

December 1 - Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 2:4-10

God's Love: *Ephesians 2:4-10, especially vs. 4:* “*God . . . is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us. . . .*” The Church reveals God's mercy and love through the holy mysteries, Scripture, the icons, the saints, and the whole of sacred tradition. Those who respond to God's luminous message walk freely in His love and mercy as “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (vs. 19). They know how greatly they are loved and for what purpose they were “created in Christ Jesus” (vs. 10).

In today's passage, the Apostle Paul summarizes the “great love” of God for His people in three declarations: God “made us alive together with Christ” (vs. 5); “raised us up together” in Christ (vs. 6); “and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (vs. 6).

Each assertion of God's love is stated in the past tense, as a *fait accompli*. God has gone on record to establish His rich mercy and great love for us, so that we, as His workmanship in Christ Jesus, would be able to discharge those “good works which [He] prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (vs. 10).

But if we are to be “made alive,” we must first know that we are dead. Hence, Saint Paul reminds us that “we were dead in trespasses” (vs. 5). He contradicts here the common error of approaching death from the wrong direction, as strictly the end of physical life, the mortality of the body. To limit death this way obscures the profound death of which the apostle speaks. Many of us are “dead” for a time, although we live in an animated body, for spiritual death precedes physical cessation for all who are “in Adam” (1 Cor 15:22).

The God who is rich in mercy and love addresses our condition at its root, saving not just our immortal souls and spirits, but solving once and for all the issue surrounding death: the alienation between our race and God. Every one of us is dead in our separation from the Source of life. Nonetheless, God took our flesh upon Himself through the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary, crossing over from the heavenly places (Eph 2:6) to die for us. Life embraced death. He entered the place of the dead, assaulting and tramping down death, and offered life to every mortal.

Are we baptized into Christ? Then, together with the faithful joined to Him, we have “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). We are now made alive with Him (Eph 2:5), raised up from that death which separates us from God, for He is our life and makes us to sit “in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (vs. 6).

Yes, our bodies will die, but in Christ we are already united to eternal Life. If we will take up the “walk” (vs. 10) for which God created us, ineffable wonders follow. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “We have been brought from non-existence into being. As to what we were before, that is, the old man, we are dead. What we are now, we were not before. Truly, then, this is a work, a creation, yea, and more noble than the first; for from that one, we have our being; but from this last, we have . . . our wellbeing” (“Homily 4 on Ephesians, *NPNF First Series*, Vol. 13, p. 68).

God has placed us on the road to the city of the Great King. Come, let us walk in good works, not stopping to indulge our flesh that will die. Rather, we join Him in faith and seize the great good that God's grace has accomplished. In His rich mercy and great love for us, we are recreated. Let us do many good works in the name of Him who has given us life.

O Lord, by Thy Holy Spirit, guide us. Bless our comings and our goings; our deeds and works and words and thoughts, that they may praise Thine ineffable beneficence. – Orthros Prayer of the Priest

December 2 – Monday of the Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 2:20-3:8

Apostolic Goals – Stand Fast: *1 Thessalonians 2:20-3:8, especially vs. 8:* “For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.” As Orthodox Christians, we seek the intercessions of the apostles for our salvation, but do we consider the goals that the apostles have set for us as disciples of Christ? This week’s epistle readings express the goals Saint Paul seeks to accomplish in the faithful. Let us now consider how following the apostles’ way makes us part of their “glory and joy” (vs. 20).

Over many months and years, the Apostle Paul invested his time in forming congregations, training pastors, and preparing the Christian communities to stand on their own without his presence. He recalls these activities in his letter to the Thessalonians. Later, separated by his travels and lacking today’s means of instant communication, he earnestly wants to know how they are faring. Surely parents of children away at college understand this concern!

Since he is unable to come in person (vs. 18), Saint Paul sends his assistant and fellow apostle Timothy to learn whether the community is bearing fruit. He wants evidence that his God-given ministry continues to function (vs. 3:2). Timothy returns with good news: the Christians in Thessalonica are standing “fast in the Lord” (vs. 8), and Saint Paul is comforted (vs. 7).

How does this apply to us? The apostles’ first goal is that our communities should *stand fast* in grace and in the way of the Lord. Today’s passage indicates how easily we can be “shaken” and even dislodged from our journey with the Lord (vs. 3).

Who among us has not faltered and taken a wrong step? How often do we let pain or troubles steal our peace in Christ? Let us have no illusions; a multitude of forces assault us, distract us, and rudely separate us from the Lord’s path. The question is how, then, are we to *stand fast* in the grace of God?”

First and foremost, we stand by faith (vss. 6-7). Each of us must do our part to build on God’s gift of faith received at our baptism. We rely on the trust the apostles convey to us and beseech their prayers; we struggle to hold fast to the word of life. After many had deserted Jesus, Saint Peter said: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69).

Second, we reframe our understanding of the tribulations that come to every Christian. The Thessalonians who hear of Saint Paul’s tribulation are themselves stressed by dire poverty. Earthly pressures come to us, but the Apostle Paul does not wish us to be dislodged from Christ.

He thus reminds us “that we are appointed to” trials (1 Thes 3:3). We know, furthermore, that trials are appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation. We give thanks that God’s hand is ever upon us, knowing that He is especially near when we endure afflictions.

Third, we must determine to reject temptations, which often come in swarms in order to shake us from the gospel (vs. 5). The outcome of each temptation lies within us: the demons play their part, but our flesh is all too ready to listen and cooperate.

We pray to resist when we are drawn into actions that oppose our Lord’s will and His commandments. We confess our weaknesses, asking that His strength prevail. We seek Christ’s grace to resist and overcome the allurements of the world and the flesh. We also ask the holy apostles to intercede for us, as ones tried and true in standing fast.

Finally, we stir up love for the Lord and His apostles. Our love for Him and His love for us is our bulwark against straying (vs. 6). The Lord closely examines Saint Peter in order to anchor him in that love (Jn 21:15-17). Christ awakens love for Him in every heart that asks!

O Holy Apostles, intercede with the merciful God to grant salvation for our souls. – Festal hymn for an apostle

December 3 – Tuesday of the Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Apostolic Goals, continued – Holiness: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, especially vss. 12-13: “*And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love . . . so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father. . . .*” In yesterday’s reading, the Apostle Paul explains how to stand fast in the life in Christ. He outlines the relationship of steadfastness to holiness, highlighting the natural spiritual movement from faith to love. Faith and love provide us with the power to stand fast. These in turn lead to another apostolic goal for every Christian disciple: holiness and sanctity (Jn 17:17).

Saint John the Theologian and the Apostle Peter both emphasize that holiness is the standard by which we judge authenticity of faith (see 1 Jn 2:6; 1 Pt 1:15). The Apostle James discusses the need for holiness as a good defense before the judgment seat of the Lord (Jas 1:12). In today’s passage, Saint Paul carefully traces the path by which we progress from faith to love to holiness. Let us learn how to walk this path.

First, Saint Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the joy he receives from their faith (1 Thes 3:9-10). Earlier, he expressed concerns that they might have slipped away from steadfast faith (vs. 5). He knows how easily they could revert to their pagan past. They are standing fast, however, and so he rejoices (6, 8).

Now, he reveals his longing to visit them again to “perfect what is lacking in your faith” (vs. 10). He knows what every serious Christian soon recognizes: our faith must be planted and then carefully nurtured, for our trust in God may be damaged if we succumb to the encroachments of the non-Christian world.

To prevent spiritual death, there must always be forward movement in faith. We live in a world filled with hedonism, secularism, and humanism. These ideals dominate the media and flood us with enticing invitations to set aside our faith in God.

Note how the apostle prays for the Thessalonians when speaking of their need to continue growing in Christ. He asks the Lord to make them “increase and abound in love to one another and to all” (vs. 12).

Consider the “work of faith . . . in our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 3). One may have trust in all sorts of things in life – possessions, projects, and people – but to trust in the Lord Jesus requires a specific kind of faith, with exacting commitments. Faith in our Lord, when fully grown, produces godly love in us for others, whether they are in the Church or in the world, including those who reject the faith and hate us for it.

For this reason, the Apostle Paul tells the disciples in Galatia that “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all” (Gal 6:10). Unless care, respect, kindness, patience, and consideration for the needs of others is manifest in us, our profession of Christ is sorely lacking. How shall we say it? Trust in Christ means loving as He does! Such love leads us to holiness.

Hence, Saint Paul says, “may the Lord make you increase . . . in love . . . so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness” (1 Thes 3:12-13). Faith and love are gifts from God, as is sanctity. Each virtue requires our active cooperation with God if we are to move toward holiness. God’s grace must be coupled with our own efforts.

Saint Paul prays that God will give His gifts of faith, love, and holiness to the Thessalonians – indeed, he is praying for us even now as he stands before the throne of the Giver of grace. Let us labor at every virtue and place all our trust in God. We are to “owe no one anything except to love one another” (Rom 13:8), for then genuine holiness will flourish among us all.

Teach us to love, O Lord, even as Thou dost love us in purity and in holiness.

December 4 - Great Martyr Barbara
Galatians 3:23-4:5

Sons in Christ: Galatians 3:23-4:5, especially vs 26: *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”* When Saint Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, he was horrified that they were “turning away...from Him who called [them] in the grace of Christ” (Gal 1:6). Turning away in favor of what? Turning toward what? Certain Jewish Christians were persuading the Galatians to keep the practices of traditional Judaism, in defiance of their freedom in Christ.

Even today some ill-informed souls see Judaism as perfectly acceptable, with its high morality, fear of the Lord, and pious worship. However, Saint Paul plainly warns that Christ will be of no profit to those who revert to the strictness of the Mosaic Law for salvation. Worse, such misguided choices cause us to lose the priceless gift of being “sons of God” (Gal 3:26)!

In this passage, Saint Paul presents the Apostolic alternative to the estrangement that occurs when anyone tries to live fully by the Mosaic Law. Orthodoxy provides the God-given gift of being “baptized into Christ” and of putting on Christ (vs 27)! The opportunity to become “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (vs 26) is ours - which is why at the great Feasts we sing, “As many of you as have been Baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!”

Thus, in these verses, Saint Paul reminds us of what it means to be one of the Sons of God. Since the Faith came to us, “we are no longer under a tutor” (vs 25). Instead, we are a new creation in Christ, and all of us are “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (vs 26). No longer in slavery to rules and regulations, we have “the Spirit of His Son [in our] hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal 4:6). We are no longer slaves under Law (important as God’s commandments are) but are sons, “and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal 4:7). We may call God our Father, even as prodigals, and to return to Him.

Rejoice in a unique, priceless relationship to God provided by Baptism into Christ; for having “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27), every ethnic, economic, and biological distinction is swept away in favor of the new status that is ours as “heirs according to the promise” that God made to Abraham (vss 28,29). Adoption is what we have received in Christ. By trusting God and receiving Baptism, we become Christ’s. Now the promise is ours, since in Christ Jesus we “are all sons of God” (vs 26). The Laws of God are good and holy. They guide us in daily living; but anyone who tries to keep the Divine commandments perfectly may fall into the trap of believing he can do the will of God perfectly. Such is the temptation with all rules, even God’s holy Laws. The root problem is sin, our inclination to rebel, to be disobedient. Sin is as old as Adam and Eve facing temptation in Paradise. Wrongdoing disrupts kingdoms and nations, as it did in the kingdom of the holy Prophet and King, David. His sin with Bathsheba ultimately tore his kingdom apart and faced him with civil war with his own son. No amount of effort to fulfill the Law will succeed! When we separate from God, Paradise is lost, and we weep (Gn 3:24)!

God wills it otherwise: having made a promise of restoration to Abraham, God added another promise, “when the fullness of the time had come, [He would send] forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4), a True Son Who would deal with sins on the Cross and make it possible for anyone to come back in trust to our good and loving Father, and “receive the adoption as sons” (vs 5). Law is good, but apart from Christ it alienates and makes us illegitimate before God. We are only made Sons of God through faith in Jesus (vs 3:26).

O Master, Who hast revealed the water of Baptism as redemption, sanctification, the loosing of bonds and the gift of adoption to sonship, renew us after Thine image, O our Creator.

December 5 – Thursday of Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 5:1-8

Apostolic Goals, continued – Sobriety: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8, especially vs. 6: *“Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.”* Just as Saint Paul calls us to live in purity, he also calls us to be watchful, for those “who are of the day” should live soberly (vs. 8). In modern times, any talk of sobriety raises the specter of substance abuse, for this widespread health issue affects marriages, destroys productivity and health, and corrupts every aspect of one’s physical, social, and spiritual life.

No doubt addiction and drunkenness were as prevalent in first-century Greco-Roman society as they are today. Yet the Apostle Paul does not focus primarily on this issue per se, but assigns a broader meaning to the term sobriety. He stresses our need to be conscious of our ultimate accountability before God. Christian sobriety thus embraces not only the specific problem of substance abuse, but also irresponsibility, loss of direction, and hopelessness.

The present passage begins with instruction about “the day of the Lord” (vs. 2). This phrase refers to the end times: the conclusion of mortal existence and history upon the Lord Jesus’ return. Thus Saint Paul’s call for sobriety is accompanied by a warning of the final judgment, while drunkenness is mentioned only in passing (vs. 7).

In fact, the apostle points toward what we may rightly call “eschatological sobriety,” from the word *eschaton* (“last”). “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night” (vs. 2). With these words he reframes our brief lives and sets them in an end-time perspective. Sobriety, then, is our antidote to the casual, moment-to-moment indulgence that will strip our life of eternal meaning if we are not careful.

The contemporary world treats values, morals, and personal worth as relative. We are invited to think like the godless man who “says to himself, ‘Who sees me? Darkness encircles me. The walls of my house hide me, and no one sees me. Why should I be afraid? The Most High will not remember my sins.’”

“His fear is the eyes of men. Yet he does not know that the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun and look upon all the ways of men, and observe even the secret places” (Sir 23:18-19).

Today, many are awed by the sweeping pace of global change and upheaval. They become fascinated with prophecies of the coming end of time. They speculate when the day of the Lord will come, even seeking to predict the very hour. Such activity is contrary to the Lord Jesus’ warning that such calculations are useless (Mt 24:36).

Saint Paul directs us away from idle conjecture and focuses on the end goal of Christian sobriety: to place our energy on growing in the Spirit. Be vigilant against the assault of anyone or anything that distracts from growing closer to the Lord Jesus in heart and soul. “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober” (vs. 6).

Note how, throughout this passage, the apostle speaks with a confidence born of sure and certain hope. He appeals to us “who are of the day, [to] be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation” (vs. 8).

Consider how a helmet protects the vital area of the head and guards the locus of our senses and the center of our cognitive processing. As Christ’s own, we have a helmet to guard the deep center of the heart, a helmet of hope in our suffering and victorious God and Savior. He has trampled down death and “given unto us life eternal and great mercy.” Let us strive not to falter or stray, but to live soberly, protected by what God wrought for us and in us.

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

December 6 - Feast of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker of Myra in Lycia
Hebrews 13:17-21

Submission: 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.” In Orthodox churches there is a custom of every altar server, reader, and chanter coming to the priest for a blessing before beginning their service at liturgy, vespers, or orthros.

What is the message behind these actions? Submission! We are to come under the rightful leadership of those designated to rule within the Church, even as they themselves submit to the Lord. Acts of submission demonstrate our respect and our readiness to obey those appointed to watch over our souls.

Saint Paul believes that true submission should be undertaken readily, with heartfelt delight, “with joy and not with grief” (vs. 17). Let us all, whether we are actively serving or not, have truly submissive hearts toward our spiritual fathers ordained in Christ to care for our souls.

What is the apostle’s point in admonishing us to submit to those in the Church? Foremost, submission relates to the eternal destiny of our souls. Saint Paul points to our stance before God when he reminds us that our pastors “watch out for [our] souls” (vs. 17). Consider this pastoral burden: every priest and bishop will give account to Christ the Lord concerning those submitted to him. Submission is the warp interwoven into the woof of Christian faith.

When a candidate is ready to be baptized, he is asked: “Do you unite yourself to Christ?” Then, “Do you believe in Him?” When both desire and commitment are established, there follows a repeated questioning: “Have you united yourself to Christ?” But once the candidate answers, “I have:” no further questions follow, nor is a statement made. Rather, a command is given: “Bow down also before Him.” Submission is the essence of life in Christ!

A further act of submission follows: after the candidate bows down, he kneels before the icon of the Lord. The fact and reality of submission continues. Not only is it unprofitable for us (vs. 17) if we fail to submit to the Lord in our hearts and deeds, but also when we refuse to submit to the godly pastors He appoints. For then we may be judged incomplete “in every good work to do His will” (vs. 21). Rebellion and resistance are attitudes with both temporal and eternal consequences.

How do we manifest our compliance under the Lord? In today’s reading, the apostle speaks for every pastor of the Church as he pleads, “Pray for us” (vs. 18). Let us ask God for hearts ready to obey the Lord in and through all our relationships, so that we may realize a holy submission to each other that is “well pleasing in [the Lord’s] sight” (vs. 21).

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Hebrews, he was absent from his flock. Therefore, he asks them, “I especially urge you to [pray for me], that I may be restored to you the sooner” (vs. 19). Do not overlook the double entendre here: if there is resistance within us, then prayer will function to restore us to our pastors and superiors “the sooner.” Let us learn to watch for any sign of resistance, restiveness, or rebellion within us, praying for a wholesome submissiveness so that our souls will not fall into mortal danger.

As we consider wholesome submission, we also recognize that there is such a thing as obsequiousness and servility, as well as inappropriate domination and “lording it over” the faithful, as some are given to doing (Mt 20:25-28). Our priests and bishops are to submit to the Lord as they rule, even as the faithful submit first to the Great Shepherd, and only then to the pastors and bishops who represent Him on earth.

O Master, unite us to Thee that we may be Thy children, ever submitted to Thee. – Baptismal Prayer

December 7 - Saturday of Twenty-fourth Week after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 11:1-6

Being Corrupted: 2 Corinthians 11:1-6, especially vs. 3: *“But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”* Sectarian voices are often heard over the airwaves and the internet, with each spokesman insisting that he is approved by “the most eminent apostles” (vs. 5). While these “leaders” may seem to preach Christ, they transform the Lord Jesus into “a different gospel which you have not accepted” (vs. 4). Although they often accuse the Orthodox of being outdated and thus “inferior to the most eminent apostles” (vs. 5), we steadfastly follow the apostles appointed by Christ and perennially declare one holy and life-giving gospel.

History demonstrates how easily human “minds may be corrupted” (vs. 3) by cunning half-truths and distortions of the faith. We must remain on guard against every so-called “Christian” teaching that would overshadow the apostolic Church with more “complete” and up-to-date versions of the faith. As Orthodox, we are united to the one, true God through holy baptism, having accepted the true faith delivered once and for all to the apostles (Jude 3).

The most dangerous heresies to assault us are those that diminish either the divinity or the humanity of the Lord Jesus, or impugn the reality of His taking on human flesh from the Virgin Mary. God and man are joined eternally and irrevocably in the incarnate Christ. How often the Church reminds us that we worship “a Son without father, who before eternity was begotten of the Father without mother, the property and essence of each substance remaining intact.” Let us carefully attend to the message of the gospels, the icons, and the liturgy!

Our weak natures must learn discernment. If we are unprepared, we are susceptible to false modern ideas. The world does not encourage us to be critical of the spiritual assumptions on which its false teachings are based.

Under the banner of scientific rigor, contemporary wisdom brushes aside the idea of invariable truth and spiritual reality. Or, we may be caught up in the reduction of Orthodox truth by heretical gospels that aim to be more palatable to the so-called modern mind. The apostles knew of such teachings; they coped with Christians who would “not endure sound doctrine . . . because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim 4:3-4).

We rely on the Holy Spirit to save us from error and “guide [us] into all truth” (Jn 16:13). Immature Christians, whether at Corinth or in one of our own communities, are those drawn toward “a different gospel which you have not accepted” (2 Cor 11:4).

We know and hear only the faith of the apostles during the Divine Liturgy. We ignore invented gospels, which are contrary to the gift of the Spirit in which we are sealed. We “have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us.”

The apostles and the Holy Church are jealous for us “with godly jealousy” (vs. 2). We are “betrothed . . . to one husband . . . as a chaste virgin to Christ” (vs. 2). However, we are only betrothed, for the wedding banquet of the age to come has not begun.

In holy communion, we receive a foretaste of that unending Mystical Supper. Let us confess the Lord like the good thief and not be condemned by accepting false spirits, nor for investigating strange and diminished gospels.

Establish us in Thy sanctification, O Lord, that all the day long we may meditate upon Thy righteousness. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 8 - Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 2:14-22

Jews and Gentiles: *Ephesians 2:14-22, especially vss. 17-18:* “*And [Christ Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*” Our faith teaches that the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles is achieved in Christ Jesus, “the chief cornerstone” of new Israel, the Church (vs. 20). The apostle in this epistle refers to the Jews as “the Circumcision” and to all other ethnic peoples as “Gentiles in the flesh,” or “the Uncircumcision” (vs. 2:11).

If we examine the implications of Saint Paul’s remarks, we understand that although most Orthodox Christians today are Gentiles, they still belong to the “commonwealth of Israel” (vs. 12). They are united to Christ, the true Messiah of Israel. Therefore, we Gentiles are citizens of the New Jerusalem, the Zion of God.

Elsewhere, Saint Paul explains that Christians of Jewish heritage also are part of the true Israel of God. Even the “natural branches” may one day choose to “be grafted into their own olive tree” once again (Rom 11:24).

In “An Orthodox Christian Priest of Jewish Heritage Serving in Jerusalem,” we read the story of Father Alexander Winogradsky, who does “not consider [himself] ethnically a Jew or Hebrew.” He quotes Saint Paul’s verses in Ephesians to affirm the idea that Christ “created in Himself one new man from the two” (cf Eph 4:15) (*Again*, Summer 2005, Vol. 27.2, pp. 18-19).

Saint John Chrysostom understands these verses in similar fashion. He points out that Saint Paul does not “disparage the Israelitish prerogative,” but rather enhances it. However, Saint John adds that the greatest risk for any Jew or Gentile, according to Saint Paul, is “being without Christ . . . being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.”

Therefore no one should take comfort on the basis of ethnicity alone, because “this circumcision is not the commonwealth,” for “the Israelites themselves were without this commonwealth, not however as aliens, but as indifferent to it, and they fell from the covenants, not however as strangers, but as unworthy.” Likewise, those of Gentile heritage were people “having no hope . . . and without God” until the coming of Christ Jesus. What they worshiped were not gods, for an idol is nothing (1 Cor 10:19).

We must understand that Saint Paul speaks here as a Jewish Christian to the Ephesians, a community of Gentile Christians. His point is that Christ the Lord “Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation” (Eph 2:14). Ethnic distinctions no longer exist in Him, for we are all one in Christ.

Again, according to Saint John Chrysostom, “It is not that the Gentile is become a Jew, but that both the one and the other are entered into another condition. . . . Laying hold on the one hand of the Jew, and on the other of the Gentile, and Himself being in the midst, He blended them together, make all the estrangement which existed between them to disappear, and fashioned them anew from above by fire and by water” (“Homily 5 on Ephesians,” *NPNF* First Series, Vol. 13, p. 71-72).

Whether Jew or Gentile, what separated the human race from sharing in the true Israel of God was our enmity toward our Creator. This enmity arose from our sin, which manifest itself as opposition to the commandments or the law. Now, Christ Jesus has reconciled us all as “God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity” (vs. 16). In Christ the cornerstone, we are now “being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (vs. 22).

O Lord, King of ages and Creator of all, who didst accept crucifixion and burial in the body to deliver us all from hades, Thou art our God, and beside Thee we know no other. – Orthros Hymn of Praise

**December 9 - Conception of the Theotokos by the Righteous Anna
Galatians 4:22-27**

Thy Kingdom Come: Galatians 4:22-27, especially vs 27: “For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband.’” The Feast that celebrates the conception of the Theotokos by righteous Anna relies upon sources found in Holy Tradition rather than from Holy Scripture, yet the Feast draws from the same well of Salvation: “God Who sitteth on noetic thrones prepared Himself a holy throne on earth. He Who hath established the heavens in wisdom hath, by His love to mankind, made a living heaven; for...He hath brought forth His Mother, a life-bearing branch. And she alone admitted Christ into the universe for the salvation of our souls” (from the Vesperal Psalm for the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos).

In the present passage, Saint Paul contrasts the two Biblical Covenants in a symbolic manner (vs 24), describing the older covenant from Mount Sinai as giving “birth to bondage” (vs 24), while the covenant from the Lord Jesus, bears “many more children” (vs 27). We may affirm the message that “we are not children of the bondwoman” (through Abraham by his slave, Hagar, Gn 16:15), “but of the free” (Gal 4:31) descended from Abraham through his wife, Sarah. Therefore, we are “children of promise” (Gal 4:28).

When God promised an “everlasting covenant” (Gn 17:7) to Abraham and his descendants, the Lord overcame the limitations of nature so that the barren Sarah conceived and bore the promised son to Abraham in his old age - Yizaakh, or Isaac, meaning “laughter.” The child’s name expresses the joy that Sarah felt at his birth: “God has made me laugh; all who hear will laugh with me” (Gn 21:6).

Let us observe with wonder the record of Holy Tradition that reports the conception of the Virgin, the completion of that which gives joy to God’s people; for, in time, blessed Mary bore Him Who inaugurated the fullness of the promise to Abraham. In and through the Son of the Theotokos, our Lord Jesus, God’s promise renew mankind is achieved. Hence, both at the giving of the promise of “the re-creation of the nations” and at its fulfillment, God overrode the laws of nature to make clear to men that “Our God is the God of salvation, and the pathways leading forth from death are those of the Lord’s Lord” (Ps 67:21).

Tradition records that “Saint Joachim was of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David,” and that Anna was of the tribe of Levi, as were the High Priests of Israel, all of whom were descendants of Aaron (Ex 29:29). Living devoutly, the couple used “only one third of their income for themselves and [gave] a third to the poor and a third to the Temple.” When they were far past child-bearing age and still childless, Joachim came to the Temple to offer sacrifices to the Lord, but the High Priest and the others with him cruelly taunted the pious old man and drove him away as one barren and unworthy to sacrifice to God. In their eyes, the fact that he had no children was sure proof of secret sin and repudiation by God.

Grieving, Joachim and Anna sought the Lord through intense prayer, and “God sent them His angel, who gave them tidings of the birth of a daughter most blessed, by whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed, and through whom will come the salvation of the world.” That child was the Virgin, whose birth-giving would bring “the salvation of the world.” The blessing of a child for Joachim and Anna manifested the glory of the coming kingdom of Christ.

As we celebrate the remembrance of Thy righteous grandparents, Joachim and Anna, O our Savior, through them we beseech Thee to save our souls.

December 10 - Tuesday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost
2 Thessalonians 1:10-2:2

God's Good Pleasure: 2 Thessalonians 1:10-2:2, especially vs. 11: *"Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power."* Saint Paul tells us that the Lord Jesus is coming again to give rest to "those who are troubled" (vs. 1:7), but how will He address the persecutions that His people now suffer? Part of the apostle's answer is that the Lord, in flaming fire, will wreak "vengeance on those who do not know God, and . . . do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 8).

To this eye-for-an-eye retribution, Saint Paul adds that the opponents of the faith will also be excluded "from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (vs. 9). He then goes on to describe how the Lord will requite those who have believed in Him, and have suffered affliction and harsh treatment for His sake.

"Those who believe" (vs. 10) will receive more than release and rest from afflictions, for God will count His faithful worthy to have "all the good pleasure of His goodness" fulfilled in them (vs. 11). What is this "good pleasure" of God's goodness? Saint Paul states that the Lord Jesus will "be glorified in His saints" (vs. 10), implying that they will be fulfilled by having Christ glorified "in" them.

Yet does Scripture not teach that glory belongs God, as something exclusive to His nature (Ex 15:11)? "Lift up your gates, O ye princes . . . and the King of Glory shall enter in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory" (Ps 23:9-10).

Indeed, we read that God's glory exceeds anything man can bear. For example, the great Prophet Moses found grace before God, yet when he asks the Lord to manifest Himself before him, he is told, "'I will pass before you in My glory'. . . . But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live. . . . So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen'" (Ex 33:19, 22-23).

The awesome otherness of God's glory is repeated on Mount Tabor, when the Lord Jesus manifests His divine light to the three disciples "in as much as they could bear it," according to the festal hymn. The icon of the Transfiguration depicts them humbled on the ground by the overpowering radiance of the glory of Christ our God. Even a brief moment of His glory is too much for them.

How, then, will God give glory to His saints? According to Saint Isaac the Syrian, "Just as each man enjoys the physical sun according to the clarity and receptive power of his sight . . . so in the age to come all the righteous shall dwell in one place indivisibly, but each of them is illumined by the one noetic Sun according to his own measure" (*Ascetical Homily 56*).

The Apostle Paul thus declares that the acquisition of *glory* by God's people will be "the work of faith with power" (2 Thes 1:11). The work of the righteous and God's power together can result in "theosis," so that human beings overflow with God's grace and acquire a touch of glory to whatever measure possible.

We find examples of this transforming power of God in the saints even here in this present life, as when Saint Seraphim of Sarov shone with God's glory before his friend Motovilov, becoming radiant. In the age to come, this glory will fill all the faithful in the kingdom by God's power, and He will "be admired among all those who believe" (vs. 10).

O Thou who reignest over the courts of Thy saints, remember us also in Thy kingdom! – Orthodox Funeral Service

December 11 - Wednesday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Deception: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, especially vs. 3-4: *“Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple, showing himself that he is God.”* Two thousand years have passed since our Lord Jesus Christ walked among us in the flesh. This passage from Second Thessalonians has often been used to trouble the souls of the faithful (vs. 2) and mislead them with a host of deceptions (vs. 3) and delusions (vs. 11).

Such frauds usually are promoted by demagogues who will not accept the “foolishness of God” (1 Cor 1:25), but favor “the wisdom of this world” (vs. 20) instead. They spread ideas and schemes devised in their own deceived minds. Saint Paul warns us against such deception. We must always be attentive to protect the pure gospel truth that all may be saved (2 Thes 2:10).

Saint Paul begins by alerting us to some of the means used to deceive: “by spirit or by word or by letter” purported to have apostolic source and authority (vs. 2); through “power, signs, and lying wonders” (vs. 9); and through bald, outright unrighteous deception (vs. 10).

Fraudulent teachers usually advance their agenda by claiming private inspiration from the Holy Spirit, or use words that purportedly have the authority of Christ or the apostles. Working from the vortex of pride and ambition, purveyors of the “latest thinking” and “new truths” quote selectively from Holy Scripture or the Fathers to support their teachings. Some use an attractive personality, along with false signs and wonders, to captivate the faithful and lead them away from the gospel and holy tradition.

Of foremost importance, the apostle directs our attention in this passage to the underlying causes that motivate such deceived and deceiving innovators. As a prelude, he observes that deception is preceded by “falling away” (vs. 3) from the basics of the faith. This term “falling away” (*apostasia* in Greek) means denying those basic truths of Christianity without which it cannot be understood. Behind this “mystery of lawlessness” (vs. 7), however, lies a deeper, more sinister rebellion that seems to well up from nowhere. The Apostle Paul, however, firmly identifies the source of all apostasy as “the working of Satan” (vs. 9). God permits the devil, our fellow men, and even ourselves to make wrong and evil choices (vs. 11).

Let us not be shocked at this divine permission, for He extends freedom of choice to us all (Gn 2:16-17). We must choose to exercise our hearts and minds to embrace His truth, rather than seeking “pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thes 2:12).

Let us strive to be aware of the diabolical machinations at work whenever we feel lured from the faith. According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “We must always be attentive to the assaults of the devil; for can we hope that he will leave us without temptation, when he did not leave alone our Founder and Source of faith and Perfecter, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?” (*Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 57).

Having helped us to see the nature of deception, the apostle spells out what happens when we allow ourselves to be taken in by Satan: our minds are shaken, our lives troubled, and disorder reigns in our communities (vs. 2). Our embrace of lies ends in our condemnation by God (vs. 12), and finally we will perish (vs. 10) along with Satan, when the Lord Jesus returns to destroy him “with the breath of His mouth” and “the brightness of His coming” (vs. 8).

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy people victory over all their enemies; and by the power of Thy Cross preserving Thy kingdom. – Hymn for the Exaltation of the Cross

December 12 - Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker
Ephesians 5:8-19

The Illumination of the Spirit: *Ephesians 5:9-19, especially vs 9:* “*For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth....*” We have many ancient manuscripts of Saint Paul’s letter to Ephesus and there are two traditions concerning a key word in the verse quoted above - one tradition mostly from Eastern Fathers and one largely from Western Fathers. In the West the preferred reading is “the fruit of the Light” but in the East “the fruit of the Spirit.” Ultimately, as Saint Mark the Ascetic teaches concerning the Holy Spirit: “On those who have been baptized He pours Himself out in His fulness like the sun. Each of us is illumined by Him to the extent to which we hate the passions that darken us and get rid of them.” To speak of the Spirit as the Light simply changes the focus from the Spirit Himself to the manner in which we experience His presence. Mostly we should understand the point that Saint Paul makes in the verse, which is well-stated by Saint John Chrysostom: “the fruit of the Spirit ought to be evinced in everything, ‘proving what is well-pleasing unto the Lord’” (vs 9 KJV). Thus, when the Lord Jesus, acknowledges “I Am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (Jn 8:12), He also is laying responsibility on us who follow Him: “You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14,16).

We should “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph 5:11) through lives so illumined by the Holy Spirit that they allow others to behold God within us. Ought there not be a contrast between the manner in which we live in Christ and the lifestyles of the great numbers around us who are children of this world and committed to its darkness? For this reason, God Himself chides us: “Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (vs 14). We can be so nice, considerate, and accommodating of the feelings of others that we remain dead-silent before blatant immorality and effectively become accomplices in wickedness. God forbid!

This life is very brief, after all. Let us not, through carelessness or fear of having others ostracize us, be found of God “as fools” (vs 15), but heed the Spirit within us and labor with Him toward our own purity until we bring forth fruit “in all goodness, righteousness, and truth” (vs 9). Let us be wise (vs 15). Why does God give us “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit”? Because this Seal will “...ever graciously illumine our heart....maintain the shield of our faith unassailed by the enemy, [and] preserve pure and unpolluted the garment of incorruption, wherewith [Christ our God] hast endowed us.”

On every corner, in every theater, at the office, and on the production line, opportunities to drink the “wine, in which is dissipation” (vs 18) are offered under a hundred different labels. Whatever your place or mine in this world, our foremost task is to manifest, to live openly, that all may see what it means to bear “the fruit of the Spirit...in all goodness, righteousness, and truth” (vs 9). We are not alone. The Spirit of the living God is sealed upon us; “be filled with the Spirit” (vs 18).

The worst mistake is to think we are alone. God is with us and gives us strength in the flesh through the Church – our fellow Christian with whom we may grow “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in [our] heart to the Lord” (vs 19).

“O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever” (Ps 135:1).

December 13 - Friday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost
2 Thessalonians 3:6-18

Disorderly Brethren: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18, especially vss. 14-15: “*And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*” In dealing with disobedience, the Apostle Paul declares that when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven, He will “give you who are troubled rest . . . taking vengeance on those who do not know God [nor] obey the gospel” (vss. 1:7-8). Some infer from these words that the Lord will come again soon.

Two thousand years after the apostle’s time, the Lord has not yet returned. Still, what Saint Paul conveys is certain: Jesus *will* return. Thus our life in Christ is marked by urgency, because our Lord’s return remains imminent. However, we are at peace, for we know what the Lord teaches: we cannot know the times and dates, but we can prepare ourselves (Acts 1:7).

More immediately, all of us face the certainty of death – a reality that draws closer to us daily. Urgency and readiness are pertinent, even if we tend to neglect them, for at death “the righteous [final] judgment of God” (2 Thes 1:5), our eternal destiny, will be settled (Heb 9:27).

Some in Thessalonica apparently drew wrong conclusions concerning the Lord Jesus’ return, assuming that there was no point in working to support themselves because life would soon end. With no income to buy food, such people were eating others’ bread and burdening the community (2 Thes 3:8). Furthermore, with nothing to occupy their time, they were busying themselves in other’s affairs (vs. 11).

The congregation sought Saint Paul’s counsel for coping with these burdensome and disruptive people. His counsel remains timely, for in every generation there are Christians who abuse the goodwill of their communities. We may profit from the apostle’s answers to these issues when we encounter disruptive people, in our personal life or our congregation. Who does not know profligate and burdensome brethren?

Saint Paul clearly teaches us to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition” (vs. 6). There are good reasons for not keeping company (vs. 14) with those who take advantage of others. First, the more time and energy we invest in those who are out of control, the more such persons are encouraged to act inappropriately (vs. 14).

Second, we may discover suddenly that we have become part of the problem, for our efforts to help the unruly may actually fuel their confusion. It is easy to fall into the trap of helpfulness, only to discover that we have exacerbated the problem by interfering. Third, frustration builds up when we persist in trying to change an unchangeable situation. The likelihood of our being drawn into quarreling or abuse increases.

Detachment is our best course: to remain quiet and apply wholesome energy to our own concerns (vss. 7,12). The apostle states a dictum, now become proverbial, for dealing with those who will not apply themselves in life: “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (vs. 10).

The application of this pronouncement must be grounded in love: to bring offenders to repentance (vs. 14). Saint Paul encourages us to admonish erring members as we would a brother, with loving concern. Confrontations devoid of love are counterproductive. Thus we pray to the Lord for the grace to admonish constructively, and to be prayerful in such matters.

While we encourage the freeloader and the overly dependent to be accountable to the Lord, we never neglect those who are truly in need and require our help. Classifying brethren in any sense verges on judgment, and that is God’s prerogative. Let us never “grow weary in doing good” (vs. 13)!

O Lord, lead us to do Thy will and become worthy of a place at Thy right hand. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 14 - Saturday of the Twenty-fifth Week after Pentecost
Galatians 1:3-10

The Gospel Essence: Galatians 1:3-10, especially vss. 3-4: “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. . . .” When an apostle of Christ consigns someone to God’s curse, it calls on our attention. Let us read Saint Paul’s words with care: “if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (vs. 9). He earnestly repudiates anyone who would modify his teaching “to please men” (vs. 10). Let us not fall under this apostolic curse in our teaching, belief, or practices!

Saint Paul speaks to us, for we have united ourselves to Christ. The personal pronoun “our” is repeated three times in verses 3 and 4. He reminds us that the gospel calls us “in the grace of Christ” (vs. 6). God honors us! Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ is offered to us so that it might pass “through all my body parts, into all my joints, my reins, my heart” (post-communion prayer).

In other words, Saint Paul pleads that we not take our faith lightly. The possibility of separating ourselves from the grace of God – and thereby losing His peace – is real. The apostle makes “turning away . . . from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel” (vs. 6) a live possibility. Self-induced perdition lies within our power.

Because the blessing of our life in Christ may be under threat, Saint Paul starts this passage with a reminder of the gracious, life-giving gospel that is ours. We address Jesus as Lord, calling Him Christ or God. As Lord, He is the master and owner: this title is similar to “Your Honor,” “Mister,” or “Father.”

Unlike these examples, however, He *owns* us. The title Christ means “anointed one,” a translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. Jesus is our anointed King (1 Kgs 8:19-22; 9:17; 10:1). Holy Scripture teaches us how to speak to God: “O God, my God, attend to me” (Ps 21:1); “Give ear, O God, unto my prayer” (Ps 54:1); “Have mercy on me, O God” (Ps 55:1); “I will exalt Thee, O my God” (Ps 144:1), “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28).

In the first century, when the Jewish nation was subservient to the Roman Empire, the people longed for God to send a ruler to free them from subjugation. They were eager for a Messiah, a Christ. In such circumstances a teacher appeared who drew around Him dedicated disciples and great numbers of other followers. This Jesus of Nazareth was often called Lord (e.g., Mt 18:21) and identified as both Messiah (cf Mt 16:15-16) and God (Jn 20:28).

What is the essence of the gospel that the Apostle Paul wants us to confess? How should we ward off any false concepts that might be called “gospels?” The answer is simple: Jesus of Nazareth is our Lord, King, and God. We are called to submit to Him who, “when He had come and had fulfilled all the dispensation for us, in the night in which He was betrayed . . . gave Himself up for the life of the world” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

When He gave Himself up “for the life of the world,” the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s deliverance of mankind “from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal 1:4). The pure gospel cuts across eternity and time, uniting them. Saint Paul declares the grace of God, and His peace in our hearts, as our rule for living in this world. Who “would not be a bondservant of Christ” (vs. 10) and join Saint Paul in giving glory to God?

O Master, open the eyes of our hearts to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings; for Thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 15 - 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

December 16 - Monday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 1:1-7

A Pure Heart and Sincere Faith: 1 Timothy 1:1-7, especially vs. 5: “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith. . . .” Saint Paul directs his disciple Timothy to command those at Ephesus to “teach no other doctrine . . . than godly edification which is in faith” (vss. 3-4). Fables, genealogies, and disputes are contrary to edification. The apostle’s commandment is given so that we may know true love: God’s love, which alone renews and refreshes our souls.

Specifically, Saint Paul calls us to labor for “a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith” (vs. 5), for these alone secure us in the renewing and refreshing love of Christ. A *pure heart* commands and directs the soul, dispelling any evil thoughts that enter it, so that we do not receive “[our] soul in vain” (Ps 23:4). Such a heart will draw close to God, and the Lord will dwell within us to help our heart continue in purity (Jas 4:8).

“Notice that God does not tolerate the slightest impurity,” observes Saint John of Kronstadt, “and that peace and God Himself leave you immediately after the admittance of any impure thought into your heart. And you become the abode of the devil if you do not immediately renounce the sin” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 301).

We are easily corrupted by contact with the evil spirits around us, for the “skirmish line” of spiritual warfare is within our mind. Evil thoughts must be stopped there if we hope to attain the pure heart that knows Christ.

“Once we have in some measure acquired the habit of self-control, and have learned how to shun visible sins, brought about through the five senses, we will then be able to guard the heart with Jesus, to receive His illumination within it, and by means of the intellect [i.e., the nous] to taste His goodness” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 18).

We are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the invincible ally of our five senses in destroying the dark enemies – if we are willing to seek His aid. Our *good conscience* is also the ally of the pure heart, but the conscience must first be purified also. Mercifully, God gave us a guardian angel at baptism who warns the conscience.

We must heed our guardian angel’s warnings and observe our thoughts and actions. Only then will we learn to grieve before the Lord. “Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly the angel who guards you will honor your patience” (Saint John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.30, p. 64).

A lively conscience guards our love for God and others. On the other hand, a deadened conscience is like a switched off alarm that fails to sound at mortal danger. “We must carefully consider whether our conscience has ceased to accuse us, not as a result of purity, but because it is immersed in evil,” says Saint John Climacus. “Many from long neglect become incurable, but with God all things are possible” (p. 65).

Thus we come to *sincere faith*, the third essential of true love. Purifying the heart requires our trust in God, which explains why Saint Paul yokes faith with “a good conscience” (vs. 5). According to Saint Herman of Alaska, “Faith and love of Christ make a true Christian. Our sins in no way hinder our Christianity, as we can tell from the words of the Savior Himself. He stated that He had ‘not been called to judge the righteous, but to save the sinful - there is more joy in Heaven at one sinner who repents than at ninety-nine righteous men’” (Mt 9:13; Lk 15:7) (Oleksa, *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality*, pp. 44-45).

O Lord, heal my soul, enlighten the eyes of my heart, grant peace to my spiritual powers, that with faith unashamed I may love and obey Thee to the attainment of Thy kingdom. – Post-communion Prayer

December 17 - Tuesday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 1:8-14

Everything in Christ: 1 Timothy 1:8-14, especially vs. 12: *“And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry. . . .”* The “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) continues to exist in the Church as it has from apostolic times. This faith is illumined for us by the Holy Spirit so long as we remain “in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 21).

The so-called pastoral epistles (two addressed to Timothy, one to Titus) offer an early record of how the faith “delivered to the saints” is handed on to subsequent leaders. Aging and death, or the need to transfer leaders into new ministries, means that the Church’s pastors must find way to entrust the saving truths of the faith to new hands. Hence, in First Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes to his young protegee, addressing him as “a true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2).

To Timothy, his “true son,” the apostle offers a message applicable to all, leaders and laypeople alike. If we are to find the strength, grace, and mercy of God, we must draw upon the Lord Jesus (vss. 12-14).

In the present passage, we observe how Saint Paul uses his own life as an example of what Christ accomplishes when He places His call upon those who serve Him. He empowers each of us for discipleship – but especially those whom He appoints to lead the ministries of the Church, whether locally, regionally, or worldwide.

First, Saint Paul focuses on the Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments (vs. 8). Next, he reviews the condition of the hearts and souls of the godless, for whom the first four commandments are given. These individuals disdain any relationship with God. Saint Paul characterizes them as lawless, insubordinate, God-denying, and profane (vs 9).

Such people serve fabricated idols, rather than the true God. They worship created things and invest energy in their gods of wealth, pleasure, power, status, and the like. They disdain the law, which they do not consider sacred, and the guidance of their superiors. Instead, they favor whatever pleases and satisfies their own desires.

The apostle next lists the sins forbidden by the last six commandments. These mandates concern our relationships with one another. As the apostle lists these sins (vss. 9-10), he follows the same order found in Scripture (see Ex 20:12-17).

His review of these fundamentals of the Law establishes a background and foundation for his review of the sound doctrine of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to [his] trust” (1 Tim 1:11). To this topic he now turns his attention.

With the phrase “committed to my trust” (vs. 11), the apostle sets the stage for addressing how God’s grace transformed him from a persecutor of the Church into an apostle. He profoundly thanks the Lord for granting him mercy, as He does with any sinner who repents.

Saint Paul sets his former life as a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” before us to serve as an example (vs 13). Here he refers to his early life when he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and bringing men and women “bound to Jerusalem” for prosecution, trial, imprisonment, and death (Acts 9:1-2).

The Apostle concludes with the assertion that “the grace of our Lord [is] exceedingly abundant with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1:14). In other words, there is no sin God will not forgive. If we continue striving to live in Christ, He is faithful to us.

O Lord, help me to sin no more and always do that which is pleasing unto Thee.

December 18 - Wednesday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2:8-15

The Good Warfare: 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2:8-15, especially vs. 18: “*This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare. . . .*” We must never be careless when handing on “the faith which was once for all delivered” (Jude 3) through the Church to us. Rather, we are to convey this inheritance in Christ without diluting or corrupting the apostles’ teachings. Only then does every generation remain true to the life-giving word, “[waging] the good warfare” (1 Tim 1:18) unto “triumph in Christ” (2 Cor 2:14).

Accordingly, we find the chief apostle charging his apprentice to attend to doctrine and worship, before everything else. This charge is fundamental, for only so long as right doctrine and right worship (*orthodoxia*) are upheld vigorously will the Church continue her struggle “against . . . the darkness of this age” (Eph 6:12) until the Lord comes.

Our Orthodox worship, doctrine, and way of life are inextricably woven together. If we wish to practice what the Church teaches, we should pay strict attention to the words of the Divine Liturgy, for at worship the Church repeatedly affirms the foundational truths that she proclaims to the world. As we receive right doctrine in the context of worship, we are enabled to keep “faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim 1:19), to pray by “lifting up holy hands” (vs. 2:8), and to “continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control” (vs. 15). We strive for these spiritual works and help pass them on to those who follow; thus, the *good warfare* continues until the Lord returns.

How do we attain “faith and a good conscience?” Obviously, faith in Christ with a bad conscience is impossible, for the two are incompatible. Faith is something to be sought and prayed for. For example, “immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’”(Mk 9:17-24). We remember the dying thief who rebukes his companion and confesses his own sins, pleading in faith: “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Lk 23:42).

When our heart is defiled by sins and passions, it needs purification with the aid of the Holy Spirit. According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “When the Mighty One enters the soul and overthrows the despoiler, then what has been taken captive can be set free” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 141

Even a faith that has languished will blossom with the action of the Holy Spirit, for He purifies our conscience “from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). Let us consider the alternative: if we indulge our passions and do as we please, rejecting the truth, then there is bound to be “shipwreck” (1 Tim 1:19). Let us not surrender our lives to catastrophe and find ourselves among those “delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (vs. 20).

And how do we learn to lift up our hands in prayer? Metropolitan Anthony Bloom reminds us, “Unless the prayer which you intend to offer to God is important and meaningful to you first, you will not be able to present it to the Lord. If you are inattentive to the words you pronounce, if your heart does not respond to them, or if your life is not turned in the same direction as your prayer, it will not reach out Godwards” (*Beginning to Pray*, p. 26).

Let us strive to heed what Saint Paul says to Timothy. We lift up our hands in prayer “without wrath and doubting” (vs 2:8), but rather “with propriety and moderation” (vs. 9), “good works” (vs. 10), and “in silence with all submission” (vs. 11) to our spiritual elders. Thus we continue the good warfare “in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control” (vs. 15), and find joy in passing on our living faith.

Keep us in Thy holiness that all the day long we may meditate upon Thy righteousness. –Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 19 – Thursday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 3:1-13

Selecting Clergy: 1 Timothy 3:1-13, especially vs. 10: *“But let these . . . first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless.”* Here is godly counsel from the Apostle Paul on the need to identify, appoint, and train competent leadership for the Church. He continues to explore a major concern of his in this letter: how we are to transmit the faith to succeeding generations. His first concern is that without blameless, competent, and mature clergy, any effort to pass on the faith will falter, leaving the Church weak and ineffective.

We present-day Orthodox Christians reading this first-century letter will discover some differences between contemporary practices and those of the early Church. For instance, bishops at that time appear to have been drawn from the ranks of married men (vs. 2) with children (vs. 4). What is important to remember is that the clergy of the early Church, very much like our clergy today, were men with common weaknesses and strengths, even though their social and marital circumstances differed.

The unfolding of the Church’s ministry over the centuries has a certain analogy to the development of a living organism. For instance, many seeds will sprout and push up through the soil, first appearing as simple two-leaf plants that look much different when they grow into maturity. Similarly, the earliest historical records concerning the clergy reveal that the ordained ministry took a somewhat different shape than do the holy orders as we know them in the Church today.

As the ministry grew and developed within the Church, taking slightly different forms over its long development, the clergy through time nevertheless remain organically related within the Body of Christ. As Saint Paul instructs, the Church has always required men who are morally pure, personally mature, and who enjoy a good testimony in all of their relationships. Such words describe our God-pleasing clergy, both past and present.

We note in particular the emphasis of the apostle on worthy moral character. He asserts that the clergy must be blameless (vss. 2, 10), of good behavior (vs. 2), not given to wine (vss. 3, 8) nor violent or greedy (vss. 3, 8), nor quarrelsome or covetous (vs. 3), nor filled with pride (vs. 6), nor double-tongued, i.e., deceptive (vs. 8). Rather, they should hold “the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience” (vs. 9).

Certainly, everyone is aware of how much mischief befalls a community because of clergy who give themselves over to immorality. We thank God that the great majority of our ordained priests are men who lead pure, moral, and faithful lives.

The Apostle Paul admonishes Timothy to be very careful that both bishops and deacons are mature men. He mentions that they must be “the husband of one wife,” meaning neither polygamous nor divorced (vss. 2, 12). They must be sober-minded (vs. 2), temperate (vs. 2), and gentle (vs. 3). Novices in the faith are not ordained (vs. 6), for the observation of candidates over time helps the Church identify their capacity for “blamelessness” (vs. 10). The pressures of pastoral life are such that clergy must be balanced and settled as persons, which is why our hierarchs today take care to assure that they have gained good general education, seminary training, and other testing in life before ordination.

Finally, the Apostle Paul urges that all clergy have “a good testimony among those who are outside” (vs. 7). They must be able to rule their own household as well (vss. 4, 12). Here again are two arenas where criticism will weaken a priest’s witness. Pray for our pastors!

O Master, Christ, may Thy Holy Spirit ever guide the Church in choosing and ordaining men worthy to stand before Thy Throne, to edify Thy people, and to feed the flock of Thy pasture.

December 20 - Friday of the Twenty-sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 4:4-8

Good Doctrine: 1 Timothy 4:4-8, especially vs. 6: *“If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.”* In today’s passage the Apostle Paul begins and concludes with an important topic: he is most concerned that Timothy should instruct the faithful in good doctrine (vs. 6). As we follow his thought in this passage, we note that he not only directs Timothy to teach the brethren good doctrine, but also commands him to follow, continue, and practice what he teaches.

According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, “It is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine, for tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions – it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is not only kept by the Church – it lives in the Church, it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church” (*The Orthodox Church*, p. 206).

Those who teach prove themselves to be good ministers of the Lord when they are themselves “nourished in the words of faith” with which they “instruct the brethren” (vs. 6). If he is pass on his faith in the Lord, a teach must transmit doctrine to others both by instruction and by example – a manifestation of his own struggle for knowledge, faith, and salvation.

Consider the apostle’s phrase “nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine” (vs. 6). How do words of teaching and doctrine “nourish?” How does doctrine feed us?

When the Lord came to the Samaritan city of Sychar (Jn 4:4-43), He and the disciples stopped near Jacob’s well. While the disciples go “away into the city to buy food” (vs. 8), an extensive conversation takes place between the Lord and a woman who has come to draw water. As the discussion is ending, the disciples return with food.

The disciples urge the Lord, “Rabbi, eat” (vs. 31). He replies, “I have food to eat of which you do not know” (vs. 32). They are puzzled, and so the Lord Jesus explains, “My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me, and to finish His work” (vs. 34). Teaching and doctrine are what nourish the Lord.

Something in us hungers for a kind of food that no bread in this world can ever satisfy, for “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from of the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). The words of God and His holy doctrine are the “bread of the kingdom” that we receive (Lk 14:15) – although often we are able to take only the milk of doctrine, not its strong meat (1 Cor 3:2).

Still, our spirits hunger and thirst for the word of God and for good teaching. “Blessed are these who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Mt 5:6). Only those who are nourished on sound doctrine can in turn transmit the faith.

When we, as God’s people, are nurtured on good doctrine, we are better able to follow what we have received and to *exercise* ourselves toward godliness (vs. 7). In the original Greek, the word for exercise is *gymnaze*, the root of our word gymnasium, or place of exercise. Truly our faith disciplines, trains, and exercises our spirits!

As our hearts grow in godliness through the practice and exercise of good doctrine, we grow and mature. We gain faith not only for this life, but also for “that which is to come” (vs. 8). Let us be like good athletes, refusing that which offers little profit: the profane, the false, and the trivial (vs. 7). We continue, rather, in holy tradition, which saves us and all who hear (vs. 16). This is the Orthodox faith, known and worthy of passing on.

Feed us, O Lord, with Thy pure words that we may increase in stature, unto ripe old age. –
Chrismation Prayer

December 21 – Saturday before the Nativity of Christ
Galatians 3:8-12

Blessed in God’s Sight: Galatians 3:8-12, especially v. 8: *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’”* We are confronted in these verses by a cluster of truths united around the words *justify* (vs. 8) or *justified* (vs. 11). To “justify” is to make right, to balance, to avouch to be true or good, or clear. However, as Saint Paul develops the term in this passage, exploring the process of being justified in God’s sight, he demonstrates that one may or may not be justified in the sight of God (vss. 8,11) – something for sober consideration!

When God deems a person justified, obviously the person is blessed (vs. 8), while anyone who seeks to be justified in God’s sight by doing all the works of the law will fail in the attempt (vs. 11). This is so necessarily, because living by the works of the law requires “the man who does them [to] live by them” (vs. 12).

The problem with gaining justification in God’s sight by keeping the law is that everyone is cursed “who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” (vs. 10). Now if Holy Scripture documents any fact plainly, it is that no human being can keep the law exactly in every detail. The universal problem of sin defeats our attempts to obey the law of God to perfection. It simply does not happen.

The apostle advises us not even to try to be justified by keeping rules, for we will wind up failing and being cursed in the sight of God. However, he still holds out the possibility that some may yet be justified in God’s sight. First, he returns to the era of Abraham, that great patriarch of Israel, and notes that when God preached to Abraham, He promised that He would justify the Gentiles by faith (vs. 8). “Gentiles” refers to the other peoples in the world besides God’s chosen people, the Jews.

According to Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Paul is assuring us that “faith is older than the law. That is obvious from Abraham’s time, since he was justified before the appearance of the law.” This insight is most significant because God, who later gave His law to the His chosen people through Moses, “was the one who decreed before the law was given, that the Gentiles should be justified. And Paul does not say ‘revealed’ but ‘preached the gospel’ [beforehand to Abraham], so that you may understand that even the patriarch rejoiced in this kind of righteousness and greatly desired its advent.”

Soon we will celebrate the birth in the flesh of Christ our God, the advent of righteousness. Although we “Gentiles” are not ethnically related to Abraham, we certainly are “those who are of faith [and] blessed with believing Abraham” when we declare our faith in Christ. At our baptism we said, “I believe in him as King and God.” Then, as now, we offer a statement of faith called the Nicene Creed.

So long as we hold fast to faith in Christ, we “are blessed with believing Abraham” (vs. 9)! We have a good hope of being justified in God’s sight, if we continue seeking to “live by faith” as Abraham did (vs. 11).

Being greatly ill and wounded, O Lord, I thank Thee for justifying me by Thy holy birth!
– Festal verse

December 22 – Sunday before the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40

Faith: Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40, especially vss. 39-40: “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.” In our Paschal icon of the Harrowing of Hades, we see Christ the Life-giver standing astride the gates of Hades. Death is bound in chains beneath His feet while he lifts Adam and Eve from their tombs. For the first time, the righteous men and women of the Old Covenant come face to face with the Messiah whom they anticipated and served faithfully while they were on this earth.

Indeed, they lived by faith. According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Faith is not the supposition that something might be true, but the assurance that someone is there.” It is now our turn to be instructed in faith by these saints of old, who understood faith as confidence in God, a willingness to trust in His promises, and a full acquiescence to His will.

Faith means living confidently in every circumstance, without tangible proofs. The materialist culture around us insists that such a life is foolhardy, for it is not based on hard, measurable facts. However, the righteous servants of God in today’s reading lived confidently because they knew in their hearts that God “is there.”

Abraham migrated to a land where settlers already had well-established cities, fields, wells, and a way of life. Finding open pasture for his flocks and herds, he lived and even thrived, yet he always remained a nomad – an alien (vs. 9) among people with fixed boundaries and title to all the land that he could see (Gn 13:14-15).

Nevertheless, he dwelt comfortably in this place because he knew God was at work. The Lord had promised to deliver this land to his descendants. Thus, with patience “he waited for the city . . . whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). He trusted God’s promises.

We find it admirable when someone calmly takes a great risk, despite contravening evidence, and is justified by the final outcome. Abraham, for example, seemed destined never to father a son of his own flesh, and yet in old age he held Isaac, his own infant son, in his arms.

Later, he was prepared to offer that very son upon the altar of God, even at the risk of losing the one in whom his “seed shall be called” (vs. 18; Gn 21:12). He took a great risk, contrary to the evidence, because God assured him that he would be justified beyond all reason by such a sacrifice. The Apostle Paul points out that Abraham reached the conclusion “that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead” (vs. 19). He chose to obey the instructions of the God who “is there,” trusting Him although he did not see Him physically. Thus Abraham shows us that faith means acting at personal risk when God reveals the course that we are to follow.

However, when God discloses such a course to us, we are blessed only when we prepare for it, work at it, and do everything we can to complete what God sets before us. When Joseph made his heirs promise to remove his bones from Egypt (vs. 22), he bound their consciousness to the promises of God. He reveals to us that faith means preparing for what is already promised by God.

“The Lord is well pleased in them that fear Him, and in them that hope in His mercy” (Ps 146:12). The righteous prophets of old were able to “subdue kingdoms . . . obtain promises and stop the mouths of lions” (vs. 33). They were “made strong” (vs. 34), above all, because they accepted death by the sword, destitution, affliction, or whatever came to them as from God’s hand. May we be worthy of such a faith, so that we may live confidently, take holy risks, and fulfill the will of God.

O Lord, grant us unwavering faith in Thy presence amidst all that befalls us in this life.

December 23 – Monday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Timothy 5:1-10

The Church as Community – Caring for Widows: 1 Timothy 5:1-10, especially vs. 3: “Honor widows who are really widows.” According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “Before Christ men were able with their own spirit and effort to create great civilizations . . . [but] it was not possible to arrive at a proper concept of God . . . as love.” (“A Century of Lessons in Divine and Christian Love” 5) “How would men know about charity had God not first acted with His?” Only with Christ does a worldwide community of caring, love, and charity come into being – one which exists with imperfections to this day, extending hands-on care to a membership of great diversity.

It seems natural to us that the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, is meant to be a caring, loving community. “As there are plants that grow only in one region, so this rare plant, this rare love, grows and flourishes only in Christ’s Church. If anyone would be convinced . . . he must read the lives of Christ’s apostles, the fathers and confessors of the Christian faith”(*Homilies: A Commentary on the Gospel Readings*, vol. 2, p. 191, 195). It is God who makes love the norm and mode within the community of the Church.

This week we read four passages that conclude the first epistle to Timothy. Each is concerned with the status and needs of a particular group or class of persons within the Church: widows, presbyters, slaves, teachers, and the wealthy. Since all are members of the Body of Christ, all are of special concern to the Church as a loving community.

Saint Paul’s remarks concerning care for widows in the first-century Church prompt us to consider how to apply the truths he teaches to our contemporary circumstances, especially with respect to any dependent women who live among us. We learn that a monastic-style order of widows was established in the early days to avert any abuse of the Church’s goodwill. The criteria for admission: “sixty years old” and “the wife of one man, well reported for good works” (vss. 9, 10). Younger widows were refused admission, “for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith” (vss. 11-12). “Younger widows [should] marry, bear children, manage the house” (vs. 14), Saint Paul insists. As Tertullian notes, they can then take “the whole course of probation whereby a female can be tested” (“On the Veiling of Virgins,” ANF, vol. 4, p. 33).

The apostle counsels Timothy that care be given to widows “who are really widows” (vs. 3) and truly require the help of the Church. Note, however, that he distinguishes widows who have “children or grandchildren” (vs. 4) from any widow “who is . . . left alone” (vs. 5). The latter are of special concern because they have no natural family who might seek to “repay their parents” (vs. 4). Where families are capable of assisting, they should bear the burden of caring for their dependent relatives, “for this is good and acceptable before God” (vs. 4). When one who calls himself a Christian but “does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (vs. 8).

On the other hand, women who have no recourse except to make “supplications and prayers night and day” to God for help (vs. 5) are the genuine responsibility of the Church. However, such an obligation should not be thrust on the Church in every case. If a woman “lives in pleasure (or indulgence),” though technically she may be a widow, she is in fact, “dead while she lives” (vs 6). Christ’s Church should shelter her dependent members, but is right to expect others to live diligently.

Heavenly Father, guide Thy Church to administer justice for the fatherless and widows. – Based on Deuteronomy 10:18

December 24 – Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ Hebrews 1:1-12

God Has Spoken: Hebrews 1:1-12, especially vss. 1-2: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.” In our present age of mass communication, we are bombarded by messages from advertisers, politicians, and government agencies. And yet we note that the Apostle declares God “has . . . spoken to us” (vs. 2). Among all the messages pouring into our ears, the last and the final word is from the Almighty God Himself. for He “has . . . spoken to us by His Son” (vs. 2).

What better time could there be than the eve of our celebration of the Lord Jesus’ Nativity to consider the ultimate Word of God? His voice is not just another voice among many. The Apostle Paul insists that we not reduce the value of the message, nor of the Messenger. So now, for a moment, let us consider what it means to receive a message from God – and His *ultimate* Message, at that! We have a divine Word spoken to us by God in Person.

Does God speak to the human race? This is what the Apostle Paul tells us. In the past, God spoke to the holy forefathers and prophets “at various times and in various ways” (vs. 1). It would take too long to review every occasion, message, messenger, and means that God used. However, the Old Testament records the principal occasions and methods by which God spoke prior to the incarnation of Christ.

These Scriptures offer an illumination of the basics in the divine-human relationship. We find audible and visual experiences, visions, angelic messengers, interventions, prophecies (and their fulfillment), direct answers to prayer, confrontations with death and life, divine help in moments of human frailty, God’s mercy and justice, and much, much more.

However, we understand the apostle to say specifically that God has spoken to *us* (vs. 2). In the Old Testament, He spoke to our predecessors. Now, He has spoken to us, who call ourselves Christians. And, by God’s mercy that “us” includes those who read this meditation. We count ourselves as primary recipients of God’s message.

For us, the faithful in Christ, this message is quite specific. Perhaps we think of the Lord Jesus Christ as a man who once lived on earth, and rightly accept Him as God. We address Him in prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!” But have we considered Him as the Message for us from God? If we personalize the apostle’s words, we hear that “God has spoken to *me* by His Son.” Are we listening?

Next, note the ultimacy the apostle assigns to this great message: these are the “last days” (vs. 2). In other words, there will not be a subsequent message. All that God wishes to communicate to us He has spoken “by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things” (vs. 2). We receive God the Word today. Let us listen carefully, and put the Word into action, for the Messenger stands squarely before us for our eternal consideration.

The Lord Jesus is our Creator (vs. 2). He owns us, being heir to the entire universe (vs. 2). He is God, “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person” (vs. 3). Were He to stop upholding us, we would cease to exist (vs. 3). All the heavenly powers worship Him (vss. 4-12). Do we worship too? In this celebration of His birth, we meet Christ directly and know Him as the Lord who loves righteousness and hates lawlessness (vs. 9).

What shall we render to Thee, O Christ, for that Thou didst appear as a man for our sake? – Great Vespers for the Nativity of Christ

December 25 - Feast of the Nativity of Christ
Hebrews 1:1-12

The Gift: Galatians 4:4-7, especially vs. 7: “Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” Christ, the Son of God, born into history of the Virgin Mary, became one of us “when the fullness of the time had come” (vs. 4). He remains so to this day. He is God’s amazing gift to mankind, giving us abundant reasons to be thankful for our creation, our preservation in this life, and for the host of blessings the Lord daily bestows on us.

Yet, nothing can compare with the Christ our God, the Gift of great wonder. The ineffable God came to us from above, from “the Orient on High.” Given and received, Christ changes everyone who embraces Him as God and King. The changes He makes are glorious, perfecting, elevating, and life-giving in every respect. What more can be said? Let us be joyful and praise Him for His glory! This divine Gift offers us the grace necessary to discern Satan’s insidious slavery, which alters our consciousness, prevents us from realizing our God-intended purpose, and mocks the image of God within us. We see what evils this slavery works in us and on those around us. Indeed, we are forced into a living subjugation to sin that leads to death, no matter how hard we fight against our oppressor or rebel against his chains.

This slavery is the common lot of the human race. We are mocked by death, and our loves, our dreams, and our achievements are only fleeting. Every beautiful, rapturous experience we enjoy is transient, and terminal. Even artistry and familial love fade in face of the grave. They all are taken away, along with our tears of protest. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “Men remember many things, but there is one thing that they can never remember, however often it is repeated: that they enter this world with nothing, and leave it with nothing” (*Homilies*, Vol. 2, p. 221).

Ye we do not despair, for we have a Gift that once and for all alters the terms of our bondage to death: “the Son, born of the Father before the ages without change, hath been incarnate in these last days of the Virgin, without seed.” He has redeemed our slave-existence, although at first glance we remain in bonds. Christ has raised us to the heights with Him: “God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into [our] hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (vs. 6).

Today the Spirit dwells in us, prays in us, and enlightens our spirits, leading us into all truth. Christ the Gift stands before us so we may see Him in His beauty. Now, in the midst of death’s slavery, our Savior has become our true Life-giver.

Today, through Christ, we are no longer slaves but sons and heirs of the eternal God. Today we are His children, sharing in Christ’s sonship with the Father. God is our Father, a relationship we received in the mystery of baptism. Death’s ownership has been severed.

“Death no longer has dominion over Him” (Rom 6:9), nor over anyone who receives God’s most precious Gift. Today we have true freedom, given to us by our immortal God. He has given us the power to say “no” to sin, “for sin shall not have dominion over you” (Rom 6:14).

Let us worship the Gift, the gracious Life-giver who humbled Himself and accepted our estate. In Him we choose to refuse sin and forever break the chains of the slave master!

Incline, O glorious Benefactor, to the praise of Thy servants, abolishing the boasting of the proud adversary. And help us who sing to Thee to overcome sin, and confirm us on the unshakable foundation of faith. – Hymn for the Nativity of Christ

**December 26 – Synaxis of the Most Holy Theotokos
Hebrews 2:11-18**

Brethren of Christ: *Hebrews 2:11-18, especially vs. 17:* “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” The pleasures of family gatherings at this Holy Season are delightful! Great also were the joy, love, and sheltering warmth shared among Joseph the Betrothed, the Ever-Virgin Theotokos and the Holy Child, Jesus. To these joys let us add the blessings we share with our brethren as the Church gathers in glad praise of our Heavenly Father Who sent His Son into this world and calls us His brethren (vss 11,12).

The true wonder of the Nativity comes in knowing Christ our God Who deigned to be made one of us - even in temptation and suffering (vs 18). He is without shame pleased to call us brethren (vs 11). How can we plumb the depths of the Incarnation? He calls us brethren! He shares our humanity. We are adopted brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider the Word of God, Who is God (Jn 1:1): He is united to us in all respects now and forever, embracing all that we are and making all that we are His own, leaving aside no part of being human. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same” (Heb 2:14). He assumed our flesh from His Mother, the Ever-Virgin Mary, whose Synaxis or partnership in the Incarnation we celebrate today. She joined herself fully to God in His purpose to unite Himself to us through her flesh and blood.

Did He set aside His Divine nature when He shared in ours? No, He did not! Rather, the Lord Jesus fully reveals the depth of Divine nature (Jn 14:9). Does this mean His Divine and human natures were merged into one nature? No, they were not. The human and Divine remain separate but function in a personal harmony and unity. Likewise, He wishes us to unite ourselves to Him freely. Cooperation between His Divine and human wills is a thing of beauty, revealing how to live as brethren - to will that which He wills, to love as He loves, and to do as He does.

God’s goal in uniting Himself to us is “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). Satan pours out untold grief on mankind, throwing the universal tragedy of death over us all. But consider the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the flesh and honor Him Who loved us even unto death; for, to destroy “him who had the power of death” (vs 14), Christ our God “gave Himself up for the life of the world” and “didst submit to the Cross willingly.” He Who is deathless Life, fully embraced death in an act of pure love - solely to restore us to Himself. Such is Divine love!

By His death and His Resurrection, the Lord Jesus our Savior made “propitiation for the sins of the people” (vs 17), thereby releasing “those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (vs 15). He did not accomplish this sanctifying work on behalf of those angels who fell into disobedience (vs 16), but for us men and for our salvation. Take note: it was in mankind that the Lord God placed His Own image (Gn 1:27). This is the miracle of our Creation. As exemplified by the woman who lost one of her pieces of silver, God lit a candle to illuminate His world, swept His house, and sought diligently till He found us (Lk 15:8).

As we plumb the depths of the Incarnation, behold One like ourselves, Who “Himself has suffered, being tempted [and is] able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). Today He continues in willingness to aid us when we are tempted; for having faced the bitter struggle with sin and death Himself, He now offers us the imperishable riches of His eternal Kingdom.

O Lord, Thou hast dwelt in a cave and hast lain in a manger; O Thou Whose throne is in heaven, Thou didst condescend to the shepherds in order to save our race. Glory to Thee!

December 27 - Friday of the Twenty-seventh Week after Pentecost
2 Timothy 1:1-2, 8-18

Living Continuity: 2 Timothy 1:1-2, 8-18, especially vss. 13-14: *“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.”* Bishop Kallistos Ware speaks of Orthodoxy’s living continuity with the apostles and Church Fathers, echoing Saint Paul’s counsel in this verse. “The Orthodox are always talking about tradition,” he says, “the faith and practice which Jesus Christ imparted to the apostles, and which since the apostles’ time has been handed down from generation to generation in the Church” (*The Orthodox Church*).

Like the apostles, Bishop Kallistos links holy tradition to the activity of the Spirit of God: “In order to live within tradition, it is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine; for tradition . . . is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. . . . It is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”

Orthodoxy holds fast to “the pattern of sound words” (vs. 13) given to us by the apostles through the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church. Though this continuity may astonish those on the outside, Saint Paul would not have been surprised. The apostle expects constancy of doctrine and practice in the Church, for as he says, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (vs. 12). His confidence in God is the mainstay of his own steadfastness and continuity.

Saint Paul urges his disciple Timothy to “hold fast” to the pattern. Further, he directs Timothy to maintain “that good thing . . . by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (vss. 13-14). Because the apostle knows the Lord by direct encounter, he is able to issue such an order.

In the apostolic age, Christians endured brutal attempts to crush the Church and remove the gospel from history. This letter was penned during a time of intense efforts to destroy the living continuity of the faith. Shortly afterward, the Apostle Paul was martyred. Still, he never doubted that God would advance the gospel “until that Day” (vs. 12). He strove to impart this certainty to his follower and successor, Timothy.

Saint Paul prays for us even now, helping us to remain confident before every opposition facing us in the world of secular ideals and indulgences. He advises, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me” (vs. 8) Rather, he commands, “Share with me in the sufferings” and embrace repudiation and shame “for the gospel according to the power of God” (vs. 8).

How do we follow this advice? We look to the Lord Jesus, who suffered as a man and yet was upheld by the power of God, even on the Cross. He “trampled down death by death” vested in the power of God. There is no circumstance in this world in which we cannot not accomplish the same! Next, the apostle reminds us that ours is a holy calling, “not according to our works, but according to [God’s] purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (vs. 9). Let us be confident, for we are engaged in the eternal purpose of God that breaks into history. God’s purpose is invulnerable to the vicissitudes of people and social movements!

Many “turned away” from the apostles and their message, including “all those in Asia . . . among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes” (vs. 15), God, however, still has zealous servants who are unashamed of chains and the gospel. We seek out faithful teachers who are true to the apostles (vss. 16-17) because the apostolic teachings alone give life.

O Holy Apostles, intercede with the merciful God that He grant salvation to our souls! – Hymn for the Feast of an Apostle

December 28 – Saturday after the Nativity of Christ
1 Timothy 6:11-16

The Good Confession: 1 Timothy 6:11-16, especially vss. 13-15: *“In the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate . . . keep this commandment without spot. . . . He is . . . the King of kings. . . .”* In today’s epistle passage, Saint Paul describes the very God we Orthodox Christians confess (vs. 12). To depict God, the apostle draws on seven expressions found in Holy Scripture. God is the Life-giver – and also the One who, as a man in the flesh, “witnessed the good confession” (vs. 13). He is the blessed Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. As the Immortal One, He dwells in “unapproachable light” (vs. 16), and no man can see Him. Here, in concise language, is the God by whom we shall be judged, and upon whose mercy we depend.

The apostle’s portrait shows us one God in three Persons. To some extent, his description seems to blur the distinction between God the Father and God the Son. Saint Ambrose explains, “When I speak of the Father I do not make separation of the Son, because the Son is in the bosom . . . of the Father. . . . In this way is the Father called ‘the blessed and only Sovereign’ – in such a way that the Son, who is always in the Father, is not separated from Him” (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament Vol. 9, p. 218).

Our God “gives life to all things” (vs. 13). For this reason we pursue Life, fleeing from death and separation from God (vs. 11). Our means for pursuing God are “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and gentleness” (vs. 11). Likewise, we do well to flee their opposites, which are described in a preceding passage (vss. 3-10).

Saint Paul makes a point of reminding us that our King and God also “witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate” (vs. 13). We mortals are to follow our Savior and “fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which [we] were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (vs. 12).

Our God is creation’s potentate, its supreme ruler (vs. 15); He holds authority over all claimants. “Keep this commandment without spot [and] blameless” (vs. 14), means that we are to give God what is His, and to Caesar what belongs to him (Mt 22:21). We discern and then oppose “anyone who teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words” (1 Tim 6:3).

We call God “the King of kings and Lord of lords” (vs. 15) to show that we submit to Him despite all pressures placed upon us to acknowledge other gods, even verbally. We honor the eternal dominion of our God above all (vs. 16).

Saint Paul reminds us that “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22), for God “alone has immortality” (1 Tim 6:16). Through Him we “lay hold on eternal life, to which [we] were also called” (vs. 12). Our God dwells “in unapproachable light” (vs. 16). He calls us to “prove ourselves children of the Light,” always “illuminated by the light of understanding” (from the service of baptism). Christ is the light of the world, illuminating us to show Him forth to the world.

This portrait reveals Christ our God as a man, testifying before Pilate in the flesh (vs. 13), while yet remaining One “whom no man has seen or can see” (vs. 16). Our God is divine and inaccessible, and yet He, who took on our flesh, encourages us to give the “good confession.”

Thou art God ineffable, who didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen didst raise us up again, and brought us back to heaven, endowed with Thy Kingdom. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 29 – Sunday after the Nativity of Christ
Galatians 1:11-19

Facing the Lord: Galatians 1:11-19, especially vss. 15-16: *“It pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. . . .”* According to Saint John Chrysostom, from the time that Saul of Tarsus met Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-8), “he was richly endowed with the Spirit, the revelation had enlightened his whole soul, and he had Christ speaking within him” (“Homily 1 on Galatians,” *NPN Fathers*, First Series Vol. 13, p. 11). Let us combine this insight with the Apostle Paul’s account in today’s reading. The impact Christ made on his life stands out vividly.

Throughout Scripture, we find this pattern of radical change repeating itself. When the Holy Trinity intervenes in human life and history, nothing remains the same. In Saint Paul’s case, a man once caught up in the darkness of hatred and self-righteousness found his soul illumined, and God made an apostle of him.

Immediately after his baptism, however, Saint Paul withdrew into Arabia, avoiding the centers of Christian activity and teaching. He had come face to face with the Lord Jesus by the will of God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He needed time to assimilate what had transpired inside him in a single moment on the highway.

It is worthwhile to compare Saint Paul’s encounter with the experiences of others who came face to face with Christ. Some approached the Lord; others Christ sought out. The Gospels give little detail concerning the recruiting of the Twelve. Saint Mark says only that Christ “called to Him those He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them out” (Mk 3:13-14).

Although “one born out of due time” (1 Cor 15:8), Saint Paul also shared the common apostolic experience of being called and appointed by the Lord. Perhaps none of the other apostles experienced such a cataclysmic upheaval in his life as did Saint Paul. Yet for each convert, coming face to face with the Lord Jesus brings a whole new orientation to life.

What bearing does our encounter with the Lord have for us? Saint Paul’s case is particularly important, because he faced the Lord in a different manner than did the other apostles. The Apostle John describes Christ in terms of “that . . . which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life – the life was manifested, and we have seen” (1 Jn 1:1).

The Twelve knew the Lord firsthand. But we can also say that Saul of Tarsus knew Christ firsthand. Indeed, every Christian comes to know Christ in this way.

Saint Paul’s encounter with the Lord reveals that God is not bound by our five senses. The Lord has fashioned us in such a manner that He may speak to our hearts. Thus we pray that God will “illumine our hearts, O Master. Open the eyes of our mind. Implant in us Thy blessed commandments. Come and dwell in us and cleanse us of every stain of sin.”

Christ said to Saint Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). In Saint Peter’s case, just as in Saul’s conversion, God the Father “revealed” Christ (Gal 1:12, 16).

When we study the lives of those who came face to face with Christ, we understand why this encounter is life’s greatest blessing. As Saint Paul said, “He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Let us seek Him, cry to Him, pray to Him, and wait upon Him. He took our flesh that we might come face to face with Him. Let us call Him Lord, and receive salvation.

Great is the mystery of Thine Incarnation, O Lord; Glory to Thee! – Orthros for the Sunday after the Nativity

December 30 – 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

December 31 – 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.

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