility (vs. 25). These good works are proven aids in attaining honor in God's service.

O Christ, keep us ever as warriors invincible, and make us victors even unto the end. –
Chrismation Prayer

January 16th - Tuesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
2 Timothy 3:16-4:4

Servants of Honor, continued – To Serve God’s Truth: 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4, especially vss. 1- 2: “*I charge you. . . . Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.*” In Saint Paul’s second letter to Timothy, we learn how to draw divine truth from God-inspired sources to insure a godly foundation for our life. The apostle helps us share the truth with others in an honest, helpful manner, always alert for the resistance we encounter within ourselves as well as others.

Isaiah the Prophet declares, “Behold, God is my Savior and Lord. I will trust in Him and be saved by Him. I will not be afraid, for the Lord is my glory and my praise. He has become my salvation. You will draw water with gladness from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:2-3).

What are these wells that yield the true water of salvation? Saint Paul offers us two. First, there is Scripture, which is “given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16). Holy Scripture is one source of truth. Secondly, he says, “*I charge you . . . before God and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (vs. 4:1). Another source of truth is that body of oral instruction given by the apostles to the Church.

Together, these constitute the building blocks of holy tradition. Note that when Saint Paul speaks of Scripture, he is referring to the books of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. He confidently places what he teaches alongside those Scriptures, for he knows that the truth we encounter in Christ is the “key” to all Scripture.

Like Saint Paul, the other apostles are direct recipients of divine truth from Christ. Thus, their writings came to be called Scripture in the New Testament. Some apostolic teachings “we have received . . . from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly through apostolic tradition,” notes Saint Basil the Great. “Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source – no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church” (*On The Holy Spirit*, p. 98).

In *The Orthodox Church*, Bishop Kallistos Ware lists non-scriptural sources of the true “water of salvation.” They include the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, our liturgical texts, canon law, and the holy icons. Saint Basil’s observation is worthy, for not everything is written down. Truth, however, remains in the Church, made present and given authority by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we look to the Church to find the “wells” of which Isaiah speaks. To draw truth, we need to remain within the Church. Here, the sources of truth are available, along with training in how to pull up true, living water.

Saint Paul not only teaches us where to find truth, but also charges us to present it to others in helpful ways. He says, “Preach the word!” (vs. 4:2). The Greek verb “to preach” also means to impart, share, inculcate, proclaim, or announce.” All these words imply a *public* activity – a ministry of edifying, such as the one upon which Timothy has engaged.

For those of us who live in the arena of the world, Saint Paul’s admonition applies to our workplace, neighborhood, and other associations beyond the Church. Our lives, actions, and words are the means by which we share the truth of the gospel according to our position and opportunities. They need not always be cast in “religious” terms. When we meet genuine interest in the faith, let us “convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (vs. 2) in a life-giving way.

The implication is that we must be *watchful* and guard against self-serving and resistance to the truth (vs. 5). We may nurture a lingering unwillingness to “endure sound doctrine” (vs. 3). This we must fight against, along with the preference of men in the world to live “according their own desires” (vs. 3). God help us to be faithful to the truth!

Help us, O Lord, to uphold truth by Thy truth, and to remain watchful against all error.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 19th - Friday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Titus 1:15-2:10

Exhibit Your Integrity: Titus 1:15-2:10, especially vs. 7: *“In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility. . . .”* According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, right doctrine is inseparable from how we live our faith. He writes, “We Orthodox attach great importance to preserving the faith, just because we know that when the faith is distorted, the cure is automatically distorted. . . . Theology is the teaching of the Church about spiritual health, but also about the path which the sick must follow in order to be healed. That is why we Orthodox give great weight to keeping the doctrine intact” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pp. 42- 43).

The careful reader of today’s epistle passage will perceive that the Apostle Paul held this same conviction. There is a direct correlation between right doctrine and right behavior. Such unity of belief and action is evidence of our personal integrity.

Seeking to help us integrate our belief and action, Saint Paul urges Titus to “speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (vs. 2:1). He also insists “that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate . . . the older women likewise . . . reverent in behavior . . . that they admonish the young women to love their husbands [and] children” (vss. 2:2-4).

The apostle is calling Titus to uphold both sound doctrine and a definite “pattern of good works” (vss. 7-8). Saint Paul’s teaching flows from doctrine to resulting behavior while barely distinguishing between them, always assuming the full integrity of belief and action.

How do we keep intact our Orthodox doctrine, which shows us the true path to health and salvation and guides us along that right path? According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, “Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is within us, indicating that the divinity dwells in our hearts. When God dwells in our hearts, He teaches and writes His doctrines and His law in our hearts and minds; for supremely, the heart is the site where God’s commandments are written” (p. 168).

The Apostle Paul understands that purity and defilement both begin in our *nous* – the spiritual center of a person’s heart and the seat of our conscience. “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and the conscience are defiled” (vs. 15).

If our *nous* and our conscience are pure, then we know God and our works affirm Him (vs. 15). However, if our heart is defiled, it does not matter if we profess to know God. We will deny the Lord, “being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (vs. 16).

The communities Saint Paul formed were composed of young and old, men and women. He urges sobriety, love, reverence, temperance, and patience to all, but especially to the older men. He knows that the virtues flow naturally from them to the other members of the community, so long as the elders remain “sound in faith” (vs 2:2). Hence, the apostle urges older men to speak “the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (vs. 1).

Saint Paul reminds Titus that he will necessarily have to exhibit integrity in his own “pattern of good works,” carefully matching it to the integrity of his doctrine (vs. 7). For example, the apostle commands Titus to instruct the faithful who are slaves to be obedient to their masters and “well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity” (vss. 9-10), and thus adorning “the doctrine of God our Savior” (vs. 10).

What of *our* integrity? May God help us purify our hearts so that He may dwell within us, teach us to hold fast to His laws and exhibit His grace on a daily basis.

Holy Father, deliver us from the sorrow of sin that we may serve Thee in spirit and truth. –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 21st - Twenty-Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossians 1:12-18

Who is Christ Jesus? Colossians 1:12-18, especially vs. 15: *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”* Do we consider the “grace . . . and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 1:2) to be our eternal hope? The Apostles Paul and Timothy declare that our answer to this question depends on our faith in Christ Jesus (vs. 4). Today’s passage thus offers us a penetrating commentary on the saving work and unique importance of “our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 3), commanding our trust in Him.

The first two verses of today’s passage affirm that our union with Jesus, the Son of God, qualifies us “to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light,” for God “has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (vs. 13). What they say has a direct bearing on our everyday lives.

We begin with the phrase “the invisible God” (vs. 15). If we accept that God is present and rules over the universe, we quickly admit that we are in the presence of One who touches every aspect of our experience and hopes.

The Apostle Paul earlier addressed that “which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit” (vs. 5-6). This statement concerns Christ the Lord, whom the Apostle John claims to have “seen with our eyes . . . looked upon, and . . . handled” (1 Jn 1:1).

This Lord Jesus Christ, of whom Saint Paul speaks, “is the [visible] image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). But now the apostle goes one step further and declares that by Christ Jesus “all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (vs. 16).

He announces to us that Jesus Christ is our Creator. He existed “before all things” (vs. 17), and *we* exist because of Him. In fact, everything exists because of Him. The entire Creation continues and exists by His will, for “in Him all things consist” (vs. 17).

These assertions are not liable to scientific or objective proof. They depend on trust. Do we take the word of the apostle as informed, worthy, and applicable to the life we lead? Does that word affect our choices and everything we undertake?

The apostle elevates Christ our God to headship over His “body, the church” (vs. 18). He places the members of the Church under His rule and authority, for He has “the preeminence” (vs. 18). These apostolic assertions necessarily influence our outlook on the world: how we relate to other people, what we take seriously, and what we consider secondary or trivial.

Now, let us reflect the most important apostolic teaching in these verses: Why did Christ Jesus, the Son of God, enter the stream of human life and take on our very flesh from his human mother? The reason is so that we might be “delivered . . . from the power of darkness and conveyed . . . into [His] kingdom” (vs. 13).

Who would argue that a terrible darkness confronts us on every side? Violence, deprivation, immorality, sickness and death all menace us and make the apostle’s message pertinent. But at the same time we know of “His blood [and] the forgiveness of sins” (vs. 14); we know that He is “the firstborn from the dead” (vs. 18). He is our promise of living, eternal *redemption* (vs. 14) from the threat of death and darkness. Yes, there is grace and peace for us from God our Father!

Glory to Thee, who hast shown us the light. Glory to God in the highest and . . . peace, good will to men. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 22nd - Monday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 3:5-11, 17-19

The Household of God: Hebrews 3:5-11, 17-19, especially vss. 5-6: *“And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.”* Each year, as the celebration of the Lord Jesus’ nativity approaches, the Church undertakes a course of readings through the epistle to the Hebrews. This week we reflect on a series of passages from the early chapters. The first three passages make excellent preparation for the upcoming feast of Christ’s Incarnation.

Since the birth of the Son of God in the flesh is of great import for the Church, we rejoice today as members of His *house* (that is, of the “household of God,” vs. 3:5-19). Christ, of course, is the promised Heir of God’s household (vss. 4:1-13). Therefore, the Apostle Paul urges us to continue our journey with faith in God, that we may receive His blessing (vss. 7:1-6).

The Church reads the Old Testament as the history of God’s relationship with His people. She understands the New Testament as defining the transformation of that relationship as a result of Christ’s ministry among us. The apostle illumines this contrast vividly in the present reading.

First, he reminds us that the Prophet Moses was the key figure in God’s household, the man charged by the Lord with responsibility for the Israel of God. Without question, Moses carried out his assigned task very faithfully (vs. 3:5).

But then the apostle reflects that even this great prophet was only a servant of God, although certainly the foremost among all His servants. When we address the present state of God’s household, we encounter our Lord Jesus Christ, who is not a mere servant in the household but “a Son over His own house” (vs. 6).

The difference in status within the household between Moses and Christ is qualitative and immense. The household belongs to the Lord Jesus, even though He ministers to its members as a servant (Mk 10:45; Jn 13:14). Talk about the humility of God!

In addition, Saint Paul points out that the groundwork for Christ was laid by Moses, who gave “testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward” (Heb 3:5). What are “those things” that we, as members of the household of God, ought to observe from the Mosaic era?

The apostle, quoting Prophet David, says, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,” referring to the revolt against Moses in the wilderness (vss. 7-8). The people of God paid dearly for straying in their hearts (vs. 10), for an entire generation failed to enter the Promised Land “because of unbelief” (vs. 19).

Now, we are that “house” through our baptism into Christ (vs..6), but only on the condition that we are not willful against God through unbelief. We must “hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end” (vs. 6), even in the wilderness of this life (vs. 17). Let us never pine and yearn for the comforts and provisions we had as slaves of the “Egypt” of this created and temporary world!

Christ our Passover (Pascha) has led us from death and slavery into life and freedom. He has made us sons with Him in the household of God. The rest that Christ provides awaits us if we steadfastly hold fast our confidence in Him. What the earlier members of the household lost in a temporal way through rebellion, let us not lose eternally!

Lo, with Judah and Levi we magnify Moses the great, and Aaron the wonderful; and with David we celebrate the memory of Joshua and Samuel, inviting all with divine songs and divine praise to the preparation of the Nativity of Christ, praying to receive His goodness; for He it is that granteth the world the great mercy. – Orthros for the Sunday before Christmas

January 23rd - Tuesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 4:1-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 24th - Wednesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 5:11-6:8

Useful Crops: *Hebrews 5:11-6:8, especially vs. 6:7: “For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God. . . .”* We will soon celebrate the wonder of the Lord Jesus’ nativity in the flesh, joining with the faithful to profess to God: “O Christ, true Light that lighteth and sanctifieth every man that cometh into the world, may the light of Thy countenance be impressed on our faces that we may see therewith the unapproachable Light [and] order our steps after Thy commandments” (First Royal Hour of the Nativity).

Surely it is not enough to soak up the joy of this feast without producing a harvest useful to the Lord who cultivates our souls. Do we hear lovely carols and hymns at our churches so that we may bear to bear thorns and briars? These to be “rejected and . . . cursed, whose end is to be burned” (vs. 6:8)! Let us not be found among those whom the apostle chides, saying, “We have much to say, and [it is] hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (vs. 5:11).

Let us take the apostle’s message to heart and offer it on the secret altar of our prayers. We make our petitions as the Church teaches, begging God to “order our steps after Thy commandments,” to help us move forward in the life in Christ. We allow the ineffable wonder of the Incarnate Son to blossom in our hearts, from this day forward.

Saint Paul is concerned that we not stagnate, remaining like babes in the faith. Surely there is something wrong if days and years pass and yet we still need “someone to teach [us] again the first principles of the oracles of God; [still need] milk and not solid food” from God’s hand (vs.12). The apostle encourages us rather to grow in the faith, “in the word of righteousness” (vs. 13), so that we may partake of the solid food that belongs to those who are mature (vs.14).

Think for a moment about how many times we say the prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mt 6:11). We know that God provides the earthly good things we enjoy, but the prayer holds much more for us as faithful disciples.

According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, “To understand this passage of the prayer in its clearest meaning we should say, ‘Our bread,’ which You prepared in the beginning for the immortality of nature, ‘give us this day,’ to us who belong to the mortal condition of the present life, so that nourishment by the bread of life and knowledge triumph over the death of sin.

“The one who prays to receive this super substantial bread does not receive it altogether as this bread is in itself, but as he is able to receive it” (*Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, p. 113). In other words, the more we drift away from faith, the less benefit we receive from communion with our Lord.

But let us never despair over our failures, but rather address our true need. We must not misinterpret the statement that “it is impossible for those who were once enlightened . . . if they fall away, to renew themselves again to repentance” (vss. 6:4-6). Here, Saint Paul simply states that we are cleansed by baptism only once.

However, we still have tears, repentance, confession, prayer, and almsgiving to restore God’s grace. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “To make men new is the work of the laver [baptism] only . . . But it is the work of repentance, when those who have been made new, have afterwards become old through sins, to set them free from this old age, and to make them strong” (“Homily 9 on Hebrews,” *NPN Fathers First Series*, Vol. 14, p. 410). May the Christ Child’s grace stir us toward this true repentance and lead us toward eternal life!

Come, ye that have put on Christ, let us behold a wonder that overtaketh all minds. – Sixth Royal Hour of the Nativity

January 25th - Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:1-6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**January 26th - Friday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 7:18-25**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 28th – Sunday of the Holy Forefathers
Colossians 3:4-11

Future, Present, Past: Colossians 3:4-11, especially vss. 5-7: “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth. . . . Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked. . . .” In this opening quote, the changing grammatical tenses refer to the passage of time. They serve cover the entire working of salvation, from the past into the present and future. All of time is summarized in these three verses. Thus, while the Apostle Paul primarily exhorts us concerning the labors and tasks of this present life, he also sketches the future in swift, impressionistic strokes while referring to the past. Then he returns again to the present, where we must daily evaluate, decide, and act.

At the start of today’s passage, the apostle indicates our present condition: “Christ who is our life” (vs 4). However, even as he speaks of this life in Christ, he places the present in the context of the future. In the time yet to come, the Life-giver will appear, and “then you also will appear with Him in glory” (vs 4). Participating in the Christian mystery now places us on the path toward the glory that shall be.

Those of us who firmly hold to Christ in the depth of our being will share in His magnificence when He is manifested in glory. Wondrously, we who are now motivated by our belief in Him will be glorified together with Him (Rom 8:17). We would be utterly at a loss to receive these words if we did not have the revelation of the glory of God in the flesh, the gospel of Savior who was born among us, in all humility, so that our finite senses could comprehend God. We can now project from the limited present to an eternal future!

In this reading the apostle invites us to consider what is demanded of us now by the future that will surely come. We are to “put to death [our] members which are upon earth” (vs. 5). Saint Paul lists what must be mortified: “fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry” (vs. 5). Are these sins operating in us now?

Why must we continually mortify our passions? Saint John Chrysostom asks us to imagine someone who “has scoured clean a statue that was filthy, or rather who has recast it, and displayed it bright afresh.” He can truly say that the rust “was eaten off and destroyed, and yet [still] recommend diligence in clearing away the rust. He doth not contradict himself, for it is not that rust which he scoured off that he recommends should be cleared away, but that which grew afterwards” (“Homily 8 on Colossians,” *NPN Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 13, p. 294).

New and former sins continue to flare up in our hearts and souls. We are called to continually purify and cleanse every trace of sin that grows within us, so that we may be found worthy of the glorious future appearing of our Savior.

Having encouraged us by means of a God-promised, ineffable future, the Apostle Paul reminds us of another of God’s promises: there will be retribution for those who disobey. The “sons of disobedience” will face wrath when the Lord returns (vs. 6). Further, Saint Paul reminds us, we too “once walked . . . [in] . . . anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, [and] filthy language” (vss. 7,8). We are to “put off” all traces of these wrongs (vs. 8)!

At the beginning, in the waters of baptism, we were illumined, we were sanctified, we were washed. Now, “even unto a ripe old age,” we are to ascribe glory to God by putting “on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (vs. 10). We labor now so that “Christ is all and in all” (vs. 11): in us, and also in everyone we influence by our life. Let us remain “rust free” until He appears in glory, so that we too shall appear with Him (vs. 4).

Grant a Christian ending to our life and a good defense before Thy dread Judgment seat. –
Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 29th – Monday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 8:7-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**January 30th – Feast of the Three Holy Hierarchs
Hebrews 13:17-21**

Accountability: Hebrews 13:17-21, especially vs. 17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account...” Consider the burden placed on our clergy - care “for *our* souls.” Today, a Priest may be called to account by His Bishop, or a Bishop by the Synod of his fellows; but ultimately every clergyman shall stand before God to account for his life, his acts, his care, his words, his ministry, his teaching, his counsel, and whatever else was done by him in relation to his people, whether to bless them, or, God forbid, to defraud those over whom he rules. We speak of no small burden, but of one fraught with urgency, because the words and actions of each clergyman occur before the penetrating eye of Him Who sees the secrets of every man’s heart and mind - no small burden!

Observe, therefore, how the Apostle turns the burden of our clergy back on us over whom they rule and watch. Give them joy. Do not to grieve them. Every action they take, every word they speak has implication for their salvation. So, obey them. Submit to them. It is possible to hide some of the inner workings of your soul from others, but do not attempt to cloak yourself from your pastors; “...for that would be unprofitable for you” (vs. 17). Shame can suggest that you “act nice,” and not show the bitterness, the craving, the pettiness, the meanness, that lodges in out-of-the-way pockets of your soul. Yet it is foolish to cloak all that murk and pus.

The Church does not ask you to “air your dirty laundry” before the world, but to unburden your heart in privacy before your Confessor, to dig down and get rid of the poison in yourself that is making your sick spiritually. We have the confessional for that very purpose. Come regularly under the pastoral stole to grow, find health, and recover. Give gladness and bring joy to your father-in-God. That will be profitable for you (vs. 17).

The starting place for every relationship is prayer. A marriage can and will blossom when a husband and wife pray to God for each other. Nations survive because their people pray for those in authority. Pray for your pastors, your Priests, your Bishops. Hold their burdens up to the Lord for His grace. Can you imagine what assurance is imparted to a Pastor when he knows that his people pray for him? What great strength it can bring to his resolve to labor in all things “to live honorably” (vs. 18)! He is a man, after all. He too struggles to be all that God intends him to be. Pour out your heart to the Lord for him without stint, and not in some routine way.

When the Apostle wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, he was away from a congregation whom he had visited sometime before. We cannot know what their relationship had been previously, when it was or how long the separation went on; but notice the pastoral concern. He urges their obedience and submission to their leaders and prayers for him so that it will be possible that he “...may be restored to you the sooner” (vs. 19). His words admonish us to obey, submit, and pray for our leaders and for those who, in turn, rule over them, as do our Bishops.

The foundation for all the Apostle has said comes at the end in the form of a pastoral blessing, a benediction that extends to you and me. May God complete you so that you carry out every good work. May He accomplish His will in you. May His grace effect “...what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ...” (vs. 21). May this great, glorious, and bountiful God, “...Who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep...” (vs. 20), give you the grace to obey your Pastors, submit to their pastoral care, and receive Divine peace. May the New Covenant of our loving God be sealed for you “...through the blood of the everlasting covenant...” (vs. 20), and showered upon you through the death and Resurrection of Christ.

We pray Thee, O Father all-holy, hear us and have mercy!

January 31st - Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 10:1-18

Once for All: Hebrews 10:1-18, especially vs. 10: *“We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”* Earlier in his letter to the Hebrews, Saint Paul explains the necessity for blood sacrifice to remove the barrier of sin – a barrier insurmountable for human strength that keeps us from fellowship with God (vss. 9:8-10, 15-23). In today’s reading, the apostle builds on his earlier teaching as he contrasts the animal sacrifices of ancient Israel with the inestimable sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the Cross.

Saint Paul begins with the symbolic nature of Israel’s worship. He then explores the boundless character of Christ’s crucifixion, disclosing to us why our Lord’s Self-offering is truly “once for all” (vs. 10:10). The apostle reminds us that the law under the Old Covenant was, at best, merely “a shadow of the good things to come” (vs. 1). It was a type – a suggestive foreshadowing – of the effective blood-sacrifice of Christ that was to come later. The animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood were ineffective, for they were not the true “image of the things” in heaven (vs. 1).

It is Christ alone, in His sacrificial death, who imparts God’s forgiveness of mankind – a forgiveness effective throughout all eternity. God, as a man on the Cross, is able to say, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34).

By contrast, animal sacrifices were offered repeatedly “year by year” (Heb 10:1) on the Day of Atonement. Nevertheless, they did not “make those who [approached] perfect” (vs. 1), for symbolic rituals can never remove the inner “consciousness of sins” (vs. 2). Only when God forgives us are our sins removed. The Pharisees understood this well, which is why they mistakenly took offense at the Lord Jesus when He forgave men their sins (Lk 5:21).

The animal sacrifices reminded the people of their sins (vs. 3). Faith readily admits that sin exists today among Christians, just as it did among the people of ancient Israel. What, then, is the essential difference between faith in Christ and the rituals of the Law?

We are constantly reminded of our sinfulness, just as Israel was. The difference lies in what God has done about sin. God the eternal Son lived exactly as we do: He became in every respect a man, immersing Himself in our condition to the point of death, the result of our sin.

All aspects of human sin were apparent to the Lord Jesus, and He chose to bear the consequence of sins despite being sinless Himself. There was no sickness He chose to avoid, nor any sickness He did not heal. By shedding His blood, he experienced fully our alienation from God and effected atonement for us with God. He took a body (vs. 5) and completed God’s will in and through that which He assumed (vs. 7).

It now becomes clear why animal sacrifice was abolished. When God offered the perfect sacrifice for sin, He took the consequence of sin upon Himself. He died in the body, although He had no cause to die. Thereby, the door to sanctification was thrown open for all eternity.

In the prayer of absolution after confession, we hear, “May . . . God forgive thee all things . . . in this present world, and in that which is to come, and set thee uncondemned before His dread Judgment Seat. And now, having no further care for the sins you have confessed, depart in peace.”

During the anaphora, at the climax of the Divine Liturgy, we hear these words: “We offer unto Thee this rational and *bloodless* worship. . . . That to those who partake thereof, they may be unto . . . forgiveness of sins.” Our liturgy takes place without the shedding of blood, for Christ offered Himself “once for all” (vs. 10) for the forgiveness of our sins.

Blessed art Thou who didst not cease until Thou hadst brought us back to heaven! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 1st - Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 10:35-11:7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

February 2nd - Meeting of the Lord in the Temple Hebrews 7:7-17

The Ultimate Blessing: *Hebrews 7:7-17, especially vs. 7:* “Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.” The Lord Jesus carefully instructs His followers concerning the culmination of time, when we will reach the end of the ages and the Last Judgment. On that day, the faithful will hear these words: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34). The Master’s righteous servants – who are to be considered “lesser,” since we attain perfection only through His grace – shall then obtain the ultimate blessing from Christ, who is “better” – indeed, the best.

On another occasion, when the Virgin Theotokos and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple “to present Him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22), we see the *lesser* blessed by *better*. Simeon takes the Child in his arms and acknowledges that he beholds the incarnate salvation of the human race. “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (vss. 29-30).

Writing today’s epistle, the Apostle Paul affirms that God the Father has provided His ultimate blessing to His people “by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb 1:2). The appearance of the Son of God transforms the Old Covenant into the new – and better – one.

Under the original covenant, the various offerings of God’s people were brought to the Temple to be blessed through pronouncements by the Levitical priests. As Solomon demonstrated at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chr 6:1-7,10), a variety of blessings, with thank-offerings to God, were offered that the Lord might continue His provision for the people’s earthly needs (vss. 29-30). Sin offerings were made, so that God might extend forgiveness (vss. 22-23), while holocaust offerings were presented so that God might bless the people with His presence (vss. 18-19).

These acts of worship under the Old Covenant were types to be forever replaced by the appearance of the ultimate High Priest, who gives us the ultimate blessing. Indeed, mankind continues to receive all good things from God without limit: food, clothing, shelter, everything we need.

Our God has called us forth out of every nation, instituting a new age for giving thanks in Christian temples all over the world. Our praise and thanksgiving for God’s earthly good things are embedded in the far greater offering to God from Christ, who becomes His own offering, presented once “in behalf of all, and for all” (from the anaphora).

We still need God’s forgiveness and healing, of course, since we are all sinners. To this end, our Great High Priest offers His Body and Blood through the Eucharist, in order that for “those who shall partake thereof they may be unto vigilance of soul, unto forgiveness of sins, unto the communion of [the] Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.”

The perfection sought through the sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood is now fulfilled in Christ our High Priest. He ever intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). Just as Simeon embraced the ultimate blessing when he held the Child in his arms, so we now say, “My eyes have seen Your salvation” (Lk 2:30).

May we one day hear God’s perfect blessing spoken by His Son, when He declares the ultimate blessing to His own (Heb 7:11)! May we receive Him now through the Eucharist with boldness toward God and not “unto condemnation,” remembering that “Christ is in our midst!”

Let Thy mercy be upon us, O Lord, even as we have set our hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

February 3rd - Saturday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Ephesians 5:1-8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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