

March 1 - Sunday of Orthodoxy – First Sunday in Lent
Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2

The Contest of Faith: Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2, especially vs. 12:1: “Therefore we also, 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.” At vespers for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we recall the prophets, who paid dearly for proclaiming the truth, and the confessors who defended the holy icons. Contemplating the long days of abstinence that lie ahead, we entreat Christ: “Wherefore, by their pleadings, prepare us to pass blamelessly over the battlefield of abstinence, O Thou who alone art most merciful.”

Winning the contest of the Great Fast requires robust faith – not only during Lent, but throughout our mortal life. Today’s epistle describes five elements of a working faith.

First, we learn that the contest of faith is a team effort. It is not for individualists who devise their own agenda and practices, for “all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ” (1 Cor 12:12). Hebrews 12:1 begins with the word “also” to remind us that we are never alone on this team.

In a relay, the lap completed by each contestant is essential to victory. In the icons that adorn our churches, we see a small part of the vast cloud of participants who, in faith, contested for Orthodoxy. “With all the saints, let us commend ourselves and each other . . . unto Christ” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Second, the contest of faith demands that we lay aside any excess weight that may be hampering us (Heb 12:1). Trimming unnecessary weight, in the form of clothing or body fat, is essential to both athletes and soldiers. Lightening one’s weight may spell the difference between a life lost or a passage through a battlefield unscathed. Let us ask ourselves what we might lay aside in favor of life-giving prayer, worship, and service to the Lord.

Third, in matters of faith, as in every struggle, it is imperative that we focus our full attention and energy on the battle. *Amartion*, the Greek word translated as “sin,” means “missing the mark,” and calls to mind the clumsy toss of a javelin.

As contestants, we must allow neither our own thoughts, nor the sounds of conflict, nor the opponents’ jibes, nor any extraneous demand distract us from our focus. A victor remains indifferent to everything except winning the struggle. The Church Fathers call this spiritual state *dispassion*.

“Dispassion is established through remembrance of God,” according to Saint Ilias the Presbyter. “Passionateness is removed from the soul through fasting and prayer; self-indulgence through vigil and silence; and impassioned craving through stillness and attentiveness” (*Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 42). The Lenten fast provides us with opportunities to grow toward dispassion.

Fourth, the contest of faith is never won by charging ahead recklessly. Only a controlled, steady pace allows us to endure the long hours and varied demands of our struggle. Likening the life in Christ to a race, the Apostle Paul encourages us to run with *endurance* (vs. 1). We undertake special conditioning to develop our stamina during Great Lent. The fast is a period of intensive training intended to yield lifetime results.

Lastly, the contest of faith is won by those who look “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (vs. 2). If we consider our wants and our need for self-esteem, we lose. “Many may be stripped of the coat of self-love,” says Saint Ilias, “but few of the coat of worldly display; while only the dispassionate are free from self-esteem, the last coat of all.”

Grant me contrition, estrangement from evil, and perfect amendment, for I am sunk in the depths of bodily passion and separated far from Thee, O God, the King of all; and I have no other hope but Thee. – Vespers for Monday of the Second Week of Lent

March 2 – Monday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 3:21-4:7

Beyond Eden – Providence Unabated: *Genesis 3:21-4:7, especially vs. 21:* “For Adam and his wife the Lord God made garments of skin, and clothed them.” The Book of Genesis reveals to us the consequences of disobedience. Paradise is closed (vs. 3:24) but God never forsakes mankind, providing us with a means of survival through birth, growth, and human labor (vs. 4:2). He exposes sin in all its vicious ugliness and deadliness – and yet, to prevent despair, God also discloses that His image remains within us. Despite sin, the grace of God abounds. He shows the abyss that results from sin even as He leads us to His kind, loving, and constant providence.

The present passage clearly shows that when God sends our primal parents out of the Garden of Eden, He neither abandons nor destroys mankind. He bars the way to the Tree of Life with a fiery sword. However, as Saint John Chrysostom notes, “He did not stop loving them at that point. Instead, faithful to His own goodness, He is like a loving father who sees His own son through negligence committing things unworthy of his upbringing and being reduced from his eminent position to the utmost depravity: He is stirred to the depths of His being as a father, yet far from ceasing to care for him, He displays further concern for him in His desire to extricate him gradually from his abasement” (“Homily 17 on Genesis” in Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 28).

Let us be humbled by God’s continuing providence. True, He allows death to come upon Adam’s race, because all are disobedient, but He does not withdraw physical life. Hence Adam calls his wife Eve, that is, *Life* (vs. 3:21). She brings many children to life (4:1-2, 25; 5:4). Further, as Saint John Chrysostom points out, God “does not overlook them in their depth of shame and nakedness . . . [but] showed them great pity and . . . makes them garments of skin . . . and clothes them in them.” He causes the ground and the beasts to produce life’s necessities for mankind (vss. 3:23; 4:3-4). Even death, Saint John contends, should be understood as providential. By death, God checks “our decline into greater evil and [stems] the tide of wickedness . . . out of fidelity to His own lovingkindness” (“Homily 18,” *The Lament of Eve*, p. 30-31).

God’s providence is evident when Cain is born. Eve is prompted to name him “I have acquired” (in the Hebrew, *qayin*, Cain). In addition to his name, she expresses delight in the child as a gift of God: “I have acquired a man through God” (vs. 4:1). Thus, she acknowledges God’s providential care for her in and through birth-giving and motherhood.

The sons of Adam are moved by God’s beneficence to bring offerings. “Cain brought a sacrifice to the Lord from the fruits of the ground. Abel also brought a sacrifice from the firstborn of his flock and of their fat” (vs. 4:3-4). However, Cain’s offering apparently falls short of full gratitude. Saint Didymus the Blind observes, “Abel’s sincerity is manifest: he offers of his firstborn, considering it necessary to reserve for God the most precious things, from which he also chose the fatlings. This is what Cain should have done, bringing the first fruits of the fields. For it is especially appropriate to offer the first fruits to God,” not merely some of the fruits, out of respect for God’s munificent providence to the human race (Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 40).

God’s providential care remains manifest even in his response to Cain’s sullen reaction when He “did not respect Cain and his sacrifices” (vs. 5). The Lord lovingly seeks to curb Cain in his passions: “Did you not sin, even though you brought it rightly, but did not divide it rightly? Be still; his recourse shall be to you; and you shall rule over him” (vs. 7). God in His prescience seeks to avert the tragedy that follows (vss. 8-11), yet He does not force Cain to do the right thing. Once again, God demonstrates great respect for the freedom He bestows upon us.

Help us, save us, have mercy on us, and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

March 3 – Tuesday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 4:8-15

Beyond Eden – Sin Exposed: Genesis 4:8-15, especially vs. 10: “Thus God said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.’” We are inclined to grade sin by degrees. As a result we often view the transgression of Adam and Eve as relatively harmless, a mere yielding to a minor and understandable temptation. However, God does not grade sin. All disobedience separates us from Him, which is why sin is always death-dealing. If “sin entered the world” with Adam and Eve (Rom 5:12) it should never be perceived as harmless, but rather as the wellspring of capital crime.

Cain’s fratricide unveils the dread potential of sin in its irreversible consequences, bondage, and resistance to self-examination. The voice of Abel’s blood cries out to God (Gn 4:10), along with the blood of history’s countless slaughtered victims. No matter how we grieve, the dead are not restored to life. And sin of every sort brings irrevocable consequences. King Saul’s disregard of the Lord’s commandment costs him his kingdom and his life (1 Kgs 13, 31). King David’s crime against Uriah the Hittite haunts his reign despite his repentance and his gifts of psalmody and prophecy. The stain of adultery remains; whispered lies return with ghastly results. Retractions never undo wrongs.

The consequences of sin may benefit us in the end if we do not whimper, like Cain, “My guilt is too great to be forgiven” (Gn 4:13). As Christians, we know that there is a better way of responding to our sins. The Prophet David teaches us that “a heart that is broken and humbled, God will not despise” (Ps 50:17).

The truth is that our response to sin is critical. By God’s grace the consequences of sin provoke our contrition, providing the breaking and humbling we need for healing. On the other hand, our denial of sin generates a downward spiral into hardened resistance, like Cain’s. The rejection of his offering brings no reflection but sorrowfulness (Gn 4:5). Presented with the alternative of offering “rightly” (vs. 7), Cain transfers his anger to Abel and murder results (vs. 8). Asked where his brother is, he evades the question by asking another: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (vs. 9). Faced with his crime and its consequences, he merely whines (vss. 13-14).

Sin enslaves, blinds, and bedevils: “But each man is bound by the chains of his own sins” (Prv 5:22). How simple is the path to freedom, and how often we resist! Admission and confession is the doorway out of the bondage of sin. The Lord speaks clearly: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev 3:20).

By God’s grace, let us confess our sins. Open the door to the dark, convoluted passageways that sin burrows into the heart! Cain will not examine his anger, nor the enormity of his crime, nor the shattering of the bond of fraternal love and trust that he severed. And yet we see that God never ceases to encourage him, and us. With no repentance from Cain nor even a sign of remorse, our patient and loving God still does not abandon him. Rather, He marks him and continues to cover over Cain until his life’s end (Gn 4:15-16).

God leaves us time and space to change our hearts, examine our souls, and confess. Even the thief on the cross found sufficient time. Let us remember Saint John’s words, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:8-9).

Cleanse us from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, and may our soul, our body and our spirit be enlightened by the light of Thy divine knowledge, that we may be saved by Thy mercy. – Archimandrite Sophrony, On Prayer

March 4 - Wednesday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 4:16-26

Beyond Eden – Secularism Is Born: *Genesis 4:16-26, especially vs. 16:* “Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod opposite Eden.” Today’s passage describes the history of Cain and his descendants, whom we might call the first “secularists.” Cain shows us what becomes of human life when it is devoid of any awareness of God. Here we see into the heart of secular man: his existence is entirely organized around the material and psychological dimensions of life, where the passions reign over the spirit.

God curses Cain, casting him out “from the face of the ground” (vss. 4:12-14). Now that he is estranged from the life of tilling the soil (see vs. 4:2), he learns what it means to be “hidden from [God’s] face” (vs. 14). His rootlessness is emphasized by the Hebrew name of the place where he comes to dwell, for “Nod” means “land of wandering.” His wandering takes him “out from the presence of the Lord” (vs. 16), and thus God is effectively removed from his thoughts. He lives solely for the *speculum* – the material world.

Living a purely physical existence, he fashions a community based on his immediate needs. Saint Augustine notes that, since Cain “belonged to the city of man” in his heart and will, “it is recorded of Cain that he built a city” (*City of God*, p. 324-5). In other words, he uses a man-centered construct to replace life in communion with God. This is secularism: a life devoid of relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul teaches that when men “exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,” they “became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts [were] darkened” (Rom 1:25, 21). However, even the darkening of men’s hearts does not totally destroy the human spirit. The Lord leaves His gifts in place for both the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45).

Artistic capacity, for example, exists in the heart of every man. Hence the descendants of Cain direct their spiritual capacities toward the invention and fashioning of elements of material culture: the husbandry of livestock, the development of musical instruments, and the mastery of metal work in bronze and iron (Gn 4:20-22).

But how can we compare a talented, worldly craftsman with the godly artisans who are filled “with the divine Spirit of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and in every manner of workmanship” (Ex 31:3). The mysteries of faith and the beauty of worship are rightly expressed only by those whom God chooses, ordains, and inspires. For this reason we see that Orthodox iconography, music, vestment making, and other forms of craftsmanship are conducted according to Church canons and accompanied by prayer and fasting, so that God is honored in all things.

Secularism inevitably leads men to greater indulgence of the passions. Cain’s descendant Lamech is consumed by anger and lust. Although God ordains monogamy as the rule for human marriage (Gn 2:24), Lamech takes two wives (vs. 4:19). No ills appear to follow from his bigamy, but Scripture recounts numerous other cases where multiple wives and indulgence of the sexual passions bring great grief.

Lamech also exhibits the characteristics of a man who is fully under the sway of the passion of anger. Anger becomes far more violent and sinister in him than in his grandfather, Cain, who killed one man. Lamech wildly boasts of wholesale revenge, announcing his intention to indulge in blood feuds and multiple killings (vss. 23-24). His ethics are founded on unrestrained self-indulgence. He thus epitomizes the spirit of secularist ideologies that espouse genocide, mass murder, and violence as a means of achieving their vaunted ideals.

Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen. – Invocation of the Divine Liturgy

March 5 – Thursday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 5:1-24

Beyond Eden – The Image Continues: *Genesis 5:1-24, especially vs. 1:* “*This is the book of the genesis of mankind in the day God made Adam, whom He made in God’s image.*” We should keep in mind that this passage contains far more than a list of descendants. Herein God unveils hope! Life is not simply “poor, nasty, brutish and short,” as Thomas Hobbes and the swaggering Lamech assert (Gn 4:23-24). The blessing of God’s image remains within us, and His gift of life perseveres despite death. God continues to seek, enrich, and watch over us all, for we are pleasing in His sight.

The opening verses direct us back to the uniqueness of mankind, for our race is fashioned “in God’s image” (vs. 5:1). God does not withdraw His blessing from us despite our expulsion from Paradise, nor on account of our sinfulness and the consequent distortion of God’s likeness within us. We hear of God’s continuing love for us “while we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8) in this morning prayer to the Holy Trinity: “Because of the abundance of Thy goodness and long suffering, Thou was not wroth with us, slothful and sinful as we are; neither hast Thou destroyed us in our transgressions, but in Thy compassion raised us up as we lay in despair, that at dawn we might sing the glories of Thy Majesty.”

We who are united to Christ, who have received life from the new Adam, cry out with joy: “Christ is born, raising the image that fell at the beginning” (Forefeast of the Nativity). What is this image of God that He places within us, to be fully revealed in Christ Jesus and illumined by the Holy Spirit?

The listing of fathers and firstborns in this chapter flows onward from Adam to Enoch. We note that in his maturity each patriarch begets a firstborn. The father lives on for many years after the birth of this long-awaited son, siring other children. God’s gift of life asserts itself against the fact of death that mankind’s disobedience has sadly introduced. Our race does not develop solely from Cain’s murderous and secular lineage, which is devoid of any relationship with God. The Lord appoints “another seed . . . instead of Abel, whom Cain killed” (Gn 4:25). The world is never abandoned to Satan and his human slaves.

Seth’s lineage ultimately extends to Christ Jesus, revealing that our gracious Creator is ever the “fountain of life” (Ps 35:10). We may be exiled from Paradise, but God remains active among us, bestowing salvation and life on those who worship and seek Him. As Elder Joseph the Hesychast says, “Blessed is he who has traded well during this exile and reached the haven of salvation” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 236).

In the seventh generation from Adam, the new lineage through Seth reaches a milestone in Enoch, a man who “was well-pleasing to God” (Gn 5:22). Like Seth, Enoch surely “hoped in the Lord God and called upon His Name” (vs. 4:26), for he did not taste of the bitterness of death. Instead, God *translated* him directly to heaven (vs. 5:24). Like the Prophet Elijah, Enoch is lifted up to the presence of God without undergoing physical death. This fact is reiterated in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found because God had taken him; for before he was taken away he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Heb 11:5). By Thy mercy may we struggle to please Thee!

Enoch foreshadows the hope that is fulfilled by the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite death, we may yet look forward to the end of our lives in hope. We pledge ourselves to live in such a manner that we, too, may be pleasing to God and worthy always to “be with the Lord” (1 Th 4:17).

O All-compassionate Word, who didst translate Enoch from the earth, by his prayers save us who glorify Thee in faith that we too may be found well-pleasing in Thy sight. – Vespers for the Feast of Prophet Elijah

March 6 - Friday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 5:32-6:8

Beyond Eden – Grace Abounds: Genesis 5:32-6:8, especially vss. 5, 6, 8: “Then the Lord God saw man’s wickedness, that it was great in the earth. . . . So God was grieved that He had made man on the earth. . . . But Noah found grace in the presence of the Lord God.” Such are the conditions before the Great Flood. We learn the cause of the deluge: men born into the lineage of Seth are now approaching life solely in terms of a material perspective. They have oriented their relationships and actions to tangible things; although they may gain renown among men, they are unfit dwelling places for the Holy Spirit of God. However, one man, Noah, finds grace before God (vs. 8).

The great tidal waves of evil sweeping over the nations of the earth today are reminiscent of the age of Noah. We see men who possess in “every intent of the thoughts within [the] heart . . . only evil continually” (vs. 5). *Men of renown* (vs. 4) may stand in society as giants of human achievement, yet they are often devoid of a living relationship with God. In this dark, confused world, grace still may be found with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us who have united ourselves to Him despite the surrounding darkness pay heed to the caution of Nicholas Cabasilas, that we “not destroy the grace that we have received, but preserve it to the end and depart this life in possession of the treasure” (*Life in Christ*, p. 159). Yes, there is need of endeavor on our part, for grace abounds in Christ only for those who seek Him in their hearts and through daily effort.

Let us consider the situation of Noah’s contemporaries. They slipped into evaluating everything – people, relationships, activities – based appearances. The example presented in today’s passage is the nearly universal human activity of selecting a marriage partner. The men of Noah’s generation choose wives because they *were beautiful* (vs. 2). Despite a godly family background, they ignore the importance of “the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Pt 3:4), focusing instead on externals. How common this is today! We are not to look at outward appearance, but to the heart (1 Kgs 16:7). Before undertaking any activity, be it a relationship, marriage, or career, our Lord teaches us to “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

Having shifted from a spiritual to a materialist focus, the orientation of Noah’s entire generation becomes fixed on the *flesh*. Such an approach to life prevents God’s Spirit from remaining “with these people forever” (Gn 6:3). To describe men who stray from a godly heritage as fleshly is a Biblical way of speaking. When certain tangibles like clothes, tools, shelter, transport, and communication become gods in our lives, then we become merely *flesh*. Our hearts are preoccupied with the material. To recover our God-given nature, it is necessary to first reject this orientation and seek to live the life of the Spirit. The Lord Jesus says plainly: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24). To be united to the Lord, our focus first and foremost must be on prayer, meditation, worship, and the receiving of the Holy Gifts.

People who dedicate their lives to the flesh may well become giants in industry, academia, politics, or the acquisition of wealth, but the Spirit of God withdraws from such persons. Their thoughts and activities focus on evil with no place remaining for “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). Following the teachings of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, let us make the acquisition of the Holy Spirit the true aim of our lives.

Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and with Thy governing Spirit establish me. – Psalm 50:11-12

March 7 - Saturday of the Second Week of Lent
Hebrews 3:12-16

Holding on or Letting Go: Hebrews 3:12-16, especially vs. 14: “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” Now, at the beginning of Lent, we find ourselves in a dangerous situation. We must guard the holy life that rescues us from evil ways (Prv 2:11-12), or we will surely be captured and see our souls destroyed (Prv 6:36-37).

In these verses from Hebrews, the Apostle Paul sets forth the alternative of “holding on” versus “letting go.” “Beware . . . [of] departing from the living God,” he warns (Heb 3:12). If we give in to an “evil heart of unbelief” (vs. 12), we let go of our anchor in Christ. It is far better to battle on and “exhort one another” (vs. 13), holding “our confidence steadfast to the end” (vs. 14).

Now is the time to face the choice before us wholeheartedly, so that we may assess the true cost of letting go. Then, by God’s grace, we may turn to Him with longing, asking “to be made such that God will receive us, receive us in repentance, receive us with mercy and with love” (Bloom, *Beginning to Pray*, p. 7).

The hope of God’s mercy awakens us to look deeply into our heart and ask what evil may lurk in its recesses. What kinds of stubborn disbelief are found within us, holding us back from God?

In moments of truth, we sense the yawning gulf between God’s dread holiness and the character of our actual lives. Before Him, “the deceitfulness of sin” (vs. 13) is painfully apparent, even frightening! The disciple Peter falls on his knees and begs the Lord to depart from him, appalled by the revelation of his sin (Lk 5:8)! Either we are like the rich young ruler who goes away sorrowful (Mt 19:22), or we draw near the Lord and kiss His feet, like the harlots and the sinners (vs. 7:38).

When we look into the gulf between ourselves and God, there is no need to despair. We are encouraged by the publican who would not so much as lift up “his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:13). He “went down to his house justified” (vs. 14), having become a blessed “partaker of Christ” (Heb 3:14).

“If we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (vs. 14), we have hope. We may come to know God, the Lord who judges our deceit and our honest desires alike. He uncovers everything in our heart, both good and evil.

The apostles remind us that we face a God who wants to be our *confidence*, assuring us of life. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn 3:17-18).

Above all, our need is to “turn to Him with all the reverence, all the veneration, all the fear of God of which we are capable . . . and ask Him to . . . make us capable of meeting Him face to face” (Bloom, p. 8).

Holding on is simply our refusal to let go of God. Instead, we let go of our pride and cling to the Master’s feet, so that we may partake of Him. Our yearning for the “living God” (Heb 3:12) delivers us from every illusory invitation of the evil one.

Let us seek a vital relationship with God now, while we still walk this earth. However, God will not allow us to seek a relationship of convenience with Him – to fit Him into our lives so that we are happy. May we allow Christ God to truly rule in our hearts!

O Christ my God, shine forth on me and on all who dwell in the darkness of sin; show me the glorious day of Thy Passion, that with all men I may cry, Arise, and have mercy! – Orthros for the Second Sunday of Lent

**March 8 - Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas – Second Sunday of Lent
Hebrews 1:10-2:3**

Wondrous Works: Hebrews 1:10-2:3, especially vs. 10: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.” We are “given to know” (Mk 4:11) the miracle of existence. The Apostle Paul now reveals this eternal mystery at work in time (Eph 3:9-11) by means of several quick, bold statements. The wondrous work of God extends from creation to the last day, when the Lord will fold up heaven and earth “like a cloak” (Heb 1:12). Then He will unfurl a “new heaven and earth,” and dwell among His people to make all things new (Rv 21:1-5).

In the opening lines of this epistle, Saint Paul chants to the Lord Jesus from Psalm 101:25-27. He thus reveals its centerpiece to be Jesus Christ, whom Saint Paul declares to be our Creator, for He is the eternal God who made the heavens and the earth (Heb. 1:10).

Christ is the changeless One, who *remains* ever the *same* (vss. 11, 12). He reigns over the entire cosmos and God the Father puts the Lord Jesus’ *enemies* beneath His feet (vs. 13). God has worked “a great salvation,” Saint Paul assures us, “confirmed to us” through His holy apostles (vs. 2:3).

With these few details, the apostle displays the vast scope of God’s works and gives us the wonder of creation – the miracle noted above – as grist for our Lenten meditations. In this scientific age, our researchers plumb the wonders of all that the Lord has wrought, from the tiniest subatomic particles to the vast light years of space, from the delicate codes of DNA to the greatest of all marvels: human life present on a tiny planet orbiting the sun.

We thus see how God long ago set the stage for our lenten journey. Without the creation of mankind, what need would there be for the ineffable revelation of the God-man, the Cross, or the Resurrection? With no Haran from which to depart, what need for the faith to sojourn in a land overrun by godlessness (Gn 12:1-2; Gal 3:6-8)? Without the waters of the earth, how could the Exodus or baptism come about?

We stand in awe before Christ our God, who created all things (Heb 1:10-12). Our God not only created the world, but gave mankind the capacity to choose, act, and love as persons, and to know Him. We are designed for fellowship with God, members of a species formed, inbreathed with life, and made for eternity with Him.

And yet we are *disobedient* (vs. 2:2), and so we die. To restore the human race, God focused His love on His chosen people and spoke to them. In keeping with the sin common to us all, those people disobeyed and “received a just reward” for refusing the Promised Land. They died in the wilderness.

Lent offers us life through confession. In the hymns of the Church, we cry to the Life-giver, “Open to me the doors of repentance.”

Great Lent takes us into the heart of salvation “which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord” (vs. 3). The meaning of God’s wondrous salvation is confirmed to us by the apostles from first-hand experience (vs. 3).

They plead with us not to *drift away*, but to “heed the things we have heard” (vs. 2). Let us not be counted with the enemies of God, but stand humbly among His people during this season and arrive at the Lord’s Pascha in joyful communion.

Thou didst shine forth, O Christ, a Light to those who dwell in the darkness of sin, in the season of abstinence. Show me, therefore, the glorious day of Thy Passion, that I may cry to Thee aloud, Arise O God, and have mercy upon me. – Orthros for the Second Sunday of Lent

March 9 - Monday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 6:9-22

The Flood – Well-Pleasing to God: *Genesis 6:9-22, especially vs. 9:* “Noah was a righteous man who was perfect in his generation and well-pleasing to God.” Noah alone among his contemporaries is called righteous and “well-pleasing” to God. As a result, God discloses to him that the time of judgment has come: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with unrighteousness through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (vs. 13). In spite of this judgment, God saves Noah from destruction.

Like Noah, we live in a time flooded with wickedness. Hence the question naturally arises: Is God likely to permit another season of destruction to come upon the earth? How might we, like Noah, be found well-pleasing to God in the event of such a worldwide catastrophe? The baptismal liturgy affirms that we are clothed with the garment of righteousness, although the text clearly cautions that we must take responsibility for preserving our “baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the dread Day of Christ.”

Noah is called “righteous,” a characteristic further emphasized by his also being called “perfect” (vs. 9). In the original, this word implies that he is effectively a complete or whole person. When Noah is described as “perfect in his generation” (Gn 6:9), we understand that his inner character accords with God’s standard. In other words, he comes very close to being that which every person is meant to be. As a righteous man, Noah is morally predictable and habitually trustworthy: he is reliable in business, in the company of other men’s wives, in handling money and valuables. He is pleasing to God.

Proverbs declares that “every desire of the righteous is good” (Prv 11:22). What causes a man to desire what is good in God’s eyes? We learn from Genesis 6:8 that “Noah found grace in the presence of the Lord God.” By God’s grace he overcomes inner confusion, conflicting impulses, and base desires so that he can function with integrity. He is at peace within himself and before God.

The grace of God is necessary to enable right behavior and the attainment of integrity. Elder Joseph the Hesychast says, “By ourselves, we cannot do anything if Christ does not first assist us with His divine grace. He first made Himself known to us, and then we came to know Him. . . . If He does not first act, the good is not activated within us” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 305). O Lord, perfect us in Thy Christ!

The integration of the inner man, by which we become *perfect* or complete in Christ, requires our cooperation with God. Let us embrace the grace of our Savior and confess our sins to Him who is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Likewise, let us receive His all-pure Body and precious Blood for healing, restoration, and reconciliation to the Lord of all. In these ways we begin to grow toward what is well-pleasing to God.

Lastly, observe how after the Lord gives Noah detailed instructions (Gn 14-21), “Noah did according to all the Lord God commanded him” (vs. 22). As God directed, so Noah did. Noah never replies verbally to God, but simply acts on God’s commands! Let us who have received grace in Christ also heed our Lord, and obey Him.

O Physician and Healer of our souls: guide us unto the haven of Thy will, enlighten the eyes of our hearts to the knowledge of Thy truth, and vouchsafe that our whole life may be peaceful and without sin; and grant us, O Lord, all our petitions which are unto salvation, that we may love and fear Thee with all our hearts and do Thy will in all things. Amen. – Priest’s prayers during the Vespers Psalms

March 10 - Tuesday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:1-5

The Flood – Embracing Mercy: Genesis 7:1-5, especially vs. 1: “Enter the ark, you and all your family, because I have seen you righteous before Me in this generation.” Ever since the Apostle Peter associated the Great Flood with holy baptism (1 Pt 3:18-22), the Church has celebrated Noah as a type of the Christian mystery. In his deliverance we find a prophetic foreshadowing of the gifts of grace, mercy, submission and salvation – the whole of the life in Christ imparted through baptism, chrismation and holy communion. Yesterday we considered the lovingkindness and grace that God extends to each one of us. The present passage reveals the importance of applying the incalculable love of God in our lives.

First of all, let us understand that God’s gracious actions, whether directed to Noah or to us, are loving invitations from the Lord. They are neither harsh commands nor empty rituals. Although the phrase “enter the ark, you and all your family” takes the grammatical form of a command, God fully reveals His purpose (Gn 7:4), thus prompting and inviting rather than brusquely ordering. Indeed all of God’s commandments share this character, for they are given out of love and compassion for our highest good and welfare.

Compare the tone of God’s directives in this passage with the prayers offered by the Church for the catechumens: “I lay my hand upon Thy servant, who hath been found worthy to flee unto Thy Holy Name, and to take refuge under the shelter of Thy wings. Inscribe him in Thy Book of Life, and unite him to the flock of Thine inheritance. And may Thy holy name be glorified in him.” Let us embrace and apply God’s mercy, because to do so is natural, healthy, and life-giving.

God prompts Noah to come into the ark with his family primarily for their safety and survival, in order that they might preserve life. Similarly, the invitation of holy baptism bids us enter into the safety and life that God offers us in His Church. Saint Nikolai of Zicha has this very security in mind when he quotes the wise Chrysostom: “If you are within, the wolf cannot enter, but if you stray outside, the wild beasts will get you. . . . Do not wander from the Church; there is nothing more impregnable than the Church. She is your hope and salvation” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 1, p. 16).

As we consider the entrance of Noah and his family into the ark, let us recall our own entry into the Church through baptism. God’s mercy brings us into the Church, and thus into the space where the Body of Christ gathers for liturgy and worship. Our assembly hall is called a *nave*, which originally meant “ship” – a haven of salvation from the floods of evil around us.

We note that the Lord gives precise instructions regarding the animals to be brought aboard the ark. He tells Noah, “You shall also bring with you into the ark the clean cattle by sevens, male and female; and the unclean cattle by twos, male and female; and the clean birds of heaven by twos, male and female” (vss. 2-3). God’s instructions insure that Noah’s family will have a sufficient number of clean animals and birds for burnt offerings in thanksgiving to God after the flood has passed, as well as for replenishing the earth.

God in His grace likewise prearranges resources to meet both our physical and spiritual needs. He gives us a planet rich in resources and abundant with life-giving goods. In the grace of the baptismal mystery, the Lord provides the blessings of new life in the Spirit through washing and anointing. He arranges for our ongoing spiritual nourishment on a day-to-day, year-in-and-year-out basis, especially through the Holy Gifts of the Lord’s blessed Body and Blood. As Elder Joseph reminds us, “Just know that everything – the beginning and the end of every good thing – is Christ” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 305).

The Lord is my light and my savior; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid? – Psalm 26:1

March 11 - Wednesday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:6-9

The Flood – Obedience: Genesis 7:6-9, especially vss. 8-9: “*And everything that creeps on the earth, entered with Noah into the ark, two by two, male and female, as God commanded him.*” As Holy Scripture records, “Noah did according to all the Lord God commanded him” (Gn 6:22), never uttering a word of reply to God. Throughout the entire account of the Great Flood, Noah silently acts as the Lord commands. The Lord’s speech to him, on the other hand, takes many forms. He directs, commands, asks, and explains. Long after the flood we finally hear Noah speak, but only to his sons (vss. 9:25-27). Never once does he speak directly to God, yet he obeys the Lord without hesitation.

Noah’s silent actions speak eloquently, however. He *speaks* when he prepares and loads the ark, and also as he waits for God to tell him when he may leave the ark. Noah typifies obedience to God for all of us who desire to actualize the mystery of being “saved through water” (1 Pt 3:20). Christian obedience begins silently within the self whenever we choose to obey the Lord. The faithful respond without question, because we believe in Christ as God and King.

The wordlessness of Noah’s behavior reveals that the habit of godly obedience begins in the silence of the soul. Listen to the words of Elder Joseph the Hesychast: “Obedience is not to carry out this or that order that you were given, while you object on the inside. Obedience is to subordinate your soul’s convictions so that you may be freed from your evil self. Obedience is to become a slave in order to become free. Purchase your freedom for a small price. . . . And don’t listen to that thought of yours which advises you” (*Monastic Wisdom*, p. 98).

Herein lies our problem: “listening” to our thoughts creates struggles – a raging storm of contradictory ideas and impulses. Saint Augustine of Hippo advises, “A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let Him remind you of those words: ‘Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey Him’” (“Sermon on Mark” 63:3, *ACCS New Testament vol. 2*, p. 65).

Note that when Christ awakens, however, the choice of how we shall respond to Him remains ours. In spite of his utter silence, Noah is not an automaton lacking all capacity to choose. Like us, he is created in the image of God. Freedom is ingrained in his essential nature as a descendant of Adam. Noah freely chooses to obey!

Free choice is the ground of our life in Christ. When undertaking this new life, each candidate for holy baptism is examined carefully so that he may fully exercise his freedom: “Dost thou renounce Satan? Hast thou renounced Satan?” Even when we are challenged to breathe and spit on him, the choice is ours. Over and over, our freedom must be exercised: “Dost thou unite thyself unto Christ? Hast thou united thyself unto Christ? Dost thou believe in Him?” Obedience is to subordinate the soul to Christ, as Elder Joseph suggests, but this subordination is offered in full freedom, in the same liberty exhibited by Noah, for the choices remain ours.

Let us take special note of the final question put to the baptismal candidate: “Dost thou believe in Him?” We are not asked if we believe that Jesus is Lord, but rather if we *believe in Jesus the Lord*. Christian obedience is commitment to Christ as our King and God. It is allegiance. We become His obedient servants. Being a servant of Jesus Christ is the first mark of identification that Saint Paul offers about himself, even before his apostleship (Rom 1:1). If we, like Noah, are to gain our freedom, let us ever commit ourselves to keeping our lives centered on that which the Lord directs, commands, asks, and explains.

Let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, Who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. – The Cherubic Hymn

March 12 - Thursday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 7:11-8:3

The Flood – To Be Saved: Genesis 7:11-8:3, especially vss. 7:24-8:1: “Now the waters prevailed on the earth one hundred and fifty days. Then God remembered Noah, and whatever was with him in the ark” God saves Noah and all who accompany him in the ark from death, just as He saves the faithful in Christ from eternal death through baptism. By embracing Christ, the faithful remove themselves from the swirling flood of death on all sides; they die with the Lord and receive His gift of new life. As Father Alexander Schmemmann says of baptism: “It is the representation not of an idea but of the very content and reality of the Christian faith itself: to believe in Christ is to ‘be dead and to have one’s life hid with Him in God’ (Col 3:3)” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 56).

Baptism hides us away from the world, shuts us up safely in the ark of life, and introduces us to life in Christ. Let us examine this mystery in the context of Noah’s story.

“The waters prevailed exceedingly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. . . . And all flesh died that moves on the earth” (Gn 19, 21). In reality, all those who perished were already dead long before the waters came, for biological death is not the totality of death. The people of Noah’s generation held the same dominant heresy that darkens the mind of modern secular man: the denial of the spiritual dimension of life and a complete focus on physical existence.

The result is described by Father Alexander Schmemmann: “Spiritual death . . . fills the entire life with ‘dying,’ and, being separation from God, makes man’s life solitude and suffering, fear and illusion, enslavement to sin and enmity, meaninglessness, lust and emptiness. It is this spiritual death that makes man’s physical death truly death” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 63).

By choosing to live life on spiritual terms, Noah elects to die in relation to his neighbors, acquaintances, and extended family, including the members of his wife’s family and the families of his sons’ wives. He leaves them all and removes himself from their delusion.

Likewise, each of us in baptism is “found worthy to flee unto [Christ’s] holy name, and to take refuge under the shelter of [His] wings.” We ask that our gracious may Lord “remove far from [us our] former delusion.” For the sake of Christ, who loved us while we were still in our delusion, we continue to love those who choose death over life. But we steadfastly choose the ark of salvation and the life in Christ that delivers us from spiritual death.

Because Noah is a righteous man, he is found worthy to build the ark that delivers him from the flood. His life of silent obedience reveals that he passed from death to life long before the flood arrives – he is a man who is truly united to God.

Let us pray that this portrait of the baptismal candidate describes the manner in which we live: “Fleeing from darkness he runs toward the light and turns to the east to seek the sun. Being freed from the tyrant’s hands he worships the King, and having condemned the usurper he recognizes his lawful Master. He prays that he may become subject to Him and serve Him with all his soul” (Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, p. 71).

Like Noah, we are called by God into the ark of the Church and shut inside with Him by His own hand. God remembers us because we are united to Him. God became man to join us to Himself. Now, as Nicholas Cabasilas says, “We are really members of Christ, and this is the result of baptism. The splendor and beauty of the members come from the Head, for they would not appear beautiful without being attached to the Head” (p. 86). Let us cling to Him who glorifies us.

Keep us in Thy sanctification; deliver us from the evil one, and preserve our souls in purity that we may please Thee in every deed and word and be heirs of Thy heavenly Kingdom. – Service of Chrismation

March 13 - Friday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 8:4-21

The Flood – Entering the New Life: Genesis 8:4-22, especially vs. 22: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and spring shall not cease by day or by night.” Like those who emerge from the ark after the Great Flood, everyone who comes forth from the waters of baptism enters upon a new life, preserved under the shelter of God’s promises. Indeed, God assures us that our lives are renewed by the Holy Spirit when we pass through the waters of baptism “through the washing of regeneration” (Ti 3:5).

How may we obtain the gracious blessings that flow from a reborn life? The experience of the righteous Noah provides us with the model. With the eye of a servant, he watches patiently to discern God’s will. He waits for God’s direction before coming out of the ark. When he emerges, his first action is to worship. Similarly, the new life in Christ is lived by watching, waiting, and worshipping.

As the last of the furious rains end and the ark rests upon the mountains of Ararat, Noah watches so that he might continue to follow the will of God. He opens a window in the ark to the new life beyond and observes. He notes the order of things and their natural interactions, looking for the Lord’s hand. Today, as then, the way we watch makes a difference.

Once, while seated at prayer on a desert mountain, Saint Antony suddenly sent two monks with water along the road leading to Egypt. They encountered two men there, one who had died and another about to die of thirst. Saint Nikiphoros, when telling the story, was asked why Saint Antony did not dispatch relief sooner. He answered that the first man’s death rested with God, not Saint Antony. The miracle happened because the saint “kept his heart watchful, and so the Lord showed him what was happening a long way off” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 195-6).

Great changes occur continually in every aspect of our lives – physical, social, and spiritual. Most are beyond our control, for they begin and end with God. The first task of a servant of Christ is to “look unto the Lord our God, until He take pity on us” (Ps 122:2). We are to discern what God wills and how He is calling us to act. Such watchfulness must be continual. Otherwise, the heart may be wounded and our birth in the new life in Christ will be disrupted, injured, or possibly stillborn.

As Noah watches, he tests the conditions by sending out a raven and then a dove. Each bird brings him signs that “the waters had receded from the face of the ground” (Gn 8:8). As we hear in the text of the baptismal liturgy, God “didst send unto them that were in the ark of Noah [His] dove, bearing in its beak a twig of olive, the token of reconciliation and of salvation from the flood, the foreshadowing of the mystery of grace.” Yet still Noah waits (vss. 10, 12).

Only after the Lord speaks does the patriarch leave the ark. This combination of waiting, watching, and testing is essential to discerning God’s will fully, for the enemy constantly sows both good and evil thoughts to distract us from God’s highest and best. May we always wait for God, for He alone teaches us and leads us to the truth (Ps 24:5).

When God directs Noah to leave the ark, the first thing the patriarch does is to present “whole burnt offerings” to the Lord (Gn 8:20). These sacrifices, consumed by fire, signify Noah’s total surrender of himself to God. Our own regeneration in Christ requires total worship and full surrender of ourselves. With the prayer of the anaphora from the Divine Liturgy – “Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all” – we give our hearts over completely to the will of God in all our ways.

We have put Thee on, O Christ our God. Teach us to watch and wait for Thee alone, O merciful One, that we may be victors even unto the end, through Thy crown incorruptible. – Baptismal prayer

March 14 - Saturday of the Third Week of Lent
Hebrews 10:32-38

Endurance and Faithfulness: Hebrews 10:32-38, especially vs. 36-38: “For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ‘For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith. . . .’” The Church offers a three-fold prayer at the conclusion of every baptism. We first thank God who “has been graciously pleased to regenerate Thy servant that hath newly received illumination by water and the Spirit.” We then ask Him to “grant also . . . the seal of the gift of Thy holy, and almighty, and adorable Spirit.”

Our third and final request is that God “keep [Thy newly illumined servant] in Thy sanctification; confirm him in the Orthodox faith; deliver him from the evil one, and from the machinations of the same. And preserve his soul in purity and uprightness, through the saving fear of Thee; that he may please Thee in every deed and word.”

God expects each disciple to *endure* and be *faithful* in this life. Our first task as Christians is not to acquire an education, get a job, or tend a business. Nor is it instructing our children in the faith, nor teaching them how to love the Lord. Before any of these worthy goals, we must tend our own soul by seeking purity, living uprightly, and pleasing God in word and deed.

There are many ways to describe this top priority of our life in Christ. We dedicate ourselves full time to fighting the demons and their traps. We strive to stand firm in the faith we profess, in the face of every worldly thing that distracts us from our goal.

Enduring and being faithful is the mode of living we embrace as disciples of Christ. We may be tempted to say that we do not know how to live like this, or even ask, “Is this possible?”

If we are committed to seeking and accepting God’s help every day, however, we can learn. We remember that we are trainees (the meaning in Greek of the word “disciple”). As such, we know that a godly life is possible because “with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

Saint Paul teaches us to keep our heart fixed on two truths. First, we know we have “an enduring possession for [ourselves] in heaven” (vs. 34). Second, our “great reward” (vs. 35) is not a fantasy, but a true promise from God (vs. 36).

All of us, to some extent, “after [we] were illuminated, endured a great struggle with sufferings” (Heb 10:32). We tried to do what we knew was right, although we were inclined to cave in to temptation. We spoke the truth even when we found ourselves ignored or overruled. We paid the price for keeping the true faith, even when it seemed easier to violate our commitment to Christ.

In other words, we have had a taste of what it means to endure and remain faithful. We know also know the cost of endurance, perhaps, as well as our tendency to fail and fall short.

Perhaps we do not endure very well. We may be fickle and tend to circle around the truth. Being nice to others may seem more appealing to us than enduring faithfully. If so, here is encouragement from the Apostle Paul: “You have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven” (vs. 34).

By His death and resurrection, Christ proves our title to “an enduring possession.” If we know that we have a fortune waiting for us, why would we toss it aside for a moment of fleeting pleasure, or to keep ourselves from being embarrassed? Life may offer us great fortune, but we are heirs to eternal life!

Let us remember that “[our] confidence . . . has great reward” (vs. 35), and refuse to throw this reward away. Yes, we may have trouble keeping promises and following through, but God does not! “He who is coming will come and will not tarry” (vs. 37). Let us dust ourselves off when we fall and prepare to try again.

Keep me ever a warrior invincible in every attack of those who assail me even to the end. – Sacrament of Chrismation

March 15 - Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross – Third Sunday of Lent
Hebrews 4:14-5:6

The Throne of Grace: *Hebrews 4:14-5:6, especially vs. 16:* “*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” The Apostle Paul advises us to *boldly* approach “the throne of grace.” This invitation might seem rather quaint to those of us who live in a world without royalty. The only dignitaries whom we are likely to approach are magistrates and judges. We do not approach them boldly, in any event, for the courts of justice are ruled by law, not grace.

There may be a few countries in the world where monarchs still reign as heads of state, but most of us have no firsthand knowledge of sovereigns and thrones. In the Orthodox Church the bishop presides liturgically from his throne. Yet even here we seldom have occasion to approach our hierarchs on their thrones, unless we are serving at worship.

What then is this “throne of grace” which the apostle exhorts us to approach? Who is seated upon it? What mercy and grace might we seek by approaching this throne? And, honestly, how dare we draw near with boldness?

The Apostle Paul tells us that Christ Jesus will appear in His “own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power” (1 Tim 6:15-16).

When we enter His courts and join all those assembled before His throne, there will be no mistake about the identify of this royal Person. Saint Paul reminds us that we will surely appear before Him one day.

If we are blessed to attend an Orthodox Church on this third Sunday of Lent, we will venerate the Cross of the Lord, who stretched out His hands upon it and drew the entire world to Himself. “What a ladder [the Cross is] over which we ascend to the heavens, raising with praises Christ the Lord!” (Orthros for the Veneration of the Cross).

Before this Throne, we are freed from the world. We embrace the Church’s joyful invitation: “Come, ye believers, let us adore the life-giving Tree, whereon when Christ the King of glory stretched His hands, He lifted us to the first bliss, us whom the ancient enemy having led captive by desire drove away from God. . . . O Lord who wast crucified . . . have mercy upon us.”

As we prostrate before this Throne, we will meet our true Lord, the Christ who reigns as our King and God. Today’s epistle reveals Christ as the reigning Monarch of all that is, visible and invisible, and as our great High Priest (see Heb 4:14-15; 5:5).

As the God-man, Christ Jesus “has passed through the heavens” (vs. 14). We have a king who can and does “sympathize with our weaknesses” (vs. 15), for He remains fully human like us for all eternity, just as He was in time, although forever “without sin” (vs. 15).

When Christ ministered among us in the flesh, He fixed an eternal bond by which we know Him as one of us – as the One who understands us, as the One from whom “we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (vs. 16).

Let us never hold back from His Majesty out of fear, but rather draw near to His “throne of grace” (vs. 16). We may be bold, like the sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears and anointed them with the oil of repentance (Lk 7:38). We bow down to Him who heals us and we affirm Him as our King and God. As our life-giving Savior, He knows our hearts better than we know ourselves, so we never hesitate to cry out to Him!

Have pity upon me, a sinner, that I may approach and touch Thee, O Christ my God. – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom

March 16 - Monday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 8:21-9:7

After the Flood – God’s Blessing: Genesis 8:21-9:7, especially vs. 1: “Thus God blessed Noah and his sons. . . .” Following the Great Flood, the Lord God blesses those who survived in the ark. Despite the evil inclinations in men’s hearts, He promises that He will never “again destroy every living thing as I have done” (vs. 21). Rather, He promises that the natural cycles sustaining plants and animals will continue (vs. 22). Then he pronounces a particular blessing of fruitfulness on the remnant of mankind, in the persons of Noah and his family (vss. 1, 7). To nourish and guide our race, God bestows on us dominion over the earth’s food resources (vss. 2, 3), condemns homicide, and reaffirms that man is the sole creature made in His image (vs. 6).

For the survivors of the great flood, the period following their disembarkation is akin to the first days of creation. A new world lies before man and beast that is fresh, open, and full of mystery. Saint Gregory the Theologian urges us to “marvel at the natural knowledge even of irrational creatures, and if you can explain its cause. How is it that birds have for nests rocks and trees and roofs, and adapt them both for safety and beauty, and suitably for the comfort of their nurslings? Whence do bees and spiders get their love of work and art? . . . Look too at the variety and lavish abundance of fruits, and most of all at the wondrous beauty of such as are most necessary. . . . Since nature has set before you all things as in an abundant banquet free to all, both the necessities and the luxuries of life, in order that, if nothing else, you may at any rate know God by His benefits, and, by your own sense of want be made wiser than you were. . . . For this is what we were laboring to show, that if even the secondary natures surpass the power of our intellect; much more then the First . . . which is above all, the only Nature” (*Second Theological Oration* 25, 26, 31, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 7, p. 297-301).

The greatest wonder found on the newly scrubbed earth is the manner in which God addresses mankind. Compare the first part of the passage (vss. 8:21-22) with the second half (vss. 9:1-7). God declares first that the physical creation – plants and the animals, seed and harvest, cold and heat, summer and spring – shall not cease. In the succeeding verses, He speaks to the unique persons whom He has created and saved from destruction. “Thus God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Increase and multiply, and fill the earth’” (vs. 1).

At the very end He exhorts us: “So then, increase and multiply; and fill the earth and have dominion over it” (vs. 7). In speaking to Noah, the Lord reaffirms His gift of *dominion* to mankind, which is first stated at the beginning at creation: “Fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gn 1:28). Saint Gregory of Nyssa explains, “That is why humankind was introduced last, after the rest of creation, not as some unimportant afterthought, but as a suitable sovereign over all that God had made” (*Creation of Man* 2.2, *NPNF* Second Series vol. 5, p. 390). Although the whole of creation has been placed at our disposal, we are of course still accountable to God for its care. Dominion is given that all, rich and poor alike, “shall eat and be filled” (Ps 21:26).

Why this special attention to the human race? Because we are fashioned in the image of our Creator (Gn 9:6)! And this God-like stamp placed upon us is the underlying reason why “God. . . . hath spread out so sumptuous and exquisite a table for us, and provided us . . . such abundant gladness” (Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily 7 Concerning the Statutes*, *NPNF* First Series vol. 9, p. 391). God’s image in us is the reason why humans are withdrawn from the food chain – and why he who takes the lifeblood of man answers to God (vss. 5, 6). These promises remain in force for all time.

O Lord, our Lord, how wonderful is Thy name in all the earth! – Psalm 8:1

March 17 - Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 9:8-17

After the Flood – The Rainbow: Genesis 9:8-17, especially vss. 13: “I am setting My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.” In the original Greek and Hebrew the word “bow” – as in the archer’s weapon – appears where our English translation reads “rainbow,” for neither of the ancient languages has a separate word for rainbow. How ironic that a weapon of war should serve as a “sign of the covenant” for peace and blessing between God and His creation!

Throughout history the bow has been linked to war, power, and death. The longbow, for example, enabled the English to dominate the French during the late Middle Ages. In Old Testament times, the reigns of kings and of entire dynasties were often ended by the bow (3 Kgs 22:34-37; 4 Kgs 9:24). How then shall we understand the bow as a covenant from God – a promise that “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood” (Gn 9:11)?

Today’s reading reveals the bow as a sign with many dimensions: it symbolizes divine judgment, God’s peace, and the spiritual warfare of those baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. When God promises Noah, “I am setting My rainbow in the cloud” (vs. 13), He reminds us, first of all, of His judgment. Noah and his family have just emerged as the sole survivors of a massive, worldwide cleansing of all the species of the earth. The bow becomes a poignant symbol reminding all men, including the faithful in Christ, that God eternally opposes wickedness.

This symbolism appears repeatedly in Holy Scripture, for the bow is often used to signify God’s judgment and His ability to defeat His enemies. In Jeremiah, for example, the Lord says, “Summon many against Babylon, even all that bend the bow. Encamp against it round about; let no be saved from her. Repay her according to her works . . . for she opposed the Lord” (Jer 27:29). The faithful in turn praise God when He makes “wars to cease unto the ends of the earth. He will crush the bow and will shatter the weapon, and shields will He utterly burn with fire” (Ps 45:8-9).

In this Genesis passage, however, God deliberately makes the bow a sign of peace. The Lord’s declaration that “I am setting My bow in the cloud” is God’s sign that He has stored His weapons in the form of a rainbow which can be seen by all men. He will no longer wage genocide against our race. The bow instead becomes a peace sign of many colors. “I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Gn 9:15).

The sign of God’s peace continues, of course, in our Christian worship. In the Divine Liturgy, as Saint John Chrysostom points out, we regularly receive the blessing of peace. “The priests, when about to consecrate, first make this prayer [of peace] for you, and so begin with the blessing [of peace]. . . . in a word, we may not say or do anything without this peace” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 797).

God further provides the rainbow as an antitype of holy baptism. Water no longer comes in the form of “a flood to destroy all flesh” (vs. 15). Under the sign of the rainbow, water becomes a covenant of peace between God “and all flesh on the earth” (vs. 17). “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Rom 6:3).

Just as we were graciously buried with the Lord “through baptism into death,” so now, like Noah, we “walk in newness of life” (vs. 6:4). In Romans 6:13, Saint Paul calls on us to “no longer present [our] members as instruments,” i.e., weapons, “of unrighteousness to sin.” Rather, we are to present ourselves to God as “alive from the dead,” like Noah, with our members becoming “[weapons] of righteousness to God.”

Being buried in Thy death, O Savior, may we receive Thy life in us as the true weapon of peace.

March 18 - Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 9:18-10:1

After the Flood – Parental Blessings and Curses: Genesis 9:18-10:1, especially vss. 25-26: “‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.’ [Noah] also said, ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant.’” Holy Scripture records that Noah both blesses and curses his own descendants. Noah’s pronouncements upon Ham and Canaan may seem harsh and arbitrary to us. However, because the patriarch “was a righteous man; and perfect in his generation and well-pleasing to God” (Gn 6:9), he knows the Lord’s will for his children. By the grace of God, Noah sets forth the path that Ham and Canaan should follow.

These verses set forth the events by which Noah discovers that these two lack the desire to walk in the way of the Lord. Their souls, held in bondage by the passions, stubbornly repulse parental wisdom as well as the call of God. Noah’s blessings and curses are no magical incantation but a prophetic declaration of the truth.

Today’s lesson also raises questions about the extent of parental influence. Are parents able to pass the blessings of their faith on to their descendants, for example? What part do parents play in transmitting sin to their children?

First of all, we should note the vast difference between blessings or curses from God and those spoken by men. Whatever God declares, happens! “So shall My word be, whatever proceeds from My mouth. It shall not return, until it accomplishes whatever I willed, and I shall prosper . . . My commandments” (Is 55:11).

Human beings, on the other hand, may call down blessings and curses on others, but their fulfillment depends upon powers greater than man. Pharaoh had material power when he cursed Moses, yet by God’s grace he was unable to force Israel to do his will (Ex 10). Joshua cursed Jericho (Jos 6:26) and, since he was a prophet of God, the city walls fell. At best our blessings and curses are but prayerful requests; ultimately, they depend upon the will of God.

However, let us not overlook the powerful spiritual bonds between parents and children! There is much support in Scripture for the belief that the blessings and curses of God-fearing parents on their children are effective. Noah’s prayer is a case in point. He blesses God as he prays for Shem and Japheth, and blessings do indeed fall to their descendants.

Unquestionably, blessings can and do flow from God *through* the prayers and example of our parents. The Orthodox marriage service affirms that “the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of houses.” Saint Theophan the Recluse explains that “a man is not born a Christian, but becomes such after birth. The seed of Christ falls on the soil of a heart that is already beating” (*Raising Them Right*, p. 9) And Saint Ambrose adds, “The formation of the children is . . . the prerogative of the parents,” including blessings and curses alike (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 803). The parental task is awesome, for parents will have to answer before the fearful judgment seat of Christ.

The curse that falls on Noah’s grandson Canaan reveals a tragedy that today’s parents also experience. All too often we see our own sins visited upon our children. There is potency in the blessings and curses we pronounce upon the young, knowingly or not. The sin of Ham, Canaan’s father, mightily befalls his line of descendants. Both Noah and Ham are implicated, however: Noah’s drunkenness and Ham’s immodesty are sins passed on to the Canaanites (see Gn 15:16-21). Let us ever pursue godly purity so that righteousness may become God’s gift to our children.

Direct our children, O Lord, in the way of salvation, and grant them Thy grace always. –
Prayer of Parents for Their Children

March 19 – Thursday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 10:32-11:9

After the Flood – The Tower of Pride: Genesis 10:32-11:9, especially vs. 4: “They also said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower, whose top will reach to heaven: and let us make a name for ourselves. . . .’” The ingenuity and vanity of men manifest themselves simultaneously in our grandest projects. A group of men migrate from the East, find a spacious plain in the land of Shinar, and decide to dwell there (vs. 2). With no sense of obligation to God, they make plans to exalt themselves to heaven based on their own way of life (vs. 4).

God, of course, intervenes and disrupts their plans. It is always divine grace that awakens our need for God, teaching us humility and restoring the word of the Lord to its rightful and natural superiority over finite human thought.

A man first says to his neighbor, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them with fire” (vs. 3). The neighbor embraces the vision and joins in the endeavor. They say to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower” (vs. 4). Where is God in the midst of all of this planning? These men are descendants of Noah. Do they not know that their life and breath comes from God?

On the contrary, they act as if God does not exist. They build a secular city based on “God-lessness.” Such is elementary humanism: to act as if God is not, giving Him no place in one’s imaginings, goals, and projects. “The sinner praiseth himself in the lusts of his soul, and the unrighteous man likewise blesseth himself therein. . . . God is not before him” (Ps 9:23-24).

The Lord visits the city and perceives that his creatures “will not fail to accomplish what they have undertaken” (Gn 11:6). At Babel, the inborn imperative to accept God-given natural boundaries has been suppressed. However, we know that any life apart from God leads only to confusion. Thus Saint Theophan the Recluse advises us to “feel with our whole heart that we have no one to rely on except God, and that from Him and Him alone can we expect every kind of good, every manner of help, and victory” (*Unseen Warfare*, p. 85).

Out of pride, our ancestors presume to build a great tower “whose top will reach to heaven” (vs. 4). Here we see the devil’s lie to Eve – “you will be like gods” (Gn 3:5) – under a new guise. Satan constantly prompts us to exalt ourselves. He lurks at the doorstep of our hearts with these promises: “I will ascend into heaven; I will place my throne above the stars. . . . I will ascend above the clouds; I will be like the Most High” (Is 14:13-14).

God answers Satan and all who heed his lies: “But now you shall descend to Hades, to the foundations of the earth” (vs. 14:15). Christ, too, warns us against self-exaltation: “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). God’s words take effect when He confounds the tongues of those godless men on the plain of Shinar and “[scatters] them abroad from there over the face of all the earth” (Gn 11:8).

Babel, the place where the tower was built, means “gate of God.” The word is also a homonym of the Hebrew verb *balal*, “to produce confusion.” Even when we enjoy initial success, confusion will surely follow as long as we rely upon our own wisdom, ignoring the guiding word of God and His ways. The Lord is the source of our dominion – “Thou hast set him over the works of Thy hands” (Ps 8:5) – and yet we prefer to follow wisdom of our own devising in order to “make a name for ourselves” (Gn 11:4).

Let us remember that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). May our good Lord deliver us from godless, self-assured reasoning! “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the counsel of the saints is understanding: for to know the law is characteristic of a good mind” (Prv 9:10).

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings. – Prayer Before the Gospel Reading

March 20 - Friday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 12:1-7

The Patriarch Abraham – Call and Promise: *Genesis 12:1-7, especially vss. 1-2:* “*Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father’s house, to a land I will show you. I will make you a great nation’*” Today we begin a series of five lessons concerning the Patriarch Abraham (Abram), a man who shines as a model of genuine trust in God. Time after time we see him venture into the unknown, obeying the Lord with no certainty as to the end result. This great man remains open to God’s will, ever ready to discover what God has in store and to make the necessary changes deep within himself. Abraham possesses faith without reservations.

From Abraham we learn that an open-ended obedience to God’s call constitutes the nature of true faith. First, we obey. Only afterward do we grasp what God intended all along. Faith is stepping forth into the unknown so that we may learn to experience directly the mind of God. Genuine faith, as revealed by Abraham, consists in trusting God over the course of many years of seeming contradictions. True faith waits on God for the outcomes that He promises.

For those whom He calls to serve Him, God’s promises are magnificent. The Lord says to Abram, “I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and in you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed” (vss. 2-3). These promises sound impressive, yet their content is intangible; it cannot be measured or neatly defined. To have faith means acting obediently, with open-ended trust in God, never fully knowing how it will all work out. Faith holds an element of adventure.

God’s call confronts each of us in similar ways. In the amazing promises of the baptismal mystery, God assures us that we shall be inscribed in His Book of Life. We will be united to the “flock of [God’s] inheritance” and regarded with mercy. Our supplications will be heard, and we will “rejoice in the works of [our] hands and in all [our] generation.” Note that the words of the service are suggestive, but not specific. As Christians we obey in faith now; only later do we discover the full implications of God’s promises.

The life in Christ is a series of choices and actions undertaken after the manner of Abraham. It is a journey that carries us far from the measurable and the familiar, directing us toward a new way of life. We learn to follow this new way by means of sustained obedience over many years. Once God establishes our priorities, we can no longer elevate family, property, career, or worldly pleasures into absolute goals in life.

The baptismal service tells us what to expect if we follow the proper path to our inheritance. We are to anticipate illumination by the Holy Spirit. We can expect the defeat of “every snare of enemies . . . visible and invisible,” but we must first prove ourselves children of the Light. We will “partake of the death and resurrection” of Christ through a series of many choices, accepting God’s direction every step of the way, always obeying His commandments.

From the beginning, Abram’s experience teaches us to expect contradictions rather than a straightforward fulfillment of God’s plan. Arriving in Canaan as God commanded, Abram “passed through the land” (vs. 6) only to discover that it is already occupied. Likewise, the new life we receive in baptism is only partially realized in this present existence. Many snares lie on the path before us, ready to trip us and choke out God’s gifts. We expect these contradictions and yet we continue to place our trust in God, for He is true Life!

May the remainder of my life be undefiled before Thy face, and a worthy hymn to Thee. –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*

March 21 – Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent
Hebrews 6:9-12

Cultivating Virtue: Hebrews 6:9-12, especially vs. 10: “For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” Saint Gregory Palamas asserts that deification occurs as the Lord Jesus, by His grace, manifests Himself to the hearts that longs for Him. At the same time the saint insists that virtue – the imitation of God – is necessary to attain theosis.

When we cry out to God, “Show us, O Lord, Thy mercy, and Thy salvation do Thou give unto us” (Ps 84:7), then God in turn cultivates virtue within us as His faithful servants. Where do we begin? Since the chief virtues are faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13), we must diligently apply our efforts here, if we hope for a great outpouring of God’s grace.

In today’s epistle these are the very virtues Saint Paul urges us to pursue. They signal where we need to begin. We demonstrate divine *love* when we actively strive to care for God’s people (Heb 6:10). We show *hope* – expressing confidence in the Lord’s promises – through tangible acts based on the faith of the apostles (vs. 11). We show genuine *faith* when we imitate all “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (vs. 12).

It is not enough to claim our faith with our lips; we are to reveal our fidelity through lives that illustrate “the doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (Ti 2:10). Only then will we actualize the virtues of faith, hope and love. If we seek God’s grace to “accompany salvation” (Heb 6:9), we will receive blessings from Him.

The Apostle Paul stresses the need to tangibly *show* the virtues. He speaks of “the love which you have *shown*” (vs. 10) and desires that each one of us “*show* the same diligence” (vs. 11).

In addition to showing the virtues, we are to “imitate those who . . . inherit the promises” (vs. 12). Saint Paul is well aware that exhibiting faith, hope, and love is not a simple matter. “The struggle is great. It is not an easy thing to transform oneself, to cleanse oneself from passions and fill oneself with virtues” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 285).

According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, virtue has two dimensions: we “shun evil and do good” (Ps 34:14). In other words, we fight the enemy in order to diminish our passions, then remain vigilant lest they increase once more. We fight to acquire the virtues and remain vigilant in order to keep them.”

The need to *demonstrate* virtue runs deep in Holy Scripture. God makes promises to Abraham, but also requires the patriarch to show his trust by going “out of your country, [away] from kindred, and from your father’s house” (Gn 12:1). Because Abraham obeys, God leads him to the land that his descendants will finally inherit.

God encourages us likewise to be diligent in expressing love, hope, and faith through our palpable efforts – to manifest these virtues as best we can. To help us find the right path, the Apostle Paul suggests that we “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (vs. 12).

Who are the heirs of the promises? The apostle speaks here of all the saints, the faithful, and our Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1). Like them, we struggle to subject ourselves to God, body and soul, in order to produce His virtues.

According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “Our soul must learn to take nourishment from the grace of God, and the body to be fed by the ‘grace-filled’ soul, and then our organism will come into balance.” The virtues we see in the saints result from precisely such efforts.

O Lord, unto Thee I flee for refuge. Teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. – Psalm 142:11

**March 22 – Sunday of Saint John Climacus – Fourth Sunday of Lent
Hebrews 6:13-20**

He who Is God: Hebrews 6:13-20, especially vs. 17: “Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath.” As the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius observes, “The universe is change.” While we, like the ancients, experience the universality of change, in Christ we are blessed to know the greater, certain, and unchanging reality of God. God does not change, but indelibly makes Himself known. All may dip into the stream of holy tradition at any point in history and meet the unchanging, *immutable* God.

When the new light of Christ broke through upon the world, the Lord added promises to His earlier pledges. As our knowledge of God increases, He remains the same. We discern Him more clearly, for we have found that the God who promises also keeps His word.

In the today’s passage from Hebrews, the Apostle Paul addresses God’s immutability. He anchors his teaching to the unvarying nature of God. Let us consider what we may learn about this immutable Lord we worship.

God is the greatest Being we could ever encounter or imagine (vs. 13). No matter what category we choose – goodness, power, truth, knowledge, value, reliability, stability – God exceeds our very definition of that category. Thus we rightly call Him Good One, almighty, the Truth, all-knowing, unchanging, and so on.

Being ultimate, God reigns supreme over all who claim to speak the truth (vss. 13, 18). We note, however, that God always gives us cause to believe in Him, knowing full well that we are accustomed to lies and half-truth. He swears an oath of fidelity and truth to us.

What surety do we have that there is no deception in the Word of God? First and foremost, He swears by Himself. For this reason the Lord Jesus pointedly asks, “What greater than God do you require?” (see Mt 23:16-22).

God blesses us especially when we trust Him (Heb 6:14). In this verse, the apostle again quotes the Genesis account (22:1-17) of Abraham. Can we imagine a greater trust in the veracity of God than that which Abraham exhibited? Truthfully, God ever proves Himself faithful to the word that He spoke to Abraham – a truth He sustains to this day.

God is our *strong consolation* (Heb 6:18), no matter what happens. Saint Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our tribulation. . . . For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ” (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

What about those times when we are wounded unfairly, or when we have fallen and then desire to repent? Let us come with our heartaches to Christ, who cares and consoles.

“Our God is refuge and strength, a helper in afflictions which mightily befall us” (Ps 45:1). In God we always have ground for hope. Our task is to “lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Heb 6:18-19).

This hope is personal as well, for God offers Himself to us. We may cry out to Him with confidence, “O Lord, Thou art my hope from my youth” (Ps 70:4).

Finally, the Apostle Paul reassures us that the immutable God is ever accessible (Heb 6:19-20). Christ our High Priest is present before God the Father. As fellow man and Savior of all, He is beyond the veil that separates God from mankind, ever interceding for us.

O Christ, unchanging One, my only Hope, hasten to my great need and save me!

March 23 – Monday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 13:12-18

Patriarch Abraham – The Promised Land: *Genesis 13:12-18, especially vs. 18:* “Then Abram moved his tent, and went and dwelt by the oak of Mamre in Hebron, and built an altar there to the Lord.” Starting with Genesis 12, Holy Scripture presents a series of passages concerning Abraham’s faith and life. The present reading discloses three ways by which Abram, as he was originally called, expresses his openness to God’s will during his sojourn in Canaan: he negotiates separate living spaces for himself and his nephew’s family; he explores the length of Canaan from Bethel to Hebron; and he builds an altar for worshipping God.

The first eleven verses of Genesis 13 describe how Abram and Lot decide to separate. Their possessions are great and “the land was not able to support them, so they might dwell together. . . . So strife arose between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and those of Lot” (vss. 13:6-7). Then “Abram said to Lot, ‘Let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen’” (vs. 8). The patriarch offers Lot his choice of the territory, and indicates his willingness to live in any area his nephew does not select. As a result, “Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom” (vs. 12).

Observe Abram’s unspoken faith that God’s will is to be achieved by allowing his nephew to choose whatever land he wishes. “Thus Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered” (vs. 10). This region seems desirable to him, and so he chooses the far southern portion of the Arabah rift valley. Abram, unlike his nephew, waits for God. Only after Lot separates from his uncle does God say to Abram, “Lift up your eyes now and look from the place where you are” (vs. 14). Lot chooses what he thinks best, but Abram looks solely to God for direction.

Abram’s faith blesses him as a peacemaker who remains meek and hungers for the will of God. Saint Augustine praises Abram as one who trusts God to show him what to do: “I have believed that You are God, Who gives to man that which enables him to do as You command” (“Commentary on Psalm 118,” p. 484). Abram continues as the “friend of God” (Jas 2:23); he inherits the Promised Land (Mt 5:5) and meets God when the three angels visit (Gn 18:1-3). Lot, trusting solely in what his eyes behold, moves to Sodom where men “were exceedingly wicked and sinful before God” (vs. 13:13). Lot pays a terrible price for trusting in his limited perceptions instead God: he loses his home, his wife, and God’s blessing.

When God instructs Abram to “lift up your eyes now,” He shows him the Promised Land, which lies “northward, southward, eastward, and westward” (vs. 14). God leads Abram to experience the breadth of the land by walking from Bethel in the north to Hebron in the south, with the promise that “all the land you see I give to you and your seed forever” (vs. 15). To secure Abram’s faith, God explains that Abram’s descendants will become “as the dust of the earth” (vs. 16). Here is no extravagant figure of speech, for those who through faith in Christ our God are sons of Abram cannot be numbered (Gal 3:7).

God leads Abram, the man of faith, to Hebron, which is the highest point in all of Palestine at over 3,000 feet above sea level. His nephew Lot descends instead to the lowest place on earth, over 1400 feet below sea level. Faith always leads us to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). When God reveals His best, Abram builds an altar and worships Him. Let us direct our steps to the altar of the Lord, His high place, and labor there to be fruitful in peace, meekness, and righteousness.

O Lord, make straight our path: establish us all in Thy fear; make firm our steps. – Prayer at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy

March 24 – Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 15:1-15

Patriarch Abraham – Unfolding Revelation: *Genesis 15:1-15, especially vss. 2-3:* “*But Abram said, ‘Lord, what will You give me seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus, the son of Masek, my domestic maidservant. . . . You have given me no offspring; indeed, my household servant is my heir.’*” God establishes our faith by working within the hearts of His servants. To certain blessed ones He reveals in advance what He will do – and then He carries out what He foretold through these prophetic stirrings. God first promises, and then He fulfills. He may often surprise His people, but He never contradicts what He has revealed beforehand. This divine consistency allows the faithful to live in the midst of apparent contradictions while retaining peace of mind and heart; they leave anything not understood up to God.

The Lord assures the faithful: “I am God, and there is no other besides Me, declaring beforehand the latter events before they come to pass, and are accomplished together. . . . All My counsel shall stand, and I will do whatever I will to do” (Is 46:9-10). When we read Scripture as a whole, we discover that God is engaged in a building process: he first reveals, then allows time to elapse, then reveals more details before ultimately fulfilling his revelation. Let us remain mindful, as we read today’s passage, of this unfolding quality of God’s disclosures.

We recall God’s words in Haran, when He first addresses Abram: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. . . . In you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn. 12:2-3). In the events that follow, Abram experiences in a concrete way the meaning of God’s promise to “bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you” (vs. 3). First, God protects Abram from Pharaoh (vss. 11-20). Then, after Abram gives Lot the land of his choice (vss. 13:8-9), he rescues his nephew from Sodom’s evil by means of successful military action (vss. 13:10-14:24).

In the present passage we observe the further unfolding of that earlier promise, “I will bless you.” The Lord reminds Abram that He is his *shield* and the *great reward* for his faith (vs. 15:1). Abram admits the truth of the Lord’s words, but now speaks of his deepest grief: his heir will not be his true son, but a slave born into his household (vss. 2-3). Abram draws the natural conclusion that God intends to make a great nation from one of his slaves, for he sees no other recourse.

The Lord counters Abram’s false assumption *immediately* and enlarges his vision with a very important detail. Abram’s heir will be his natural son: “This one shall not be your heir, but the One who will come from your own body shall be your heir” (vs. 4).

God then reveals to Abram the unfolding of his family’s future (vss. 13-15). His descendants will be *strangers* and then slaves in a foreign land, i.e., Egypt. However, God’s judgment will come upon Egypt (in the form of the plagues). Abram’s descendants will “come out with great possessions” and eventually return to the very land God promised to Abram.

Note that God’s promises, as well as His purposes, unfold little by little. Let us learn how great are God’s promises to us: “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). The Lord’s mercies and faithfulness truly are new every morning.

Thou hast justified by faith our father Abram; by his pleadings save us also, O Christ. –
Troparion of the Feast of the Forefathers

**March 25 - March 25 – Annunciation of the Theotokos
Hebrews 2:11-18**

Savior and Kinsman: *Hebrews 2:11-18, especially vss. 14-15:* “*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.*” The hymn for the feast of the Annunciation declares: “Today is the beginning of our salvation.” On this day, “the Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel proclaimeth grace.”

God’s restoration of mankind, planned “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4) is now fulfilled. A flesh-and-blood Child, conceived in the womb of a flesh-and-blood Virgin, has come to save all who embrace Him as Savior. The conception of God the Word within the Virgin Mary marks the beginning of the saving Incarnation.

Ever since becoming man, God has shared our very flesh. Without holding back from our material existence, God the Word came into the world to release us, “who through fear of death” have learned, in bitter shame and frustration, that we are forever “subject to bondage” (Heb 2:15).

Now, we have One who is capable of helping us in our pitiable state, for He “has suffered, being tempted [and] is able to aid those who are tempted” (vs. 18). Even in those times when our *bondage* to the flesh chafes and grinds down our will, our God-in-the-flesh continues on our side. Christ opposes our dread foe and defeats impotent Satan on his own demonic turf.

Mary, the Virgin Birthgiver of God, rightly is called “full of grace” (Lk 1:28) since the day she conceived the God-man, our Savior. God Himself becomes eternally one of us, a complete human being in every respect, except without sin (Heb 4:15), and never coming under Satan’s power.

How is it that infinite God becomes man? The festal hymn celebrates “the manifestation of the mystery of the ages.” Our human experience is exceeded, for the Son of God, who alone is capable of “transcending nature and the bounds of the laws of birth,” takes on flesh and blood – truly!

Being flesh-and-blood, Christ releases us from the fear of death (vs. 15). Without Christ, death forever diminishes our struggle against sin. In the end, the devil has us in his grasp! Yet Lord Jesus meets our foe and defeats him at his game of lies. “You shall not die by death. For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil” (Gn 3:4-5).

Let us remember that the aid Christ gives is not intended for the angels. It is designed for the seed of Abraham – for *all* men (Heb 2:16). By assuming flesh from the Virgin Theotokos, He intended “in all things He” to “be made like His brethren” (vs. 17). Christ is our kinsman, now and forever, the flesh-and-blood Savior who fights for us.

Lastly, Christ our God makes propitiation (vs. 17) for our sins, on the basis of His “insider” status. As a flesh-and-blood man, He faced temptation in His own body, denying sin at every turn. He is personally and immediately available to us, as He was to the drowning Peter who cried, “Lord, save me!” (Mt 14:30). Our Savior answers our cries for help as His weak brethren, coming to the aid of every one of us.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!

March 26 – Thursday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 18:20-33

The Great Mercy: Genesis 18:20-33, especially vs. 21: *“Therefore, I will go down now and see whether or not they are carrying out the outcry coming to Me concerning them.”* In the Midrash, the rabbis puzzle over the question of whether or not God knew that Sodom was wicked. Of course He knew, but let us consider the implications of this divine *going down* to Sodom and Abraham. It is a type of the incarnation of God the Son, for “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Ti 1:15) – that is, to save all who are willing to be freed from Sodom’s destiny. If any of Sodom’s residents – fifty, forty, thirty, even ten – would have turned and received the great mercy, then the city would have been spared.

We behold the great mercy of God leaping like fire amidst the dry and sinful tinder of mankind in order to inflame true love in our hearts. Christ came down as a man – not in a theophany, as in the case of the three angels in this story, but as Jesus, a mercy and a divine gift to be known and received. He is one of us. True love, mercy, and humility gleam brightly upon our hearts and disclose His love to sinners – not to those who are self-righteous and stubborn, but to the repentant. God’s love ignites our love, arousing us to repent and to plead for our fellow sinners.

In the heart of God there burns an eternal determination to *go down and see* if the cry He hears corresponds with the wickedness He knows to be present in men. We learn from Leviticus 18 that the sin of sodomy transgresses the law of God, as do many other sexual sins. And yet Ezekiel teaches that Sodom did not perish because of sodomy alone. Its most egregious sins were arrogance, haughtiness, and a failure to “give a helping hand to the poor and needy” (Ez 16:49,50). Such sins reveal the divine descent as a great mercy that enables those who will to cry out, “I am wounded with love” (Sg 2:5).

The great mercy of God, which “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Ti 2:4), aims to awaken a love that *pleases* Him. This is true especially with beloved servants like Abraham, who welcome Him and offer Him hospitality. God in His mercy shares His plans with Abraham: “Shall I hide from Abraham, My servant, what I am about to do? But Abraham shall surely become a great and populous nation, and in him all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. For I know that he will order his sons and his house after him. They will keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and judgment” (Gn 18:17-19).

From among the ranks of fallen men God enlists those who will join Him in extending great mercy and salvation to others. We note that Abraham does not single out his nephew when he insistently inquires of the Lord (vss. 23-32). Doubtless he includes him in his prayers, but if he had only Lot in mind, He would have specifically sought that young man’s deliverance from the coming judgment of Sodom (vs. 20).

In these verses God reveals the greatness of His mercy. He does not wish to see anyone condemned in judgment. Awakened mercy in our hearts leads us to pray for others, even to importune for them. We know, from receiving God’s forgiveness, that our fellow sinners “are worthy of tears for the punishment and condemnation to which they make themselves liable,” as Saint John Chrysostom says (*NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 343). We are ready, then, to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy” (Heb 4:16) – for others as well as ourselves!

O compassionate Savior, remove delusion far from all who are ensnared in godless doubt and immorality, and fill them with repentance that they may fulfill Thy will and find life therein. – Sunday before the Nativity of Christ

March 27 - Friday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 22:1-18

Patriarch Abraham – The Testing of Faith: *Genesis 22:1-18, especially vs. 1:* “Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham. . . .” By choosing Christ as our supreme authority, we have accepted His challenge: “You believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn 14:1). Scripture now places before us an incident from the life of Abraham which shows that our faith will be put to the test, for God wishes our trust in Him to endure despite life’s wrenching contradictions. We learn that these tests often involve our dearest attachments; they force us to act, exposing the roots of our faith. At the same time, such tests also reveal that true faith comes only as a gift from God.

Truthfully, our faith will be tested in the context of what we treasure most. A host of choices between *treasures on earth* and *treasures in heaven* confront us (Mt 6:19-20). Through these choices God leads us to deeply examine our true relationship with Him, while showing us how much we need His grace to endure.

We recall God’s earlier promise Abraham: “I will make you a great nation” (vs. 12:2). Abraham assumed that a slave from his household would become his heir, but God clarifies His promise: “This one shall not be your heir; but the One who will come from your own body shall be your heir” (vs. 15:4). Still Abraham wavers; he resorts to begetting a son, Ishmael, by a slave woman. The Lord corrects him again: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him” (vs. 17:19).

Now the Lord prepares to lead Abraham into an unexplored realm of his soul. He says, “Take now your beloved son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a whole burnt offering on one of the mountains I tell you” (vs. 22:2).

This choice will uncover what is of prime importance to Abraham – is it his son or his relationship with God? Three times in this passage the Lord God declares to Abraham that his actions demonstrate his faith (vss. 12, 15, 18). But let us understand what God is teaching us here. The Lord will bring each of us to an ultimate choice in this life. We may thus see in the relationship between God and Abraham a reflection of our own destiny.

At times Abraham misunderstands and wavers, yet God continues to lead him into a full and robust faith in Him. In the end, Abraham’s choice is clear. May God grant us the grace of a faith like Abraham’s, that we may hear the Lord say, “Now I know you fear God. . . . because you obeyed My voice” (vss. 12, 18).

Abraham finds faith through action, which reveals the supernatural source of his faith. Faith is God’s gift; it is not something of which we are fully capable, for we are flawed and doubt-ridden. How shall we read Abraham’s reply to Isaac? Was it an evasion of the horrifying plan, or a disclosure of God’s gift of faith within Abraham? Note the patriarch’s words: “My son, God will provide for Himself the sheep for a whole burnt offering” (vs. 8).

Abraham never questions the choice God gave him. Why? We know that he has sojourned among the Canaanites, who regularly practiced child sacrifice (Lv 18:21, 20:2-5); of course, he also lacks the guidance of Mosaic law. Yet in the end he simply obeys based on faith in God. Saint John Chrysostom says of Abraham that his “faith opposed faith.” He risks trusting God even when His command is logically opposed to His promise. In Chrysostom’s words, God “enjoined things that were in contradiction to the promises, and yet not even so did the righteous man stagger” (“Homily 25 on Hebrews 11,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 333). For such faith, let us pray!

Lord, grant us grace to gleam with faith like Abraham and to illuminate this dark world. –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*

March 28 – Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent
Hebrews 9:24-28

Christ's Sacrifice – His Accomplishment: Hebrews 9:24-28, especially vs. 26: “Now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” In reading this epistle, we must grasp the difference between representations and realities. To describe the *representation* of a divine reality, the Church uses the word *antitype*. In this passage, the high priest, the Temple, and the offerings made there are all considered antitypes, or representations of God's immeasurably greater realities.

By contrast, we call an ultimate, heavenly reality a *type*. Saint Paul presents Christ, His sacrifice, and heaven as divine types. If we study the icons of the Church, we see Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of all) portrayed as God. Any icon of the Lord remains an earthly antitype – a representation presenting our holy Lord Jesus to our spiritual eyes and hearts.

The true Christ illumines the icon, just as the high priest in the ancient sanctuary showed the true Savior to the eyes of the ancient people of God. As we near the end of the lenten fast, we consider three antitypes and their corresponding types: the high priest who offers, the sanctuary in which he offers, and the offering he presents.

Each high priest of ancient Israel went into the Holy of Holies annually on behalf of the congregation of God's people. He would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the Mercy Seat to represent atonement for sins.

This ancient ceremony was an earthly representation, or foreshadowing, of the unique act of Christ. Our Lord offered His blood in the true holy place – in heaven, in the “presence of God for us” (vs. 24).

Let us consider the immense contrast between the earthly worship offered in ancient Israel and Christ's divine action. His offering occurred once, beyond time, just as He went into the “Most Holy Place” (vs. 25) beyond this world. The ancient Levitical priesthood went in yearly, “with the blood of another” (vs. 25), but the Lord's Self-offering ends all antitypes.

Aaron, the first high priest, went into the “Most Holy Place” inside the desert tabernacle. When the Apostle Paul says “every year” (vs. 25), he thus refers to long-standing tradition. He stresses repetition, but Christ acted for us as High Priest only “once at the end of the ages” (vs. 26).

When the eternal God acts in history, His offering is infinite. Our Divine Liturgy is a form of “rational and bloodless worship,” for the Lord's blood was shed once on earth and now offered in heaven eternally.

The Apostle Paul also takes care to contrast the earthly sanctuary with the heavenly Holy Place “not . . . made with hands” (vs. 24). Heaven is the true reality, where Christ now appears “in the presence of God for us” (vs. 24).

As beautiful as an earthly sanctuary may be, its splendor lies in the reality it conveys: the heavenly Kingdom where Christ is enthroned on the right hand of the Father, interceding for us sinners. For this reason we sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.”

No sacrificial animal is needed now, for Christ “has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (vs. 26). He carried His own pure and immaculate body to the Mercy Seat of God's throne in heaven. The altar is an icon of God's throne – the throne of our High Priest who once and for all bore “the sins of many” (vs. 28). Long ago the high priest emerged to the acclamations of the people; one day, we the faithful will greet Christ as He returns (vs. 28).

Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee, in behalf of all, and for all. We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, and we pray unto Thee, O our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**March 29 - Sunday of Saint Mary of Egypt – Fifth Sunday of Lent
Hebrews 9:11-14**

Christ's Sacrifice, continued – The Opportunity: *Hebrews 9:11-14, especially vs. 14:* “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” This final week of Great Lent signals the approach of Holy Week, with its focus on Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. What was our Lord's purpose when He chose crucifixion, offering Himself to cleanse our “conscience from dead works to serve the living God”?

Clearly, the Lord created an opportunity never available to the human race before: to cleanse, purify, and restore the conscience to a right relationship with God. The Lord says, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me” (Mt 11:29). United to Him in His Passion, we may now offer ourselves “through the eternal Spirit” (Heb 9:14) to be restored as whole persons. We are freed from spiritual paralysis in this life and the life to come.

According to Saint Philotheos of Sinai, Christ “in His gentle love will say, ‘Behold, I am by your side and ready to help you’” (*Philokalia*, vol. 3, p. 46). For our part, we must exert ourselves, taking the Cross into the depths of our hearts. We watch, pray, repent, and practice self-control. The Holy Spirit will help us make these works life-giving rather than futile, works that truly cleanse and restore the new life in Christ within our very being.

“The short way for beginners to acquire virtue is silence of the lips and closed eyes and ears,” says Saint Nicetas Stethatos (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 139). We are instructed to “dedicate a certain hour for the practice of the Jesus prayer, for the meditation on the name of Jesus [and] start the practice of the Jesus Prayer gradually and proceed according to [our] thirst and the grace [we] feel. . . . It is necessary that we have a steady hour for prayer which should not be changed for any reason, not even for good works” (Vlachos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, p. 135).

The Jesus Prayer helps us to close the world out of our hearts, for prayer is God's primary means for us to “keep watch.” Our *nous*, the eye of our heart, “like a commander stands independently between ideas, judging and separating the good thoughts from the bad ones . . . laying up spiritual goods” and casting all other thoughts into oblivion (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 140).

“This work of purification is performed by the Holy Spirit,” says Saint Diadochos of Photiki. “When the mighty One enters the soul and overthrows the despoiler, then what has been taken captive can be set free” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 260). Note the source of the power!

In the process of praying and watching, we are brought to repentance. When the Apostle Paul speaks of “cleansing” our consciences, this is accomplished when the deep place in our heart is uncovered through repentance.

The Holy Spirit shows us where we are enslaved and corrupted. As we come to see our bondage with God's eyes, we enter into deep mourning and confession. We may cooperate with God, cleansing and further unveiling our eyes until we see the great things of the Lord within us. Repentance, of course, must be thoroughgoing, bringing us not only godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10) and acknowledgment of sin (Ps 50:4), but also strengthening our self-control.

As we review the steps in this process, let us ask God for help in establishing these habits. We are to fight off discouragement, by which the enemy would defeat us. Christ has accomplished a great salvation, opening a wonderful opportunity to us. Indeed, He sends the Holy Spirit to guide us along this living the way. While there is time, let us press ahead!

Keep me in purity through saving fear of Thee, O Lord, that I may truly please Thee.

March 30 - Monday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 27:1-42

Spiritual Growth: Genesis 27:1-42, especially vs. 28: “Therefore, may God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.” In this final week of the Great Fast, our readings in Genesis turn to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, the younger of the fraternal twins born to Isaac and Rebekah (vss. 25:21-23). In personality these twins are very different. The Church Fathers see in Esau, the elder son, a tendency toward sensual wickedness, but in Jacob a man growing through his relationship with God. Esau serves as a warning to us to “trample down all carnal desires,” while Jacob shows us how to “enter upon a spiritual manner of living” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

If we read the present passage in isolation, we might conclude that a gross injustice occurs as a result of the plot between Rebekah and Jacob. The Church Fathers, however, read this passage in the context of the full historical evidence concerning the two brothers. Origen, for example, observes that “the plot of Esau against Jacob has its apparent occasion in taking away the blessing. But before this, Esau’s soul had roots of his being immoral and irreligious” (*On Prayer* 28.18, in Manley, *Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 837). We find support for Origen’s interpretation as Esau broods angrily and finally decides to commit murder (vss. 27:41-42).

The Apostle Paul, referring to Esau, warns the faithful to look “carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any . . . profane person like Esau” (Heb 12:15-16). He adds: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph 4:31).

In the plot devised by Rebekah and Jacob the Church Fathers perceive a type of spiritual growth. Just as Esau and Jacob came out of the single womb of Rebekah, so also evil and good come from the same source – our souls. Saint Ambrose instructs us to follow Rebekah in repudiating the evil offspring of our hearts, so that we may see that “goodness is fostered and strengthened” (*Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 837). We must weep for our sins, turning away from the Esau in ourselves and praying for the firm resolve of Jacob, if we are to do what is pleasing to God. Our pursuit of goodness must be active for, as Saint Nikitas Stithatos says, we shall be “in [God’s] likeness if we possess virtue and understanding; for His virtue covered the heavens” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 142).

A two-pronged effort is necessary for spiritual growth. We must rid ourselves of the sinful passions and at the same time make the virtues our own. Saint Andrew of Crete likens our situation to Esau’s: “O my soul, you have given away the birthright and lost your Father’s blessing, and in your wretchedness been twice supplanted in action and knowledge” (*Lenten Triodion*, p. 390). We can easily give away the likeness that God impressed upon Adam. We regain that inestimable treasure by God’s grace, received through the holy mysteries of confession and communion.

After his birthright is lost, Esau pleads with Isaac because he still wants to inherit the blessing. However, he is rejected. Saint Paul notes that Esau “found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears” (Heb 12:17). Only in Christ does genuine repentance, the cleansing of our sins, and restoration to God become possible once more. Through our sins we have forfeited the blessing of our Heavenly Father. Let us strive to “spend the remaining time of our life in . . . repentance” and thus be restored to our intended state.

O Lord, accept the dust of our repentance, and grant us the heaven of Thy grace. – Elder Joseph the Hesychast

March 31 - Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Vespers – Genesis 31:3-16

Providence: Genesis 31:3-16, especially vs. 13: “Now then, arise . . . and I will be with you.” The life of the Patriarch Jacob reveals much about God’s providence. Through everything that happens to Jacob and his family, the Lord shields him from evil. The God of all, who kept Israel and cares for the Church, always comes to the aid of His inheritance. He “shall keep thy coming in and thy going out, from henceforth and for evermore” (Ps 120:8). As the Prophet David declares, God has stored away His goodness for those who fear Him and hope in Him “before the sons of men” (Ps 30:19).

However, God’s provision for His people never comes in the form of a one-way handout, randomly bestowed on those whom He happens to bless. The Lord’s abundant provision and protection flow in, to, and through those who honor Him in all their ways. Honoring God begins with a heart quick to obey the Lord in unquestioning submission to what He has ordained, and with a firm resolution not to act unilaterally.

When the Lord tells Jacob, “Return to your father’s land and to your family,” He adds this promise of oversight: “I will be with you” (vs. 3). The assurance of God’s presence follows on Jacob’s obedience to the Lord’s command to end his ties in Haran and return to the land of his birth.

When Jacob reflects on his life with Laban, he perceives that his father-in-law’s “countenance . . . is not favorable toward me as before; but the God of my father has been with me” (vs. 5). He recalls how God formerly intervened on his behalf to defeat the plots against him. Thus when the Lord says, “I am the God Who appeared to you at Bethel. . . . Now then, arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your nativity, and I will be with you” (vs. 13), he resolves to obey.

Leaving Haran means that Jacob will leave the place under the authority of Laban, his father-in-law. However, his departure is not an ill-conceived attempt to flee from Laban’s oversight, but a recognition of God’s higher sovereignty. It is the Lord who directs him to return to the land “where you anointed the pillar and made a vow to Me” (vs. 13).

As a son-in-law Jacob works for years under Laban, the father of his wives. With all his might he serves him, even when Laban deceives him and changes his wages ten times (vss. 6, 7)! If we do not honor the authorities ordained by the Lord in our families, workplaces, government, and the Church, how can we claim to be cooperating with God? How can we expect the blessings of His providence? Saint John Climacus calls “obedience . . . the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.3, p. 21) Jacob learns to die to his own will, and in return he is able to see God’s providence at work in his life.

In breaking with Laban the patriarch does not act unilaterally. When the Lord commands Jacob to return to Canaan, He assures him, “I have seen everything Laban is doing to you” (vs. 12). Then, just as God has taken counsel with him, Jacob counsels with his wives concerning the move. He listens to their concerns and works out in concert with them the plan to relocate (vs. 14-16). They in turn stand with him in his resolve to obey God: “Now then, whatever God has said to you, do it” (vs. 16). When we act this life, let it be in God’s will – and let us always take into account and have respect for the needs of others, so that the Lord may bless us.

In my heart have I hid Thy sayings that I might not sin against Thee. I am a sojourner on the earth, hide not from me Thy commandments. – Psalm 118:11, 19