

DEMETRIOS and GEORGE, the WARRIOR-MARTYRS
The Purpose of Suffering
The Hatred of the World
Deliverance From Suffering

October 26, 2009
Revision B

	DEMETRIOS	GEORGE
GOSPEL:	John 15:17-16:2	John 15:17-16:2
EPISTLE:	2 Timothy 2:1-10	Acts 12:1-11

BACKGROUND:

Demetrios was a soldier and the military commander of Salonica in Macedonia. Most of what is known about him comes from events surrounding his martyrdom, and little is known for sure of his early life. Historically, he took on great importance along with St. George during the Crusades and a great deal of legend sprang up as a result of him being a hero for the Crusaders. Following are excerpts from the Prologue, October 26 and 27:

“Demetrios was born in the city of Salonica of well-born and devout parents. Begged of God by these childless parents, Demetrios was their only son and was, because of this, most carefully cherished and educated. His father was the military commander of Salonica, and, when he died, the Emperor made Demetrios commander in his place. In doing this, the Emperor Maximian, an opponent of Christ, particularly recommended him to persecute and exterminate the Christians in Salonica. Demetrios not only disobeyed the Emperor: he openly confessed and preached Christ the Lord in the city. Hearing of this, the Emperor was furious with Demetrios and, at one time, on his way back from a war against the Sarmathians, went to Salonica especially to look into the matter. The Emperor, therefore, summoned Demetrios and questioned him about his faith. Demetrios proclaimed openly before the Emperor that he was a Christian, and, furthermore, denounced the Emperor’s idolatry. The enraged Emperor cast him into prison. Knowing what was awaiting him, Demetrios gave his goods to his faithful servant, Lupus, to give away to the poor, and went off to prison, glad that suffering for Christ was to be his lot. In the prison, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: ‘Peace be with thee, thou sufferer for Christ; be brave and strong!’ “

“At the time that Demetrios was in prison awaiting his fate, there was something stirring in a young man, Nestor, who had learned the Christian faith from Demetrios. At that time, the Emperor Maximian ordered various games and amusements for the people. The Emperor’s favorite was a Vandal called Lyaeus, a man of Goliath-like size and strength. (The Vandals came from South of the Baltic Sea and overran Rome in the 5th Century.) As the imperial

gladiator, Lyaeus challenged men every day to a duel and slew them, and this blood-letting of his delighted the blood-lust of the idolatrous Emperor. He built a special arena, like a terrace on pillars, for Lyaeus' duels. Underneath this terrace were planted spears with sharp cutting-edges pointing upwards. When Lyaeus had overcome someone in the duel, he would push him from the terrace above onto the whole forest of prepared spears. The pagans stood around with their Emperor, and were delighted when some poor wretch writhed in torment on the spears until he died.

Among Lyaeus' innocent victims were a large number of Christians, for, when there was a day when no-one came forward voluntarily to duel with Lyaeus, then, by the Emperor's orders, Christians were compelled to fight with him. Seeing this horrifying enjoyment of the pagan world, Nestor's heart swelled with pain and he resolved to go himself to the arena of the gigantic Lyaeus. He first went to the prison where Demetrios was kept, and asked his blessing to do this. Demetrios blessed him, signed him with the sign of the Cross on forehead and breast, and said to him: 'You will overcome him, but you will suffer for Christ.' The young Nestor then went to Lyaeus' arena. The Emperor was there with a large crowd, and they all bewailed the probable death of the young Nestor, trying to dissuade him from fighting Lyaeus, but Nestor crossed himself and said: 'O God of Demetrios, help me!' With God's help, Nestor overcame Lyaeus, felled him and threw him down onto the sharp spears, where the heavy giant soon found death. Then the whole people shouted: 'Great is the God of Demetrios!' But the Emperor had lost face before the people, and, mourning his favorite, became filled with wrath against Nestor and Demetrios. The wicked Emperor ordered that Nestor be beheaded with the sword and Demetrios run through with spears."

"After several days, the Emperor sent soldiers to the prison to kill Demetrios. They came upon him at prayer, and ran him through with their spears. Christians secretly took his body and gave it burial."

"In the years following Demetrios' death, many miracles were attributed to his relics similar to the miracle associated with the relics of Elisha (2 Kings 13:20-21). A small church was very soon built over his relics. One of those cured was an Illyrian nobleman, Leontius; in gratitude he built a much larger church in place of the old one."

"The relics of Demetrios have remained in Salonica in spite of efforts on the part of some emperors to move them to a more prominent location. Over the centuries, the residents of Salonica have attributed the defense of their city to help from Demetrios. In addition, Dimitry is a popular Russian name deriving from Demetrios and the Russians have also sought Demetrios' help in times of war."

The above account does not mention much about what Demetrios actually did. However, being the commander of Salonica, he had to be a very prominent person. Also, if Nestor went to the prison where Demetrios was being held to seek his blessing, this implies that Demetrios was a major spiritual force in Salonica also.

THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

**October 26, 2009
Revision B**

EPISTLE LESSON: 2 Timothy 2:1-10

Today's Epistle lesson is often used in the West at about this time in the Church year.

Background to Paul's letters to Timothy

Paul first met Timothy in Lystra and Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren there and at Iconium (Acts 16:1-4). While the Acts 16 passage occurred at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey (49 AD) or right after the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul probably met Timothy on his first missionary journey also¹ Timothy may have been among the elders (or presbyters) Paul and Barnabas appointed at the end of their first missionary journey in 48 AD (Acts 14:23).

Lystra was not Timothy's first contact with Christianity. Timothy and Titus were numbered among the original Seventy who were sent out by the Lord two by two to heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 10:1-24). Since the Seventy were sent out around October of 29 AD (the year before the Crucifixion), Timothy had been a believer for at least 20 years when Paul met him.

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written in about 64-65 AD, or following Paul's release from house arrest in Rome; that is, after the end of Acts 28. During the intervening years 48-64 AD, Timothy had accompanied Paul on all his missionary journeys doing apostolic work (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3, Acts 19:22, 1 Corinthians 4:17).

Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) to set some things straight. The words Paul used for Timothy's mission there were very strong. Timothy may even have ordained other bishops in the area; otherwise 1 Timothy 3:1-7 seems out of place. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul describes qualifications and characteristics of a bishop. Paul knew many of these didn't apply to Timothy himself, but these very well may apply if Timothy, himself, was ordaining Bishops. Timothy remained Bishop of Ephesus until about 95 AD when he was martyred. Shortly after Timothy's martyrdom, the Apostle John returned from a 15 year exile on Patmos and ordained Onesimus, Philemon's former slave (Philemon 10), as bishop in Timothy's place. Tradition credits Aquila (also one of the Seventy) as the first Bishop of Ephesus beginning in 52 AD during Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:18-19). Aquila was still there in Ephesus when Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy in c.67 AD. Gaius (also of the Seventy) was the second Bishop of Ephesus; he, like Timothy, traveled with Paul a lot (Romans 16:23, Acts 19:29, 20:4).

Copyright © Mark Kern 2001

¹ Compare 2 Timothy 3:10-11 where Paul referred to events of his First Missionary Journey that Timothy was very familiar with.

Paul wrote this second Epistle to Timothy in about 67 AD just before his death in Rome under the Emperor Nero. He wrote that “the time of my departure is at hand” (2 Timothy 4:6). This Epistle is then the last of Paul’s writings, and he was probably martyred (by being beheaded) within a few months of writing this.

His message to Timothy is that there is a purpose to his (Paul’s) suffering, and Timothy will see a purpose to his own suffering. Just as Christ’s suffering helped us, so Paul’s suffering helped Timothy and in turn Timothy’s suffering will help others.

Timothy’s Struggle

Paul’s words beginning the Epistle lesson are words of reminder to Timothy to continue the Apostolic work that Timothy was called to. These reminders were:

- Be strong in the Grace that is in Christ Jesus (v.1)
- The things you heard from me, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (v.2)
- You must endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus (v.3)

Since Paul realized he would not be around too much longer, he also stated, “consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things” (v.7). In other words, Timothy cannot depend on Paul to answer questions any longer; he’ll have to depend on the Holy Spirit.

Paul compared Timothy’s efforts to a soldier (vv.3-4), a wrestler (v.5) and a vinedresser (v.6). Besides enduring hardship as a soldier, Paul also stated that “no one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier” (v.4). The Lord had said something similar in the Sermon on the Mount: “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is single-stranded, your whole body will be full of light... No one can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:22, 24). This was also stated by James, the Lord’s brother: “Friendship with the world is enmity with God” (James 4:4).

John Chrysostom (4th Century) pointed out that it is considered an honor to serve as a soldier under the great kings of the earth, where enduring hardship is expected. It therefore behooves us not to complain, if we endure hardship, for that is the part of a soldier (Homily IV on 2 Timothy 2).

Demetrios and George were good examples of this, where their discipline as a soldier made them good evangelists and allowed them to persevere under torture.

In regard to wrestlers, Paul stated that no one who wrestles is crowned unless he wrestles according to the rules (v.5). Breaking the rules during the match means disqualification. Chrysostom pointed out that, in addition, this implies a rigorous regimen of diet, temperance, sobriety, etc., that the wrestler may bear everything with fortitude and endurance (Ibid.).

Paul also said that “it behooves the hardworking vinedresser to be the first to partake of the fruits” (v.6). Paul had written similar words to the Corinthians twelve years earlier. “Whoever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?” “Even so, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the Gospel should live from the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9:7,

14). Chrysostom noted that Timothy's mission was to commit these things to faithful men who will be able to teach others (v.2). Timothy was then in a position of teaching the teachers, where good teachers have a special reward that comes from the satisfaction of working with receptive people (Ibid.). In addition, the teacher learns more than anyone concerning that which he teaches.

The Benefit of Timothy's Struggle

Paul encouraged Timothy in all his efforts by saying, "Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (v.10). As part of Paul's struggle, he was currently suffering, being imprisoned as an evil doer, even to the point of chains (v.9). In this regard, Alexander the Coppersmith was very instrumental in having Paul incarcerated (2 Timothy 4:14). For more details on Alexander, see the discussion for the Epistle lesson for the Sunday before Theophany (Epiphany).

Paul's struggles as he wrote this letter were very grave. Everyone had deserted him except Luke, and no one stood with him at his first defense (2 Timothy 4:10, 11, 16). He was delivered out of the "lion's mouth" at his first defense (2 Timothy 4:17), perhaps a reference to his not being thrown to the lions immediately. But yet Paul had no hope of being acquitted and spoke as having "finished the race" and that "his departure is at hand" (2 Timothy 4:6, 7).

The question we might ask is how do Paul's struggles help the elect? What benefit is there to us to know of all of Paul's suffering? And what good does it do us to know of Timothy's suffering and that of those after him such as Demetrius?

John Chrysostom answered these questions at some length: "In war, the Captain who sees his General wounded and recovered again, is much encouraged. And thus it produces some consolation to the faithful, that the Apostle Paul should have been exposed to great suffering and not rendered weak by the utmost of them. For Timothy heard that he who possessed so great powers (see Acts 19:11-12), was a prisoner, and afflicted, yet was not impatient nor discontented upon the desertion of his friends. He, if ever exposed to the same sufferings himself, would not consider that it proceeded from human weakness, nor from being a disciple, nor because he was inferior to Paul, but that all this happened in the natural course of things" (Ibid.). For if Paul endured these things, much more Timothy ought to be able to bear them.

In this regard, the Lord had said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master... If they have called the Master of the house 'Beelzebub', how much more will they call those of His household" (Matthew 10:24).

Chrysostom added that Timothy knew where the battle lines were drawn and that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12). Paul said to stand firm not to depress Timothy but to excite him. "Be sober therefore, he means, and watch; have the Grace of the Lord cooperating with you, and aiding you in the contest; contribute your own part with much alacrity and resolution" (Ibid.). When we go to watch a wrestling match today, we don't go there in depression, but with excitement to root for our favorite contestant. In the same vein, we are all contestants in a larger wrestling match where the angels and saints are cheering for us.

Paul also mentioned that the things he had spoken to Timothy were spoken “among many witnesses” (v.2). This is undoubtedly a reference, at least in part, to the other apostles that traveled with him. Besides Timothy, Luke, Barnabas and Silas, there were over 50 others of the original Seventy (Luke 10:1-20) that traveled or met with Paul on his various missionary journeys. So Timothy was not alone in his efforts; there were a number of these “witnesses” he could count on.

Paul reminded Timothy that, although he sits in chains, the Word of God is not chained (v.9). Chrysostom stated that the implication of this is that “God has made us such that nothing can subdue us”. And this is the chief benefit to others of Paul’s and Timothy’s and Demetrios’ struggles: it demonstrates what Paul said. “For our hands are bound, but not our tongue since nothing can bind the tongue but cowardice and unbelief alone. And where these are absent, though you fasten chains upon us, the preaching of the Gospel is not bound. If indeed you bind a vinedresser, you prevent his planting, for he sows with his hand; but if you bind a teacher, you hinder not the Word for it is sown with his tongue, not with his hand. Our Word, therefore, is not subject to bonds. For though we are bound, that is free and runs its course. This is for the encouragement of those that are free. For if we that are bound preach, much more does it behoove you that are loose to do so. It is a great wonder that, being bound, I do the work of those that are free; that being bound I overcome all; that being bound I prevail over those that bound me (for they bound Paul specifically for preaching the Gospel.) For it is the Word of God, not ours” (Ibid.).

Chrysostom concluded with a very fitting example: a comparison of the Emperor Nero with the Apostle Paul, where it was Nero who had Paul beheaded. “Nero had the glory of this world, Paul had the dishonor of this world. Nero was a tyrant who had great success, many trophies, wealth overflowing, numerous armies, the greater part of the world in his sway, the Senate crouching to him and a splendid palace to live in. When he went out, he was arrayed in gold and precious stones and was surrounded by guards and attendants. When he sat down, he was clothed in robes of purple. He was called lord of land and sea, Emperor, king and other high-sounding names. Even wise men, potentates and sovereigns trembled at him for he was said to be a cruel and violent man. He wished to be thought of as a god, and he despised both all the idols and the very God Who is over all.”

“Now in opposition to him, let us consider Paul, a Cilician, a tent-maker, a poor man, unskilled in the wisdom of Rome, knowing the Hebrew language, which was especially despised by the Italians. He was a man that often lived in hunger, often went to bed without food, a man that didn’t have clothes to put on, often in cold and nakedness (2 Corinthians 11:27). And Paul was cast into prison by Nero himself, confined with robbers, impostors, grave-robbers and murderers, and scourged as a malefactor. Yet (in the 4th Century), the greater part have never heard of Nero while Paul is daily celebrated among Greeks, barbarians, Scythians and those who inhabit the extremities of the earth. No one knows where Nero’s grave is, while the tent-maker occupies the midst of the city as if he were a king and living.”

“Yet let us consider what the case was when Paul was in chains, dragged bound from prison, while Nero was clothed in purple and walked forth from a palace. Nero, with armies at his command, said, ‘Do not disseminate the Word of God!’ Paul said, ‘I cannot stop, the Word of God is not chained!’ Thus the Cilician, the prisoner, the poor tent-maker, who lived in hunger, despised the rich Roman emperor with all his armies. He that was in chains was a conqueror; he

that was in a purple robe was conquered. A single man defeated the Emperor and his armies. The surrounding multitudes were all slaves of Nero, yet they admired not their lord but him who was superior to their lord.”

“And yet I am but raising the lion for his claws, when I ought to be speaking of his real honors. How will Paul come in shining vesture with the King of Heaven? How will Nero stand then, mournful and dejected? Let us, my beloved children, be imitators of Paul, not in his faith only, but in his life, that we may attain to heavenly glory, and trample upon that glory that is here” (Ibid.).

THE HATRED OF THE WORLD

**October 26, 2009
Revision B**

GOSPEL LESSON: John 15:17-16:2

Today's Gospel lesson is used in the West for either Pentecost or the Sunday after the Ascension. In the Eastern lectionary today's Gospel lesson, is used for the Feast Day commemorating both the warrior-martyrs Demetrios of Salonica (October 26th) and George of Cappadocia (April 23rd). Related to the Gospel lesson is the Gospel reading for both of the above Feast Days: Luke 21:12-19. Both Gospel readings record Jesus' words to His disciples during Holy Week just before the Crucifixion. Also related to the Gospel lesson is the Epistle lesson for the Feast Day of George of Cappadocia: Acts 12:1-11.

In all three of the above readings, we wrestle with the question of why seemingly good people hate and persecute the righteous. This is not something that was done back then and doesn't occur today; there are countless similar examples today and most Christians have encountered it to one degree or another. In George's and Demetrios' case, they were persecuted by the Emperor. In the case of the Lord and the Twelve, it was either the Jewish leaders or King Herod. Their enemies were not the underbelly of society but the leaders who were respected and who upheld the law — seemingly good people. The Lord pointed out that there was considerable hypocrisy involved regarding the Jewish leaders (Matthew 23). And the Jewish historian, Josephus, chronicles chapter after chapter of the sordid, scheming, homicidal family life of the Herod family. But most people didn't know all this. It seemed like good people were persecuting the righteous.

The Hatred of the World

The Gospel lesson begins with the Lord giving His disciples final instructions before His Crucifixion. He said that:

- He would be returning to the Father (John 13:33)
- They would follow Him later (13:36)
- He was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:3)
- His relationship with the Father is God of God: He is in the Father and the Father in Him (14:10)
- If they had trouble accepting that, believe because of the works that He has done (14:11)
- He would not leave them as orphans, but would send the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who would teach them all things (14:16, 17, 26)
- No longer will He call them slaves, but friends, for all things He heard from the Father He made known (14:15)
- The characteristic of His followers is to be love: as He loved them and laid down His life, so should they do for one another (14:10-17)

Copyright © Mark Kern 2001

In contrast to this are the words of the Gospel lesson: “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18). By “the world” here, the Lord means those over whom “the ruler of this world” (John 14:30) reigns. It is he who was responsible for the Lord’s Crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:8), and he was called the father of those who opposed Jesus and plotted His death (John 8:44).

Why should the world hate Jesus? He stated in the words of the Gospel lesson: “They hated Me without a cause” (v.25). This is a quote from Psalm 35:19, Psalm 69:4 and Psalm 109:3 and reflects David’s struggle against the godless (Psalm 35:16), the wicked and the deceitful (Psalm 109:2). “Zeal for the Lord’s house had consumed David and the reproaches of those who reproach God had fallen on David” (Psalm 69:9).

The Lord made the same connection in the Gospel lesson: “They hated both Me and My Father” (v.24). One purpose of the Lord’s coming was to expose this and to give them an opportunity to change. “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father” (vv.22,24). For the works that Jesus showed were from His Father (John 10:32).

These “works which no one else did” are mentioned throughout the four Gospels. For example: A mute, demon-possessed man was healed and then spoke; the crowd said, “It was never seen like this in Israel” (Matthew 9:33). The paralytic who was lowered through the roof was forgiven his sins, then healed. The crowd responded, “We never saw anything like this!” (Mark 2:12). After being healed, the man born blind remarked, “Since the world began, it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind” (John 9:32). And even the Twelve were stunned at Jesus’ works: After calming a raging storm, they said, “Who can this be? For He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him!” (Luke 8:25).

The Jewish leaders claimed to oppose Jesus because He was opposed to the Father. For example, Moses wrote that anyone who performs signs and wonders AND leads the people to serve other gods shall be executed for instigating a rebellion against the Lord (Deuteronomy 13). The works Jesus did testified by themselves as to Who He was: the crowds’ reaction was, “When the Christ comes, how could He do more signs than these which this Man had done?” (John 7:31). And Jesus was not leading a rebellion against God but a return to God. Yet when Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders with this, they refused to see it. They also didn’t notice that Moses prophesied of Jesus’ arrival saying, “The Lord God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen; you shall listen to Him” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

In response to this, Jesus said, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you (try to) stone Me?” They answered, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” Jesus answered, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me. But if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me and I in Him” (John 10:32-38). Thus, one can say that, on their part, it was a refusal to accept the obvious. Their allegiance was to their father, the devil (John 8:44), and not to God or even to upholding the Mosaic Law.

Because Christ and the Twelve were not of the world, they were hated by the world (v.19). Because they were of the Father (John 17:11, 12) and the ruler of this world hated the Father, they were hated by the world. This then led to persecution by the world.

The Matins Gospel (Luke 21:12-19) prophesied concerning this: Jesus said that their persecution would involve:

- Being delivered up to the synagogues and prisons (v.12)
- Being brought before kings and rulers (v.12)
- Being betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives and friends (v.16)
- Some being put to death (v.16)
- Being hated by all for Christ's Name's sake (v.17).

Yet all this would turn out for them as an occasion for their testimony, where the Lord will give them a mouth and wisdom which all their adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist (vv.13,15). And not a hair of their head would be lost. But by their patience, they will possess their souls (vv.18,19).

In v.13 above, the word translated “testimony” is the Greek word *marturion*, from which we get the English word martyr. Over the centuries, their “testimony” came to be regarded as their martyrdom.

The term “possessing their souls” can be thought of in terms of finishing the race: “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:35-37).

Parables of the Feast

The Gospel lesson concludes the discussion of the hatred by the world with, “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service? (16:2). The being “put out of the synagogue” refers to the Mosaic Law injunction of being “cut off from Israel”, leaving one with no part in the religious life of Israel, and thus no forgiveness of sins. For more discussion of this, see the Gospel lesson for the 6th Sunday of Pascha.

The Apostle Paul, in the years prior to his conversion was involved in the killing of Christians as a “service to God.” This involved not just the Deacon Stephen (Acts 7:57-60), but also causing others to blaspheme under torture and persecution (Acts 26:9-11). Later, Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners because of his role in this persecution (1 Timothy 1:12-15).

The Old Testament readings for the Vespers of the Feast Days of Demetrios and George offer some insights into this persecution. They can be thought of as parables illustrating a deeper meaning:

Isaiah 43:9-14 LXX - The Lord's Witnesses: This reading is used for the following Feast Days:

George of Cappadocia, Martyr - April 23

Catherine of Alexandria, Martyr - November 25

The 40 Martyrs of Sebastea - March 25

The context of this reading is the gathering of all people at the end of time before the Lord. Some are referred to as "Israel"; they had passed through waters and rivers without being drowned, and through fire without being scorched (vv.1-2). They are precious in His sight (v.4) and have been gathered from the East, West, North and South (vv.5-6). They are called by His Name and were created for His glory (v.7).

When all the nations are gathered together, they are instructed by the Lord to present their witnesses. In the Septuagint, the word translated witnesses is the same one referred to earlier: *marturion*, from which we get the English word martyr. To them the Lord said, "Be My witnesses and I am a witness", said the Lord God, "and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe and understand that I AM. Before Me there was no other god and after Me there shall be none. I am God and besides Me there is no Savior" (vv.10-11). As the Lord's witnesses, there was no strange god among them, even from the beginning, and there is no one that can take them out of His hands (vv.12-13). The witnesses therefore testify as to Who God is.

Isaiah 63:15-64:8 - We are the Clay; He, the Potter: In this reading for the Feast Day for Demetrios, the Prophet asked that the Lord look down from heaven at the stirrings of the hearts of the righteous. For "Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us" (63:15-16 LXX). The nation had departed from the ways of the Lord and the righteous were swept away also. "The Lord had hardened their hearts and they had become like those over whom the Lord had never ruled" (vv.18-19 LXX). The Prophet asked that the Lord rend the heavens and come down (64:1), for He had turned away His face from them (64:7 LXX). Yet Isaiah was very humble about his situation and concluded that "we are the clay and You our Father; and all of us are the work of Your hand" (v.8 LXX). Note that the Hebrew uses the term "potter" while the LXX substitutes "Father".

Jeremiah 2:2-12 - Heaven is Amazed: This reading for the Feast Day for Demetrios is from the beginning of Jeremiah's mission to warn Israel about the coming Babylonian captivity. The people of God "had forsaken the Lord, sacrificed to strange gods and worshipped the works of their own hands" (Jeremiah 1:6 LXX). In this reading, Jeremiah reminded the people of the Lord's kindnesses in times past (2:2 LXX), when they followed the Holy One of Israel. The people had revolted against the Lord without cause (2:5 LXX). Now the priests don't even ask 'where is the Lord?' The shepherds also sinned against Him and the prophets prophesied by Baal (2:8 LXX). Yet the Lord will still plead with His people. To verify this, one can go to Cyprus or Arabia and see if such things have been done (2:9-10 LXX). Heaven is amazed and horror-struck that the Lord's people have exchanged their glory for that from which they shall not be profited. Similarly, heaven is amazed and horror-struck at the martyrdom of God's people, even in times of apostasy, for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15).

Wisdom 3:1-9 - the Righteous are Chastised: The Wisdom of Solomon is a book that is included in the Septuagint (the 200 BC translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek) but

which was left out of more modern versions of the Hebrew Bible. Since the Early Churches used the Septuagint as its Old Testament text, the “Apocrapha” were read along with the other 39 books. [Most of the quotations from the Old Testament contained in the New Testament are quoted from the Septuagint. Only occasionally do the New Testament writers quote from the Hebrew Old Testament.] This reading from Wisdom is used in the Orthodox Church for the Vespers of the following Feast Days:

Demetrios of Salonica, Martyr - October 26
George of Cappadocia, Martyr - April 23
Catherine of Alexandria, Martyr - November 25
The 40 Martyrs of Sebastea - March 9
Theodosios, Monk - January 11
Anthony, Monk - January 17
Euthymios, Monk - January 20
Athanasius and Cyril, Patriarchs - January 18
Basil, Gregory and Chrysostom, Patriarchs - January 30

The reading from the Wisdom of Solomon begins “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die, and their departure is taken for misery, and their going from us to be utter destruction; but they are in peace” (vv.1-3 LXX). While they may be physically abused, yet the torment of their enemies will not touch their souls.

The reading continues to look at their martyrdom from God’s viewpoint: “And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for Himself. As gold in the furnace has He tried them, and received them as a burnt offering” (vv.5-6 LXX). This is a theme similar to Paul’s letter to the Romans: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1).

The reading goes on to address their reward when the Lord returns (vv.7-9):

- They shall shine (compare Matthew 13:43, Daniel 12:3)
- They shall run like sparks among the stubble (compare 1 Corinthians 3:12-15)
- They shall judge the nations (compare Matthew 19:28)
- They shall understand the Truth (compare John 8:32, 32)

This can be put in perspective with the words from the Wisdom of Solomon: “For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of His own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world; and they that are of his side do find it” (Wisdom 2:23, 24).

Wisdom 4:7-15 - The Timely Death of the Saints: This reading is used for the following Feast Days:

George of Cappadocia, Martyr - April 23
Nicholas of Myra, Bishop - December 6
Theodosios, Monk - January 11
Anthony, Monk - January 17
Euthymios, Monk - January 20
Sava of Cappadocia, Monk - December 5
Gregory of Nazianzus, Patriarch - January 25

This reading begins by stating that an honorable age is not necessarily a long length of years. Wisdom and an unspotted life is the best “old age” (vv.8,9). To achieve this, the Lord takes His saints away from sinners at an appropriate time when they please Him and before “wickedness alters his understanding or deceit beguiles his soul. For the slander of worthlessness obscures things that are honest and the partaking of lust undermines the innocent mind” (vv.11,12). This may come at a young age (George was 20) or at an old age (Sava was 94).

Many people don’t understand this; they think it’s a tragedy for anyone to die young. But Wisdom says, “He (i.e. the young martyr) being made perfect in a short time fulfilled a long time. For his soul pleased the Lord; therefore He hastened to take him away from among the wicked. This the people saw but didn’t understand, neither did they lay this up in their minds: that His Grace and mercy is with His saints and that He has respect for His chosen” (vv.13-15).

Deliverance From Suffering

October 26, 2009

Revision B

EPISTLE LESSON: Acts 12:1-11

This Epistle lesson is not used at all in the West. In the Eastern lectionary, this Epistle lesson is used for the Feast Day of George of Cappadocia and adds another aspect to the suffering and persecution of the martyrs: deliverance. This reading is used because of the miraculous events that occurred just prior to George's martyrdom, where he was delivered from the wounds he suffered during his torture. Following is a brief summary of George's life from the Prologue, April 23:

George was born in Cappadocia, the son of rich and God-fearing parents. His father suffered for Christ, after which his mother moved to Palestine. When George grew up, he went into the army, in which he rose, by the age of twenty, to the rank of tribune (equivalent to a magistrate protecting a certain region), and as such was in service under the Emperor Diocletian. When this Emperor began a terrible persecution of Christians, George came before him and boldly confessed that he was a Christian. The Emperor threw him into prison, and commanded that his feet be put in the stocks and a heavy weight placed on his chest. After that, he commanded that he be bound on a wheel, under which was a board with great nails protruding, and thus be turned. He then had him buried in a pit with only his head above the ground, and left there for three days and nights. Then, through some magician, he gave him deadly poison; but in the face of all these tortures, George prayed unceasingly to God, and God healed him instantly and saved him from death, to the great amazement of the people. When he also raised a dead man to life by his prayers, many embraced the Christian faith. Among these were the Emperor's wife, Alexandra, and the chief pagan priest, Athanasius, the governor Clycerius and Valerius, Donatus and Therinus. Finally, the Emperor commanded that George and the Empress Alexandra be beheaded. Blessed Alexandra died on the scaffold before being killed, and George was beheaded. This happened in the year 303. Consumed by love for Christ, it was not difficult for George to leave all for this love — his status, wealth and imperial favor, his friends and the whole world.

This Epistle lesson is the account of Peter's release from prison by an angel following the death of James, the son of Zebedee and thus has similarities to George's deliverance.

The setting for the Epistle lesson is about the time of the famine during the days of Claudius (Acts 11:28), which began in 44 AD. Herod the king (or Herod Agrippa who reigned from 41-44 AD) began to harass some of the Church and killed James, the brother of John with the sword (vv.1-2). John Chrysostom said that Herod picked James out "at random and without selection" (Homily XXVI on Acts 12). James had just returned to Judea from evangelism in

Copyright © Mark Kern 2001

Spain and was very outspoken and prominent. [According to tradition, James' body was returned to Spain and buried there with great honor.]

Having killed James, Herod saw that it pleased the Jewish leaders, so he imprisoned Peter also, intending to do the same after the Days of Unleavened Bread (a seven day festival that includes Passover). Herod had wanted to make sure Peter did not leave the area because of the death of James. Chrysostom remarked that Herod pleased the Jewish leaders by doing murders without plan or reason, and that this was a very sad commentary on their blood-lust (Ibid.).

As was the case in the Gospel lesson, one notices here also the unjustifiable hatred of Peter by both Herod and the Jewish leaders. For what did they hate him? For healing the sick (Acts 3:1-6)? For performing miracles (Acts 5:15)? For speaking the truth (Acts 4:19-20)?

At this point, it had been about 13 years since Pentecost and they had had ample opportunity to see Peter's good deeds. The Lord had put this question to them 13 years ago: "For which of those (good) works do you try to stone me?" (John 10:32) They answered that they were trying to stone Him for blasphemy "making Himself God" (John 10:33). James and Peter did not make themselves to be God ever; why does it please the Jewish leaders so to see James and Peter dead? (Acts 12:3, 4). Their lust for blood seems out of control, and they seem to be hating him without a cause just like they did the Lord.

In the account, Peter was bound with two chains, placed between two soldiers (v.6), and guarded by four tetrads (a squad of four soldiers) until after Passover (v.4). At the same time, prayer was offered to God constantly for him by the Church. The night before Herod intended to bring Peter out, an angel stood by him in prison, and lit up the prison (v.7). Only Peter saw this light; we know this because of the controversy that developed the next morning (v.18). When the angel told Peter to get up and get dressed, his chains fell off. Peter followed the angel past the first and second tetrad, not sure if this was real or a vision. As they got to the iron gate leading to the city, the door opened by itself. After going down one street a little ways, the angel disappeared (vv. 9-10). Then Peter realized this was real and not a vision (v.11). The next morning, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. When Herod came looking for Peter, and didn't find him, he examined the guards and then executed them. Peter, meanwhile, left for Caesarea (v.19), and eventually settled in Antioch.

Chrysostom noted that this was no ordinary holding cell, having to go past the first and second watch (or tetrad), besides being chained between two soldiers of a third tetrad. "By this the Lord honored him, that by the ministry of His angel he rescued him" (Ibid.).

Chrysostom also noted that when Peter arrived at the house of Mary, he told them what happened, then left, making sure they made these things known to James and the brethren. [This is James, the Lord's brother, the Bishop of Jerusalem.] When he withdrew to another place, he did not tempt God, nor fling himself into temptation. When they were commanded to do this, then they did it; such as when an angel opened the prison doors, letting them out and telling them to stand in the Temple and speak to the people (Acts 5:20). Here the angel gave him free permission to withdraw that he should not fall into danger again (Ibid.).

George's deliverance was just temporary, but its purpose was the same: to give his tormentors no excuse. After the crushing and the nails and the burying alive and the poison,

Diocletian should have gotten the message. After all, his wife, the Empress Alexandra got the message. But Diocletian was so insanely blinded by his hatred for God, that he had his own wife executed instead of recognizing what God was trying to tell him. Fortunately, others were not as blind and were led to believe by George's "testimony."

The same is true for us. Our testimony may not be as dramatic as that of Demetrios or George, but there are always people looking on. And there are others that will hear about it later. When we can overcome the hatred of the world with love and obedience to Christ, we offer a testimony that is difficult to refute.