

May 1 - Friday of the Third Week of Pascha
Acts 8:40-9:19

The Lord, My Helper and Shield – Sauls’ Conversion: Acts 8:40-9:19, especially vss. 3-4: “As . . . he came near Damascus . . . suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’” On numerous occasions throughout history God intervenes to change the course of events. At times He frustrates men’s plans, as He does at the tower of Babel (Gn 11:1-9). At other times He alters the conditions of the world through acts such as the Incarnation (Lk 2:1-7). Often, when God acts, it is “with a strong hand and a lofty arm” (Ps 135:12).

When God’s help comes, it may bring with it wonder, consternation, or gratitude for His mercy. The song that Moses and the children of Israel sing to God on the shore of the Red Sea reflects the latter response: “Let us sing to the Lord, for He is greatly glorified. Horse and rider He has thrown into the sea. The Lord became my helper and the shield of my salvation; He is my God, and I will glorify Him” (Ex 15:1-2).

At times the Lord intervenes on behalf of a single person, as with Saul’s humbling encounter with the reigning Christ. Previously the sworn enemy of Christians, Saul is now overcome by gratitude. His experience reveals the Lord as the true “helper and shield of [our] salvation.”

Before he is transformed into Paul the apostle of Christ, Saul is a man driven by dark inner forces, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). We read of his presence at the stoning of the Protomartyr Stephen. He even holds the cloaks of those who throw stones at Stephen, visibly “consenting to his death” (vss. 7:58, 8:1).

Some of the most notorious and vicious opponents of the faith remained enemies of Christ until their dying day, as was the case with the Emperor Julian the Apostate. God stopped Him in battle, allowing him to fall at the hand of the Persians.

God also stops Saul, but fills him with a host of virtues. After that first meeting with the Lord, Paul continues to marvel at the Lord’s compassion: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord . . . because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant. . . . For . . . I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering” (1 Tim 1:12-16).

God destroys the most powerful plans of men in ways both awesome and humbling. When the glorified Christ discloses Himself to the fanatic Saul, the latter is still seeking men and women to “bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). In a moment, Saul is utterly humbled. Overwhelmed by the uncreated light of the Godhead, the venomous Saul “fell to the ground” as the “light shone around him from heaven” (vss. 3-4).

Reduced to trembling and astonishment, he is left blind and unable to eat for three days. He passes this time in prayer before God (vss. 6, 9, 11). When his trial ends, a new man rises to serve the Lord.

Saint Paul leaves hate and violence behind him forever on the road to Damascus. Not a trace remains afterward. Rather, he is filled with praise and thanksgiving, crying, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing . . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (Eph 1:3-4).

Let us remember at all times that God makes Himself known to us in order to bless, heal, protect, and illumine us. To worship Him in gratitude is our natural response.

Glory to Thee, who hast shown forth the light. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men. We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee! – Doxology

May 2 – Saturday of the Third Week of Pascha
Acts 9:19-31

The Lord, My Helper and Shield, continued – A Convert’s Response: Acts 9:19-31, especially vss. 19-20: “Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.” When God blinds and humbles Saul, He brings him to repentance; the Lord’s gifts fill him with gratitude. As we follow the inner changes worked by the Lord within the heart of the former blasphemer and persecutor, let us reflect on what results may come to us when we encounter the living Christ.

The present passage tells of events taking place in two distinct locations, first in Damascus and then at Jerusalem. However, we observe that Saul’s activities follow a common pattern. First he spends time with the local Christians (vss. 19, 27). Next, he proclaims the lordship of Christ *boldly* to his fellow countrymen, the Jews (vss. 20, 29). His public comments open a discussion with those who have questions or doubts about the faith (vss. 22, 29).

Negative reactions to the Christian message develop quickly, especially among the Greek-speaking Jews (vs. 29). Threats are made on Saul’s life. However, the disciples and the local churches rally to help Saul escape, thereby preventing his murder (vss. 25, 30).

Having obtained mercy from the Lord (1 Tim 1:13), Saul pursues the step most essential for every Christian: he joins the communion of fellow believers. From earliest times, Christians have called each other to “gather together each Lord’s Day, break bread, and hold Eucharist. . . . Let no one who has a quarrel with his fellow man join in your meeting until they be reconciled” (*Didache* 14).

Our life in Christ is based on communion: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). In the Orthodox Tradition, even hermits leave their isolation to come together regularly for prayer and to celebrate the liturgy.

As the Lord says: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). A branch separated from the vine will soon wither and die (Jn 15:5). Let us be attentive!

In Jerusalem, there are grave doubts about Saul’s motives for seeking out the disciples (Acts 9:26). However, he understands his need to be united to the Church despite the suspicions of his fellow Christians. When Saul persists in his efforts, “Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles” (vs. 27).

Saul “immediately” preaches Jesus as the Christ and “the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). Some English translations use the word “proclaim” in place of “preach.” The preaching of the clergy during the Divine Liturgy is a special form of proclamation, designed for edification of the faithful. Such a proclamation is inappropriate for recent converts and the unordained.

Yet Saul offers his personal confession in the synagogues, where he is already known and welcomed. Such “preaching” is appropriate in our intimate contacts with neighbors and family (Rom 9:3). Saul shares his faith with his friends and loved ones, that they might embrace the true faith. Let us always be open about our faith, although we should try to avoid being “preachy.”

Finally, as opportunities present themselves, Saul holds reasoned discussions with those who question his new-found faith. We know from his epistles that he never relied on his own brilliance (1 Cor 2:1-2), and yet he confounded many (Acts 9:22). He does what we are meant to do: he speaks from the heart to anyone who is open to listening. As Saint Paisius Velichkovsky reminds us, “He who remains in love, remains in God: where love is; there is God also” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 73).

O Lord, inspire me with Thy Holy Spirit, that my words and deeds may glorify Thee.

May 3 - Fourth Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Paralytic)
Acts 9:32-42

The Intercession of the Apostles: Acts 9:32-42, especially vs. 40: *“But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, ‘Tabitha, arise.’ And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.”* At the conclusion of every liturgy, the priest asks Christ to have mercy on us through the intercessions of “the holy, glorious, and all-laudable apostles.” The present passage shows us why it is wise for us to ask for their prayers, given the flood of perils and sorrows that we face in this present existence (Rom 8:19-22).

The apostles’ prayers undergird God’s household. These saints know our weaknesses and temptations. They desire to see us “[grow] into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21), established on their prayerful foundation with Christ as “the chief cornerstone” (vs. 20).

Today’s reading concerns Peter, the chief of the apostles, who “came down to the saints who dwelt at Lydda” (Acts 9:32) and finds God’s people suffering weakness and infirmity (vs. 33). He answers their entreaties (vss. 38-39) and heals them by his prayers (vss. 34, 40).

Every apostle follows the example set by Christ, who came to His people, found them crippled by sin and death, and healed them. The apostles are the Lord’s right hand, seeking His people and praying to the Savior for our healing and restoration. Freely they received; freely they give (Mt 10:8).

The possibility of effective intercession by the apostles arises when we seek to have God reach out to us in our paralysis and looming death. After we emerge from the water of baptism and received the anointing of chrismation, Christ our God does not leave us to fend for ourselves against the enemy, but sends his saints and apostles to aid us.

We see how “Peter went through all parts of the country” (Acts 9:32). The apostles are never far removed from us, no matter where in the world we find ourselves living. They are near, actively visiting the saints – not just the Christians in Lydda, but those in every corner of the earth. Naturally, we seek their powerful intercessions for Christ’s healing.

Yes, we are greatly paralyzed by our sins and frailties, but our help is close at hand. The apostles, who “looked upon, and . . . handled . . . the Word of life” Himself (1 Jn 1:1), are constantly attentive to our necessities. They look for us as we lie on our pallets of weakness, tempted to give up hope of ever rising from our sins.

Let us never hesitate to seek the intercession of the holy apostles, but rather meet them as they come with the power of the Lord to heal and set us aright. God forgives and overcomes. He sends us the apostles to encourage us in prayer, and to pray with us. Seek their prayers!

Who has not sinned gravely in this life? We have cast aside what we knew to be pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil 4:8). We have tasted bitter death in our spirit, despite our righteous accomplishments, and our “good works and charitable deeds” (Acts 9:36). The best among us are sinners, falling short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

Yet even now the apostles are our fervent intercessors before the Savior. Their prayers are effective with Him, both for our own healing and for the infirmities of those we know.

Especially, let us never hesitate to seek the prayers of the apostles for our loved ones and brethren in Christ. The disciples in Joppa send two of their own to Peter, “imploring him not to delay” (Acts 9:38). When he comes, they stand before him weeping and showing him their loss (vs. 39). Drawing on his privileged relationship with the Lord, he kneels and prays for Tabitha’s restoration to life. The apostles are ready, for Christ is ready to aid us.

Intercede for us, holy apostles and all the saints, that we may be delivered from perils and sorrows; for we have acquired you as fervent intercessors before the Savior. – Lenten Daily Vespers

May 4 – Monday of the Fourth Week of Pascha
Acts 10:1-16

Ecstasy: Acts 10:1-16, especially vss. 10-11: “Then [Peter] became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners descending to him and let down to earth.” Today’s account of the Apostle Peter’s visit to the coastal plain of Sharon deepens our understanding of the spiritual life of the chief apostle. We see a man of deep holiness and godly illumination – the sort of man we rarely encounter in the course of everyday life. His soul is completely united with the Lord Jesus.

Saint Peter appears free of the familiar distractions of this life and of the desires of flesh common to most people. He stands outside the confusion arising from the darkness of this world. Thus he speaks with clarity, calm, and authority in situations when ordinary men might sigh and weep.

In the present passage, we see Peter experiencing one of the highest levels of the spiritual life, called *ecstasy* by the Church Fathers. While our translation in the Orthodox Study Bible says that “he fell into a trance,” the original Greek literally reads “there came upon him an *ekstasis*” – that is, an ecstasy.

How do the Fathers of the Church understand ecstasy? In the mystery of baptism, God cleanses His divine image within us as the essential beginning of our life in Christ. Our Christian life consists of a sustained effort to recover our lost likeness to God.

Saint Maximos the Confessor divides the human side of this labor for salvation into three stages: practical philosophy, natural theoria, and mystical theology. The first stage, which involves the purification of our passions and adornment with the virtues, occupies much of our earthly life.

Those who achieve a level of purity seek illumination, or the attainment of true knowledge of God in the deep center of the heart and soul. Beyond this lies a third stage, a crown granted to the saints who through inner struggle obtain true mystical experience.

Saint Hesychios asserts that the mystical experience of ecstasy occurs only where there is “love and intense longing for God” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 198). When Saint Peter converses with the risen Lord, Jesus asks him repeatedly, “Do you love Me?” (Jn 21:15-17). The saints who reach a statue of ecstasy, like Peter, do so “because the taste of the divine and the ecstasy of desire make their longing ever more intense and insatiable as they ascend, [and] they do not stop until they reach the Seraphim.”

Although human effort is needed to attain to the state of ecstasy, it is always a God-given state, a flooding with God’s love that ends the domination of the ego. The vision that God gives Peter (Acts 10:11-15) comes while he is at prayer and seeking communion with Christ our God.

Even before the vision comes to the apostle, he is in ecstasy. As Saint Maximos the confessor describes it, he is drawn up into “unsullied union in grace with the divine” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 224).

God discloses a vital truth to Peter while he is in ecstasy: the Church is released from the ancient dietary regulations of the Old Covenant (vs. 15). Now, the Church may freely accept the Gentiles into the fellowship of believers (vss. 17-20), for “the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Eph 3:6).

The stage is now set for the apostles to accept the conversion of the Gentiles. Soon Cornelius, a Roman centurion, will become the very first Gentile convert (see Acts 10:21-48).

Water also my heart with the dew of Thy grace, O good Lover of mankind. – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

May 5 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Pascha
Acts 10:21-33

The Mystery of Christ: Acts 10:21-33, especially vs. 28: “*You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.*” Today, because we understand Judaism and Christianity as two separate religions, the full impact of Saint Peter’s words may elude us. Jews and Christians both worship as they see fit, and the restrictions that once prevented Jews from socializing with Gentiles have all but disappeared – at least here in the American melting pot.

We learned from yesterday’s reading that an “ecstasy” came over the Apostle Peter during prayer (Acts 10:10), disclosing the heights of his spiritual life. While he was in that exalted state, God revealed an essential truth to him concerning those outside of Judaism, i.e., the Gentiles. The saint declares, “But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (vs. 28).

With this revelation an historic change began within the scattered Jewish communities of the ancient world. That shift defined a new relationship between “Israel after the flesh” (Judaism) and the “New Israel” – the unique religious community of the Orthodox Church, composed of people from a multitude of nations with a single citizenship and a living fellowship in the Body of Christ.

At the time God imparts this revelation to Peter, however, the Church is still located within Jewish society. It is a Jewish sect – one among many synagogues based in Jerusalem and functioning within the extended Jewish community.

Tensions are already appearing between mainstream Judaism and the Jewish Christians who proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. However, Peter’s testimony reveals that the the early Christians still consider themselves Jewish – after all, they are ethnic Jews. Their status within Judaism is recognized by opponents and friends alike, whether in Palestine or the diaspora.

Then, a group of hyper-conservative Jews called Freedmen initiates a persecution of the Christ-worshiping Jews (vss. 7:54-8:3). After the martyrdom of Stephen, many of the latter flee Jerusalem (vs. 8:4). In the process of relocating, they come into contact with people of other ethnic and religious outlooks (vss. 5-40).

Peter’s revelation at Joppa – and his encounter with a little community of Gentiles gathered around Cornelius, the Roman centurion – begins the incorporation of non-Jews into Christian congregations, and the ultimate separation of the Church from Judaism. From the perspective of Orthodox Christianity, the Church is the true Israel. As the New Covenant community, the faithful are the obedient followers of Israel’s Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostles teach us that God does not cast away “Israel after the flesh” (the ethnic Jews), although He “has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see . . . to this very day” (Rom 11:8). Until the end of this age, “blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in [to the true Israel].” Ultimately, we know that all Israel will be saved (vss. 25-26).

God reveals this truth first to Peter, then later to another devout Jew, Saul, whom we know as Saint Paul (Eph 3:1-3). As apostle to the Gentiles, Paul speaks of this inclusive truth as “the mystery of Christ” (v. 4). Gentiles and Jews, once separated under the Mosaic Law, are now united “by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one . . . having abolished in His flesh the enmity . . . so as to create in Himself one new man from the two” (vss. 2:13-15).

O Lord, unite us unto communion of the one Holy Spirit with all of Thy saints. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

**May 6 - Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Pascha – Feast of Mid-Pentecost
Acts 14:6-18**

The Power of Christ's Resurrection: Acts 14:6-18, especially vss. 9-10: *"This man heard Paul speaking. Paul observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, 'Stand up straight on your feet!' And he leaped and walked."* Today we celebrate the Feast of Mid-Pentecost, the midway point between Pascha and Pentecost. The opening line of today's passage from the Gospel of John reflects our arrival at this mid-point: "Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught" (Jn 7:14).

Of course, the historical feast referenced in this Gospel reading is the Mosaic feast of Tabernacles. Today, however, this reading also invites us to recall the theme of the fourth Sunday of Pascha, so that we may connect the healing of the lame man at Lystra (Acts 14:6-18) with that of the paralytic at the Sheep Pool (Jn 5:1-15). All these themes are drawn together by the Lord Jesus' second mention of the healing of the paralytic in John 7:23.

With the events at Lystra, we now see the healing power of Christ our God revealed *after* His Resurrection. These events center on "a certain man without strength in his feet . . . a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked" (Acts 14:8). Yet Christ has overcome death in His own body, and now extends His power over human flesh to the Church. As ones paralyzed by our own sins, we cry out, "O Christ God . . . Maker of all, grant us Thy mercy and compassion; for Thou art the Fountain of life" (hymn of Mid-Pentecost).

We see the power of the Resurrection manifested first through the proclamation of the Gospel. The Apostles Paul and Barnabas come to the little town of Lystra, located in the mountains of central Anatolia, after a violent attempt on their lives at Iconium (vss. 4-6). "And they were preaching the gospel there" (vs. 7).

As we survey the Book of Acts, we take note of how Saint Luke compresses many years of apostolic mission into just twenty-eight chapters. Hence he is very selective, reporting only on certain key events.

For example, we are to understand that enough time has elapsed since the apostles arrived to Lystra for the crippled man to develop trust in the risen Lord (vs. 9). Faith does not occur in a vacuum: this event does not happen one day out of the blue, with neither background nor preparation. Rather, we are observing the culmination of an extended time of proclamation and teaching of the Gospel, perhaps over several weeks or even months.

The power of God is revealed in the healing of the lame man in Lystra because he believes in the Lord Jesus, who was crucified, buried, and rose on the third day (vs. 9). Of course, we are not healed simply because we believe that the Lord Jesus has the power to heal. Such a notion would suggest that our belief somehow obligates God to heal us.

Our greatest need goes beyond mere physical healing. We must believe in Jesus as Lord, and commit ourselves to Him. Our need for salvation outweighs any need for relief from physical ills. The man in Lystra is a convert in his heart; he has already drawn close to Christ. His conviction and commitment were evident to Paul as the Apostle studied him carefully.

In the preceding series of readings from Acts (vss. 9:32-10:33), we have explored the elevated state of Saint Peter's life. Here, the Apostle Paul reveals the same "unsullied union in grace with the divine." Saint Paul is able to speak with authority, for he knows his Lord's will. By faith, the lame man at Lystra hears the voice of his Lord and Savior through the apostle, and he "leaped and walked" (vs. 10). May the ears of our hearts hear the true Savior's voice speaking to us!

Give Thou my thirsty soul to drink of the waters of true worship, O Savior. – Hymn for Mid-Pentecost

May 7 – Thursday of the Fourth Week of Pascha
Acts 10:34-43

The Gospel: Acts 10:34-43, especially vs. 43: “*To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.*” The Apostle Peter’s message to a gathering of Gentile believers in the home of the centurion Cornelius is the “word which God sent to the children of Israel” (vs. 36). It was this very *word* that Jesus of Nazareth “proclaimed throughout all Judea” after His baptism by John (see vss. 37-38). That word remains forever known to us as the gospel, or good news.

Saint Peter knows, when he preaches the gospel to those assembled with Cornelius, that he is obeying a command of the Lord Jesus (vs. 42). He is also certain it makes no difference whether those who hear him are Jews or Gentiles (vss. 34-35), for his message is the best of all news for all people (Mt 28:19).

Let us pay close attention to six points in the apostle’s message, for its truths apply to us – and indeed to everyone who has ever lived, whether in the time of the apostles or today. As we read, let us seek to apply these teachings to ourselves through a series of questions.

First, Saint Peter declares that God is concerned for everyone without respect to culture, race, ethnicity, language, or religion (Acts 10:34-35, 42-43). Our Christian faith is never imperialistic, despite the fact that some have mistakenly sought to impose its truth on others.

We faithful in Christ are under a mandate to disciple all nations without *partiality* (Mt 28:19, Acts 10:34), but this command never extends to the use of force or hype. The gospel is offered as a free gift (Rom 5:15). Have we freely chosen to receive the gospel and apply it to our lives?

Some people consider faith in Christ insignificant; others go so far as to admit that God may be a “useful idea” for those inclined toward “that sort of thing.” As we consider Peter’s contention that God cares for everyone, let us ask ourselves if we believe that God is active not only in history, but in our own lives. Do we believe that He truly care about us and what we believe, say, and do?

From the Apostle Peter’s perspective, the foremost issue facing us in this life is the state of our relationship with God. And yet this relationship with God is significantly disrupted by sin (Acts 10:42-43). We have broken our relationship with the One who created us, who holds our life and our eternal destiny in His hands. Are we concerned about our sins against God?

Many people consider the Christian message to be simply an effort to make people feel guilty. And yet the gospel, which Saint Peter sets forth firmly, asserts that Jesus Christ is “He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead” (vs. 42). The gospel affirms that each one of us will have to give an account to God for the sins we committed in this life – for polluting our relationship with our Creator. Are we concerned about what we will say to God when we stand before the dread Judgment seat of Christ?

The most welcome and astonishing news announced by the apostle is this: Jesus Christ, will be our judge, and “He is Lord of all” (vs. 36). As the Second Person of the Godhead, He is ready to accept, love, forgive, heal, and free us from every demonic compulsion (vss. 38, 43). Do we seek Christ as our Savior, praying to Him to help us repent, so that He may *accept* us sinners, move us to *fear* Him, and *work righteousness* in our lives (see vs. 35)?

Saint Peter’s message in Caesarea is for all people, including those who read about that long-ago meeting with Cornelius and those who do not. Let us ask ourselves if we fear God and are willing to humble ourselves before Him. Will we risk believing in His promises, cry for His forgiveness, and work with Him for the renewal of our souls (see vs. 43)?

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

May 8 – Holy Evangelist John
1 John 1:1-7

God Is Light: *First John 1:1-7, especially vss 5, 7:* “*God is light and in Him is no darkness at all....But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*” In the opening seven verses of his first letter, the Apostle and Evangelist John, encapsulates the entire life-giving, eternal truth concerning the Lord manifested to His Apostles (vs 2). Part of the reason the Church added the title ‘Theologian’ when speaking of John, is because centuries of experience show that his teaching is true, purifying, and enlightening theology concerning the living God.

Saint John declares that “God is light” (vs 5), an experience anticipated by the Prophet David who of old said to the Lord, “Thou...coverest Thyself with light as with a garment” (Ps 103:2) and “in Thy light shall we see light” (Ps 35:10). And even as David drew close to God, he confronted light enveloping the Lord’s Person, light intimately associated with the Eternal Himself and with God’s illumination of all true Prophets. David evidently came very close to Saint John’s experience, for he confessed, “The Lord is my light and my savior” (Ps 26:1). In knowing God as Savior, he also knew Him as Light, as He Who illumines.

Later, Isaiah the Prophet spoke of God-as-Light, a word that became the Father’s promise to His Divine Son: “Behold I give You as the covenant of a race, and as the light of the Gentiles, that You should be the salvation to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6). Thus, for the Church of Christ, “the Lord shall be your everlasting light, and God your glory” (Is 60:20). It was on the basis of this prophecy that the Forerunner and Baptizer “came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light” (Jn. 1:7). Not that he was the Light, but announced that “the true Light which gives light to every man [was] coming into the world” (Jn 1:9).

Observe the subtle but significant theological development that began with the Prophet David’s experience of holy light surrounding God’s Person and reached fulfillment in the Forerunner’s declaration concerning Christ our God Incarnate: that He “gives light to every man coming into the world” (Jn 1:9). At first, Divine Light was only ‘associated’ with God; then, Light was seen and declared to be God, He Who must be called Light. Hereafter, the Apostle announces: “we have fellowship” with God (1 Jn 1:6). Light is the Lord Jesus, the very One Who created and sustains His Apostolic fellowship, the Church.

Furthermore, as a result of fellowship with God, the Apostles invite us into their Holy Communion (vs 3), for “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (vs 3). Take care to “walk in the light as He is in the light...have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son [will cleanse you] from all sin” (vs 7).

The holy, fellowship-giving God is He Whom Saint John proclaimed because he knew Jesus in the flesh. As the Apostle says, “we have seen with our eyes...we have looked upon, and our hands have handled...the Word of life” (vs 1). The capacity to call God ‘Light’ and to have fellowship with Him arose directly from interpersonal contact with the God-Man, Jesus Christ Who “cleanses...from all sin” (vs 7). He was ‘manifested’ as Jesus of Nazareth, the Life-Giver (vs 2). The Apostle says of Him, as Light, “we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father...was manifested to us” (vs 2). Fellowship with Him is eternal life, “if we walk in the light as He is in the light” (vs 7). The God-Who-is-Light is Christ our Savior, with Whom we may have fellowship and Eternal Life.

Come, let us go to the house of our God, to behold His glory as of an only Son of the Father, receiving light from His light. And ascending by the Spirit, let us praise our Triune God.

May 9 - Saturday of the Fourth Week of Pascha
Acts 12:1-11

Standing Firm When Attacked: Acts 12:1-11, especially vs. 1: “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the Church.” The Prophet David writes that “the kings of the earth were aroused . . . against the Lord” (Ps 2:2). Now, we read about one of the first politically motivated assaults on the Church. The mention of Herod the king in verse 1 places these events just after AD 41, for in that year Emperor Claudius enlarged Herod Agrippa’s kingdom in southern Syria and Galilee to include Judea. Agrippa chose to move his capital to Jerusalem.

Judea had been directly governed by the Romans for thirty-seven years. Every agent of government answered to the imperial procurators, of whom Pontius Pilate is the best known. Now, with the Jewish king Herod Agrippa’s ascension to the throne, those Jews who opposed the Church gained a political ally in their violent campaign against the Jewish Christians.

Saint Luke records this political shift toward violence, which begins with the execution of the Apostle James. “And because he [Herod] saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also” (Acts 12:3). When those with worldly power oppose the will of God, Christians are often made to suffer as a result of those beliefs and choices.

Even in modern times government authorities may turn against the Church, as happened in Soviet Russia, and the faithful must answer for their loyalties. Saint Luke makes it clear that Herod’s goals are political: the king is playing for the favor of his citizens in a nation with a nearly all-Jewish population. The Jewish supporters of Christ compose an unpopular minority, and thus make a useful target.

Ten years earlier their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, had been executed. Now the followers of Jesus are admitting Gentiles into their synagogues, ignoring the sacred laws dividing Jews from other ethnic groups. Their actions offend the traditional values of Israel’s citizens (e.g., see 1 Chr 16:34).

In Herod Agrippa, upholders of Jewish tradition now had a king of acceptable lineage, a ruler supported by imperial Rome. They could argue that Christian synagogues threaten the stability of Jewish privilege with the Romans by admitting Gentiles. Recall the Prophet David’s words concerning the kings of the earth: “The rulers were assembled together, against the Lord, and against His Christ. Let us break their bonds asunder, and let us cast away their yoke from us” (Ps 2:2-3).

Government necessarily depends upon control and the power to enforce the law. By pleasing most people through the oppression of the Christians, King Herod aimed to build up his popular support, solidify his power, and keep his newly restored kingdom in the hands of his family.

The God-given goal of the Church, on the other hand, is the redemption of all people who choose Christ, no matter what their ethnicity. Access to God’s kingdom belongs to everyone on the face of the earth. Furthermore, since God is Ruler of all, the Lord’s will is to be honored (Acts 12:11), no matter what governments have to say. Even we may be asked to resist for the truth some day.

The early Church unites in the face of Herod’s arrests and executions, trusting in “constant prayer” (vs. 12). Although Herod’s attacks are popular with society, the hand of the Lord proves greater, for “He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn, and the Lord shall deride them” (Ps 2:4). What truly matters is our stance before the Judge. May we always stand with the Lord, and welcome people of every ethnic group into our churches (Is 60:3)!

Preserve Thy holy Orthodox Church, keep it in peace and unconquerable forever.

**May 10 - Fifth Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Samaritan Woman)
Acts 11:19-30**

The Way of the Lord: Acts 11:19-26, 29-30, especially vs. 21: “*And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*” The British poet William Cowper penned the well-known line: “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.” The present passage from Acts reveals the diverse ways in which God illumines our darkness, so that in spite of our failures to see, we still understand that the Lord’s hand is at work (Is 41:20).

We know that some Jewish members of the early Church refused to share the gospel with Gentiles, contrary to Christ’s mandate that “all the nations” are to be brought into the Church (Mt 28:19). Although Saint Peter’s ministry focuses on the Jews, God leads him to preach to a group of Gentiles and baptize them (Acts 10:9-48). When Greek-speaking Jewish Christians scatter abroad after the stoning of Stephen, God uses them to reach the Gentiles.

At Antioch, God moves some of these Greek-speaking disciples to speak “to the Hellenists [Greeks], preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20). News of this prompts the Jerusalem Church to send Barnabas to Antioch. When he, in turn, sees “the grace of God” (vs. 23), he “departed for Tarsus to seek Saul” (vs. 25). He brings this former foe of the Church into her assemblies, and together they “taught a great many people” (vs. 26).

Let us note the many ways God moves in His disciples’ lives, for our Lord is active in every aspect of our own life. He may act through a conflict we are now facing, or a persecution we must endure for Christ, or an exile we must endure far from our homeland or family of origin. During our travels and while we are at home, in formal interviews and small talk, in planned meetings and chance encounters, God works on our dispositions and understanding.

Nothing in this world remains outside His purview. The way of the Lord is to be everywhere present, filling all things. Let us be attentive to what He is doing and saying at every moment.

The Church calls certain Fathers neptic, meaning “watchful.” Their lives teach us to be alert to the Lord’s promptings at all times. In the *Philokalia*, Archimandrite Ioannikios reminds us of “three giants of the devil, who demolish the spiritual life . . . to its very foundation . . . forgetfulness, ignorance, and indolence.” Yet “watchfulness . . . shows itself much stronger than these three treacherous malefactors.”

However, although “the Christian can stay free from the bonds of forgetfulness and ignorance . . . that alone is not enough for an awakened conscience.” In the spiritual life, theory must always be practiced. We must be diligent in working at the divine commandments and remain as energetic as possible in obeying Christ.

Take the case of Barnabas in the present reading. Why does the Church in Jerusalem send him out? Surely one reason is his record of industry. When the Church must care for many who are in need, he sells his land “and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:37).

This shining example of due diligence shows us why the Church selects him “to go as far as Antioch” (vs. 11:22). Clearly, he seeks to follow the commandments of God when he looks for Saul, finds him, and brings him to Antioch (vss. 25-26).

Attentiveness and watchfulness are precious gifts of the Holy Spirit. We read of Barnabas: “For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (vs. 24). Such grace may be ours, if we only make an effort. “The grace of the Holy Spirit is the light which enlightens man,” Saint Seraphim tells us, for this is the way of the Lord whose grace is meant to be ours!

O Holy Spirit, mysterious Light, fill me with the streams of Thy knowledge! – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

May 11 - Saints Cyril and Methodios
Romans 10:11-11:2

Going into All the World: Romans 10:11-11:2, especially vs 13: *“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”* Those who cross cultural divides confront many surprises including differences of custom, language, and even outlook on life’s meaning. At the same time, if people journey under mandate from the Lord, likely they already have been enriched in themselves by our Savior; for He is “rich to all who call upon Him” (vs 11). Thus, for ‘missionaries,’ for ‘divinely-called’ persons, for those who venture into ‘foreign’ worlds under the promises of God, any dislocations they meet are qualified by knowing that Lord does “not cast away His people whom He foreknew” (vs 2). Indeed not! He goes with them, “and [they] shall be like the tree which is planted by the streams of the waters, which shall bring forth its fruit in its season” (Ps 1:3). Nevertheless, struggle is inevitable in cross-cultural service.

Here’s an example from the days of Russian Alaska: in 1829, the Priest, John Veniaminov, served a flock scattered along the Aleutian chain, but sought to visit Saint George Island in the Pribilofs, far to the northwest in the Bering Sea. Gaining passage on the brig Goluvnin, he stopped at a fort located on Alaska’s mainland at the mouth of the Nushegak river. There he met fourteen native men who listened to his message. He spoke of the One God, “Whom we...worship...and what pleases Him and what displeases Him.” One of the men asked, “How is it that I think and do things that I don’t want or desire to think or do?” Through the interpreter, Father John explained that “everyone is that way, and...the more one conquers himself, the greater the reward that he will receive there in eternity.” All but one were baptized.

The ninth century missionary journey of two brothers, Cyril and Methodios, from Thessalonika in Greece, proved to be a cross-cultural struggle. After ordination as Priests the two moved to Constantinople. In the great city, Cyril served as librarian at the Hagia Sophia Cathedral. After some time, the Emperor Michael III sent the two into Moravia (an area today part of Czech Republic). Making basic friendships there, the brothers longed to provide both the Scriptures and the Divine Liturgy in readable forms so that the Moravian people might better access the Faith in their native, Slavic language.

It is clear that both brothers took a close interest in the language of the Moravians, but it was Cyril who struck on the idea of using his native Greek alphabet to develop a new script known and used today as Cyrillic; it is the orthography (the written characters) that provides for the great number of sounds in the Slavic languages. After a few years, the brothers visited Rome, seeking help for their work in Moravia. There Cyril, falling gravely ill; accepted tonsure as a monk and died in a Roman monastery. Desiring to continue the fledgling mission work in Moravia, and with the blessing of the Roman Pope, Methodios went back, but now he faced strong resistance for his mission project from nearby German bishops. These Church leaders, from a different linguistic and cultural region (Bohemia), arranged to have Methodios imprisoned for two years to stop his work with the Slavic-speaking Moravians. While the Pope did gain Methodios’ release, he thought it politic to withdraw his permission to use Cyrillic in the mission.

However, the seed of Truth had been planted among the Slavs, even if others in Central Europe did “not all obeyed the gospel” (Rom 10:16; Is 53:1). Christ was “found by those who did not seek” Him and “made manifest to those who did not ask for” Him (Rom 10:20; Is 65:1). Truly, when God calls anyone to labor for Him, wherever and whenever, He makes beautiful those “who bring glad tidings of good things” (vs 10:15; Nah 2:1).

As the Apostles’ equals, as lights that shine exceeding bright, the Gospel’s mighty-voiced Cyril and Methodios do we praise on earth and in Heaven, together with men and angels.

May 12 - Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 12:25-13:12

The Holy Spirit: Acts 12:25-13:12, especially vs. 2: “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” While the ministry of Christ our God is at the forefront of the Gospels, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is prominent in the Book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is named in nearly every chapter. Where He is not specifically identified, His presence and work are evident between the lines for the perceptive reader (vss. 14:9, 23; 27:10).

The present passage offers three instances of the Holy Spirit at work: ordaining, sending, and bestowing charisms. In each case, we notice how the Spirit of God carries out His ministry in cooperation, or synergy, with flesh-and-blood human beings who are open to Him and seeking His graces. Should it not be the same for us?

Let us first consider the ordination of Barnabas and Saul as apostles. The action of the Holy Spirit comes upon these two while they are serving as prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (vs. 13:1). The faithful already know of their godliness and spiritual illumination (vss. 9:19-20, 27; 11:22-26). Their election as missionaries is an example of how leaders move from lesser to greater ministries, which is still the Spirit’s way within the Orthodox Church.

Next, we observe the liturgical setting for these actions: they take place “as they ministered [in Greek, *leitourgounton*] to the Lord and fasted” (vs. 13:2). In other words, “as they *performed the liturgy* to the Lord and fasted.” This pattern continues today, for the mystery of ordination always occurs within the context of the Divine Liturgy.

What about the mention of fasting? We do not know if their ordination occurred during a fasting season, or if they fasted in anticipation of the ordination. Saint John Chrysostom affirms the latter: “A great, yes a great good is fasting: it is circumscribed by no limits. When need was to ordain, then they fast: and to them while fasting, the Spirit spake” (“Homily 27 on Acts,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 12, p. 230).

How do we understand the next part of verse 2, “the Holy Spirit said”? Within the good order of the Church, we know that devout members and leaders of pure heart still hear the Holy Spirit speaking within them; and they in turn speak and act in obedience.

God has instructed the Church to proclaim the Gospel to all nations (Mt 28:19; Acts 11:18). The church in Antioch does so; their pagan neighbors see the Spirit at work, for “a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

And what about the millions beyond Antioch? When the Holy Spirit speaks to the church in Antioch, He moves in their hearts. Together with the prophets and teachers at Antioch, the faithful agree in the Spirit, for He pours His wisdom upon them. They open themselves through worship and fasting so that the Spirit may reveal His candidates.

Thus the community *hears* and understands that these men are worthy. After additional fasting and prayer, they “laid hands on them” (vs. 13:3). Today, our bishops present a candidate for ordination before the faithful and say to the congregation, “Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the grace of the all-Holy Spirit may come upon him.”

The Holy Spirit ordains Paul and Barnabas and extends their ministry, for as men they are in need of the Spirit’s grace. Indeed, as the service of ordination says, the life-giving Spirit “completeth that which is wanting . . . through the laying on of hands.”

Afterward, wherever Barnabas and Saul go, they follow the Spirit’s lead (vs. 13:4), relying on His charisms for knowledge and insight. Thus, according to Saint John Chrysostom, “it shows that the Spirit did all.”

Through communion with Thee, O Blessed Spirit, may we ever serve Christ our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 13 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 13:13-24

Modus Operandi: Acts 13:13-24, especially vss. 14-15: “They came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’” The arrival of Saint Paul and his companions at this synagogue is consistent with the pattern of missionary outreach throughout Acts (e.g., vss. 13:5, 14:1). When the Sabbath comes, the apostolic teams attend services at the local synagogue or another Jewish gathering for worship. We find eight instances of this type of missionary contact scattered through the Book of Acts.

Today, visitors attend our churches to inquire about the faith. We may derive several principles from the apostles’ presentation of the Christian message in this passage. First, we naturally use the existing beliefs of those who seek information about our faith. We then consider the experience and knowledge of those who ask and, lastly, keep the focus on the Lord and the Gospel.

The very act of going to services on the Sabbath represents a conscious effort by the apostles to connect with people in the most natural way available to them. They do not go up to the rulers of the synagogue and ask to speak. Rather, they come honestly and correctly as fellow Jews. They then use whatever opportunities develop, based on shared beliefs and background.

In any encounters with visitors at our parishes, we should seek imitate the apostles. We begin with the beliefs we hold in common with others and work from this natural base. Then, when it becomes appropriate, we may rightly proceed to what may be new and unfamiliar.

If we establish a link with those who come seeking, they will be able to follow our presentation of Orthodox truths more easily. When Saint Paul speaks, he begins with the well-known history of Israel (vss. 13:17-22). Such an approach affirms his listeners and helps them to overcome any barriers to understanding by fostering an open atmosphere of inquiry.

The apostle’s very first words show that he has taken into account the composition of his audience. He immediately sees that, in addition to Jews, there are also “God-fearers” present – Gentiles who are sympathetic to Judaism.

Such devout non-Jews were common in first-century Greco-Roman synagogues, for Judaism’s monotheism and morality attracted many who were dissatisfied with the superstitions and excesses of paganism. However, barriers such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the rejection of idolatry stood in the way of these inquirers. It is well for us to be sensitive to – and honest about – our notable differences from our listeners, whether it be age, social status, religious affiliation, etc.

Even though today’s reading gives us only the opening lines of Saint Paul’s speech (vss. 17-24), the apostle clearly directs his message to a central theme: the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior of mankind. What about our own churches? What stands out, above all else, in our worship?

Icons of Jesus Christ surround us. In almost every prayer, He is named or addressed directly. We identify the Eucharist as His Body and Blood, which we receive for the cleansing of our souls, the hallowing of our thoughts, the enlightenment of our hearts – for establishment in Him. Following Saint Paul, let us strive to keep the Lord Jesus Christ at the forefront whenever we share with others about our Orthodox Christian faith.

Lord, Thou art our life and salvation. Glory to Thee who hast shown us the light!

May 14 - Thursday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 14:20-15:4

Oversight: Acts 14:20-15:4, especially vs. 23: “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” In this reading from Acts we follow the Apostles Paul and Barnabas on their first “church planting” journey. Saint Luke records only the highlights, omitting many tedious details of first-century travel via Roman sailing ships and on foot. Likewise, he gives us a brief outline of how the apostles trained wise leaders for their congregations. Then, as now, leaders are essential in Christian communities to answer questions, correct errors, and encourage the faithful. Providing ongoing oversight was – and is – a major apostolic activity (vs. 15:36).

Our New Testament word “oversight” derives from the Greek verb *episkopeo*, to “watch over.” During the earliest decades, oversight was carried out by the apostles themselves (2 Cor 11:28). The local shepherds they appointed continued watching over the new congregations after the apostles’ martyrdom.

Oversight still is a chief function of our bishops (*episkopoi*) today. How is apostolic-style oversight carried out in practice? Today’s reading covers several major facets of oversight, including the strengthening of souls (Acts 14:22) and the ordination of additional leaders who are called elders (*presbyteroi*) – that is, priests (vs. 23).

When Saint Paul’s missionaries return to congregations they have formed, their foremost goal is to “[strengthen] the souls of the disciples” (vs. 22). They accomplish this task through exhortation, encouragement, and commendation (vss. 22-23).

Exhortation is important because the pagan environment around these tiny new churches is rife with immorality and temptations. Does this situation sound familiar? At all times it is important for us to establish a distinctly Christian life and follow truly godly conduct. We exhort members of the Church to live always in a manner worthy of their calling in Christ (2 Thes 1:11).

So, for example, Saint Paul tells the members of the new Corinthian church, “I wrote to you . . . not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world . . . since then you would need to go out of the world. But . . . not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater” (1 Cor 5:9-11).

Similarly, we all need *encouragement* to live in Christ, so that we may love one another, cope with life’s difficulties and sorrows, and manifest the words and deeds of the saints and apostles (1 Cor 11:1). When the apostles plead with their new disciples, they also plead with us: “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3).

The apostles also exercised *commendation*, praying earnestly for their friends and converts in the Lord Jesus. We do the same in the liturgy when the priest says, “Let us commend ourselves, and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.”

Saint Paul acknowledges his own dependency on the Lord. “Therefore most gladly I will rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Likewise, the Church earnestly encourages us to make use of the Jesus prayer, acknowledging our need of God. Let us cry out to Him in our necessities, infirmities, and temptations!

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.

May 15 - Friday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 15:5-34

Living Boundaries: Acts 15:5-34, especially vss. 28-29: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” In the first millennium of the Christian era, the nascent Church faced a churning sea of Gentile cultures and conflicting morality. The early Fathers held firm to the charge of discipling all nations, but they were forced to carefully delineate between Christian practices and those of the Judaism of their origins and of the pagan world.

As Gentiles – the word’s Latin root means “peoples” – entered the Church, the requirements of the Mosaic Law caused a crisis within the community. Some Christians devoutly believed that unless one is “circumcised according to the custom of Moses, [one] cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). These disciples not only asserted that “it is necessary to circumcise [Gentile converts]” but also “to command them to keep the law of Moses” (vs. 5).

The present passage from Acts briefly describes the meeting of the first apostolic council “to consider this matter” (vs. 6). The decisions of this Jerusalem council (summarized in verses 28 and 29 above) show us how the young Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, remains faithful to the revelation given to Moses as well as to the new and final revelation received from Jesus Christ.

As Orthodox Christians living two millennia later, we find the council’s decision helpful in our own struggles to remain “unspotted from the world” (Jam 1:27). First, note that the council directs Gentiles to abstain from idolatrous sacrifices, to the point of not eating any meat offered to idols. Here, we see that Christianity shares with Judaism a sense of the purity central to the worship of God (Dt 5:7-9).

As we come into daily contact with worshipers belonging to other sects and to non-Christian religions, we guard our holy faith by avoiding the meetings and worship services of such groups. After all, how can we expect to grow in truth if we indulge in the superstitions and “unorthodox” practices that some of them promote?

There may be useful spiritual insight in what others say, but we do best if we approach truth through the Church’s worship, through Scripture, and by studying the words of the Church Fathers. Rather than going outside to learn the faith, let us attend to the spiritual resources provided at home.

The apostles are keenly aware of the conflicting sensitivities of mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles. Jewish Christians, for example, were raised to eat meat only if it had been drained of blood (Lv 17:10-12). The Gentile Christians had no such concerns.

Today, Orthodoxy is a worldwide faith that embraces a variety of ethnic traditions. The need for mutual respect continues to be important. Like the apostles, we are to carefully delineate what is essential to the faith and what is not. Also, let us never give offense to a fellow Christian (1 Cor 8:12).

Finally, the Council orders all Christians to keep themselves “from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29) – in the original Greek, *porneia*. This prohibition extends to all extramarital relations and obscenity, for we know that pagan worship incorporated sexual libertinism.

Among Christians, for whom marriage is an icon of the mystery between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:22-33), the sanctification of both private and public behavior is essential. We are to be holy as our Lord Jesus is holy.

Enlighten the eyes of my heart to keep Thy commandments with love unfeigned. – Post-communion Prayer

May 16 - Saturday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 15:35-41

Differences of Opinion: Acts 15:35-41, especially vs. 39: “Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus.” What are we to make of the difference of opinion between the Apostles Barnabas and Paul over whether John Mark should join their missionary journey? The Greek word translated as “contention” in verse 39 is also the root word for “paroxysm,” suggesting that the feelings dividing the two leaders were strong.

In response to the proposal that Mark should accompany them, Saint Paul finds him not worthy. Earlier, the young man “had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work” (vs. 38). However, according to Saint John Chrysostom this dispute was “not enmity nor quarreling. The contention availed so far as to part them” (“Homily 34 on Acts,” NPNF First Series, vol. 11, p. 213). They simply go their separate ways.

Perhaps Barnabas is influenced by concern for his cousin, John Mark (Col 4:10). At the same time the Church’s mission is also furthered, for the apostles divide the work, one focusing on Cyprus and the other fortifying the churches in Syria and Cilicia – all to the glory of God.

Elsewhere, the record shows no negative effects on the relationships among the three (see 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). Indeed, differences of opinion are not something to be avoided at all costs in the Church. Every aspect of truth, whether touching on discipline, revelation, or worship, is ultimately known fully and completely only to God. We are merely the vessels through whom teachings come to fruition. Any single individual can embrace only part of the truth.

God blesses the whole Church with the presence of the Holy Spirit, which guides the Body of Christ into all truth (Jn 16:13). Remember, the Church took centuries to resolve disagreements about essentials of the faith and to establish sure, dogmatic statements such as the Nicene Creed.

Over time a graduated scale for classifying the teachings and statements concerning the truth has evolved, from tentative opinion (*theologoumenon*) through doctrine and finally to dogma. On lesser matters we recognize differences and allow for varied opinions and styles among those who hold firm and invariable “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Many influences shape our perspective on issues in the Church, such as age, gender, culture, education, spiritual development, and experience, to name a few. The Holy Spirit adapts these factors through the extended process of decision-making that has resulted in balanced truth, the hallmark of Orthodox theology and living.

In the ongoing life of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ is the constant. He precedes all clarification of the truth in the midst of disputes, for He is ever the Lord and Master. As the Life, the Way, and the Truth, He is prior to all theology worthy of His name.

Thus disagreements within the Church are sometimes resolved as they were by Paul and Barnabas, by separate efforts that allow God to manifest the fullness of truth. In time the Holy Spirit revealed John Mark to be worthy, for he authored the earliest written Gospel and served Saint Paul in prison (Col 4:10).

Let us always labor in humility, not hiding our differences but approaching our mission with candor and submitting to the will of God. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “No evil did come of it [the parting of Barnabas and Paul] . . . but a great good. . . . For in many things they acted upon their human judgment, for they were not sticks or stones” – nor are we!

Lord, grant us wisdom to resist self-will and always to walk the path of Thy truth.

May 17 - Sixth Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Blind Man)
Acts 16:16-34

Highest Authority: Acts 16:16-34, especially vss. 20-21: “*And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, ‘These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.’*” The message of Jesus continues to evoke conflict, just as the Lord foretold (Mt 10:34). Today’s account illumines the inherent conflict between Christianity and human cultures.

When we are baptized, we commit ourselves to follow our King and God in every dimension of life, making Christ our first and highest authority in all things. “There shall be no different gods before My face” (Dt 5:7). Even today, our allegiance to Christ can sometimes bring us into conflict with various laws and customs. In reading these verses, let us meditate on the potential for conflict that faces all Christians and pray that our focus remains on the Lord.

We observe that the Apostle Paul becomes impatient with the persistent crying of the demonized slave-girl, even though what she says is true (Acts 16:16-18). As “servants of the Most High God,” the apostles are indeed proclaiming “the way of salvation” (vs. 17).

However, Saint Paul recognizes the anguish of a soul tormented by an unclean spirit. He understands that an oppressive demon possesses her and aids her divination. The source of her powers comes straight out of hell. Such demonic powers remain active in our secular, godless culture. As Christians, we must be alert to potential conflict with them, for demonic powers will always oppose the Church and the gospel.

Yet as Saint Paul faces a persistent demon, he is confident that the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than the powers possessing a wretched slave. He boldly cries, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (vs. 18).

The owners of the slave-girl appeal to the magistrates on the grounds that non-Romans had no right to teach foreign religions and deny the sacred Roman deities (vs. 21). Their appeal brings the apostles into direct conflict with the Roman authorities.

Actually, the Roman Empire tolerated many foreign religions as long as they took their place alongside the Roman pantheon of gods. Christians, however, declare that the Lord Jesus is the reigning authority who stands above all rulers.

Christ’s exclusivity challenges all illicit authority. Our Lord commissions us to teach, live, and bring this truth to all people (Mt 28:19). As we face cultural forces requiring us to deny Christ as our supreme authority, let us pray we understand what is at stake in such conflicts.

The jailer’s response illustrates how the struggles of Christians may engage others. An earthquake breaks open the jail, and the guard is certain he has lost his prisoners. He is ready to commit suicide rather than be executed by his superiors for the escape, but the apostles intervene and save him (Acts 16:27-28).

The jailer assumes that his prisoners would flee, but they did not! Rather, they call out to him and save his life. Here is a new teaching in the form of men caring for others above self, which clashes with the mores of Greco-Roman culture. He begs the apostles for instruction, asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (vs. 30).

When we stand for Christ as the highest authority, we may well behave in ways that may surprise or even shock others. As Christians, we ought to expect our loyalty to the faith to overturn many assumptions held by others about life. Let us prepare our hearts and souls to stand for the truth that is in us, and perhaps to save others around us.

O Lord, deliver Thy servants from all bondage to the enemy, and receive us into Thy heavenly kingdom. Open the eyes of our hearts that Christ may ever shine brightly in us. – Baptismal Prayer

May 18 - Monday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 17:1-15

The Upside Down World: Acts 17:1-15, especially vs. 6: *“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”* Contrary to the assertion of the Jews at Thessalonica that the apostles were turning the world upside down, they merely identified how inverted our world truly is. The Apostles Paul and Silas proclaimed that “Jesus . . . is the Christ” (vs. 3) in whom and through whom God restores all things (see Acts 3:21). God is with us, bringing the world back to its upright position, putting all things in order, and inviting us to join ourselves to Christ and be restored.

The gospel declares that Christ our Savior lived in the flesh, just as we do in this upside down world, for He was born from the Virgin Mary. In this very out-of-kilter existence He walked uprightly, divulging the disorientation of the world and exposing the delusion that life is as it should be.

Our Lord Jesus promises that a right-side-up world is coming, a world which He calls the kingdom of God. Furthermore, He undertakes the essential corrective action to straighten out the present disorder. Let us rejoice, for the restorative power of our Lord is available to everyone today!

Why are the Jews in Thessalonica offended at the apostles’ message? They know God made man in His own image (Gn 1:27). From Moses, they know that the Lord “will have mercy on whom [He] will have mercy, and . . . will have compassion on whom [He] will have compassion” (Ex 33:19). They understand that God is Lord “Most High over all the earth” (Ps 82:17), a majestic and awesome King “sitting on a throne, high and lifted up” (Is 6:1).

They know also what the Lord makes clear: “My counsels are not as your counsels, neither are your ways My ways. . . . As heaven is distant from the earth, so is My way distant from your ways” (Is 55:8-9).

However, the apostolic message confronts these Jews’ conclusions about God and overturns what they had believed for generations. While it might be acceptable to declare that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” to do good (Acts 10:38), it was offensive to assert that He was the Messiah, who was then crucified and “killed by hanging on a tree” (vs. 39).

A suffering Messiah seems like an affront to God. How could they accept the idea that the Messiah “had to suffer and rise again from the dead,” or that “this Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ” (vs. 17:3)? They are accustomed to an upside-down universe.

The proclamation of a suffering Messiah even sounds blasphemous to their ears. That God’s world is inverted might be clear, but to suggest that the Almighty God would right it through the suffering and death of His Messiah is still a “stumbling block” for many (1 Cor 1:23). How can one believe in the Resurrection if one expects the kingdom of God come about by God restoring the throne of King David by military means? Crucifixion and resurrection seem like fanciful, far-fetched, upside-down thinking.

Yet God is in Christ, and He as Lord makes all things right! Death is defeated, and Jesus our Savior sits forever at the right hand of the Father. We may live in the upside-down state of the human enterprise, but in Christ we know the longsuffering mercy and compassion of God.

When we consider the wars and revolutions of men, we discover that none of these victories ever stood this world right side up for very long. Perhaps some improvements came about, but they proved only temporarily. One eternal fact stands over history: Christ is risen, and the eternal kingdom of God is at hand!

Rejoice, O Jerusalem and leap for joy, in that thou beholdest Christ the King like a bridegroom come forth from the grave. Receive the glad tidings of the Resurrection of Christ! – Paschal Orthros

May 19 - Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 17:19-28

Some New Thing: Acts 17:19-28, especially vss. 24-25: “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.” The Apostle Paul, “as his custom was” (vs. 17:2), visited the synagogues in Athens (vs. 17) and also the agora – the city’s market center. There the masses mingled with philosophers from the classical schools, spending “their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (vs. 21).

As the primary bearers of Hellenistic culture, the Athenian philosophers naturally wish to bring the visiting apostle to a gathering at the Areopagus or Mars Hill (vs. 19). According to Saint Luke, the Stoics and Epicureans who “encountered him” (vs. 18) are especially curious about his “new doctrine” (vs. 19). Among the pagan schools of philosophy, these two dedicated the greatest effort to illumining the uncertainties of life and seeking truth concerning the divine. However, their efforts were based solely on human reasoning.

Saint Paul’s words undercut the Athenians’ basic assumption that the ultimate truth about life can be found by men through reason, using trial and error. We recall that in the Garden of Eden the serpent suggests this very approach, promising Adam and Eve “you will be like gods” (Gn 3:6).

Ultimately the Church, in the person of the Apostle Paul, brings the true light to Hellenized world, which “received the heavenly Spirit” and acquired “the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity,” as we sing during the liturgy after holy communion. This new faith made profound advances upon Western culture until the Enlightenment.

Gradually, the idea that mankind has the capacity to discern its own truth gradually regained ascendancy. Today, we are once again living in a world where the ancient lie rules. Scientific materialism and secular humanism openly attack the truth which Christ and His apostles taught.

What Paul shares with the Athenian philosophers is truly “some new thing” (Acts 17:21): the Word of life, sent by God’s own initiative, to enlighten mankind (vss. 30-32). The Athenians’ “unknown God” (vs. 23) is the Christ who has revealed Himself to the Church.

Christ is disclosed as the Maker of all things, visible and invisible (vss. 23-29). Saint Paul proclaims that the Lord has revealed Himself openly. As the psalmist says, “God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us” (Ps 117:26).

The ancient Hellenists and modern materialists alike believe we can decipher “the unity of all things contrary to the appearance of diversity.” Metropolitan John Zizioulas repudiates this view and its corollary position that God does not rule over the material world since “He too is bound by . . . necessity to the world and the world to Him” (*Being as Communion*, p. 29).

Saint Paul’s *new thing* directly counters this error, for he declares, “God . . . made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth” (vs. 24). God needs nothing, for “He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (vs. 25). The Creator existentially contradicts the ancient and modern lie that leads mankind on the impossible quest to know everything.

The apostle also addresses a related lie, initiated by Plato: “The world does not exist for the sake of man, but man exists for its sake.” Herein we find a denial of God’s infinite freedom as well as His gift of free will to us as persons who are intended to be “like” God.

Instead, the Apostle Paul says, “We are also His offspring,” i.e., free beings (vs. 28). If we have accepted the lies of materialism, let us hasten to repent (vs. 30)!

O Lord, Thou hast made all things new. Help us live in Thy likeness to eternal life.

May 20 - Wednesday of Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 18:22-28

The Fullness of the Faith: Acts 18:22-28, especially vs. 25: *“This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.”* If we carefully read through the services of baptism, chrismation, and holy communion – the mysteries of initiation into the life in Christ – we notice many prayers asking God to aid His new servants in actualizing and preserving their salvation.

For example, we pray that the catechumen “may render praise unto Thee,” “ascribe unto Thee glory,” and “be no more a child of the body, but a child of Thy kingdom.” We ask that “he may prove himself a child of the Light” and “put away from him the old man.” Indeed, we are to work “out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling [knowing] . . . it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

Such prayers help explain why the Christian faith was at first called “the Way” (Acts 9:2). Today’s reading describes a man traveling on this way of faith. Apollos is quick to grow in the truth and to show others “that Jesus is the Christ” (vs. 18:28).

A future apostle and bishop of Smyrna, Apollos exhibits three qualities needed in order to attain to the fullness of the faith. We too need to become “mighty in the Scriptures . . . instructed in the way of the Lord, and . . . fervent in spirit” (vss. 24-25).

In calling Apollos “mighty in the Scriptures,” Saint Luke states that “he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord” (vs. 25). It is easy to understand how Apollos acquires those skills: he is humble, for he allows Aquila to instruct him. In the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “This man lets himself be taught (“Homily 40 on Acts,” NPNF First Series, vol. 11, p. 247).

Such a learning process involves an ongoing, cooperative, synergistic struggle on the part of the faithful. It requires us to find teachers who know the truth and are able to impart what they know, and it requires us to be students who are open to learning.

Our success in this endeavor depends upon our attitude as trainees. We need to acquire a thirst for ferreting out the truth, and cultivate minds and hearts that are willing to dig down deep into the substance of the faith.

However, we must take care that we do not confuse the fullness of faith with acquiring information “about” the faith. Rather, we are to work at living “in the way of the Lord” (vs. 25), for as Christ reminds us, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

To know and actualize the fullness of the faith thus requires us to be “fervent in spirit” (Acts 18:25). We are to seek to receive the Holy Spirit, who “doth overflow with streams . . . of grace, and doth water all . . . with refreshing life” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, it is the faithful man who “seeks . . . salvation and . . . is resolved for its sake to . . . offer true repentance for all his sins and . . . practice the virtues which are opposite to the sins committed, [who] then . . . will acquire the Holy Spirit who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom” (*Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 104).

May we dedicate ourselves to cleansing the corners of our souls in order to become whole, and may the hearts of our teachers overflow with joy! And may we ever be thankful for the Scriptures and teachings of the Church Fathers, and for the many excellent teachers and instructors who live and share with us the wisdom they have gained in the faith.

O Christ, look with mercy upon us Thy servants who boweth the head unto Thee, and keep us as warriors invincible and victors to the end through Thy crown incorruptible. – Chrismation Prayer

May 21 – Feast of the Ascension
Acts 1:1-12

The King of Glory: Acts 1:1-12, especially vs. 9: “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” The apostles watch the Lord Jesus visibly ascend, returning to the eternal heavens beyond the boundaries of space, time, and creation. Let us rejoice as Christ is “taken up [as] a cloud received Him out of their sight” (vs. 9), for the Lord’s Ascension establishes humanity’s place in the heavens.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, the Prophet David perceived Him with the eye of his heart: “Comely art Thou in beauty more than the sons of men; grace hath been poured forth on Thy lips, wherefore God hath blessed Thee for ever” (Ps 44:2). After His Ascension, the Lord continued to reveal Himself in many times and places.

When the Lord Jesus comes again, everyone “shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). Thus Isaiah’s promise remains true: “All of you will see a King with His glory, and your eyes will see a land from afar” (Is 33:17). Like the first disciples at the Ascension, however, we need to receive the assurances of the Holy Spirit so that we – and all the faithful – may find the power to live for Him “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Indeed, we greatly depend on the Holy Spirit! Christ “presented Himself alive” (vs. 3) after the Resurrection. After the Ascension, however, “He through the Holy Spirit [gave] commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen” (vs. 2) so that those mortal men might fully understand the weight of His words.

Even now, in this present existence, our God and King still communicates with us through the Holy Spirit. He speaks to our human, spiritual capacities, for He made us as creatures who are both spiritual and physical.

Before the outpouring at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was already at work illumining and enlivening Christ’s growing flock. Now, every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we join our priests in praying for the Spirit of God “to descend upon us.” The Spirit’s quickening presence remains essential if we are to understand and obey Christ our Lord. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we would remain in darkness and confusion. Therefore, let us be attentive and heed the Holy Spirit whom Christ sends.

In today’s passage from Acts, we read that the risen Lord “presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs” (vs. 3). “Infallible proofs” is a translation of the Greek word *tekmeriois*. This word was used by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle to connote the strongest proof of which a subject is susceptible.

As we study the appearances of the risen Lord in the Gospels, it becomes clear that Christ our God uses many circumstances and gatherings of the apostolic Church to *assure* the apostles’ hearts and minds of the truth of the Resurrection. If we consider these manifest physical appearances in light of Saint Luke’s observation that our Lord still acts through the Holy Spirit, the meaning of *tekmeriois* in Acts becomes clear. As we pray to Him, our Savior uses tangible means to remove lingering shadows of doubt from our minds (Jn 20:27-29).

He continues working with us today, assuring us who believe in the apostles’ witness “through their word” (Jn 17:20). Let us open our hearts to Christ our God that He may build up our faith, and open ourselves to the Spirit who gives us faith, virtue, and power to be faithful witnesses “to [Christ] . . . to the end of the earth” (vs. 8).

When we seek the Spirit, we are drawn to the Lord “through the promise of good things to come.” Then everything we say and do leads others to turn to Christ the Savior in the joy of His truth.

O Lord, show me as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise the habitation of sin. – Post-communion Prayer

May 22 - Friday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 19:1-8

Pluralism: Acts 19:1-8, especially vss. 1-2: “*And finding some disciples [Paul] said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’*” In a pluralistic society, diverse ethnic, religious, and social groups participate independently in their own traditions within a common political order. Pluralism aptly describes the Greco-Roman world into which the apostles introduced the Church, for Rome’s social structure was in many ways similar to that of the contemporary West.

The present reading provides us with a glimpse into the methods used by the Apostle Paul when encountering people with a potential attraction to Christianity. His approach should be of particular interest for us as Orthodox Christians, for we live amidst many Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church which shares many elements of the true faith.

Although the apostle welcomes his contact with other disciples (vs. 1), he first carefully inquires into the nature of their knowledge and experience of the faith (vss. 2-4). He is clearly laboring to fulfill the Lord’s desire for “all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

When Saint Luke refers to the men whom Paul finds as *disciples* (Acts 19:1), he is using a term reserved for those who, to some degree, “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” (vs. 18:25). This passage merely informs us that the Apostle Paul *found* these men, without telling us how the meeting came about. Instead, Saint Luke focuses on the Apostle Paul’s delight at a chance to discuss the faith with those who have an evident sympathy for the gospel.

As Orthodox Christians, we have similar encounters with our neighbors, work colleagues, and social acquaintances. Some may express interest in touring our church or attending services, while others come to weddings or funerals. Likewise, we may be invited to participate in local interfaith projects.

The apostle’s response to “finding some disciples” (vs. 19:1) is to talk willingly, inquire carefully into their beliefs and practices, and share fully the truth of the faith. We should never fear our encounters with others of friendly persuasion, nor hesitate to reach out in friendship. Let us be open to such persons while keeping our feet firmly planted in Orthodox truth, without any trace of defensiveness or argumentativeness.

The Apostle Paul is especially interested in these disciples’ knowledge and experience of two essential doctrines of the faith: the Holy Spirit and the work of “Christ Jesus” (vss. 2-4). The early Church was much concerned with clarifying, correcting, and defining the relationship of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Let us never assume that another disciple necessarily has an adequate or complete theology concerning God.

Note the positive outcome of the apostle’s discussions and inquiries: “They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And . . . Paul . . . laid hands on them” (vss. 5-6). They enter the Church and the life in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

After we receive holy communion during the Divine Liturgy, we hear this hymn: “We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us.” Let us emulate the apostles and share our faith with all who are open and interested. As our relationships with other Christians develop, we quietly but firmly uphold the fullness of the faith without compromise, belligerence, or defensiveness.

Grant, O Lord, that many may be found worthy to flee unto Thy name for refuge. – Prayer for Catechumens

May 23 – Saturday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 20:7-12

Curing the Heart: Acts 20:7-12, especially vs. 10: “But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, ‘Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him.’” God will heal us from our slavery to sin so long as we sustain our life in the Church, read Holy Scripture, and partake of the mysteries of confession and holy communion. We may be heavy with sleep because of our passions, yet we rise to life within the Church. The Lord is among His people, embracing us and restoring us to life.

However, we must resolve to confess our sins and seek God’s grace if we are to be blessed like Eutychus in today’s passage from Acts. God longs to heal us, and He will heal!

When we discover our deep enslavement to the passions, it can be shocking. Yet it is also an occasion for joy. Even though our lives are disordered, we only need accept that we are sick. Then, according to Saint Diodochos of Photike in the *Philokalia*, the Holy Spirit discloses to us that deep place “where the grace of God is hidden” (vol. 1, p. 279). This inner place becomes our gateway to the path of true healing.

If we seek out “where the grace of God is hidden” in our hearts, we discover that there “God meets with man, there He imparts His knowledge, there man gains a sense of His being,” according to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos. And yet “in order for this communion and vision of God to come about, the heart must be pure, which the Lord affirms as well: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Mt 5:8).”

Metropolitan Hierotheos describes several actions involved in the curing of the heart. He emphasizes watchfulness and courage, for “only courage . . . gives a man heart to revive his nous, dead from sin. . . . Even if he bows to the devil . . . he hopes in God” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 139).

We first embrace *repentance*, which Saint John Climacus defines as “the renewal of baptism . . . a contract with God for a fresh start in life. Repentance goes shopping for humility [and] is ever distrustful of bodily comfort. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. . . . Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord . . . the purification of the conscience” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54).

Contrition follows: “A sacrifice unto God is a broken spirit; a heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise” (Ps 50:17). Saint Mark the Ascetic recommends “vigil, prayer, and patient acceptance” for realizing contrition, but we must also confess our sins and the Lord’s Passion on our behalf (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 111).

Contrition leads to *pain in the heart*. Any growth without spiritual pain is bogus and fruitless. Only “through many tribulations may we enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Pain in the heart leads to *tears*: “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Abba Poemen tells us to “weep . . . [for] there is no other way than this” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 184). Tears cleanse the heart like the waters of baptism. If we, as children of this age, have become estranged from tears, let us learn to cry for help!

God then brings a *fire engendered in the heart* to burn out our spiritual sicknesses. We labor until this fire enters the sanctuary of our heart to consume every passion, predisposition, and hardness found within. God’s gift of fire creates an inner *warmth* of love toward the Savior, concentrating the powers of the soul in undistracted prayer. Let us persist in purifying the heart!

O Master, grant me healing of soul, unto the enlightenment of the eyes of my heart. – Post-communion Prayer

**May 24 – Seventh Sunday of Pascha (Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council)
Acts 20:16-18, 28-36**

Savage Wolves: Acts 20:16-18, 28-36, especially vss. 29-30: *“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”* The attentive reader of Acts soon recognizes the Holy Spirit as the lead actor in the Church, for He is named in nearly every chapter as the director and master of all that transpires, as well as being the Author of Life.

The Orthodox Church continues to call upon the Holy Spirit as our heavenly King. The visible authorities in the Church – our priests and bishops – pray for the protection of the flock of Christ and build up the faithful by relying on the Holy Spirit. The health of the Church depends upon the Spirit as the true, unseen authority operating within every pastor, synod, council, and faithful member.

In Acts, as throughout Church history, the Holy Spirit is known by His work in the visible life of the Church, incarnating the presence of the Holy Trinity amongst the people. The holy icons, Scriptures, and writings of the Fathers, the canons, ecumenical councils, and liturgical rites and their texts receive particular honor and reverence because they reveal the Spirit’s presence.

If we accept the Holy Spirit as head of the Church, how does the Church then function to protect God’s own against the “savage wolves” of heresy? Predators of the hearts of the faithful have come among us repeatedly during the last two thousand years. Heretics and schismatics appear from the first century onward, a fact that both New Testament history and current events amply demonstrate.

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, whom we celebrate today, met at Nicaea to address the threat of the heretic Arius. A brilliant clergyman with many followers, Arius “[drew] away the disciples after [himself]” (vs. 30). The Arian controversy thus exemplifies what Saint Paul prophesied to the Ephesian clergy.

At Nicaea “the God-mantled Fathers, having . . . come together with energy, and burning with zeal, did cut with the sword of the Spirit him who is marked with confusion because of his blaspheming belief, being prompted by the directing Spirit” (vespers for the Sunday of the Holy Fathers). These holy Fathers submitted themselves to the Spirit and applied their energies against destructive partisans, heeding Saint Paul’s warnings.

Because the errant priest Arius was not “sparing the flock” (vs. 29), Bishop Alexander of Alexandria assembled the clergy of that city. He then called a regional synod of bishops from Egypt and Libya. These gatherings, whose goal was to “support the weak” (vs. 35), called on Arius to recant the heresy that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist.

Arius, however, continued “speaking perverse things” (vs. 30). He even convinced a synod of bishops in Nicomedia to declare his views orthodox. The Emperor Constantine then sent Hosios, a bishop faithful to “the word of . . . grace” to build up the Church (vs. 32). The result was the first great council at Nicaea.

There the bishops, as true shepherds of the Church, took “heed to . . . all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit [had] made [them] overseers” (vs. 28). Both Arius and his teaching were rejected, and the Nicene Creed took form with the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

By celebrating today the memorial of the divine Fathers, O all-compassionate Lord, we implore Thee, through their petitions, to deliver Thy people from the harm of all heretics, making us worthy to glorify the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, as one God. – Festal Hymn

May 25 – Monday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 21:8-14

The Will of the Lord: Acts 21:8-14, especially vs. 14: “So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, ‘The will of the Lord be done.’” In the well-known “Prayer at the Beginning of the Day” attributed to Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, we ask the Lord to “help me in all things to rely upon Thy holy will.” We may find it difficult to concur with God’s will, however, when events run counter to our idea of His will – a problem the saints face at Caesarea (vs. 12).

In the *Philokalia*, reliance on the will of God is illustrated by the following story. The Lord sends a prophet to confront a cruel king. Wondering how to get the king’s attention, the prophet comes upon a man working with an axe and says, “Thus saith the Lord, strike my head with your axe.”

The workman replies, “Certainly not; I will not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed.” The prophet finds another laborer and repeats, “Thus saith the Lord, lift your axe and strike my head.” Without hesitation the man strikes the prophet’s head.

The prophet says, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you, for you listened to the voice of the Lord.” Thus bloodied, the prophet gains the king’s sympathy and delivers the Lord’s message. According to Saint Peter of Damascus, “God seems to be angry with the man who is disobedient and to bless the man who is obedient. But in reality it is not so. . . both were equally good, since the motive of both was to do God’s will” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 279-281).

Ultimately, Saint Paul’s companions yield to God’s will (vs. 14). Saint Cyprian of Carthage says of the Lord’s Prayer, “We add: ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ not so that God may do what He wants, but that we may be able to do what He wants. For who could hinder God from doing whatever He wishes?” (Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 165).

Presumably we, too, desire to do the will of God. Two issues face us when we seek to conform to the will of God. The first is *discernment*, the second *willingness*. How do we discern the will of God in the flux of circumstances in this life, and then become willing to do His will?

According to Saint Paul, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). He adds immediately, “But he who is spiritual judges all things” (vs. 15). Surely Christ our God asks us to do His will. Our first task then as disciples is to be *spiritual* so that we may more readily judge the will of God aright in every circumstance.

Saint Cyprian says that being spiritual “entails being humble in our lifestyle, steadfast in our faith, modest in our words, just in our actions, merciful in our dealings, disciplined in our conduct, incapable of inflicting a wrong but able to bear one inflicted on us; keeping peace with our brothers; loving God with all our heart; cherishing Christ . . . [and] clinging tenaciously to His love; standing brave and confident by His Cross; and whenever His name and honor are involved, displaying in our speech the constancy to confess Him, or under torture the courage to fight for Him, and in death the patience for which we shall be crowned.”

Often we know the will of God but do not wish to obey, like the two sons in the Lord Jesus’ parable (Mt 21:28-31). Obstinacy, as well as the unspiritual state of our hearts and minds, hinders us. Let us recall the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “It is an evil thing not to choose the good from the start, but it is a heavier charge not even to be brought around. . . . Let no one be like this, but though he might be sunk down to an extremity of wickedness, let him not despair of being able to change for the better” (“Homily 67 on Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 412).

O Lord, in every hour of the day reveal Thy will to me, and enable me to do Thy will.

May 26 – Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 21:26-32

Meeting Opposition – Consideration: Acts 21:26-32, especially vs. 26: “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.” In some parts of the world, being a Christian carries the possibility of bodily assault on a daily basis. This threat may take the form of violence to person and property, or even death at the hands of intemperate people who hate us for not believing as they do. Yet Christ our God, the apostles, and our pastors teach us to be considerate of others, never compromising our commitment to “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self control” (Gal 5:22-23).

In today’s reading the Apostle Paul’s life is under threat in the Temple, underscoring this point and begging our thoughtful reflection. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem know Paul is a walking target because of his association with non-Jews. They take great care to defuse public opinion and to present him in the most acceptable light as possible through acts of piety highly esteemed in Jewish society, even by the most conservative element (Acts 21:23-24).

The plan almost works (vs. 26). Then Saint Paul is noticed by some “Jews from Asia” (vs. 27), a region where he actively led Gentiles to Christ Jesus. These most vigorous opponents of Christianity “stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (vs. 27), putting the whole city “in an uproar” (vs. 31).

Saint Paul reminds us that we should not “share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure” (1 Tim 5:22). When threatened, our foremost concern is for our spiritual health. We are to maintain a Christ-like spirit, so that even if assaulted we do not lose our salvation through imprudence. For this reason we pray to gain gentleness, goodness, and faithfulness; we strive to be modest, prudent, and honest at all times.

By all means we should consult with our spiritual elders when a confrontation is likely, as the Apostle Paul does. Note that this passage records no sinful reactions from him – even when he is slandered (Acts 21:28), mobbed (vs. 30), and beaten (vss. 31-32). He contains himself like the Lord Jesus, who was “led as a sheep to the slaughter” (see Is 53:7).

We see how considerate the Christians are of the sensibilities of their fellow Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah. Paul’s supporters develop an honest plan to quell the rancor against him. Four of their members have taken Nazirite vows (see Nm 6:2-21), and are now completing their sacred oaths. A highly honored custom among devout Jews was to cover the expenses of the sacrifices required of those concluding Nazirite vows. Herod Agrippa, for example, was famous for providing such pious aid, and gained much popularity by doing so.

Hence the plan to have Paul pay the offerings of the four men serves as a straightforward show of piety (Acts 21:24). Saint Paul embraces the proposal. He takes the men, is purified with them, enters the Temple to announce the expiration of their vows, and arranges payment of their offering (vs. 26).

After the seven-day waiting period is over, he returns to the Temple. However, fanatic enemies “stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (vs. 27). Their attack leads to his being taken into protective custody by soldiers from the Roman garrison (vss. 32-34).

None of us can foresee or prevent any attack that may arise against us. However, we can pray to live our faith mindfully and honestly, holding to the Lord Jesus’ promise: “The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:12).

O Christ, grant us the spirit to think and do always such things as are right: that we who cannot do anything good without Thee may, by Thee, live according to Thy will. – Western Rite Prayer for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

May 27 - Wednesday of Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 23:1-11

Meeting Opposition, continued – Godly Knowledge: Acts 23:1-11, especially vs. 6: “*But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!’*” Reading and meditating daily on Holy Scripture is a practice greatly commended by the Church Fathers. “And we, too . . . should devote ourselves to [the Scriptures] and meditate on them so constantly that through our persistence a longing for God is impressed upon our hearts. . . . The wisdom of God renders what is difficult easy, so that gradually it deifies man,” writes Saint Peter of Damascus in the *Philokalia* (vol. 3, p. 123).

Reading Scripture regularly leads us deeper into the ways of Lord, so that we may acquire His perspective on the activities of the world. Scripture provides a light to our minds amidst the swirl of popular opinion, trends, and fads. Let us consider Saint Paul’s experience during the twenty-four hours described in this passage as a guide for the right use of Scripture as the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).

Naturally, the Apostle Paul received thorough training in the writings of the Old Testament; the eloquence of his epistles confirms this. Saint Paul explains that this intimacy with Scripture began when he was “brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law” (Acts 22:3).

Gamaliel was a highly honored teacher and also a member of the Sanhedrin (vss. 5:33-40). In the Mishnah, a Jewish commentary on the Old Testament, Gamaliel is called *Rabban*, meaning “our teacher,” a title even more respected than Rabbi.

Saint Paul’s understanding would go beyond what he learned from this great master, however. After he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, the Holy Spirit illumined his existing knowledge of Scripture and further opened his heart to knowledge of the wisdom of God.

We observe the apostle using his God-given knowledge five different times in the events surrounding today’s verses from Acts. First, divine wisdom leads Saint Paul to speak Greek to the commander of the Roman garrison. This man intervenes with a squadron of soldiers as a mob is beating him to death, and grants Paul permission to address the throng (vss. 21:37-40).

The same godly wisdom prompts the Apostle Paul to speak to the crowd in Hebrew. They fall silent when they hear the sacred language of the synagogue and Temple (vs. 22:2). As a result, he gains an opportunity to preach the gospel to the crowd (vss. 22:3-22).

Later, when the soldiers prepare to examine him by scourging, he wisely asks, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” (vs. 22:25). He uses knowledge of his status as a Roman citizen to halt a painful and illegal interrogation.

Facing the members of the Jewish council, he twice more uses his divinely given wisdom. First, he quotes from Exodus, which gains his listeners’ respect even though he speaks against the high priest (Acts 23:5).

Then, aware of the existing disagreements between the Sadducees and the Pharisees on the council, he appeals to the Pharisees’ bias (vs. 6). This move quickly divides the assembly. The subsequent quarrel leads to his return to the protective custody of the Roman military, and protects him from stoning or assassination by his enemies.

Grounding in Scripture will always draw God’s servant closer to Him. Let us empower ourselves with this most effective knowledge (Jn 16:1, 13).

Master, grant us true knowledge, that we may ever think and do what pleases Thee. – Prayer of the Priest at Orthros

May 28 – Thursday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 25:13-19

Illumination or Allegation: Acts 25:13-19, especially vss. 18-19: “When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against [Paul] of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.” This passage gives us a glimpse into the mind of the Roman authorities who oversaw the district of Palestine in Syria during the first century. Festus, the newly appointed regional procurator, receives a courtesy visit from King Agrippa, head of the local Jewish satellite state, and his sister Bernice (vs. 13).

The royal presence seems to offer Festus further insight into the status of the prisoner, Paul, whom the procurator inherited from his predecessor, Felix (vss. 14-15). Already, Festus has been through two hearings with Paul’s accusers among the Jewish chief priests and elders. These witnesses fail to clarify the question of why Paul should be sent to Rome to appear before the courts of the emperor (vss. 16-18).

What troubles Festus is that the only “questions against him [arose from] their own religion . . . about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive” (vs. 19). The New English Bible helpfully translates verse 19 to read “certain points of disagreement . . . about their peculiar religion, and about someone called Jesus, a dead man whom Paul *alleged* to be alive.”

To Festus, the rancor against Paul seems to be merely an internal Jewish religious issue. It apparently has nothing to do with governance, or with the good peace and order of the empire. In this light, the standing order to send Paul to Caesar at Rome seems petty and untoward (vss. 11-12).

As Christians, however, we perceive in these verses from Acts 25 the profound energy that Jesus’ Resurrection brings into the world. We understand that Christ is among us, and likewise present in the events in Caesarea. We are illumined, for Christ is risen, trampling down death by death and filling us “with the pure light of . . . divine knowledge, and [opening] the eyes of our mind to the understanding of [His] gospel teachings” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Christ is among us, implanting in us “the fear of [His] blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto” Him. By contrast, the Roman official Festus is still groping in the quandaries of the world, considering how someone can be charged with worshipping a dead man who is somehow *alleged* to be alive.

In truth, Christ is “the illumination of our souls and bodies . . . and unto [Him] we ascribe glory together with [His] unoriginate Father and [His] all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “The man who sees God possesses in this act of seeing all there is of the things that are good. By this we understand life without end, eternal incorruption, undying beatitude. With these we shall enjoy the everlasting kingdom of unceasing happiness; we shall see the true Light and hear the sweet voice of the Spirit; we shall exult perpetually in all that is good in the inaccessible glory” (“The Beatitudes,” Ancient Christian Writers 18, p. 144).

For us, there are no allegations that require our careful consideration. We ourselves have beheld the Resurrection of Christ and boldly sing the Paschal hymn.

Thy Cross do we adore, O Christ, and Thy holy Resurrection we praise and glorify, for Thou art our God, and we know none other beside Thee. – Paschal Hours

May 29 - Friday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 27:1-44

Telling the Truth: Acts 27:1-44, especially vs. 11: *“Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul.”* Most of us have neighbors, acquaintances, or friends – even beloved family members – who live their lives without faith in Christ. Many of these unfortunate people exist without the benefit of the essential wisdom that our faith provides. Others may have rejected what they once learned of Christianity in favor of secular philosophies, exotic religions, or worldly ideologies.

What can we do when we see such people facing life’s momentous decisions bereft of the guidance of Christ? How do we share the truth with those in need?

Today’s account from Acts follows Saint Paul on a journey with 276 souls aboard an ancient Roman cargo ship. They are sailing for Italy from the southwestern coast of the Anatolian peninsula, part of modern Turkey (vs. 6). Twice during the voyage, the ship’s company faces circumstances requiring life-and-death decisions (vss. 9, 30).

The Apostle Paul’s responsibilities are intensified by the fact that in both instances God extends insight to him concerning the decisions to be made (vss. 10, 21, 23). If we read carefully, this passage provides insights to guide us as we speak to others, especially to those who lack the resources of a strong faith.

After first setting sail from Anatolia, the ship advances slowly because of contrary winds. The crew is forced to head southward across the Mediterranean to the coasts of Crete, arriving at a port unsuitable for spending the winter (vs. 12). The experience of the sailors and the desire of the passengers concur on the need to continue sailing to a more suitable harbor, farther up the island coast (vss. 11-12).

However, the Lord reveals to the Apostle Paul that this move will result in shipwreck (vs. 10). Often, in our pluralistic modern world, the insights of technology and human knowledge run counter to our traditional Christian morality, experience, and wisdom. Let us observe how Saint Paul handles such a case.

First, he listens; then he shares his insights and convictions in a simple, friendly, and calm manner. Nevertheless, as Saint Luke reports, “the majority advised to set sail from there” (vs. 12). Once this decision is reached, the apostle keeps silent. He does not demand that they follow his advice, nor does he rail against them or ridicule them for continuing. Sometimes it may be best to allow the will of God to prevail through ensuing events, so that He may teach others the wisdom of His way and confirm the word given to His servants.

When the ship is hit with tempestuous winds, the vessel is in serious jeopardy (vss. 14-20). The sailors make every effort to deal with these harsh conditions. They allow the ship to run before the wind, strengthen the hull with cables, drop the sails, and throw all unnecessary cargo overboard to prevent swamping.

In the midst of these extreme conditions, the Lord again reveals useful insights and wisdom to Saint Paul (vss. 22-25, 30-31). Furthermore, God creates an openness and receptiveness among the company to heed the apostle’s words.

The apostle restates what God has revealed to him, and also witnesses to his faith by action: “He took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat.

“Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves” (vss. 35-36). Shipwreck follows, yet all hands survive. In the end, Paul’s counsel prevails to save the prisoners’ lives (vss. 42-43). May our speech imitate his kindness, modesty, and truth, guided by our trust in the Lord.

O God, let my hearing be inaccessible to idle words, but establish me in Thy grace. – Priest’s Prayer, Divine Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts

May 30 – Saturday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 28:1-31

Sharing the Faith: Acts 28:1-31, especially vss. 23-24: *“He explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken and some disbelieved.”* Now that we have nearly completed our meditations on the Book of the Acts, we are reminded that the Apostle Paul seems never to have presented the gospel in a new community without dividing his listeners pro and con. Such is the nature of truth!

Indeed, Acts documents ten instances of divisive reactions to Saint Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, covering a period of fifteen years of laboring for the Lord. What were the effects of such mixed results on the apostle himself? What were his expectations as he “explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God” (vs. 23)?

The Apostle Paul is rightly called God’s “dauntless witness,” for he never tired of sharing the faith, knowing that some would hear him while many would not (vs. 26). Why should we expect different results? Let us learn from Saint Paul, and from the Lord Jesus as well, that the fallen world forever stands in opposition to the gospel.

At the same time, we are encouraged by the zeal of this apostle who is constantly ready to share the faith. This holy man teaches us some ground rules for our own sharing and witnessing. First, we must start from common assumptions; second, we must possess a thorough knowledge of the faith; and third, we approach anyone who is open to the good news of the “faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you . . . by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (2 Tim 1:13-14).

Note that the Apostle Paul appeals to his fellow Jews at Rome on the basis of what they hold in common: “the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20). This hope is the shared expectation of God’s people scattered across the earth, based on God’s promise to fulfill His plan in history.

When Saint Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch (vss. 8:27-35), he finds the man puzzling over a portion of Isaiah. He takes that passage of Scripture as his starting point to explain the gospel (vs. 35). We can never be certain which aspect of the faith will attract our listeners’ attention. In Athens, Saint Paul points to the altar dedicated to “the unknown God,” telling the Athenians, “the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (vs. 17:23).

We may think of the wisdom of starting from common ground – from what is already known – as the “gateway” rule. That is to say, we ought not share the faith except from common ground, where a natural basis exists, for we are instructed not to push our faith on those who are not ready to hear (Mt 13:15-17).

Second, the Apostle Paul knows the faith well and believe firmly in the message he is presenting. He has first-hand knowledge of the truth of God’s revelation in the Scriptures (Acts 28:23). If we lack rudimentary experience of the life in Christ, then let us be modest like Andrew, and bring our friends and acquaintances to those who are more likely to help enlighten their hearts and minds (Jn. 1:41-42).

As Christians, we persist in our efforts to gain a living understanding of Holy Scripture, the Church, and our traditions. We invite friends and neighbors to our local parish, if they show an honest interest, or we may share a pamphlet or article on a topic of interest to them. Ultimately, we trust on the Holy Spirit to touch men’s hearts, for all is up to Him.

Finally, we learn from Saint Paul to remain sensitive to those who are open and will come freely (Acts 28:30). Let others dispute among themselves (vs. 29); the unspoken maturing life in Christ is the most effective evangelical gift we have for inquirers (vss. 30-31).

O Christ, grant us the light yoke, and make us honorable members of Thy Church. – Prayer for Catechumens

May 31 - Feast of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-11

Wind, Fire, and Language: Acts 2:1-11, especially vs. 6: “And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.” The Holy Scriptures give ample evidence that the Holy Spirit “is everywhere present and filleth all things.” When He comes upon the faithful, He gives the very life of God to our hearts and souls and bodies. His indwelling cleanses and saves us.

As Saint John Chrysostom observes, “Now that Man has gone up on high, the Spirit also descends mightily from on high” (“Homily 4 on Acts,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 11, p. 27). The Holy Spirit descends to transform and make all things new.

However, let us be cautious here, for the Spirit’s descent is not a material phenomenon. “Observe . . . that you may have no gross sensible notions of the Spirit,” says Chrysostom. “Also, ‘as it were of a blast,’ therefore it was ‘not’ a wind, ‘like as of fire.’ For when the Spirit was to be made known to John [the Baptist], then it came upon the head of Christ as in the form of a dove: but now, when a whole multitude was to be converted, it is ‘like as of fire.’ And it sat upon each of themthat wind was a very pool of water” (p. 25)

The image of a pool of water conveys the copiousness of the fire that engulfs the apostles. True, what happens to the Church, as its members gather and wait in obedience to the Lord’s command (vs. 1:4), is similar to an encounter with physical wind, water, or consuming flame; but let us reverently consider what Saint Luke conveys in this passage.

The atmosphere enveloping the earth is constantly stirred by immense forces such as the radiation of the sun, the rotation of the earth, heat differentials on earth, sea, ice, and growing vegetation. As a result, the air swirls and shifts, and we call the result wind. Wind may come silently, in a whisper, or shrieking and howling. At times the wind roars like a mighty engine of destructive force, as in hurricanes and tornados.

The Evangelist Luke reports, “There came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting” (vs. 2:2). The Church is gathered “with one accord in prayer and supplication” (vs. 1:14). Whenever the Church is assembled the Holy Spirit moves with force, but His power is spiritual in nature. On some occasions the wind of the Spirit is gentle, but at other times He comes forcefully.

The gathering of the faithful on Pentecost includes the Twelve, the Theotokos, the Myrrhbearers, many of the Seventy, and others. All had seen, talked, and eaten with the risen Lord. This is the unique gathering that Christ our God commands to pray and wait for the Spirit: an assembly of the faithful who, with the “ears of their hearts,” hears the Spirit come like a rushing, mighty wind, manifest and moving.

Our Lord Jesus Christ called this wondrous gathering together to engage in pure prayer until He returned, and while they are at prayer the Spirit opens their eyes to see the heavenly throne and before it “a sea of glass mingled with fire” (Rv 15:2). The Heavenly King, the Comforter, sets them ablaze with supernatural fire, with His divine and heavenly energy.

That company is deified in the same manner described by Saint Seraphim of Sarov. By the grace of God, they acquire “the Holy Spirit, who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom of God. The word of God does not say in vain: ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ (Lk 17:21)” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1. p. 104).

This same Spirit works in and through this gathering to bring others to life. The apostolic members of that blessed community preach in Jerusalem, where others are drawn to them, even hearing them speak in their own languages (see Acts 2:6).

O Thou Light most pure and blest, shine within the inmost breast of Thy faithful people.