

FASTING AND PRAYER
OUR HOPE
The Anchor of Our Soul

April 11, 2021
4th Sunday of Lent
John of the Ladder
Revision F

GOSPEL: Mark 9:17-30
EPISTLE: Hebrews 6:13-20

Today’s Gospel lesson is virtually ignored in the West except for some charismatic churches due to its controversial nature. In the Eastern lectionary, however, it is used twice: here from Mark 9 and on the 10th Sunday after Pentecost from Matthew 17. Here the theme of fasting and prayer will be covered while on the 10 Sunday after Pentecost, the theme of a faith capable of moving mountains will be used. Today’s Epistle lesson has been used by some Western churches, but is falling into disuse also.

Table of Contents

Background for the Gospel Lesson.....	560
Gospel: Mark 9:14-30, (Matthew 17:14-21, Luke 9:37-42)	561
History of Fasting.....	563
Types of Prayer.....	569
Epistle: Hebrews 6:13-20	572
Oaths and Promises	572
Two Immutable Things.....	574
Christ, Our Forerunner, as High Priest Within the Veil	577
The Anchor of the Soul.....	582
The Life Of John Climacus.....	584

Background for the Gospel Lesson

Today’s Gospel lesson occurred nine days after last week’s Gospel lesson (Luke 9:28, 37) where the Lord mentioned taking up one’s cross and comes as a reality check following a mountaintop experience. Peter, James and John had just come down from Mt. Tabor, where they had witnessed Jesus’ Transfiguration. And the first event after coming down was our Gospel lesson: a demon possessed boy that they couldn’t heal. The question we grapple with today is why they couldn’t heal the boy.

The setting for the Gospel lesson is the summer of 29 A.D., or almost a year before Jesus’ crucifixion. The Twelve had been sent out two by two to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons just the previous winter and returned a few months later. Between the sending out of the Twelve and the Transfiguration, there were a series of powerful miracles, mostly recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as follows:

EVENT	REFERENCES
Feeding the 5000	Mark 6:30-44, Matthew 14:13-21, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14
Jesus walked on the water and calmed the storm	Mark 6:45-52, Matthew 14:22-33, John 6:15-21
Mass healings in marketplaces and along highways	Mark 6:53-56, Matthew 14:34-36
Casting out demons from Syro-Phoenician Woman's daughter	Mark 7:24-30, Matthew 15:21-28
Healing of deaf man	Mark 7:31-37, Matthew 15:29-31
Feeding of the 4000	Mark 8:1-10, Matthew 15:32-39
Blind man healed	Mark 8:22-26

Following the healing of the blind man (Mark 8:22-26), Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus responded that on this confession He would build His Church (Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-21). Immediately after Peter's confession Jesus reminded them of the cross, "Whoever desires to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). This was the subject of last week's Gospel lesson. After addressing the Cross in their lives, Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain for the Transfiguration. Then, following the Transfiguration, we come to today's Gospel lesson: the reality check.

Gospel: Mark 9:14-30, (Matthew 17:14-21, Luke 9:37-42)

The Gospel lesson centers around the inability of the Twelve¹ to heal the mute, deaf and "moonstruck" (Matthew 17:15) boy, whose father was at wits end. This was not the first time the Twelve had tried to cast out demons; they had been doing this now for six to nine months. And they had been doing it quite well, thank you! So well, in fact, that they had a dispute among them as to who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven immediately following this episode (Matthew 18:1-5, Luke 9:46-48).

In referring to the Twelve and the boy's father, Jesus used different forms of the word faith or belief (Greek: *pistia*). When the Twelve asked why they couldn't cast out the demon, Jesus said, "Because of your little-faith" or *oligo-pistia* (Matthew 17:20). Referring to the boy's father, Jesus said, "O unbelieving or *apistos* generation" (Mark 9:19). The boy's father later said (Mark 9:24), "I believe (Greek: *pisteuo*); help my unbelief" (Greek: *apistia*). From *apistia*, the opposite of *pistia*, we get the English word apostasy. Thus the Twelve had a weak faith, but the boy's father was still in darkness.

Cyril of Alexandria pointed out² that the boy's father was not very gracious in his approach to the Lord. Crying out to the Lord (Luke 9:38), he proceeded to find fault with the Apostles and to subject them to public ridicule (Mark 9:18) where the Scribes were disputing with the Apostles about this also (Mark 9:14).

¹ Peter, James and John had just come down the mountain after witnessing the Transfiguration. The difficulty the "Twelve" had probably included just the other nine of the Twelve.

² Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 52, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 230.

“It was the duty of the father of the lad to lay the blame upon his own unbelief (Mark 9:23-24), rather than upon the holy Apostles. For this reason Christ justly called out, ‘O unbelieving and perverse generation; how long shall I be with you; how long shall I put up with you?’ (Mark 9:19) He justly therefore calls both the man himself, and those of like-mind, an apostate generation. It is a wretched sickness, and whoever is seized by it is perverse and utterly without knowledge to walk uprightly.”

For the man, Cyril said, found fault with the Grace given to the Apostles and not with the Apostles themselves. This is blasphemy, for the Grace given them was Christ’s, and Christ was justifiably angry. It would have been deserved had the father of the demoniac gone away disappointed. But that no man might imagine that Christ was unable to work the miracle, He did it anyway and forbid the demon to enter the boy again lest the father’s apostasy cause recurring problems.

John Chrysostom added³ to this that while the father had no belief at all, “If You can do anything, help us” (Mark 9:22), others who came to Jesus were not like that. For example, the leper said, “If You are willing You can make me clean” (Matthew 8:2). In our Gospel lesson, Jesus responded to the father by playing his words back to him, “If you can believe all things are possible” (Mark 9:23). The boy’s father was ungrateful for everything he was given.

“While the father uttered speech that was in no way worthy of His power, Jesus proceeded to show him that even he (the father) could do this and much more. In fact, the Lord’s care had been apparent even before the father brought his son to Jesus. For the demon (Mark 9:22) had thrown the boy both into the fire and into the water to destroy him, but to no avail”.

If we apply this to our lives, we might ask ourselves how we approach a service of Holy Oil for healing. Do we approach in faith, with little faith or with apostasy? The Grace available is still Christ’s and we should be careful not to find fault with the Grace given to the priest in charge.

When the Twelve asked Jesus why they couldn’t cast out the demon, as they had been doing before, Jesus replied with two answers: (1) their little-faith and (2) “this kind of demon can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29).

Their little faith He compared to a mustard seed. Earlier He had said “the kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds. When it is grown it is greater than all the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32). Here, applying the mustard seed analogy to faith, He said, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain: ‘Move from here to there’, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 3.

John Chrysostom wrote⁴: “Certain saints after them (the Twelve), far inferior to them, are said actually to have removed mountains⁵ when necessity called for it”. “But by faith here, He means that which related to the miracles and mentions a mustard seed to declare its power. For though in bulk the mustard seed seems to be small, yet in power it is the strongest of all things. To indicate that even the least degree of genuine faith can do great things, He mentioned the mustard seed. Neither did He stop at this only but mentioned moving mountains and went on beyond that, ‘for nothing’, said He, ‘shall be impossible for you’”.

While the Twelve had cast out other demons, this one was too difficult. We may think that all demons are alike; but there are ranks of demons just like there are ranks of angels. The Lord said that to develop a strong faith that can cast out the stronger demons, one needs fasting. John Chrysostom said⁶,

“Together with our faith, fasting brings no small power. For it both implants much strictness, and of a man makes one an angel and fights against the incorporeal powers. Yet not by itself, but prayer too is needed, and prayer must come first”.

James, the Lord’s brother said, “A petition of a righteous man that is made effective is very strong” (James 5:16). The question is how does one make one’s prayers effective? The prayers of the Twelve weren’t effective for healing the demon-possessed boy. The key is fasting, when done correctly. To see the implications of this, consider the history of fasting throughout the Scriptures.

History of Fasting

Jerome stated⁷ that fasting was common among the pagans going back many centuries before Christ. He mentioned great fasting by philosophers on Cyprus, in Persia, Babylon, Greece and India. Those who fasted were looked up to as men of great virtue who had conquered human nature. Some examples are:

1. Chremon the Stoic stated that the priests of ancient Egypt lived a life of fasting and virginity.
2. Empedocles and Pythagoras, on account of their doctrine of the transmigration of souls, think nothing which lives and moves should be eaten; they look upon him who fells a fir tree or an oak as equally guilty with the parricide or the murderer.
3. Epicurus, the defender of pleasure, in all his books speaks of nothing but vegetables and fruits; he says that we ought to live on cheap food because the preparation of sumptuous banquets of meat involves great care and suffering; greater pains attend the search for such delicacies than the pleasures that come from its consumption. Where there is bread and water, nature is satisfied. Whatever more there may be does not go to meet the needs of life, but are servants to vicious pleasure.
4. Neanthes of Cizycus, and Asclepiades of Cyprus, at the time when Pygmalion ruled over the East, relate that the eating of meat was unknown.

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 4.

⁵ See Note 6, p. 355 in Philip Schaff, ed., Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1995.

Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Gregory Thaumaturgus.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 4.

⁷ Jerome, Against Jovinianus, II, 6, 11, 14.

5. Eubulus, also, who wrote the history of Mithras in many volumes, relates that among the Persians there are three kinds of Magi, the first of whom, those of greatest learning and eloquence, take no food except grains and vegetables.
6. Bardesanes, a Babylonian, divides the Gymnosophists of India into two classes, the one called Brahmans, the other Samaneans, who are so rigidly self-restrained that they support themselves either with the fruit of trees which grow on the banks of the Ganges, or with common food of rice or flour, and when the king visits them, he adores them, and thinks the peace of his country depends on their prayers.
7. Euripides relates that the prophets of Jupiter in Crete abstained not only from meat, but also from cooked food.
8. Xenocrates the philosopher writes that at Athens out of all the laws of Triptolemus only three precepts remain in the temple of Ceres: respect for parents, reverence for the gods, and abstinence from meat.
9. Orpheus in his song utterly denounces the eating of meat.
10. Antisthenes, the contemporary of Pythagoras and Socrates, after teaching rhetoric with renown, on hearing Socrates, is related to have said to his disciples, 'Go, and seek a master, for I have now found one'. He immediately sold what he had, divided the proceeds among the people, and kept nothing for himself but a small cloak. Of his poverty and labor Xenophon in the Symposium is a witness, and so are his countless treatises, some philosophical, some rhetorical.
11. Satyrus, the biographer of illustrious men, relates that Diogenes to guard himself against the cold, folded his cloak double: his scrip was his pantry. When aged he carried a stick to support his feeble frame, and was commonly called "Old Hand-to-mouth," because to that very hour he begged and received food from anyone. His home was the gateways and city arcades.

In the Mosaic Law, however, fasting is only specified on one occasion: The Day of Atonement or the 10th day of the 7th month (Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27-32, Numbers 19:7-11). On this occasion, fasting meant abstinence from both work and food from evening until evening and was a remembrance of the sin of Nadab and Abihu who offered "strange fire" before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-3).

Following the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity, Jewish tradition states that additional fasting was prescribed to remember and mourn the sins of the nation prior to captivity:

Day	Event Remembered	Scripture
17 Tammuz (4 th month)	Capture of Jerusalem	Jeremiah 52:6,7, Zechariah 8:19
9 Ab (5 th month)	Burning of Temple	2 Kings 25:8, Zechariah 7:3, 8:19
3 Tishri (7 th month)	Death of Gedaliah	Jeremiah 40:4ff, Zechariah 8:19
10 Tebeth (10 th month)	Beginning of Attack on Jerusalem	2 Kings 25:1, Jeremiah 52:4, Zechariah 8:19

In addition to the above, fasting was also proclaimed for the feast of Purim on the 13th of Adar (12th month) to remember the genocide planned by Haman (Esther 9:29-32).

During Jesus' earthly ministry, the Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12) on Monday and Thursday⁸. This was to remember Moses going back to Mt. Sinai the second time, for 40 days, leaving on a Thursday and returning on a Monday. The twice-weekly fasts were also abstinence from all food from evening to evening. Each of the above one-day fasts remembered in some way the wickedness or sins of the people and thus was intended as mourning over ungodliness. Even among the pagans, fasting was seen as a higher way of life.

Besides one day fasts, the Scripture also speaks of extended fasting where ordinary food was not consumed. This probably was something akin to Orthodox fasts where the faster consumes one uncooked vegetarian meal per day. Some examples are:

PURPOSE OF FAST	REFERENCES
David, petitioning for Bathsheba's first son (7 days)	2 Samuel 12:16-20
Nehemiah, regarding the broken down wall of Jerusalem	Nehemiah 1
David's valiant men at the death of Saul (7 days)	1 Samuel 31:8-13, 1 Chronicles 10:8-12
Ezra, seeking the Lord for a safe journey from Babylon to Israel (at least several days)	Ezra 8:21-23
Jehoshaphat and all Israel at the approach of the armies of Moab and Amon	2 Chronicles 20:1-19
John the Baptist as a way of life	Matthew 9:14-18, Mark 2:18-22, Luke 5:33-39
The Prophetess Anna as a way of life	Luke 2:36-38
The Centurion Cornelius seeking a word from the Lord	Acts 10:30
All hands on Paul's ship in the face of shipwreck (14 days)	Acts 27:27-34

The most profound fasting spoken of in the Old Testament was an extended fast accompanied by sackcloth, ashes and often weeping. This was not something that one entered into lightly, and there was usually some strong motivation behind it. For example:

PROFOUND FASTING EVENT	REFERENCES
Queen Esther, Mordecai and all the Jews facing genocide at the hands of Haman; in addition to fasting, many lay in sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:3)	Esther 4
King David, facing persecution from Saul, his own family, etc.	Psalms 35:9-16, 109: 21-29
The people of Nineveh facing destruction prophesied by Jonah. Even the King of Nineveh sat in ashes (Jonah 3:6)	Jonah 3
Daniel, seeking to know how long Jerusalem would be desolate, prior to an angelic visit.	Daniel 9
Nehemiah, Ezra and all Israel as they confessed their sins following the Feast of Booths and the Reading of the Law.	Nehemiah 9:1-3
King Ahab repenting for his part in Jezebel's wickedness.	1 Kings 21:27-29

In Orthodox Matins, we sing some of David's Psalms that came out of his struggles, persecution, prayer and fasting. Thinking of David with his prayer and fasting during Matins causes the Psalms that are sung to take on a deeper meaning.

⁸ Merrill Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 346.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul fasted a lot. For example, besides keeping the appointed fast days such as the Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9), Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed over the ordination of presbyters (Acts 14:21-23). As the Lord instructed (Matthew 6:16-18), Paul did not trumpet his fasting to sound spiritual, but we get hints that he did it a lot (2 Corinthians 6:5,11:27).

Jerome described⁹ the history of fasting among the people of God. Adam, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, David, Samson, Samuel, Anna, John the Baptist and Cornelius all benefited greatly from some type of fasting. Others who refused to fast were led away into ungodliness. The pattern here seems to be that those who are willing to deprive themselves for a greater purpose are rewarded in some way.

“On those of faith, Jerome began with Adam, who fasted from meat and from the one tree. So long as he fasted, he remained in Paradise; he ate, and was cast out. Even when cast out he did not immediately receive permission to eat meat; but only the fruits of trees and the produce of the crops, and herbs and vegetables were given him for food, that even when an exile from Paradise he might not feed on meat.”

“The people of Israel, on their way to the land of promise, longed for the meat of Egypt, ‘Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots’ (Exodus 16:3). And again, ‘Who shall give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt; but now our soul is dried away and we have nothing except this manna to look at’ (Numbers 11:4-6). They despised angels’ food (Psalm 78:25), and longed for the meat of Egypt.”

“Moses for forty days and forty nights fasted on Mount Sinai, and showed even then that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word of God (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4). Moses with empty stomach received the law written with the finger of God (Exodus 31:18). The people that ate and drank and rose up to play fashioned a golden calf (Exodus 32:4-6), and preferred an Egyptian ox to the majesty of the Lord. So the people well fed could not bear to look at the face of Moses (Exodus 34:29-35) who fasted.”

“But the second writing of the tables of the Law could not have been done without fasting. What was lost by drunkenness at the time of the golden calf was regained by abstinence, a proof that by fasting we can return to Paradise, from which, through fullness, we have been expelled.”

“Elijah after the preparation of a forty days’ fast saw God on Mount Horeb, and heard from Him (1 Kings 19:8-11). When the people were assembled in Mizpah, Samuel proclaimed a fast, and so strengthened them, and thus made them prevail against the enemy (1 Samuel 7:7-10). The attack of the Assyrians was repulsed, and the might of Sennacherib utterly crushed, by the tears and sackcloth of King Hezekiah, and by his humbling himself with fasting (2 Kings 18). So also the city of Nineveh by fasting excited compassion and turned aside the threatening wrath of the Lord (Jonah 3). Ahab, the most impious of kings, by fasting and wearing sackcloth, succeeded in escaping the sentence of God (1 Kings 21:27-29), and in deferring the overthrow of his house to the days of his posterity. Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, by fasting won the gift of a son” (1 Samuel 1:15-17).

⁹ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, II, 15-16.

“Daniel and the three youths gained a good report by fasting, and although they were fed on beans and lentils, they were healthier-looking and wiser than they who ate the meat from the king’s table (Daniel 1-2). Daniel fasted for three weeks; he ate no bread; he was not anointed with oil. He, who in the eyes of God was worthy of compassion, afterwards was an object of terror to the lions in their den. How nice a thing it is, which propitiates God, tames lions, terrifies demons! Habakkuk, the prophet, was sent¹⁰ to him with the reaper’s meal, for by a week’s abstinence he had merited so distinguished a server.”

“David, when his son was in danger after his adultery, made confession in ashes and with fasting. He tells us that he ate ashes like bread, and mingled his drink with weeping (Psalm 102:9). His knees became weak through fasting (Psalm 109:24). Yet he had certainly heard from Nathan the words, ‘The Lord has put away your sin’” (2 Samuel 12:13).

“Samson and Samuel drank neither wine nor strong drink (Judges 13, 1 Samuel 1:11), for they were children of promise, and conceived in abstinence and fasting. Aaron and the other priests, when about to enter the temple, refrained from all intoxicating drink for fear they should die (Leviticus 10:9). From this, we learn that they will die who serve in the Church without sobriety. Thus it is a reproach against Israel, ‘You gave my Nazirites wine to drink’ (Amos 2:12). Jonadab, the son of Rechab, commanded his sons to drink no wine forever. And when Jeremiah offered them wine to drink, and they of their own accord refused it, the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying, ‘Because you have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me forever’” (Jeremiah 35:18).

“On the threshold of the Gospel appears Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, the wife of one husband, and a woman who was always fasting (Luke 2:36-37). Long-continued chastity and persistent fasting welcomed a Virgin and her Lord.”

“His forerunner and herald, John, fed on locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6), not on meat; and the hermits of the desert and the monks in their cells, at first used the same sustenance. But the Lord Himself consecrated His baptism by a forty days’ fast (Matthew 4:2), and He taught us that the more violent devils couldn’t be overcome, except by prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21). Cornelius the centurion was found worthy through alms-giving and frequent fasts to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit before baptism” (Acts 10:4).

One of the points of fasting is to subdue the fleshly desires. In the Mosaic Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the Hebrew word *tsoom* (meaning “to cover the mouth” or to fast) is not used at all. Instead the people were instructed to “humble your souls” at the Day of Atonement. Fasting was just a means of doing so (see Ezra 8:21, Daniel 9:3, 10:12).

There were times when the Lord’s people just went through the motions of fasting and made it look like they were humbling their souls (Joel 2:12-18, Jeremiah 14:10-12). The fast, which the Lord chooses, includes “loosening the bonds of wickedness, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and clothing the naked (Isaiah 58:3-8). This sounds

¹⁰ Lancelot C. L. Brenton, The Septuagint with Apocrypha, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA 01961, 1990, p. 138. Bel and the Dragon 1:30-39.

much like the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Last Judgment a few weeks ago (Matthew 25:31-46), which was the beginning of the Lenten fast.

Paul spoke of married couples refraining from sex in order to devote themselves to fasting and prayer for a time (1 Corinthians 7:5ff). Those of the Twelve Apostles who were married (Peter, Philip, Jude, Simon the Zealot (1 Corinthians 9:5) did this for the remainder of their lives after the Resurrection. This was quite natural for them in their quest for holiness, since abstinence from sex was part of the Mosaic Law purification process (Leviticus 15:16-18). Under Old Testament Law, if the people didn't purify themselves, they couldn't bring an animal sacrifice because they would be unclean! Moses had prepared the people in this way for the Lord to speak to them from Mt. Sinai accompanied by thunder, lightning, a thick cloud and a very loud trumpet sound (Exodus 19:14-20).

Ambrose of Milan contrasted¹¹ the pleasures of food, which deprived us of Paradise, with fasting and prayer, which revealed the things of God. Those who reject fasting parrot the voice of the heathen, who have no hope of things to come.

“Holy Scripture teaches us that pleasure was suggested to Adam and Eve by the enticement of the serpent. The passions of pleasure are various and slippery, and as it were infected with the poison of corruption. Adam was deceived by the desire of pleasure and fell away from the commandment of God and from the enjoyment of grace. Pleasure cannot recall us to Paradise, seeing that it alone deprived us of it!”

“The Lord Jesus, wishing to make us stronger against the temptations of the devil, fasted when about to contend with him, that we might know that we can in no other way overcome the enticement of evil. Further, the devil himself hurled the first dart of his temptations from the quiver of pleasure, saying, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread’. The Lord replied, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God’ (Matthew 4:3-4), and would not do it”.

“What is the intention of the Scripture, which teaches us that Peter fasted, and that the revelation concerning the baptism of Gentiles was made to him when fasting and praying? (Acts 10:10) This shows that the Saints themselves advance when they fast. Finally, Moses received the Law when he was fasting (Exodus 34:28); and so Peter when fasting was taught the grace of the New Testament (Acts 10:9-17). Daniel, by virtue of his fast, stopped the mouths of the lions (Daniel 6) and saw the events of future times (Daniel 9:3, 20-27). And what safety can there be for us unless we wash away our sins by fasting, since Scripture says that fasting and alms do away with sin?” (Tobit 12:8-9)

“Who then are these new teachers who reject the merit of fasting? Is it not the voice of heathen who say, ‘Let us eat and drink?’, whom the Apostle ridicules, when he says: ‘If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what is it an advantage to me if the dead do not rise? Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (1 Corinthians 15:32). That is to say, ‘What is the profit of my contention even to death, except that I might redeem my body? And it is redeemed in vain if there is no hope of the resurrection. And, consequently, if all hope of the resurrection is lost, let us eat and drink, let us not lose the enjoyment of things

¹¹ Ambrose of Milan, Epistles, LXIII, 14-17.

present, who have no hope of things to come. It is then for them to indulge in meats and drinks, who hope for nothing after death”.

John Chrysostom stated¹² that a person who fasts is like a light winged creature, who is able to pray effectively and is an enemy to demons.

“Do you see how He now proceeds to lay beforehand in them the foundation of His doctrine about fasting? You see, at any rate, how many blessings spring from both prayer and fasting. For he who is praying, as he ought, and fasting, doesn’t have many wants, and he who doesn’t have many wants can’t be covetous; he who is not covetous, will be also more disposed for almsgiving. He who fasts is light, and winged, and prays with wakefulness; he quenches his wicked lusts, propitiates God, and humbles his soul. Therefore even the Apostles were almost always fasting. He who prays with fasting has his wings double, and lighter than the winds. For neither does he yawn or stretch himself or grow lazy in prayer as is the case with most men, but is more vehement than fire. Such a one is most especially an enemy to the evil spirits. Nothing is mightier than the man who prays sincerely. But if your body is too weak to fast continually still it is not too weak for prayer or for contempt of pampering the belly. Although you cannot fast, yet you can avoid luxurious living, and even this is no small thing”.

The 4th Sunday of Lent traditionally remembers John Climacus, also called John of the Ladder, because of one of his writings¹³ that outlined 30 “steps” in a “ladder” to being closer to God. His “ladder” has been featured very prominently in monastic communities ever since. His work is remembered today because of his teaching on prayer and fasting as part of the “ladder”. This “ladder” is not a works program to substitute for faith; it is merely some practical guidelines for faith working with works in order that the faith might be perfected (James 2:22). For a brief outline of the life of John Climacus, see Appendix A.

So fasting has always been a part of the life of the people of God. Getting control of the passions is one of the main focuses of the times of fasting and the foods avoided during times of Orthodox fasting are those that are thought to excite the passions more than others, such as red meat.

Usually, Old Testament fasting also meant refraining from work as at the Day of Atonement. If one has to work all day (as most people do today), it takes a less severe fasting regimen to accomplish the same “humbling of one’s soul”. And it is the humbling of our souls before the Lord that causes our prayers to be effective.

Types of Prayer

If prayer and fasting are linked in some way, what kind of prayer is it that goes with fasting? Different types of prayer are referred to in the New Testament. For example, words used to describe various prayer activities are listed in Table 1. Sometimes these words are used together (Ephesians 6:18, 1 Timothy 2:1, 5:5), such as referring to prayer and supplication (*proseuche* and *deesis*) or prayer, supplication and intercession (*proseuche*, *deesis* and *enteuxis*).

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVII, 5.

¹³ John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent

The most commonly used words for prayer are the first two below, where *proseuche* is often used in situations that imply a liturgical or general prayer versus a spontaneous or specific prayer. For example, Table 2 lists some occasions where a liturgical prayer might be implied from the use of *proseuche*, and Table 3 lists some usage of *deesis* where a more specific need is implied.

Table 1
Greek Words for Various Kinds of Prayer

Greek Word	Meaning	Strong's Ref. #
Proseuche	a prayer	4335
Deesis	a need, entreaty, supplication	1162
Euche	a prayer or vow	2171
Deomai	to want or entreat	1189a
Hiketerios	a supplication (used once)	2428
Erotao	to ask or question	1065
Enteuxis	an intercession or conference	1783

TABLE 2
Usage of *Proseuche* (Implied Liturgical Prayer)

PURPOSE OF PRAYER	REFERENCE
The Temple was a House of Prayer	Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46
There was a place of prayer in Philippi where Paul “went to Prayer” at certain times	Acts 16:13-16
The Pharisees made long prayers	Luke 21:47
The multitude was in prayer during Zachariah’s angelic visit	Luke 1:10
Peter and John went up to the Temple for 9th hour prayer	Acts 3:1
The Twelve devoted themselves to prayer	Acts 1:14, 6:4
The people continued in the Apostles’ teaching, in fellowship, in breaking bread (i.e. The Lord’s Supper) and in prayer	Acts 2:42
Paul encouraged others to continue steadfast in prayer	Romans 12:12, 1 Corinthians 7:5, Colossians 4:2
Cornelius’ prayers and alms were a memorial before God	Acts 10:4, 31

Both *proseuche* and *deesis* are mentioned in connection with fasting. In the Gospel lesson case, *proseuche* is used, as in “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29, Matthew 17:21). In the case of Anna and John the Baptist, *deesis* is used, as in “serving God with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37, 5:33).

James, the Lord’s brother, has some additional things to say about prayer: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray (verb of *proseuche*). Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders (presbyters) of the Church and let them pray (verb of *proseuche*) over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. And the vow (*euche*) of the Faith will save the sick, and the

Lord will raise him up” (James 5:13-15). James’ statements imply that there is something liturgical about what he is recommending.

In addition, this seems like a strange use of the Greek word *euche*, meaning vow. It’s easier to understand Paul’s use of *euche* in connection with a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18, 21:23-24). The Nazirite was someone who was dedicated to the Lord’s service for a special mission and certain procedures applied (Numbers 6). Some well-known Nazirites were Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist (Judges 13:2-7, 1 Samuel 1:11, Luke 1:13-17); James, the Lord’s brother was a Nazirite as well for his whole life. The closest thing to a Nazirite vow today is the vow of celibacy for a monk or nun.

TABLE 3
Usage of *Deesis* (Specific Supplication)

PURPOSE OF PRAYER	REFERENCE
Zachariah’s supplication for a child was heard	Luke 1:13
Anna was involved in fasting and supplications	Luke 2:37
John the Baptist’s life involved a lot of fasting and supplication	Luke 5:33
Jesus offered many supplications (<i>deesis</i> plus <i>hiketerios</i>) during His earthly life	Hebrews 5:7
Many examples of people praying (in supplication) for someone else	
- Paul for Israel	Romans 10:1
- Deacons for Corinth	2 Corinthians 9:14
- Paul for Philippi	Philippians 1:4
- Philippi for Paul	Philippians 1:19
- Corinthians for Paul	2 Corinthians 1:11
- Paul for Timothy	2 Timothy 1:3
- Generally for one another	James 5:16

Perhaps the common thread between prayer and fasting as compared to “the vow of the Faith” is what might be called a life of prayer. The Scriptures speak of praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17), praying night and day (1 Thessalonians 3:10), and praying always (Ephesians 6:18, Acts 10:2, Colossians 1:3, 4:2). Paul states “the Spirit also helps us in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for (Greek: verb of *proseuche*) as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession (Greek: *enteuxis* literally over and above intercession) for us with groaning which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26).

One might say that there are three stages of prayer: (1) saying the words of the prayers; (2) saying the words with meaning and full concentration; (3) praying without words, when one is so filled with the Holy Spirit and so in union with God that words are inadequate. The latter is the highest form of prayer.

For the Twelve, in their inability to heal the child, this was the kind of prayer and fasting that the Lord said they needed to learn. They did learn to do that later and lived the rest of their lives in prayer.

OUR HOPE

The Anchor of Our Soul

4th Sunday of Lent;
John of the Ladder
Revision E

Epistle: Hebrews 6:13-20

The theme of the Epistle lesson is our hope. Yet there is a slight difference in connotation between the Greek text and most English translations. Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word translated “hope” implies a confident expectation and has the connotation of pleasure. Whereas the English word, “hope” has come to carry the connotation of a maybe or maybe not situation as in “I hope he shows up!”

Oaths and Promises

In the Epistle lesson, hope is intricately connected to oaths and promises. This also meant something different in the 1st Century than it means today. Today oaths and promises that are broken carry very little penalty. Under Hebrew law, however, breaking a promise to pay a debt would probably result in the debtor and his family being sold into slavery. Thus, a man’s word, including his oaths and promises had a lot more meaning then compared to today. And if someone were to bring a false charge against his neighbor and the neighbor were acquitted, the penalty for the accusation would then apply to the accuser (Deuteronomy 19:16-27).

The Hebrew word *shaba*, meaning to swear or take an oath, literally means to seven oneself. A common practice was to call God as a witness and repeat the pledge or promise seven times. Forfeiting on that pledge could mean not only slavery but also being cut off from Israel. If oaths and promises were taken this seriously for men, how much more so for God!

John Chrysostom stated¹⁴ that in swearing an oath to Abraham (Hebrews 6:12-13), God did not regard His own dignity, but in order to persuade men, He endured to have unworthy things said concerning Himself. For it is not the same thing for man to swear by himself, as it is for God. For man has no power over himself. Yet God did this because He wished to impart full assurance, and that “we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:18). What is “the hope set before us”? From these past events, we conjecture the future. For if these came to pass after so long a time, so certainly will the others. So the things, which happened in regard to Abraham, give us confidence also concerning the things to come.

Ambrose of Milan pointed out¹⁵ that while men can give an oath by referring to someone greater than themselves (like God), God couldn’t do that because there is no one greater. Christ has no one greater in His Divinity, but in His humanity, He was made a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5, Hebrews 2:7-9).

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¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 2.

¹⁵ Ambrose, Exposition of the Christian Faith, II, viii, 70-71.

“Paul said, of Christ, ‘He thought it not robbery that He should be equal with God’ (Philippians 2:6). For that which a man doesn’t have, he seeks to acquire. Christ possessed in His own substance equality with the Father, as God and Lord. He did not have it as plunder wrongfully seized. Therefore Paul added the words, ‘He took the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2:8, Hebrews 5:8). Now surely a servant is the opposite of an equal. Equal, therefore, is the Son, in the form of God, but inferior is the taking upon Him of the flesh and in His sufferings as a man. For how could the same nature be both lower and equal? And how, if the Son is inferior, can He do the same things, in like manner, as the Father does? How can there be sameness of operation with diversity of power? Can the inferior ever work such effects as the greater, or can there be unity of operation where there is diversity of substance?”

“Admit, therefore, that Christ, as touching His Godhead, cannot be called inferior to the Father. Christ speaks to Abraham, ‘By Myself have I sworn’ (Genesis 22:16). Now Paul shows that He, Who swears by Himself, cannot be lower than anyone else. Thus he said, ‘When God rewarded Abraham with His promise, He swore by Himself, forasmuch as He had none other that was greater, saying, Surely with blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you’ (Hebrews 6:13-14). Christ had, therefore, none greater, and for that cause swore by Himself. Paul has rightly added, ‘for men swear by one greater than themselves’ (Hebrews 6:16), since men have someone who is greater than themselves, but God has no one.”

John Chrysostom stated¹⁶ that the oath was important for the sake of our fuller assurance, bringing us a better hope. The Levitical priests were established without an oath, but God the Father established Christ as our High Priest with an oath. Our hope is better also. Under the Law, the hope was that they should possess the land, and that they should suffer nothing fearful. But in this age, we hope that we shall possess not earth, but heaven.

“The Law made no man perfect, since it was disobeyed. Even if it had been listened to, it would not have made one perfect and virtuous. Paul addressed the weakness of the Law here (i.e. Hebrews 7:18), in that it had no strength. In the Law, written precepts were set down, ‘Do this’ and ‘Do not do that’, being commanded only, and not giving power within¹⁷. Paul implied, that while it was once in force, it is now of no account, since it accomplished nothing (Hebrews 7:18). The Law was of great use, however, but to make men perfect it was of no use. In this respect he says, ‘The Law made nothing perfect’ (Hebrews 7:19). All were figures and shadows; circumcision, sacrifice, Sabbath. Therefore the Law could not reach through to the soul; as a result the Law passes away and gradually withdraws.”

“The matter of the oath (Hebrews 7:20) becomes necessary for Paul here. Paul previously discussed in detail how God swore (Hebrews 6:17); and swore for the sake of our fuller assurance, ‘bringing in a better hope’ (Hebrews 7:19). Under the Law, people also had a hope, but not such as this. They hoped that, if they were well pleasing to God, they should possess the land, that they should suffer nothing fearful. But in this age, we hope that, if we are well pleasing to God, we shall

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews*, XIII, 4-5.

¹⁷ That is, not giving power within like the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

possess not earth, but heaven. Or rather, which is far better than this, we hope to stand near to God, to come to the throne of the Father, to serve Him with the Angels. Paul introduced these things little by little. Earlier he said, ‘which enters the Presence within the veil’ (Hebrews 6:19); but here he says, ‘by which we draw near to God’ (Hebrews 7:19). Both statements refer to similar things in drawing near to God.”

“These things were not merely promised. For those Levitical priests were established without an oath, but this Priest was established with an oath by Him, Who said to Him, ‘The Lord swore and will not repent; You are Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’. By so much was Jesus made a guarantee of a better covenant” (Hebrews 7:21-22).

“He lays down two points of difference: (1) that it has no end as the Covenant of the Law had. He proves this from the fact that Christ exercises the priesthood; for he says ‘according to the power of an endless life’ (Hebrews 7:16). (2) Christ proves to be the better guarantee also from His role as the priest, because He is One only. Under the Law there were many priests, because they were mortal; but here there is just The One, because He is immortal. This is a better covenant, because Christ will always be Priest.”

Two Immutable Things

Paul stated, “Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:17-18). What does Paul mean by “two immutable things?”

John Chrysostom connected¹⁸ the “two immutable things” to the nature of God. The Father and the Son may be different persons, but they are both part of the one Godhead. When one person does something, the entire Trinity does it. If, as the heretics claimed, that Christ was just responding to what the Father was doing, then the Son would be continually learning the same things over and over.

“What does it mean, ‘The Son can do nothing of Himself?’ (John 5:19) That He can do nothing in opposition to the Father, nothing alien from, nothing strange to Him, which is especially the assertion of One declaring an Equality and entire agreement.”

“He did not say that, ‘He does nothing contrary’; instead He said, ‘He can do nothing of Himself?’ From this He shows the invariableness and exactness of the Equality, for the expression does not attribute weakness to Him, but shows His great power. Since in another place Paul said of the Father, ‘That by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie’ (Hebrews 6:18). And again, ‘If we deny Him — He abides faithful’, for ‘He cannot deny Himself’ (2 Timothy 2:12, 13). This expression, ‘impossible’, does not declare weakness, but power, and power unspeakable. For what He said is, ‘that Essence does not do these things’. For just as when we say, ‘it is impossible for God to do wrong’, we do not attribute to Him any weakness, but confess in Him an unutterable power. So also when He said, ‘I can of My own Self do nothing’ (Hebrews 6:30), His meaning is, that ‘it is impossible, because of My nature, that I should do anything contrary to the Father’.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 4.

And that we may confirm that this is really what is said, let us go over what follows, and see whether Christ agrees with it. The expression seems to prove His Equality, His unvarying Likeness to the Father, and the fact that all is done as it were by one Will, Power and Might. Let us then inquire of Christ Himself, and see what He says next, whether He interprets these words according to our supposition.”

“For those things that the Father does, these also the Son does likewise’ (John 5:19). This confirms what we said, since, if Christ does nothing of Himself, neither will the Father do anything of Himself, if Christ does all things in like manner to Him. If this is not the case, another strange conclusion will follow. For He did not say that ‘whatever things He saw the Father do, He did’, but, ‘except He see the Father doing anything, He doesn’t do it’. If the former were true, Christ would be continually learning the same things. Do you see how exalted is the idea, and that the very humility of the expression compels even the most shameless and unwilling to avoid groveling thoughts, and such as are unsuited to His dignity? For who is so wretched and miserable as to assert that the Son learns day by day what He must do? How can that be true, when ‘You are the same, and Your years will have no end?’ (Psalm 102:27), or ‘All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made’ (John 1:3)? If the Father does certain things, and the Son sees and imitates Him, how can the above be true? Thus proof is given of His independent Power.”

Cyril of Jerusalem stated¹⁹ that the High Priesthood of Christ began in eternity past. Not only is there no succession in His priesthood, but He was anointed before all ages by the Father and not by oil prepared by men. By an oath Christ was made High Priest, and this is part two of the two immutable things for our encouragement, part one being the Father’s purpose.

“Jesus means in Hebrew ‘Savior’, but in Greek it means ‘The Healer’. Since He is physician of souls and bodies, curer of spirits, curing the blind in body, and leading minds into light, healing the visibly lame, and guiding sinners’ steps to repentance, saying to the paralyzed, ‘Sin no more’ (John 5:14), and, ‘Take up your bed and walk’ (John 5:8). Since the body was paralyzed for the sin of the soul, He dealt first with the soul that He might extend the healing to the body. If, therefore, anyone is suffering in soul from sins, there is the Physician for him. If anyone here is of little faith, let him say to Him, ‘Help my unbelief’ (Mark 9:24). If any is bothered with bodily ailments, let him not be faithless, but let him draw near; Jesus deals with such diseases also Jesus deals; let him learn that Jesus is the Christ.”

“For that He is Jesus, that is healer, the Jews allow; but not that He is Christ. Therefore Paul says, ‘Who is the liar, but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ?’ (1 John 2:22) But Christ is a High Priest, ‘whose priesthood does not pass to another’ (Hebrews 7:24), neither having begun His Priesthood in time²⁰, nor having any successor in His High Priesthood, which is ‘after the Order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 5:6-10). He did not receive the High Priesthood from bodily succession, nor was He anointed with oil prepared by man, but before all ages by the Father;

¹⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, X, 13-15.

²⁰ That Christ’s High Priesthood extends to eternity past, Cyril mentions this again in Catechetical Lectures, XI, 1. Athanasius of Alexandria also implies this in Four Discourses Against the Arians, II, xv, 12. John Chrysostom stated it similarly, “Paul did not say that Christ came first and then became High Priest, but having come for this very purpose. He came and became at the same time.” John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 4.

and He so far excels the others as with an oath He is made Priest. For they are priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him that said, ‘The Lord swore, and will not relent’ (Hebrews 7:21). The mere purpose of the Father was sufficient for guarantee. But the mode of assurance is twofold, namely that with the purpose there follows the oath also, ‘that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong²¹ encouragement’ (Hebrews 6:18) for our faith, who receive Christ Jesus as the Son of God.”

“This Christ, when He had come, the Jews denied, but the devils confessed. His forefather David was not ignorant of Him either, when he said, ‘I have ordained a lamp²² for my Anointed’ (Psalm 132:17), which lamp some have interpreted to be the brightness of Prophecy (2 Peter 1:19), others the flesh which He took upon Him from the Virgin, according to the Apostle’s word, ‘But we have this treasure in earthen vessels’ (2 Corinthians 4:7). The Prophet was not ignorant of Him, when He proclaimed to men His Christ (Amos 4:13 LXX). Moses also knew Him, Isaiah knew Him, and Jeremiah; not one of the Prophets was ignorant of Him. Even demons recognized Him, for He rebuked them, because they knew that He was Christ (Luke 4:41). The Chief priests didn’t know Him, and the devils confessed Him. The Chief Priests didn’t know Him, and a woman of Samaria proclaimed Him, saying, ‘Come, see a man which told me all the things that I ever did. Is not this the Christ?’” (John 4:29)

John Chrysostom stated²³ that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, foretold by the Prophets, confirmed by the Son with two immutable things. We are given a down payment and we also make a down payment. That is, we are given the Holy Spirit as a down payment of our inheritance, and we believe as a down payment to Him, both of which are part of the whole. When we show our faith by our works, He will add the rest. This makes us just temporary residents in this world. If God had done this just for our sake, we might have some room for misgiving, wondering at why He would do this for such unworthy creatures. But He did it for His own Name’s sake in order to display His goodness; therefore He will surely perform His part.

“Paul does not speak of our being predestinated only, nor of our being allotted, but of our being sealed (Ephesians 1:14). God separated those who believed, and sealed them for the allotment of the things to come. In process of time, He makes them objects of wonder. So long as they were in His foreknowledge, they were not obvious to anyone, but when they were sealed, they became clear. Israel also was sealed, but that was by circumcision, like the brutes and reasonless creatures. We too are sealed, but it is as sons, ‘with the Spirit’. By ‘the Spirit of promise’ he means that we have received that Spirit according to promise. There are two promises, the one by the prophets, the other from the Son.”

“The promise by the Prophets is, ‘I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions’ (Joel 2:28). Listen again to the words of Christ; ‘But you shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall

²¹ The strong encouragement is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called the “Helper” or *parakletos* (John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7). Our encouragement (Hebrews 6:18) is another form of the same word *paraklesis*. In this regard, Simeon was waiting for the *paraklesin* of Israel (Luke 2:25) and Barnabas was called the Son of *parakleseos* (Acts 4:36).

²² The Lamp for the Anointed was commonly applied by the Fathers also to John the Baptist.

²³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians*, II, v. 14.

be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts. 1:8). Paul means that he grounds his affirmation, saying, 'That by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie we may have a strong encouragement' (Hebrews 6:18). He makes the things already given a sure token of the promise of those, which are yet to come. For this reason he further calls it a down payment²⁴ (2 Corinthians 1:22) for a down payment is a part of the whole. He has purchased what we are most concerned about, our salvation; and has given us a down payment in the meanwhile. He did not give the whole at once, because we, on our part, have not done the whole of our work. We have believed, and this is a beginning; and He too on His part has given a down payment. When we show our faith by our works, then He will add the rest. He has given another pledge, His own blood, and has promised another still. Just like in the case of war between nation and nation, where they exchange hostages as a pledge, just so has God also given His Son as a pledge of peace and solemn treaties; and the Holy Spirit also which is from Him. For those that are indeed partakers of the Spirit, know that He is the down payment of our inheritance. Paul had a foretaste of the blessings there. This is why he was so eager to be released from things below, and groaned within himself (2 Corinthians 5:2-4). He transferred his whole mind there, and saw everything with different eyes. We have no part in the reality, and therefore we fail to understand the description. If we were all partakers of the Spirit, as we ought to be partakers, then we would see Heaven, and the order of things that is there."

"Our absolute redemption takes place then. Now we have our life in the world, and we are liable to many human accidents, and are living among ungodly men. But our absolute redemption will be then, when there shall be no sins, no human sufferings, when we shall not be indiscriminately mixed with all kinds of people."

"At present, however, there is but a down payment, because at present we are far distant from these blessings. Yet our citizenship is not on earth; we are out of the jurisdiction of the things that are here below; we are temporary residents even now."

"The immediate connection is for 'the praise of His glory' (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14), to give those who heard it full assurance. If it were for our sake only that God did this, there might be some room for misgiving. But if it was for His own sake, and in order to display His goodness, he assigns a reason why these things never possibly could be otherwise. We find the same language everywhere applied to the case of Israel. 'Do this for us for Your Name's sake' (Psalm 109:21); and again, God Himself said, 'I do it for My own sake' (Isaiah 48:11); and so Moses, 'Do it, if for nothing else, yet for the glory²⁵ of Your Name'. This gives those who hear it full assurance; it relieves them to be told, that whatever He promises, He will most surely perform for His own goodness' sake."

Christ, Our Forerunner, as High Priest Within the Veil

²⁴ That is, an earnest or guarantee.

²⁵ This seems to be a paraphrase of Exodus 33:12-17 or Exodus 34:5-10.

Christ, having become High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, has entered the Presence of God behind the veil **as a forerunner for us (Hebrews 6:19-20)**. What does this mean? John Chrysostom stated²⁶, “a forerunner is a fore runner of someone, as John was of Christ. For there is no great interval between the forerunner and those who follow; otherwise He would not be a forerunner. For the forerunner and those who follow ought to be on the same road, and to arrive after each other”. We are on the same road in taking up our cross, and we will arrive after Him.

In his dealing with the Arians, who claimed that Christ was a lesser God than the Father, Athanasius of Alexandria pointed out²⁷ their error by distinguishing between Christ’s Deity and His humanity. It was in His humanity that He was the forerunner for us in entering heaven, since He has always dwelt there in His Deity.

“If, as David says, ‘His Name remains before the sun, and before the moon, from one generation to another’ (Psalm 72:17, 5 LXX), how did He receive what He always had? How is He exalted, if before His exaltation He was the Most High God? How did He receive the right to be worshipped, who before He received it, always was worshipped? It is not a dark saying but a divine mystery. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1); but for our sakes afterwards the ‘Word was made flesh’ (John 1:14). The term in question, ‘highly exalted,’ does not signify that the Essence of the Word was exalted, for He always was and is ‘equal to God’ (Philippians 2:6); but the exaltation is of the manhood. Accordingly this is not said before the Word became flesh; that it might be plain that ‘humbled’ and ‘exalted’ are spoken of His human nature. Where there is a humble estate, there too may be exaltation. If because of His taking flesh ‘humbled’ is written, it is clear that ‘highly exalted’ is also said because of His taking flesh. Since then the Word, being the Image of the Father and immortal, took the form of the servant, as man He underwent death in His flesh for us, that He might offer Himself for us through death to the Father. Also as man, because of us and for us He is said to be highly exalted, that as by His death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ Himself we might be highly exalted, being raised from the dead, and ascending into heaven. The forerunner Jesus is leading us there and entered for us, not into the figures of the true heaven, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 6:20, 9:24). But if now for us Christ entered into heaven itself, though He was before the Lord and Framer of the heavens, for us therefore His present exaltation is written. He Himself, who sanctifies everything, says also that He sanctifies Himself to the Father for our sakes (John 17:19), not that the Word may become holy, but that He Himself may in Himself sanctify all of us. In like manner we must take the present phrase, ‘He highly exalted Him’ (Philippians 2:9) not that He Himself should be exalted, for He is the highest, but that He may become righteousness for us. We are exalted in Him, that we may enter the gates of heaven, which He has opened for us, the forerunners saying, ‘Lift up your gates, O you rulers, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in’ (Psalm 24:7). The gates were not shut on Him, as being Lord and Maker of everything, but because of us this too is written, to whom the door of paradise was shut. In a human relation,

²⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 4.

²⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, I, xi, 41.

because of the flesh which He bore, it is said of Him, ‘Lift up your gates’, and ‘shall come in’, as if a man were entering. But in a divine relation on the other hand it is said of Him, since ‘the Word was God’ (John 1:1), that He is the Lord and the ‘King of Glory’. The Spirit announced our exaltation beforehand, saying, ‘And in Your righteousness shall they be exalted, for You are the glory of their strength’ (Psalm 89:16-18). And if the Son is Righteousness, then He is not exalted as being Himself in need of exaltation, but it is we, who are exalted in that Righteousness” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

John Chrysostom spoke²⁸ in detail about Christ as our forerunner and our Priest within the veil. The “Holy of Holies” and “beyond the veil” refer to heaven as a place where God is concealed. The veil also refers to Christ’s flesh (His human body) as also concealing God. This imagery served a purpose in the Temple in Jerusalem to illustrate the Presence of God to those who were worthy to see it. Christ came as our great High Priest; He did not become our High Priest.

“Paul has shown from the Priest, from the Priesthood, from the Covenant, that that age was to have an end. He shows it from the fashion of the tabernacle itself, where there was the ‘Holy’ and the ‘Holy of Holies’. The holy place then is a symbol of the former period, for there all things are done by means of sacrifices; but the Holy of Holies is a symbol of the period that is now present.”

“By the Holy of Holies as a symbol, he means Heaven; and by the veil, he means Heaven, where the Christ’s flesh ‘entered the Presence within the veil’ (Hebrews 6:19). That is to say, He entered ‘through the veil of His flesh’ (Hebrews 10:20). It would be well to speak of this passage, taking it up from the beginning.”

“Paul said that the first covenant had ‘Ordinances of Divine service’ (Hebrews 9:1). ‘Ordinances’ are symbols or rights. He means, it does not have this now. Even though it still was standing as Paul wrote Hebrews, it is as if it wasn’t.”

“He calls it the Temple in Jerusalem ‘the worldly²⁹ holy place’, inasmuch as everyone was permitted to walk in it; in the same house, there was a place where the priests stood, where the Jews, the Proselytes, the Greeks, the Nazirites. Since even Gentiles were permitted to walk in it³⁰, he calls it ‘worldly’. For surely the Jews were not ‘the world’”.

“‘There was a tabernacle made; the first, which is called holy, in which was the Lamp Stand, and the Table, and the Showbread’ (Hebrews 9:2). These things are symbols of the world.”

“Paul refers to ‘behind the second veil’. There was then not one veil only³¹, but there was a veil outside also. The second veil concealed that part of the tabernacle, which is called Holy of Holies (Hebrews 9:3). Observe how everywhere he calls it a tabernacle with regard to God’s encamping there.”

“The Holy of Holies had a Golden Censer and the Ark of the Covenant overlaid with gold. Inside was the golden pot that held the manna, Aaron’s rod that

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 1, 4.

²⁹ “Worldly” from the Greek word *kosmikos*, an adjective form of the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning the world. This phrase is often translated “The earthly sanctuary”.

³⁰ That is, in the “Court of the Gentiles”!

³¹ The first veil concealed the Holy Place, where only the priests were allowed to go, from the Courtyard of the Israelites, where any Jewish men were allowed to go.

budded, and the tables of the covenant. All these things were venerable and conspicuous memorials of Jewish obstinacy. The tables of the covenant were there because they broke them. The manna was there, because they murmured; and therefore because they handed on the memory to their posterity, He commanded it to be stored up in a golden pot. And Aaron's rod³² that budded! Over the Ark were the Cherubim of glory, which are those, which are under God, shadowing the mercy-seat."

"From another point of view, he praises these things highly in his discourse, in order to show that those, which come after them, are greater. 'Of which we cannot now speak in detail' (Hebrews 9:5)! In these words he hints that these were not merely what was seen, but were sort of riddles. He could not speak in detail about them at that time, perhaps because they needed a long discourse."

"But Christ came as High Priest of good things that have come by a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands' (Hebrews 9:11). By a more perfect tabernacle, he means Christ's flesh, which concealed His Divinity. Well did he say, 'greater and more perfect', since God The Word and all the power of The Spirit dwell there; 'For God does not give the Spirit by measure to Him' (John 3:34). And 'more perfect', as being both blameless, and setting right greater things; 'That is, not of this creation'. It was greater, for it would not have been 'of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1:20) if man had constructed it. Nor is it 'of this creation'; that is, not of these created things, but spiritual, of the Holy Spirit."

"Do you see how he calls Christ's body 'tabernacle', 'veil' and 'heaven'? 'By a greater and more perfect tabernacle' (Hebrews 9:11; 'Through the veil, that is, His flesh' (Hebrews 10:20); and again, 'enters the Presence within the veil' (Hebrews 6:19). And again, 'He entered into the Holy of Holies, to appear in the Presence of God for us' (Hebrews 9:24). Why then does He do this? Heaven is a veil, for as a veil it walls off the Holy of Holies; the flesh is also a veil hiding the Godhead; and the tabernacle likewise a veil holding the Godhead. Again, Heaven is a tabernacle, for the Priest is there within."

"Christ came as High Priest'; he did not say, 'became', but 'came'; that is, having come for this purpose, not having been successor to another. He did not come first and then become High Priest, but came and became at the same time. And he did not say 'came a High Priest' of things, which are sacrificed, but 'of good things that have come'".

"He entered in once for all into the Holy Place' (Hebrews 9:12). He thus called 'The Holy Place' Heaven. And entering, He obtained eternal redemption. This expression, 'having obtained', was expressive of things very difficult, and that are beyond expectation."

Gregory of Nyssa used³³ the words of Christ to Mary Magdalene, "Do not cling to Me" (John 20:17) to illustrate Christ's purpose as our forerunner. Mankind was outlawed and exiled from Paradise, but Christ brought us back. Just as a woman (Eve) had been the advocate for man's original rebellion against God, so a woman (Mary Magdalene) becomes the guide to faith for men who wish to return.

³² Aaron's rod represented the authority of Aaron and Moses, which was repeatedly rejected.

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, XII, 1.

“Those who would degrade the majesty of the glory of the Only-begotten to slavish and groveling conceptions think that they find the strongest proof of their assertions in the words of the Lord to Mary, which He uttered after His resurrection, and before His ascension into heaven. He said, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’ (John 20:17). The orthodox interpretation of these words, the sense in which we have been accustomed to believe that they were spoken to Mary, is I think clear to all who have received the faith in truth.”

“Now that the words addressed to Mary are not applicable to the Godhead of the Only Begotten, one may learn from the intention with which they were uttered. For He Who humbled Himself spoke the words. He Who is by nature Father of existing things, has been proclaimed as one, ‘For there is one God’, he says, ‘and Father, of Whom are all things’ (1 Corinthians 8:6). Human nature did not enter into the creation from any other source than the Father of all. And the name of Godhead itself imports a certain relation to humanity. For He Who gave as a gift to all things that are, the power of being, is the God and overseer of what He has Himself produced.”

“By the wiles of him that sowed in us the tares of disobedience, our nature no longer preserved the stamp of the Father’s image, but was transformed into the likeness of sin, and was grafted by virtue of similarity of will into the evil family of the father of sin. The good God and Father was no longer the God and Father of him who had been thus outlawed by his own depravity. Since this was the sum of our calamity, He, Who is the Shepherd of the whole rational creation, left in the heights of heaven His sinless flock, and went after the sheep, which had gone astray, that is, our human nature. Since it was impossible that our life should of itself return to the high and heavenly place, He Who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), and frees us from the curse by taking on Him our curse as His own (Galatians 3:13). Having taken it up, He ‘slew’ in Himself ‘the enmity’ (Ephesians 2:16), which by means of sin had come between God and us, where in fact sin was ‘the enmity’. Having become what we were, He through Himself again united humanity to God. By purity He brought into the closest relationship with the Father of our nature that new man, which is created after God (Ephesians 4:24). He drew with Him into the same grace all the nature (i.e. humanity) that partakes of His body. This good news He proclaims through the woman, not to those disciples only, but also to all who become disciples of the Word. The good news is that man is no longer outlawed, no longer cast out of the kingdom of God, but is once more a son, inasmuch as along with the first-fruits of humanity the lump also is holy (Romans 11:16). ‘For behold’, He says, ‘I and the children whom God has given Me’ (Hebrews 2:13, Isaiah 8:18). He from Whom we were formerly alienated by our revolt has become our Father and our God. That which has taken place in Christ’s Humanity is a common benefit given as a gift to mankind generally. When we see Him ascending through the air into the heavens, we believe that we also ‘shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’ (1 Thessalonians 4:17). When we hear that the true God and Father has become the God and Father of our First-fruits, we learn that we shall come to the same place where Christ has entered for us as our forerunner. And the fact that this grace was revealed by means of a woman, itself agrees with the

interpretation, which we have given. For since, ‘the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression’ (1 Timothy 2:14), and was by her disobedience foremost in the revolt from God, for this cause she is the first witness of the resurrection, that she might retrieve by her faith in the resurrection the overthrow caused by her disobedience. By making herself at the beginning an advocate to her husband of the counsels of the serpent, she brought into human life the beginning of evil. By ministering to His disciples the words of Him Who slew the rebel dragon, she might become to men the guide to faith. Thus it was not the intangible, immutable, and invisible God, but the moving, visible, and tangible nature that gave command to Mary to minister the word to His disciples.”

The Anchor of the Soul

If it’s just this life only where we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiful (1 Corinthians 15:19). But hope, by definition, refers to something not seen; if it were seen here and now, it wouldn’t be hope (Romans 8:24). Christ in us is therefore also referred to as the hope (Colossians 1:27).

Another aspect of hope is patient endurance (Hebrews 6:15). Abraham endured patiently for 25 years awaiting the promise of Isaac (Genesis 12:4, 21:5). On the other hand, faintheartedness and lack of endurance can thwart a promise. Consider Esau who sold his birthright when he was hungry (Genesis 25:29-34). At this point in the Lenten Fast, we have just passed the halfway point and fasting is probably beginning to wear on us. Let us not be fainthearted but be encouraged to endure patiently to the end.

Hope is related to faith. Faith is the reality of things hoped for and the proof of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). By faith, we understand that the Word of God framed the ages so that the things we can see were not made out of things, which are visible (Hebrews 11:3). They were made out of nothing physical. And therefore we do not need something physical to have hope. Like the saints of the past, we await the consolation of Israel as did Simeon (Luke 2:25), the redemption in Jerusalem as did Anna (Luke 2:38), the Kingdom of God as did Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43), and the King of Kings coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:64). That’s our hope.

Paul refers to our hope as the anchor of the soul (Hebrews 6:19). The anchor, dropped from the vessel, does not allow it to be carried about, even if high winds agitate it. Without this hope, we would have been sunk long ago. With this hope, we may be living on a turbulent sea, and we may be agitated, but we will not be shaken. John Chrysostom stated³⁴ it this way:

“Paul shows, that while we are still in the world, and not yet departed from this life, we are already among the promises. For through hope we are already in heaven. He said, ‘Wait; for it shall surely be’ (Hebrews 6:12). Afterwards giving them full assurance, he says, ‘rather by hope until the end’ (Hebrews 6:11). And he said not, ‘We are within’, but ‘He has entered within’ (Hebrews 6:20), which was truer and more persuasive. For as the anchor, dropped from the vessel, does not allow it to be carried about, even if ten thousand winds agitate it, but being depended upon makes it steady, so also does hope.”

“And see how very suitable an image he has discovered. He said not, Foundation; which was not suitable; but, ‘Anchor’. That which is on the tossing

³⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 3.

sea, and seems not to be very firmly fixed, stands on the water as upon land, and is shaken and yet is not shaken. For in regard to those who are firm, Christ with good reason made that statement, 'Whoever has built his house on a rock' (Matthew 7:24). But with respect to those who are in a turbulent state, and who ought to be carried through by hope, Paul has suitably set this down. For the surge and the great storm toss the boat; but hope allows it not to be carried here and there, although winds innumerable agitate it; so that, unless we had this hope we would have been sunk long ago. Nor is it only in things spiritual, but also in the affairs of this life, that one may find the power of hope great. Whatever it may be, business, farming, a military expedition, unless one has hope set before him, one would not even undertake the work. In this case, Paul said not simply 'anchor', but 'sure and steadfast anchor'; that is, not shaken."

Appendix A
The Life of John Climacus
From the Prologue

The author of the famous “Ladder”, he came from an unknown place to Mount Sinai as a sixteen-year-old boy and remained there, first as a novice, then as a hermit and finally as abbot of Sinai, until he died at the age of eighty, in about 649. His biographer, the monk Daniel, says of him: “He brought his body up to Mount Sinai, but his spirit he brought to the Mount of Heaven”. He spent nineteen years in obedience to his spiritual father, Martyrios. Anastasius of Mount Sinai, who saw John once as a young man, foretold that he would be abbot of Mount Sinai. After the death of his spiritual father, John took himself off to a cave, where he lived for twenty years in strict asceticism. His disciple, Moses, fell asleep one day in the cool shade of a huge rock. John was at prayer in his cell, and, perceiving that his disciple was in danger, began to pray for him. Moses came up to him later, fell to his knees and began to thank him for saving him from certain death. And he related how he had heard John calling him in his sleep and had jumped up at the very moment that a rock fell. Had he not jumped out of the way, the rock would certainly have killed him. At the importunate urging of the brethren, John accepted the abbacy, and guided their souls to salvation with loving zeal. He once heard a monk reproach him for being too verbose. He was not in the least angered, but was silent for an entire year, not uttering a single word until the brethren begged him to speak. He then began to instruct them with the wisdom with which God had endowed him. Once 600 pilgrims came to Mount Sinai. At supper they all noticed an agile young man dressed as a Jew who was serving at table and giving orders to the other servants, taking charge of everything. Suddenly, he disappeared. While everyone was pondering this and asking questions among themselves, John said: “Do not bother to look for him; that was the prophet Moses serving you in his own home.” During the time that he was silent in his cave, John wrote many instructive books, of which the most famous, “The Ladder”, is much read to this day. It describes the way to raise the soul to God as if on a ladder. Before his death, John appointed his own brother, George, to the abbacy, but George began to grieve greatly at the approaching parting with John. Then John said that, if he were found worthy to stand close to God in the next world, he would pray that George be taken up to heaven in the same year. And so it came to pass. After ten months, George also fell asleep and departed to take his place among heaven’s citizens alongside his brother John.