

January 1 – Thursday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 11:27-33

The Baptism of John: Mark 11:27-33, especially vs. 30: *“The baptism of John – was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.”* The Lord Jesus addresses this question to the Sanhedrin, the first-century tribunal of the Jewish nation. He expects us, as His disciples, to answer as well. We, of course, are accustomed to the display of Saint John’s icon adjacent to that of the Lord. We celebrate the saint’s feast days and hear his name mentioned in the hymns of the Church.

However, perhaps we have never paused to answer Christ’s question, or answered it without reflection. Let us be certain that our answer is based on an understanding of the nature of John’s baptism, on what we know about John, and on Christ, who points to the true answer: John’s “baptism . . . was . . . from heaven” (vs. 30).

The baptism practiced by John stands squarely in the ancient tradition of God’s people. It continues the deliverance of Noah and his family from the waters of the great flood (Gn 6-9), Israel’s passage through the waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s hosts (Ex 14), and the nation’s triumphant crossing of the Jordan River into Palestine (Jos 1-4). Together, these experiences reveal the constituent elements manifest in John’s baptism: cleansing, repentance, and divine judgment.

These same elements are present in the mystery of baptism as we know it today (Mt 28:19). According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, “Baptism is defined . . . as being the removal of original sin . . . as the sacrament of regeneration . . . as the passage from an old into a new life, and finally as an epiphany of the Kingdom of God” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 10-11). The priest prays that Christ will “show this water to be the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the illumination of the soul, the laver of regeneration, the renewal of the spirit. . . .”

Even more significant are the many witnesses who testify that John the Baptist is called by God. “Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying . . . ‘And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest’” (Lk 1:67, 76). The people under the Old Covenant “all counted John to have been a prophet indeed” (Mk 11:32). Even John’s enemies acknowledge that “he was a just and holy man” (Mk 6:20). Furthermore, the Forerunner confirms these views with his own testimony (Jn 1:19-27).

From the beginning the Archangel Gabriel prophesies that John will “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15). This fact is confirmed while he is still an unborn babe. At the sound of the voice of the Theotokos, who carries God Incarnate (Lk 1:44), John leaps within his mother’s womb.

Finally, the Holy Trinity directly reveals that John’s baptism comes from heaven. The God-inspired Evangelist John declares that the Forerunner “was a man sent from God” (Jn 1:6). John is directed by “the word of God” to go into the region around the Jordan and preach “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Lk 3:2, 3). Then God the Father speaks openly to John at Jesus’ baptism: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

The Forerunner himself declares that, due to his human limitations, he did not know Christ beforehand. He relies entirely on God, for “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1:33-34).

Let us reply without hesitation, “John’s baptism was from heaven, not from men.”

O wise Forerunner, John, thou didst behold the ineffable glory of the Father from on high, and the Son in the waters, and the Spirit descending on Him: pray Him to save our souls. –Vespers for the Synaxis of the Forerunner

January 2 - Friday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 12:1-12

Bearing Fruit: Mark 12:1-12, especially vs. 9: *“The owner of the vineyard. . . will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”* This parable contains a prophecy of the fate of God the Son. Christ Jesus is sent by the Father to win the respect of His people; they indeed will take Him and kill Him and cast Him out of the vineyard (vs. 8). As a result, the Lord Jesus will give “His people to other husbandmen, that is, to the apostles” (Blessed Theophylact, *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 102).

We are God’s vineyard, charged with bearing fruit and offering “the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). We are to abide in Him or risk being “cast out as a branch and . . . withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (Jn 15:6). Let us give God His due in the time allotted to us.

Sin is around us and within us. Its allure deceives us so that we often fail to consider the consequences of not *abiding* in Him. It is easy to live for the moment, without thinking about what follows from our actions. However, our petty resistance and refusal to pay our dues only deepens the gulf between us and the Giver of Life.

When we look at the fall of Adam and Eve, we notice how rapidly they descend after that tiny bite of forbidden fruit. They are driven from Paradise and foul murder soon follows (Gn 3:23; 4:8). Turning to the century only recently past, we find the latest chapter in this sordid human record: mass executions, genocide, the destruction of whole cities, and terror unspeakable.

We dwell close to Life. We are united to the Lord in baptism, sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and partake of Christ’s own life-bearing Body and Blood. “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11).

Why should we hoard – or worse, squander – the fruit gained in the Orthodox vineyard? Let us consider the fate of the wicked vinedressers and share “some of the fruit of the vineyard” (Mk 12:2) garnered in Christ. First, we are to honor the servants whom the Lord sends – our pastors and bishops. We kiss their hands and offer them the fruits of our labors in the Lord’s vineyard.

What are those fruits? Our God loves truth and wants to make us whiter than snow, turning His face away from our sins, if we simply offer Him “a broken spirit, a heart that is broken and humbled” (Ps 50:17). Let us heed Saint Makarios of Egypt: “Being bountiful and full of love, God awaits with great patience the repentance of every sinner, and He celebrates the return of the sinner with celestial rejoicing, as He Himself says, ‘There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 315). The power to give lies with us; give Him the gift of true purity.

Second, we are to resist every corrupting movement within our hearts and give freely, “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). Dag Hammarskjöld, the famed secretary general of the United Nations, writes: “Weep / If you can, / Weep, / But do not complain. / The way chose you – / And you must be thankful.” After all, God “didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do all things until [He] hadst brought us up to heaven” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

When we meet Christ in the Holy Mysteries, He is looking for our respect. When He comes in the garb of the poor, we remember all He has given to us. We offer thanksgiving to the Life-giver in our words and actions: “We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, and we pray unto Thee, O our God” (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great).

Serve ye the Lord with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling. Lay hold of instruction. . . . Blessed are all that have put their trust in Him. – Psalm 2:11-13

January 3 – Saturday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Luke 17:3-10

The Duty of a Disciple: Luke 17:3-10, especially vs. 5: *“And the apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’”* Consider for a moment the circumstances that prompt this appeal to the Lord by the apostles. Jesus has been discussing with them how we are to respond to a fellow disciple, or even a person we do not know, who offends us. The gospels make clear the unlimited, mandatory nature of our duty to forgive if we call ourselves disciples of Christ. Our every objection and resistance to forgiving wrongs is ruled out by the Lord who prayed on the Cross, asking God the Father on behalf of those crucifying Him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Those who are now beginning to plot Jesus’ arrest and execution do not know what they are doing. Had the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees grasped Jesus’ true identity, it seems hard to believe that they would allow their Lord and Creator to be sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, who likewise does not understand the import of his actions.

Just as Christ was born secretly, in a cave, His identity as He stands before Pilate is hidden from men’s perceptions. Jesus alone among those witnessing the travesty of His crucifixion realizes the enormity of the crime. The disciples, of course, run like rabbits, except for a few who lurk around the edges to see how it all comes out. Even brave Peter weasels out at his moment of truth, and later weeps over his failure.

When the Lord rises from the dead, He breaks through the blindness of His disciples. He shows Himself to the world as victor over death and every kind of injustice. And He calls us to follow the way of the Cross and forgiveness, which is our salvation.

Since we hear the Resurrection narratives read at Sunday Orthros, week after week, we may not stop to consider the enormity of the event. We may well wonder, in our indifference, how far removed we truly are from those who committed the crimes against our Lord. The Holy Spirit however, allows us a glimpse sufficient to bring us to whatever degree of repentance we can manage.

If we dare to call Christ our Savior, addressing him as “my Lord” or “my King and my God,” then the duty to forgive is ours. We must forego those responses that come to us more easily in the face of offense: sarcasm, an angry retort, sullen withdrawal, the inner pledge to get even, a proud, disdainful smirk.

Every time He tells us “you shall forgive him” (vs. 4), we beseech Him to “increase our faith” (vs. 5). Let us not justify ourselves by insisting that whoever let fly the cutting remark, gave us a nasty dig, or loosed the most bitter cruelty upon us remains unrepentant. The reaction of the transgressor is no concern of ours in the face of Christ’s expectations.

Am I willing to forgive? Do I want to forgive? Can I find it in myself to forgive? These are far more urgent issues for us. Our eternal salvation hangs on our willingness to obey the Lord and on our readiness to forgive. The Master will refuse to deliver us until we have paid all that is due on our account “if each of [us], from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Mt 18:35).

Indeed, let us beg Christ our Lord to increase our faith every time He asks us to forgive. As we regard the one who has struck us down, we look past the dark pit of unforgiveness and bitter death and lift up our hands to the holy place. “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24).

Establish me in the path of Thy commandments, and let me not stray from Thy light. –
Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*

January 4 - Twenty-Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Colossian 3:12-16

The Robe of the Chosen: *Colossians 3:12-16, especially vs. 12:* “*Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering. . . .*” As the newly baptized Christian emerges from the waters and is clothed in a white robe, a prayer of encouragement is read: “Vouchsafe unto me, a robe of light, O Thou who clothest Thyself with light as with a garment.” What is this robe of God’s chosen, in which we pray to be clothed? In today’s epistle reading, Saint Paul identifies both the substance of the robe – its most essential element – and the way it is to be woven.

Like the Patriarch Joseph of old, the faithful in Christ are holy and beloved to our Father in heaven. In the baptismal mystery, God gives us a wondrous garment to put on (Gn. 37:3), like the Lord who is clothed in light. This robe is woven of seven radiant virtues that form the warp, the basic threads, of our life in Christ.

These virtues are “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, and long-suffering” (Col. 3:12), all named by Saint Paul at the start of today’s passage. Together with the virtues of “bearing . . . and forgiving” (vs. 13) that are named subsequently, these constitute the essential strands that make up the fabric our Christian life.

Note how the baptismal hymn associates the robe we pray for with God’s own divine vesture of uncreated light, which cloaks His essence from the eyes of His creatures. The virtues that compose our baptismal garment derive from God’s nature and are revealed fully through the humanity of the Lord Jesus. In His tender mercy, Jesus gave Himself up for us in kindness, humility and meekness, *bearing* our sins and *forgiving* us even unto death on the Cross. He thus reveals the garment we are to weave if we are to be truly clothed with undying light.

While the seven virtues form the warp of the garment of light, love constitutes the essential strand of the woof “which binds together and completes the whole” (vs. 14), as one translation puts it. A weaver first sets up the threads of the warp, through which he will then pass the shuttle back and forth to lay down the woof strands.

In a similar manner, we the faithful fulfill the life in Christ by making the characteristic Christian virtues into a robe of light, weaving love through the virtues to bind them in a complete whole. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “It is possible for one to be kind and meek, and humble-minded, and longsuffering, and yet not affectionate . . . for all these things fall asunder, except they be done with love; this is what clenches them all together” (“Homily 8 on Colossians,” *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 8, p. 295).

The robe of light we wear is woven by five actions. First, we allow “the peace of God [to] rule in (our) hearts” (vs. 15). As Saint John Chrysostom says, “As God made peace with you, so do ye also make it” (p. 296). Second, we are called to be a Eucharistic people, for being “called in one body” we are to “be thankful” (vs. 15).

Third, we let “the word of God dwell in [us] richly” (vs. 16), so that, in the words of Saint Isaac the Syrian, “we may see in ourselves that likeness and that true image which belong to the divine nature and divine essence.” Fourth, we strive to teach and admonish “one another” (vs. 16).

And lastly, we sing “with grace in [our] hearts to the Lord” (vs. 16). If there is no joy rising from the heart and resounding from the lips, then the robe of the chosen of God yet lacks its finishing touch of grace.

O Master, preserve pure and unpolluted the garment of incorruption, wherewith Thou hast endowed us, upholding inviolate in us by Thy grace the seal of the Spirit. – Chrismation Prayer

January 5 – Forefeast of Theophany
1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Apostolic Evangelism: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, especially vs. 23: *“I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now I do this for the gospel’s sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you.”* Above all else, the Apostle Paul perceives himself as an evangelist – one serving under Christ (vs. 21) that he “might by all means save some” (vs. 22). Here, he is speaking of the men and women with whom he has come into contact. He knows, as the Lord Jesus demonstrates in the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:2-23), that some will hear the Gospel and yet never “obtain it” (1 Cor 9:24). Others, including even the apostle himself, risk being “disqualified” (vs. 27) through personal failure or dereliction.

Knowing the value of the “imperishable crown” (vs. 25) that our Lord Jesus holds out to every disciple, Saint Paul is determined to do everything in his power to become “a partaker of” that crown (vs. 23). He encourages those he trained up in the faith, such as the Corinthian Christians to whom he addresses this passage, to “run in such a way that [they] may obtain it” as well (vs. 24).

Saint Paul is holding himself up to us as a model to follow in the practice of evangelism. Under Christ, each one of us must likewise become the servant of all men, if we are to win them to the Lord Jesus (vs. 19). Likewise, we must be sensitive to the spiritual outlook of those with whom we interact (vss. 20-23). Our conduct is thus disciplined and “temperate in all things” (vss. 24-27).

There is profound irony in the apostle’s call to use our freedom in the service of others. It is a radical proposal, to say the least, but St. Paul asserts that it is essential if we are to “win more” people to the glories, beauties, and life-giving truths of our faith. Let us never hoard our faith, but be willing to pay the price! Christ has directed us to make disciples of all men (Mt 28:19).

We note, however, that the apostle proposes approaching the mission of discipling others in a sensitive way, mindful of their persona spiritual orientation. There is a delicate balance between our role as slaves of the Master, with the obligation to evangelize, and the need to remain sensitive to others outside the faith. The Gospel requires us to reach out with our faith, but at the same time it demands genuine consideration of others.

Saint Paul approaches the Jews as a fellow Jew, and the pagan Romans as a Roman citizen. He does not compromise his integrity by bending himself like a pretzel, nor does he change his colors like a chameleon. Rather, he starts from the assumptions he shares with those he encounters. He finds a place to meet them on common ground.

Finally, the apostle uses an illustration from the Greek games, one which would be familiar to every first-century Corinthian. Engaging others with the new and radical truth of Christianity is a demanding task, which can be likened to competitive sports. If we are to overcome society’s false assumptions, deep-seated erroneous concepts, and comfort with half-truths, we must become tough competitors ready to fight for the truth we value so highly.

What are we to do? First, we keep the “imperishable crown” we offer (vs. 25) – the kingdom of God – ever in mind. Second, we remain “temperate in all things” (vs. 25).

The ascetic disciplines we practice are not intended to punish us, but to train us in how to obtain salvation and then evangelize others. If we fail to discipline our bodies and bring them into subjection, we may discover that although we have preached to others, we ourselves have “become disqualified” (vs. 27).

Of Thine immense goodness, O Lord God, show me the path of Thy will in every meeting with others, and grant me to walk in Thy sight without sin, but to Thy glory and honor. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, On Prayer

January 6 – Feast of Theophany
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Salvation Has Appeared: Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7, especially vs. 11: *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”* If we are seeking one short, inclusive statement in Holy Scripture that best summarizes the work of our Lord Jesus from the time of the annunciation of His birth to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost on the apostles, what better choice than this quote from today’s epistle?

“The grace of God,” the eternal Father’s love, was definitively revealed when our Lord Jesus came to minister among us in the flesh. The “appearance” in time of the only-begotten Son is the supreme gift of divine condescension on behalf of all mankind. When the Apostle Paul speaks to Titus of the “salvation [that] has appeared to all men,” this single phrase encompasses all that Christ our God did as a man to assure the possibility of everlasting life for our race.

Who defines divine “grace” and “love” more fully than the Lord Jesus? According to Saint John Chrysostom, when we see that our numberless sins have been forgiven, “this in no common degree awes and humbles the soul . . . for it received not punishment, but obtained pardon, and infinite favors” (Manley, *Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 987).

From the moment we perceive the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth and follow Him with all of our heart and soul, our mind and strength, we attribute everything thereafter to God’s grace and love. How can we possibly define God’s grace? Our words cannot do so, and yet Jesus Christ is the grace of God embodied before our eyes.

Let us move beyond rational concepts and definitions and embrace the mystery of the divine Himself. Let us affirm and celebrate our union with Him as received in holy baptism and chrismation. Let us struggle to become fully one with His immaculate Body and precious Blood. When we say that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19), this claim is not a logical, reasoned postulate. Rather, Christ is God’s undeniable claim upon our lives, wills, and actions, both now and forever.

Jesus Christ is neither a myth nor an idealization of everything good, true, beautiful, and perfect. Yes, all these ideals are embodied in Him, both when he appeared in history and when He will appear again (Ti 2:13). Indeed, His life, teachings, and deeds are better documented than the evidence collected about Caesar and many of the other ancient greats.

“God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us. Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.” This is the message we celebrate today. The word *theophany* means “appearance of God.” We celebrate the Lord God’s baptism as a theophany, because on that occasion the three Persons of the Trinity were at last disclosed by name.

Thus when he says “the grace of God . . . has appeared” (Ti 2:11), Saint Paul goes beyond the idea of grace merely being displayed in some action or monument. God has appeared personally. The Father gives His only-begotten Son as His gift to the disordered world of men, and the Spirit confirms the truth of His Word.

The appearance of God has but one purpose: to bring “salvation . . . to all men” (vs. 11). God diagnoses our human condition and administers the cure. Seeing our plight, He does not stand aside from the degradation He sees strewn across the dark tracks of human history. Rather, He acts. He exceeds the wonder of the burning bush, or the thunder and smoke on Mount Sinai.

He humbly takes on our flesh, walks among us, and dies as one of us in order to trample down ubiquitous death that hangs like a pall over every nation and every person (Is 25:7-8). He is the Way by which we deny ungodliness and worldly lusts so that we may live soberly and righteously in this world (Ti 2:12).

Great art Thou, O Lord, and wondrous are Thy works, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wonders. Glory to Thee, O Christ our King and our God, glory to Thee! – Great Blessing of the Waters

January 7 – Synaxis of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John
Acts 19:1-8

The Gift of the Holy Spirit: Acts 19:1-8, especially vss. 1-2: “And . . . Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’” Why do these unnamed disciples at Ephesus know nothing of Holy Spirit? As disciples of the Forerunner and Baptist John, they have only learned about repentance as the preparation for the Messiah who will come and “baptize [them] . . . with the Holy Spirit” (Mt 3:11).

The Apostle Paul does not miss this golden opportunity to tell them that the true Messiah has already come (Acts 19:4). Immediately, at the apostle’s hands, these men receive holy baptism, as the Lord commanded (Mt 28:19). They are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit in holy chrismation, and receive the Eucharistic gifts. Then “the Holy Spirit came upon them” (Acts 19:6).

The knowledge of the Holy Spirit is a normal experience for all who are in Christ. That is why the apostle asks, “Into what then were you baptized?” (vs. 3). And yet today many among the faithful have only the barest knowledge of the Holy Spirit, and little or no experience of His presence.

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, “The true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ’s sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 169).

Every one of the holy mysteries or sacraments emphasizes this obtaining of the Holy Spirit. At the service of baptism, we pray to Christ that each new servant will be filled “with the power of Thy Holy Spirit . . . that he may be no more a child of the body, but a child of Thy kingdom.” Along with this prayer, we ask that the servant of God, “having preserved the gift of Thy Holy Spirit, and increased the measure of grace committed unto him . . . may receive the prize of his high calling and be numbered with the first-born.”

Then, when the newly baptized servant of Christ receives chrismation, we pray that our Lord, having illumined His disciple by water and the Spirit, will grant “unto him the seal and gift of Thy holy, and almighty, and adorable Spirit.” The Holy Spirit keeps him in sanctification, confirms him in the Orthodox faith, and delivers him from the evil one and his machinations.

Finally, every time we receive holy communion, we pray to God, “Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these Gifts . . . changing them by Thy Holy Spirit . . . that to those who shall partake thereof they may be unto cleansing of soul, unto the remission of sins, unto the communion of Thy Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of Heaven, unto boldness toward Thee, and not unto judgment or unto condemnation.” Always we pray for the Holy Spirit to come, indwell, and act within us.

The Lord Jesus intends for us to know Him through the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls (Jn 14:16-17). He expects us to work with the Spirit to achieve what He teaches and commands (vss. 16:13-14). Saint Seraphim explains that “the Holy Spirit . . . brings into our hearts the kingdom of God and opens the way for us to win the blessedness of the future life” (p. 170).

For this reason, the work of the Spirit is described thus during Orthros: “All creation together is regenerated . . . and returns to its former being. . . . He doth establish all creatures and preserve them in the Father and the Son. . . . By the Holy Spirit hath all holiness and wisdom been observed.” *O Heavenly Spirit, Light, Life and a living supersensuous Fountain, purify our offenses, for Thou deifying Fire projecting from Fire, and distribute Thy gifts upon us and save our souls.* – Verse for Pentecost

January 8 – Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 10:35-11:7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 9 - Friday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:8, 11-16

Desire What is Worthy: *Hebrews 11:8, 11-16, especially vs. 16:* “*But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.*” Saint John Chrysostom urges us to “make our souls a heaven.” This may seem like a worthy desire, but let us first take care that we understand what the saint means by making our souls “a heaven.” If we study today’s passage from Hebrews, we may search out his meaning so as to direct our labors toward their true end.

First and foremost, the making of the soul into a heaven depends on our trust in God (vss. 8, 11). We must act like Abraham and obey God; we choose to obey Christ our Savior. Faith is only slightly concerned with our mind and emotions. Mostly it is a matter of *complying*, even if we do not understand and entertain doubts, even if we do not especially feel like doing what the Lord asks.

Faith definitely entails risks and uncertainty. Nevertheless, trusting and obeying God is the essence of faith. Imagine Sarah’s doubts! She gives her maid Hagar to Abraham so that he will have an heir (see Gn 16:1-4). She has resigned herself to childlessness because of her age (Heb 11:11). Thus she laughs at God’s promise of a son (Gn 18:12). However, when like Abraham she is challenged, Sarah takes strength from the Lord who promised, and “received strength to conceive seed” (Heb 11:11).

In Abraham’s case, God calls him to leave the familiar, withdrawing from the place where he is comfortably settled, and “[go] out, not knowing where he was going” (vs. 8). Often, obedience means leaving our place of comfort, as it did for Abraham. We admit that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth (vs. 13), who must sever our ties with the familiar.

If we decide to obey God above all else, then we know to expect some interruptions to our comfort. Concerning such spiritual disruptions, Saint John Chrysostom says, “Let us no longer continue on the earth. . . . For to be and not to be on the earth is the effect of moral disposition and choice” (“Homily 16 on Hebrews,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 14. p. 445).

Now we begin to understand that to “make the soul a heaven” means advancing into the unknown (Lk 9:62). Choosing an unknown future may entail leaving behind familiar creature-comforts and stepping onto an unexplored path. Trusting and obeying often demands that we fast, persevere in prayer, read the Scriptures, receive the Holy Mysteries, confess our sins, block anger and jealousy, set aside greed, and take up the practice of virtue. These acts resemble a mountain range that the stranger and pilgrim must cross (vs. 13).

Still, we are encouraged to trust God with determination. We accept moments of discomfort and refuse to give up (vs. 15). In those difficult moments when we face the choices that come with faith. when we struggle to go forward, we “declare plainly that [we] seek a homeland” (vs. 14).

What *homeland* lies beyond the rugged hills, beyond the present struggle of obedience? It is that worthy, heavenly country, a *city* God has prepared (v. 16) for us. If we step out, we come nearer to God and to joy. God is with us when we begin our journey and while we are in the midst of the struggle – and He is waiting on the other side.

Let us undertake this journey so that we may discover that He is the destination we desire. He is the motivation for our struggles, and the heaven we truly seek in our hearts. “The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon Him, to all that call on Him in truth” (Ps 144:19).

O Lord our God, sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house, glorify them in recompense by Thy divine power, and forsake us not who hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 10 - Saturday after Theophany
Ephesians 6:10-17

Defeating the Adversary: *Ephesians 6:10-17, especially vs. 12:* “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*” No Christian who reflects on the events of the last hundred years can easily dismiss the apostle’s claim that we are engaged in a global spiritual struggle. On the contrary, many alive today have witnessed depravity, genocide, atrocity, and self-indulgence on an enormous scale. The spiritually awakened know that behind these depraved human choices are the spiritual forces of evil, and the demonic powers sent from hell.

No other explanation fully accounts for the madness and viciousness that swept over the world in our “enlightened” modern era. Rather, historical events only serve to underscore the wisdom of the apostles and Church Fathers. The Church knows the “spiritual hosts of wickedness” (vs. 12). How well Saint Paul grasped the truth that history is the Church’s struggle against evil!

Let us therefore heed the saint’s admonition. God knows we are weak, so let us “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (vs. 10). The forces ranged against us are neither blind nor inanimate, but personal foes who wish us the worst. As the Apostle Paul urges, we must “put on the whole armor of God, that [we] may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (vs. 11).

“Gird[ing our] waist with truth” (vs. 14) is essential for all the faithful when we live in a world flooded with lies. We know that “from the beginning” the devil is the father of lies (Jn 8:44). He deceived our mother Eve with a lie (“You shall not die” – Gn 3:4), and now all the descendants of Adam die (1 Cor 15:22).

The adversary sows his half-truths in any of us who are willing to listen. To those of us who are overly quick to compromise, he whispers that we must avoid being rigid. To those inclined to “strive about words” (2 Tm 2:14), he urges us to contend for our opinions. Let us instead gird ourselves with Truth!

The “breastplate of righteousness” (vs. 14) shields our heart against moral weakness and failure. It protects us from lies such as “everyone does it,” or “one time won’t matter.” God’s commandments are never intended to confine us, but rather to protect against the cruel consequences that inexorably follow wrongdoing. Our true moral life is based on praise, thanksgiving, and love – gifts from God to encourage us to strive toward purity.

“The gospel of peace” (vs. 15) prepares our feet to walk always in the way of the Lord. Jesus our Lord made no war with the scribes, Pharisees, or chief priest. He offers His kingdom of peace to all. Let us preserve the peace we have in the Lord, for if we do, there is no situation or attack on our persons that can turn us into soldiers of hate.

The “shield of faith” (vs. 16) does indeed “quench the fiery darts of the wicked one,” along with all his burning doubts, accusations, and heated suggestions for arousing the passions. Let us use our well-trained trust in God to cool the mind, steady the heart, and sober our emotions in every situation. Faith responds to the adversary by trusting the sure promises of God.

The “helmet of salvation” (vs. 17) protects our mind, for we attain in by a thorough knowledge of Scripture and the teachings of the Church Father. This helmet covers those who regularly read and study our Holy Tradition. Let our minds be filled with God’s impregnable power against despair and hopelessness.

Lastly, the “sword of the Spirit . . . is the word of God” (vs. 17). When the Lord Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, He uses Scripture to cut down the enemy’s invitations. Let us train well in the use of this sword.

Glory to Thee, O Lord! Thou hast armed us that we may stand against the adversaries.

January 11 - Sunday after Theophany
Ephesians 4:7-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 12 - Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:17-31

Promise and Faith: *Hebrews 11:17-31, especially vss. 17-18:* “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’” The actions that lead Abraham toward the sacrifice of his son Isaac are neither blind nor irrational. Indeed, logical choice leads Abraham to pursue a deliberate plan to sacrifice his only son.

Although on the face of it the sacrifice of Isaac seems contradictory and irrational, the underlying cause of the patriarch’s actions is his absolute trust in God’s word. He fully accepts the trustworthiness of what God has promised him. This trust is possible because the patriarch is certain that God is able to keep His promises.

Today’s epistle reading highlights the essential connection between promise and faith. As illustrations, Saint Paul offers us a series of faith-based actions by various Old Testament saints who trusted God’s promises. Each of them anchored his faith on the reliability of God. Their examples are especially important for us Christians struggling to live by faith in the strange land of contemporary materialist and secular culture.

The apostle continues his discussion of what it means to act on faith in verse 20, jumping ahead to the time when Abraham’s son Isaac is himself an old man. When Isaac blesses his sons Jacob and Esau, he, like his father, cites a promise from God (see Gn 26:2-4; 27:1-40).

In the apostle’s next example, we see Jacob, now an old man, blessing his grandsons by Joseph (Heb 11:21). Again, there is reference to a promise from God (Gn 48:3, 15-16). And on Joseph’s deathbed (Heb 11:22) many ancient promises, including those involving Joseph’s brothers, are once again reviewed (Gn 50:22-26).

Saint Paul next reminds us of the birth of the great Moses. His parents refused to obey Pharaoh’s command of infanticide (Heb 11:23) because of a promise (Ex 2:1-10). Indeed, the book of Hebrews continually reminds us of God’s zeal and dedication toward releasing His enslaved people from bondage.

When Moses comes of age, he “by faith forsook Egypt” (vs. 27). (Note how, in verse 26, the Apostle Paul refers to Christ in His pre-incarnate divinity. A similar reference to Christ appears in First Corinthians 10:1-4.) Each verse of today’s passage continues the refrain “by faith.” Saint Paul makes sure that each verse also contains one or more of the Lord’s promises, upon which vital faith forever depends.

The apostle then reviews the first Passover (Heb 11:28), taking us to the shores of the Red Sea to witness Israel’s deliverance (vs. 29) and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. These events became the basis for Passover feast celebrated by the Israelites (Ex 12:13-16, 26-28) and also the basis for the Evangelist John’s theme of the lamb (Jn 1:29, 36).

When the Lord says to Moses, “Tell the children of Israel to go forward” (Ex 14:15), this promise gives them the necessary faith to make the passage. Skipping over their years in the desert, the apostle again shows us promise evoking faith, in this instance before the fortifications of Jericho (Heb 11:30, Jos 6:2). Note that the “harlot Rahab did not perish” with the other citizens in the fortress because she helped the Israelite spies before the battle (Heb 11:31, Jos 6:20-21).

Saint Basil the Great says of God’s promises, “To him who believes, a promise is given by God: ‘I will give you hidden treasures, unseen ones’ (Is 45:3). When we have been deemed worthy of knowledge face to face, we shall see also the depths in the storehouses of God.”

O Lord, remember Thy holy promises, and bring forth Thy people with joy. – Based on Psalm

January 13 - Tuesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25

The Voice of the Lord: *Hebrews 12:25-26, 13:22-25, especially vs. 12:25:* “*See that you do not refuse Him who speaks.*” The Prophet David composed this beautiful hymn lauding the voice of the Lord: “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory hath thundered, the Lord is upon the many waters. The voice of the Lord in might, the voice of the Lord in majesty, the voice of the Lord who breaketh the cedars, yea, the Lord will break the cedars of Lebanon. And He will break them small like the calf of Lebanon, and His beloved is like a son of the unicorns. The voice of the Lord who divideth the flame of fire, the voice of the Lord who shaketh the wilderness, yea, the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kaddis. The voice of the Lord gathereth the harts, and shall reveal the thickets of oak, and in His temple every man uttereth glory” (Ps 28:3-9).

In today’s epistle the words of the Apostle Paul, like those of the Psalmist David, help us to heed the voice of the Lord. Although the Lord’s voice breaks great trees and makes mountains *skip* (Ps 113:4), shaking and gathering animals into herds, this voice is never impersonal. It is neither a brute power nor inanimate energy, nor does it lack intelligence.

Rather, the voice of the Lord is meaningful and personal, coming from our God who conveys His intention, purpose, and result. Thus the Apostle Paul entreats us, “See that you do not refuse Him who speaks” (Heb. 12:25).

The voice of God is recorded by His people in Holy Scripture, by a community brought together by His voice. Scripture is our primary written witness of God’s words and accomplishments. Here we also discover what God is doing at this very moment and what He will bring about through time unto eternity.

At the center of all Scripture is the Word of God, for the voice of the Lord comes to us as God the Word. The Word achieves everything described in Psalm 103: He “stretchest out the heavens . . . maketh the clouds . . . laid the foundation of the earth . . . coveredst it with the deep . . . gave drink to every beast . . . causeth the grass to grow . . . giveth meat to all in due season.”

More important than these provisions are the people He brings forth – a host “innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore” (Heb 11:12). He covenants with us, calls us His people, and goes before us to do battle on our behalf. He bears us up in His arms “as a man carries his son” (Dt 1:31).

The Apostle Paul deplores the refusal of the early people of God to hear and obey the voice of the Lord, who raised up the Prophet Moses to lead them into a land of their own. At the boundary of that land, they “would not go up, but disobeyed the word of the Lord [their] God. And . . . murmured” (vss. 1:26-27).

Through the great Law-giver, God clearly told them by His Word – His own voice from the mountain – that He would give them the land. “Yet, in all this matter [they] did not believe the Lord [their] God” (vs. 1:32). Hence, Saint Paul says, “they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth” (Heb 12:25). They died in the wilderness, outside the promised land!

May we always heed the message God gives to us through “Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 25): Jesus, the Incarnate voice of the Father, “His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (vs. 1:2). We have greater divine promises than did ancient Israel. Let us not refuse God, for we shall “not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven” (vs. 12:25).

As Moses communed with God and, in an ineffable manner, received Thy voice in his ear, do Thou prepare us to worship Thee, O Word of the Father, and ever to hear and to obey Thee. – Verse from Cheesefare Sunday

January 14 - Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
James 1:1-18

Coping with Trials: *James 1:1-18, especially vs. 2:* “*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*” The first-century brethren to whom the Apostle James is writing are in the midst of a test of their commitment to the Lord Jesus. As the apostle warns, such *perasmos* (“trials”) are often accompanied by personal suffering. Although these brethren do not face martyrdom, those he addresses must stand fast as “confessors” of the faith, to use the Church’s terminology.

The Apostle James is counseling us as well, for our own faith is being tested. On television and in the media, in classrooms at college and secondary school alike, we are bombarded with materialistic, godless messages. Scant allowance is made for spiritual truth, still less for the possibility of miracles, asceticism, chastity, traditional morality, or worship.

Indeed, spirituality in almost any form is treated as either nonexistent, unimportant, or worthy of ridicule. Let us wake up! Our faith is being repudiated, undermined, and brushed aside!

Patience is necessary if we are to endure this constant, unrelenting assault on the sacred. Saint James advises us to “let patience have its perfect work, that before God we may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (vs. 4).

Above all, we should never underestimate the worldly learning and persuasiveness of those who oppose the Orthodox faith. They ride the crest of a wave of popular acceptance. When we feel ourselves incapable of speaking the truth, or lacking sufficient wisdom, we “ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to [us]” (vs. 5).

We strengthen our faith by standing before the holy icons, reading Scripture, and absorbing the hymns and prayers of the Divine Liturgy. These reinforce our commitment to God, so that we do not become like one “who doubts,” nor “like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (vs. 6). We avoid adopting a worldly outlook that would make us “double minded” and “unstable” in our ways (vs. 8), for in such a case we will not “receive anything from the Lord” (vs. 7).

In the midst of our success-driven culture, we who lack riches and status look to Jesus Christ, who also was poor, and “glory in [our] exaltation” with Him before God the Father (vs. 9). If we are wealthy by worldly standards, then we remember how fleeting and uncertain riches can be. In the heat of the marketplace, our financial worth can wither like the grass and perish. We know that “the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits” (vs. 11).

Instead, let us labor for that which lasts for eternity. If we endure temptation and are approved of God, we “will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (vs. 12).

Above all, we do not blame God for our struggles. We understand that we may be drawn away – either by our “own desires” (vs. 14) or by whatever “gives birth to sin” (vs. 15) – and run the risk of falling into the full-blown sin that “brings forth death” (vs. 15). The worst outcome is to be captured by this world: its assumptions are deadly, no matter how plausible they sound.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (vs. 17). With God we escape from the changing fads of this materialistic world, for in Him “there is no variation or shadow of turning” (vs. 17). Like a mother, He gave us birth that we might become “a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (vs. 18) – an entirely new kind of humanity. Let us hold onto this gift from our Father and keep His name holy all our days.

Show me to be a dwelling-place of Thy Spirit; and in no wise the dwelling-place of sin. – Post-communion Prayer

January 15 - Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
James 1:19-27

Self-Deception: James 1:19-27, especially vs. 25: *“But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”* What standard should we use if we wish to measure ourselves honestly, to assess accurately who and what we are? Saint James teaches us to look “into the perfect law of liberty” (vs. 25) – by which he means the Lord Jesus, for only Christ embodies the perfect law of liberty for mankind.

By looking at Him and measuring ourselves in turn, we are enabled to see ourselves without distortion, inflation, or self-flattery. The Lord neither enlarges our moral and spiritual height nor diminishes it, nor does He pass over any desire of our hearts. In musical terms, we can liken Him to that pure note or pitch with which any slight tonal variation, sharp or flat, will immediately cause discord.

Christ our God is the reliable standard to use for authentic assessment of every person, no matter what our race or tongue. Being Himself pure and undistorted, He accurately reflects all our “filthiness and overflow of wickedness” (vs. 21), as well as our potential for “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father” (vs. 27).

The Elder Joseph the Hesychast explains how the Lord mirrors every element of our lives so well: “Once someone has tasted wine, he can tell if they give him vinegar instead.” The Lord Jesus is the wine; to know Him is to know both the bad and the good within ourselves.

First, the Lord Jesus shows us how slow we are to hear (vs. 19). When asked why He speaks in parables, Jesus replies, “Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:12-13).

Instead, He opens our ears that we may be *swift to hear*. “God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear” (Is 35:4-5).

Foolish as we are, we are often swift to give way to wrath rather than offering a kind or healing word (Jas 1:19). Invariably, our wrath “does not produce the righteousness of God” (vs. 20). As Solomon wisely said, “A stone is heavy, and sand is cumbersome; but the wrath of a man without discernment is heavier than both” (Prv 27:3).

Thankfully, Jesus Christ our Savior turns us from wrath. When His disciples are ready to destroy a community of Samaritans who will not receive the Lord, Jesus rebukes them, saying, “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Lk 9:56).

Jesus Himself implants His words in our heart and enables us to receive His gifts and spirit of meekness (Jas 1:21). He it was who “was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb [was] silent before his shearers” (Is 53:7). He reveals the beauty of a meek and quiet spirit in the face of violence. Christ Jesus exemplifies His beatitude “blessed are the meek,” for at the end of all things, He “shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5).

Jesus our Lord blesses us when we care for the widow and orphan (Jas 1:27) instead of exploiting or ignoring the poor and defenseless: “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:40).

Let us follow Saint James’ teachings and look steadily “into the perfect law of liberty,” our Lord Jesus Christ, not as forgetful hearers but as doers of the work Christ gives to us (Jas 1:25). Only He can keep us unspotted from the world and undeceived in our hearts (vs. 26).

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge; and implant in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 16 - Friday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
James 2:1-13

Partiality: James 2:1-13, especially vs. 1: “*My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*” The Apostle James is intensely concerned with the vice of partiality (see verses 1, 4, and 9). But what, exactly, is this partiality he warns against? The New Testament Greek word translated into English as partiality is formed from the word *lambano* – “to take in hand,” “receive,” or “recognize” – combined with the word *prosopon*, which means “person.”

According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, in Greek culture *prosopon* came “to be identified . . . quickly with the mask, *prosopeion*, which was used in the theater.” So close was the association between the two words that they became synonyms. Thus, “in the ancient Hellenic world for someone to ‘be a person’ meant that he had something added to his being” (

Prosopon thus implies a person’s outward features or characteristics. The New Testament writers, including Saint James, were drawn to this word when expressing the vice of showing “favoritism with respect to distinguishing features or external appearance” – that is, *partiality*.

The use of this word by the epistle writer expresses the idea of giving special attention to, or favoring, someone more than another. Clearly, the emphasis in the original is on the outward features and characteristics that draw us to a person or group of people.

Drawing upon this understanding, let us turn to Saint James’ illustration of partiality. He identifies this practice, into which his readers obviously have fallen, as one of paying “attention to the one wearing the fine clothes” (vs. 3) as opposed to recognizing the “poor man in filthy clothes” (vs. 2).

When we look at partiality this way, we surely recognize the impulse to favoritism which is common to us all. As Christians, however, we face a stern apostolic warning against showing any type of partiality or favor. Saint James commands us to “show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (tr of vs. 1 in RSV). We are to guard against the pervasive and sinful inclinations of our souls that prefer certain classes of persons over others.

When we meet a person of a certain ethnic background, we may be drawn instantly to like or dislike that person just because of these distinguishing features. In American culture, we have a strong bias in favor of youthful dress and youthfulness. We are suspicious of people who speak with certain accents.

Regardless of the fact that bias is repudiated and even sometimes made illegal, we are still partial. We divide up people into classes of those we like and those we do not. We do exactly what the Apostle cautions us to avoid, for “if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (vs. 9). It is not enough to mask our tastes and inclinations – we must be prepared to confess these sinful tendencies of our hearts to God.

Saint James suggests that the way out of the snare of this nearly universal sin can be found by fulfilling “the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vs. 8). This rule he calls “the law of liberty” (vs. 12).

Yes, it is one thing when God commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves; it is another to actually do it. Saint James reminds us that “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” to which we hold is our commitment to “the Lord of glory” (vs. 1). May we discover through His grace that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (vs. 13), for Christ yearns to free us to experience impartial love for everyone.

O Lord Jesus, cleanse me from all inclination and showing of favor, so that I may treat all others as my brethren, hold the faith without partiality, and love others as myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 19 - Monday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
James 2:14-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 21 – Wednesday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
James 3:11-4:6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 22 - Thursday of the Thirty-second Week/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
James 4:7-5:9

Ten Commandments for Disciples: James 4:7-5:9, especially vs. 17: “*Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*” Our life in Christ never conflicts with the Ten Commandments given by God to His people in ancient times (see Dt 5:7-21; Ex 20:1-17). At the same time, our life in Christ differs from existence under the Law of Moses, for the Lord requires us to do good not out of obedience alone, but from our hearts. In today’s verses, Saint James enumerates ten commandments for Christ’s disciples, showing us how the impetus “to do good” (vs. 4:17) flowers from a pure heart.

1. *Submit to God* (vs. 4:7): The Lord teaches us that “God is Spirit” (Jn 4:24). To submit to God requires surrendering the spiritual aspect of our being to Him, so that we may be united with God “in spirit and truth.” This spiritual aspect is called the heart, which must be the basis of all true discipleship.

2. *Resist the devil* (vs. 4:7): The mystery of baptism begins with an exorcism, which expels every spirit “which operateth through the prompting of the devil.” Such foul spirits must be driven from our hearts during this life, so that we continue to “renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride.”

3. *Draw near to God* (vs. 4:8): Having received baptism and chrismation, we strive to draw steadily nearer to God. Christ’s grace acts in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. *Cleanse your hands* (vs. 4:8): Our actions and words can sully our hands and corrupt our hearts. For this reason we must invest constant effort in ending all sinful activity.

5. *Purify your hearts* (vs. 4:8): The central concern of every Christian should be the condition of our heart. Our life’s work is to purify our hearts of every impure desire that invites improper actions.

6. *Let your laughter be turned to mourning* (vs. 4:9): Christ teaches, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Godly mourners grieve for their own sins, and for others caught by Satan’s lies. They turn naturally to repentance, which is essential to the life in Christ. Saint James commands us to “weep and howl” (Jas 5:1).

7. *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord* (vs. 4:10): Humility accords with our Lord’s command to open the pitiful condition of our hearts before Him. At the same time, we anoint our head, wash our face, and refuse the appearance of false piety.

8. *Do not speak evil of one another* (vs. 4:11): Having already warned us of the dangers of an unruly tongue (vss. 1:18; 3:1-12), Saint James instructs us specifically, “Do not grumble against one another” (vs. 5:9).

9. *Live humbly in the will of God*: We are to say, “*If the Lord wills*, we shall live and do this or that” (vs. 4:15). Our life in Christ is one of quiet, heartfelt acceptance of God’s providence and grace. We attribute everything that befalls us as coming from the Lord. Whether God is the cause or allows something to happen for our correction, we accept it as a blessing.

10. *Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand* (vs. 5:8). Saint James ends as he begins – by directing us to the condition of our hearts. We are to cultivate *patience* and thus be well-established in Christ: “Wait on the Lord, be thou manful, and let thy heart be strengthened, and wait on the Lord” (Ps 26:16).

Turn Thy face away from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. – Psalm 50:9-10

January 23 – Friday of the Thirty-second/Thirty-third Week after Pentecost
1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-12; 2:6-10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 24 – Saturday of the Thirty-second/ Thirty-Third Week after Pentecost
1 Thessalonians 5:14-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 25 – Saint Gregory the Theologian
1 Corinthians 12:7-11

Manifestation of the Spirit: 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, especially vs. 7: “*But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.*” When the newly baptized Christian receives the life-giving mystery of chrismation,” the priest declares, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” What does it mean to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? Saint Seraphim of Sarov was asked this same question: “Father, . . . you speak all the time of the acquisition of the grace of the Holy Spirit as the aim of the Christian life. But how and where can I see it? Good deeds are visible, but can the Holy Spirit be seen? How am I to know whether He is with me or not?” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 181.)

We are able to touch, use, consume, or otherwise apply our earthly gifts. The problem of “seeing” or “knowing” the gift of the Holy Spirit arises because He is “incorporeal, purely immaterial, and indivisible,” according to Saint Basil the Great. How then can our earthly, materially-oriented senses apprehend the Spirit’s presence?

Our senses are incapable of such perception. The Lord suggests that the Spirit’s gifts become apparent much like the movement of the wind (Jn 3:8). Just as we do not see the wind, but only its action, so too do we observe the presence of the Holy Spirit by His actions, as He works in and through the faithful in Christ.

While God the Holy Spirit is without form, the Apostle Paul teaches us in today’s reading from First Corinthians that the Spirit does disclose His presence, manifesting Himself in nine different ways through His operations within us.

Three of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit may be termed “illumination.” Saint Paul speaks of the “word of wisdom,” the “word of knowledge” and of “discerning of spirits” (vss. 8, 10). As Saint Basil says, the Spirit “is the source of sanctification, spiritual light, who gives illumination to everyone using His powers to search for the truth” (*On the Holy Spirit* 9.22, p. 42).

We know the Spirit guided the human authors of Scripture. He guided the Church Fathers as they interpreted Scripture and fixed the canon of authorized books. Likewise, He guides everyone who digs deep like a miner, seeking not precious things but the divine wisdom found in Holy Tradition.

Modern technology and science are raising new issues and problems for the world that were unknown when the Bible was written. Nevertheless, Scripture and writings of the Fathers contain essential truth – not technical information, but full of the wisdom and knowledge of God. When God’s people seek to find the true, right, and godly uses of any new discovery of science, the Spirit manifests Himself by enabling His Christ-loving people to discern false spirits that would deceive us and lead us far from the truth of the Lord Jesus.

The Spirit of God also enables the faithful to work miracles: to heal the sick in body, soul, or spirit, or exhibit great wonders in the face of apparently contrary data (vss. 9-10). Even when medical personnel have given up hope, the Holy Spirit has answered the prayers of the faithful and effected a complete recovery in someone gravely ill. When we turn to God in desperation, the Holy Spirit often unexpectedly supplies exactly what we need, even when all doors of relief appear to be closed.

Saint Paul mentions a third group of manifestations of the Spirit which involve language: the capacity to speak clearly in a situation without prior preparation, and the ability to speak or understand unknown foreign languages (vs. 10). Saint Romanos, who was untrained and illiterate, cried out to the Theotokos; through her intercessions, he received his singing voice as well as the text of the Nativity kontakion, “Today the Virgin,” and many other hymns as well.

O Lord the Holy Spirit, help Thy people with Thine invincible strength, that we drive away all sins and let Thee enter in with Thy life-giving gifts. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

January 26 – Monday of the Fourth Week before Lent
1 Peter 2:21-3:9

Christ-like Suffering: 1 Peter 2:21-3:9, especially vs. 21: *“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. . . .”* In this passage the Apostle Peter admonishes us to follow the Lord’s example in suffering. He recalls the Lord’s Passion (vss. 22-24), reminds us that Christ is watching over our souls (vs. 25), counsels wives (vss. 3:1-6) and husbands (vs. 7), and advises the community of the faithful (vss. 8-9).

While the subjects covered by Saint Peter range widely, a careful reading discloses their deeper unity under the mandate to suffer like Christ. Very simply, our Lord Jesus expects every member of His Body to live by a norm that runs contrary to the assumptions of the world (Mt 16:24). We are to bear whatever trials God permits to come our way, without complaint. Above all, we maintain our integrity in Christ: we give no offense, we are innocent and patient in suffering, we mistreat no one, and accept wrongs against ourselves cheerfully.

Three of the apostle’s exhortations stand out. First, we are to remain firmly committed to the Lord Jesus, even in suffering; we must never deservedly earn afflictions by committing sin; and finally, we never return evil for evil but bless everyone, come what may.

Saint Peter reviews our Lord’s Passion – the supreme model for Christian life – in verses 22-24. Here, the apostle applies the Suffering Servant prophecy (Is 53:4-12) to Christ. However, let us remember that Saint Peter is not speaking theoretically, but rather from experience: the events he describes changed his life (Mk 14:46-72). Initially, Peter resisted the Lord Jesus’ declaration that He must suffer (vss. 8:31-32), yet later he embraced Christ’s sufferings for his salvation.

In declaring that our Lord “committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (vs. 23), Saint Peter reveals how we are to behave when we unfairly suffer. The Passion was endured by Him “who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth . . . [but] bore our sins . . . that we . . . might live for righteousness” (vss. 22-24). Christ maintained integrity, purity, and innocence; He never wronged others.

The Apostle Peter underscores our Lord’s example by noting that when He “was reviled [He] did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten” (vs. 23). Christ our Savior faced many provocations to return evil for evil; instead, the Master blessed. Saint Peter witnesses to this example, for which he later gave his own life, and summons us to follow.

Even as the topic shifts to marriage, Saint Peter’s three challenges to us persist. He counsels “wives [to] be submissive to [their] own husbands” (vs. 3:1), imitating the holy women of old who “trusted in God . . . being submissive to their own husbands” (vs. 5).

The calling of the Christian woman – even one whose husband does “not obey the word” (vs. 1) – is to pursue a pure and holy life. She is not to feign servility, but rather win her husband to Christ by living chastely, reverently, gently, and quietly (vss. 1-4). Her aim is to be free of sin, like Christ. The Christian wife will, in all circumstances, “do good, [but be] not afraid” (vs. 6). Never retaliating, she is always blessing.

The apostle likewise counsels husbands – and all of us who constitute the Church, as “heirs together of the grace of life” (vs. 7) – to be of one mind with Christ (see Phil 2:5). May we who are united to Christ Jesus submit to Him and be like Him: compassionate, tenderhearted, and courteous, never “returning evil for evil” (vss. 8-9)!

O Lord, enable us, with spotless conscience, to suffer with Thee that we may be found worthy to be drawn up on high with Thee to the Jerusalem above in the kingdom of heaven. – Orthros verse for Holy Monday

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 28 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week before Lent
1 Peter 4:1-11

Suffering in the Flesh: 1 Peter 4:1-11, especially vss. 1-2: “He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” Earlier in this same epistle, Saint Peter declares that Christ suffered death “in the flesh” purposely, in order “to bring us to God” (vs. 3:18). Now, when he tells us to “arm [ourselves] also with the same mind” (vs. 4:1), he is urging us to embrace an intention similar to the Lord’s.

We should not read the expression “suffered in the flesh” as applicable only to martyrs and confessors, for a vital truth would then be lost. Suffering is common to everyone and takes many forms: persecution, injury, disease, financial reverses, rejection. While Saint Peter’s primary concern throughout his first epistle is with physical persecution, he is well aware that *suffering in the flesh* extends beyond the afflictions imposed on those who died for Christ.

This suffering may also come to one who has indulged in sinful living, but now withdraws for Christ’s sake and ceases to “run . . . in the same flood of dissipation” (vs. 4). As we would expect, the Apostle advises us against living “in the flesh for the lusts of men” (vs. 2). We should avoid “lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (vs. 3), determined to avoid all such indulgence.

But social isolation may follow when we choose to stop living “in . . . dissipation” (vs. 4). According to *The Orthodox Study Bible*, Saint Peter is talking about the vices then prevalent in Asia Minor, “where excessive drinking, along with unspeakable practices, took place in connection with the worship of various deities.” Let us bear in mind that these vices are well known today, even though they are no longer part of the worship of any deities!

As a fledgling disciple, Saint Peter learned the captivating power of a sinful mind. Christ tells us that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man” (Mk 7:21-23).

Among the Fathers of the Church, Saint John Climacus commends the pain of struggling for chastity and purity, especially since we have a vital hope of *ceasing from sin* (1 Pt 4:1-2). “Purity means that we put on the angelic nature. Purity is the longed-for house of Christ and the earthly heaven of the heart. Purity is a supernatural denial of nature. . . . He is pure . . . [who] expels fleshly love with divine love, and . . . has extinguished the fire of passion by the fire of heaven” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 15.1-3, 7, p. 104).

Keep in mind that Saint John does not limit the virtue of chastity to sexual purity, but rather asserts that “chastity is the name which is common to all the virtues.” In our struggle to gain purity, God helps us take certain steps that are necessarily accompanied by pain. We observe our passions, repent sincerely, and confess thoroughly; we undertake fasting, abandon self-reliance, and strive for unceasing prayer.

“Let no one thoroughly trained in purity attribute its attainment to himself, for it is impossible for anyone to conquer his own nature,” Saint John cautions. “When nature is defeated, it should be recognized that this is due to the presence of Him who is above nature.” Indeed, we never endure such sufferings apart from God, but rather in the presence of His love.

I am caught in the depths of sins. O Savior, draw me out of passion, and save me! – Orthros for Sunday of the Prodigal Son

January 29 - Thursday of the Fourth Week before Lent
1 Peter 4:12-5:5

Clothed with Humility: 1 Peter 4:12-5:5, especially vs. 5: “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’” The Apostle Peter bids us to clothe ourselves in humility, a virtue manifested through gentle actions and graceful words. He likens humility to a spiritual garment which we put on as our visible apparel. Indeed, humility is visible lowliness: it arises from a meek heart and makes no outward show of piety.

According to Saint John Climacus, “It is one thing to be humble, another to strive for humility, and another to praise the humble. . . . The first belongs to the perfect, the second to the truly obedient, and the third to all the faithful” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 25.19, p. 153).

If we are to take our place among the faithful, as our holy father among the saints suggests, we may come to recognize the seven marks of this “nameless grace in the soul . . . known only to those who have learned it by experience [as a] gift from God.” As the Lord says, “Learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29).

What does humility entail? First, we may anticipate every “kind of ascetic hardship, together with prayer that springs from an afflicted heart and is accompanied by many tears” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 29). To be truly humble means afflicting ourselves and shedding tears, for we discover how profoundly we are captive to sin. The humble “sow with tears [but] shall reap with rejoicing. . . . They wept as they cast their seeds. But in their coming shall they come with rejoicing, bearing their sheaves” (Ps 125:6-8). The harvest of humility is a merciful heart granted by the Lord, who richly rewards all who labor in His fields.

Second, we must know ourselves. We receive fear of the Lord as a grace, for God Himself teaches us how feeble we are. He helps us remember that “we are dust. . . . [and our] days are as the grass,” for when the “wind is passed over it, then it shall be gone, and no longer will it know the place thereof” (Ps 102:12-14).

Third, humility requires us to avoid wickedness. “Where humility is combined with the remembrance of God,” observes Saint Philotheos, “there is the place of God, the heaven of the heart in which, because of God’s presence, no demonic army dares to make a stand” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 17).

Fourth, if we are truly humble, we are thankful for our deliverance from past sins. We gladly endure trials inflicted on us, “accepting them as . . . [our] due on account of . . . former offenses” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 185). The humble offer their trials to God for correction of sins.

Fifth, the humble soul is filled with compassion, kindness, and mercy. We are to extend the same love to everyone, as our Heavenly Father does (see Mt 5:45). Saint John Climacus describes the “holy team” of humility and love: while “the one [humility] exalts, and the other [love], supporting the exalted ones, never fails” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.37, p. p. 156).

Sixth, the humble esteem others as greater than themselves. “The higher a man ascends in humility, the lower he appears in his own eyes. . . . The humble man does not wish to be compared even with the most lowly and is grieved when . . . given first place” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 38).

Lastly, humility bears indignity, humiliations, and the most despised conditions, for “God rejoices when He sees us running to meet dishonor, so as to crush, strike, and destroy our vain self-esteem” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 25.45, p. 157).

Out of the night my spirit awaketh at dawn unto Thee, O God. Teach me Thy righteousness; enlighten the eyes of my understanding lest at any time I sleep unto death in sins. – Orthros verse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 31 - Saturday of the Fourth Week before Lent
2 Timothy 2:11-19

Preconditions for Life: 2 Timothy 2:11-19, especially vs. 15: *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God. . . .”* One portion of today’s passage (vss. 11-13) appears to be an ancient baptismal hymn. It emphasizes faith as a necessary precondition for our life in Christ – faithfulness, not faithlessness; true loyalty, rather than indifference or an open denial of Christ’s claims.

Many people claim to know about God and to possess knowledge of spiritual realities. Our Orthodox faith assumes an active, day-to-day relationship with God as the absolute pre-condition for Christian life. This active relationship includes worship, purification of self, and the development of godly virtue.

Knowing Christ involves an active relationship, a connection that can be likened to marriage (e.g., Eph 5:22-33) or to the parent-child bond. Within the Church, every effort is directed toward helping the faithful in Christ to endure loyally, remaining committed to the Lord no matter what vicissitudes come upon us in this present life.

Our reading begins with the reminder that “if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him” (vs. 11). How do we die with the Lord? Unfortunately, according to Father Alexander Schmemmann, our understanding of “dying with Christ” has been grievously complicated in the modern world.

We no longer understand death as a spiritual reality, “of which one can partake while being alive, from which one can be free while lying in the grave” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 61). Death is reduced to a mere biological event. We have lost sight of the reality that death means separation from God, with attendant physical, psychological, and spiritual corruption.

Saint Paul teaches that “sin entered the world, and death through sin” (Rom 5:12). When we reject God, we sever our relationship with Him. The result is the spiritual death of our heart. Such a rejection can take many forms, including a preoccupation with worldly things to the exclusion of God. Likewise, we can allow our fears and delusions, or our enslavement to wrongdoing – lust, despair, hatred – to permeate our activities and separate us from Christ.

On the other hand, when we unite ourselves to Christ freely, we give ourselves over to Him and seek to live out His will. Christ Jesus longs to free us from spiritual death. The Lord Jesus embraced death and overcame it so that He might end that creeping death in our hearts.

For this reason His disciples desire to die with Him – we wish to end all mortal sinfulness and separation from God in order to “live with Him” (2 Tm 2:11). The precondition for any vital relationship with Christ is always a willingness to die with Him.

Another precondition of the Christian life is to *endure* (vs. 12). This endurance requires us to freely choose to pay the costs of maintaining our relationship with Christ. We die to the world in order to be seated with Him in spirit “on the right hand of God” (Mk 16:19).

Our life in Christ demands that we set our “mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col 3:2) We actively “seek those things which are above, where Christ is” (vs. 3:1), for we know that “[our] life is hidden with Christ in God” (vs. 3).

Today we are surround by the constant assaults of death on every side. Terrorist attacks, such as 9-11 and the daily suicide bombings in the Middle East, are but one example. The Lord, however, calls us to trample down our fears, our enslavement to sins, our lust and hatred. In this way we die with Him and attach our affection to things above, which ultimately leads us to the highest outcome: to “reign with Him” (2 Tm 2:12).

The final precondition for life in Christ is faithfulness (vs. 13). If we deny Him and refuse the cost of a relationship with Him, He will deny us. Lord, have mercy!

Grant us, O Lord, so to die daily with Thee, that we may rise to new life in Thee.