

WINDOWS OF HEAVEN
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

February 21, 2010
Sunday of Orthodoxy
First Sunday of Lent
Revision F

GOSPEL: John 1:43-51
EPISTLE: Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-40

Today's Gospel lesson is not commonly used in the West; in a few Western churches, it is used in mid September. Today's Epistle lesson is not used at all in the West. Readings from Hebrews 12 subsequent to today's Epistle, however, are used in the West at this same time of year.

The theme for the First Sunday in Lent is taken from the decrees of the 7th Ecumenical Council held in Nicea in 787 AD. The major controversy at that time concerned the use of icons or paintings in Churches. Some in the Church wanted four bare walls; others wanted to keep the icons that had been used since the 1st Century when the Evangelist Luke began painting icons of the Virgin Mary. The decision of the whole Church, meeting in council, was that the icons represented windows whereby we see, however dimly, the goings-on around the Throne of God in heaven. The Gospel and Epistle lessons address various aspects of this as we are given a vision of where we are going as we begin Lent.

Readings from Hebrews 11 are also used in the Orthodox lectionary for the Sunday Before Christmas (Hebrews 11:9-10, 17-23, 32-40) and for the Sunday of All Saints immediately after Pentecost (Hebrews 11:32-12:2). The theme for the Sunday Before Christmas is looking backward at the genealogy of Christ to see where we have come. All Saints Sunday looks at the Communion of Saints at the present time and today's Epistle lesson looks at the Communion of Saints as it will be.

Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 11:8-12:25

Some have referred to Hebrews 11 as "God's Hall of Fame". But this chapter is more than just memories of courageous deeds; it is about fellow members of Christ that can be seen through the windows of heaven.

The first part refers to Moses' life as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Thermuthis (Hebrews 11:24-26). During this time, which was during the 40 years before he met the Lord at the burning bush, Moses had a vision of where he needed to go and what he needed to do. We get some details of Moses' early life from the 1st Century Jewish historian, Josephus.

Moses, the Young Man

Moses spent his first forty years being schooled in all the wisdom of Egypt (Acts 7:22). At the age of forty, he chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. Thus, he esteemed the reproach or reviling of Christ to be greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (Hebrews 11:24-26).

Josephus wrote¹ about this as follows: "The Egyptians had grown delicate and lazy, and had given themselves up to the pleasures of life, especially the love of wealth. As the Hebrews were blessed by God and grew numerous and wealthy by hard work, the Egyptians grew jealous and forced them into slave labor: digging canals, building city walls and building pyramids".

Josephus also mentions² some royal intrigue in Pharaoh's house, where the magicians recognized Moses as a threat who would overthrow the nation of Egypt. But Thermuthis was Pharaoh's only child, and she was barren. Therefore Moses also represented Pharaoh's only heir. As a result, Pharaoh disregarded the advice of his magicians to kill Moses and instead protected him and raised him as the heir to the throne. An heir was very important to reigning Pharaohs, since there were cases where the succeeding Pharaoh would erase all trace of his predecessor's memory. With a loyal heir, this would be much less likely to occur.

Josephus mentioned³ another account of Moses' early life, which is also quoted by Irenaeus. The Ethiopians, who were Southern neighbors to Egypt, began marching into Egypt, conquering Egyptian territory at will. The Egyptian magicians consulted their oracles, which told them to set Moses as commander of the army to stop the Ethiopian advance. Their plan was both to save Egypt and to kill Moses in the same process.

Moses, with the backing of Pharaoh and Thermuthis undertook this task with keen insight and clever strategy. The Ethiopians were expecting the Egyptians to advance on them by way of the Nile, since the route over the desert was difficult due to the multitude of poisonous snakes. Moses chose the desert route and brought along many wicker baskets full of a certain bird that is the natural enemy of the snakes. The birds cleared the way for the army and enabled Moses to take the Ethiopians by surprise and defeat them. This early activity of Moses may be what Stephen, the Protomartyr, referred to saying that Moses, "Was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22) before he left Egypt at age forty.

After Moses returned as a conquering hero, the magicians entertained a greater hatred of him than before, and were able to convince Pharaoh to beware of him as a military force⁴ to be reckoned with. At this same time, the incident occurred where Moses saw an Egyptian taskmaster unjustly beating a Hebrew. Moses and the taskmaster quarreled and Moses struck down the Egyptian and killed him, and buried him in the sand. The next day, he came upon two Hebrews fighting. Trying to act as a peacemaker, Moses spoke to them. But one of them replied, "Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you going to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses realized that the event had become known. Pharaoh heard of this incident quickly also and he tried to kill Moses, knowing that his general had now identified with

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II, ix. 1.

² Josephus, *Antiquities*, II, ix,7.

³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II, x, 1-2.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, II, xi, 1.

the Hebrews as his magicians said he would. However, Moses left Egypt before Pharaoh could find him (Exodus 2:11-15).

John Chrysostom stated⁵ that the “reproach of Christ” that Moses received was that spoken by his own people, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us?” (Exodus 2:14). By his rank (heir to the throne, general in the Egyptian army), they should have welcomed him with open arms as a prince and a judge. Chrysostom compared this to the reproach Christ received from His own, “He came to His own and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). After they crucified Him, “Those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads, ‘if You are the Son of God, come down from the Cross’” (Matthew 27:39-40). Thus Moses and Christ suffered alike. Moses and Christ alike looked to the reward mentioned in our Epistle text (Hebrews 11:26, 12:2).

Our Epistle text states that “by faith Moses left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the Pharaoh” (Hebrews 11:27). Yet Exodus 2:14 states that Moses was afraid when the event of his killing the Egyptian taskmaster became known. John Chrysostom stated⁶ that if Moses was truly afraid of Pharaoh, he would never have come back to lead Israel out of Egypt. Thus, even flight was an act of faith. To stay in Egypt, Chrysostom said, and to be a champion of the Hebrews who were so ungrateful would have been a foolish and senseless thing. It would have been equivalent to the devil’s temptation of Christ to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, depending on angels to break His fall (Matthew 4:6). Our Epistle text gives the reason he left Egypt, “for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:27). Sometimes we also need to have the insight to leave a bad situation behind us rather than to stand and fight for justice that isn’t attainable and only results in blasphemy.

The Saints Made Perfect

Paul stated, “God provided something better for us, that they (Hebrews 11:32-38 plus earlier) should not be made perfect apart from us.” How were they made perfect? Some of the references to the deeds of the Old Testament saints need to be clarified. Table I lists some examples of the activities Paul referred to. Most of these examples are found in the Scriptures; a few, like Isaiah, who was sawn in half by King Manasseh, are described in other traditional sources⁷.

While all these obtained a good testimony through faith (Hebrews 11:39), they were not made perfect apart from us (Hebrews 11:40). Why? The answer is set forth in the section preceding our Epistle lesson (Hebrews 11:8-16), and in the section that follows (Hebrews 12:22-25).

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXVI, 4.

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXVI, 5.

⁷ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, May 9.

The Ascension of Isaiah, a pseudepigraphal work that was well known in the Early Church, also documents Isaiah’s martyrdom

TABLE I
Hebrews 11 References

Statement in Hebrews	Person	Reference
Subdued Kingdoms	Barak	Judges 4
	Gideon	Judges 7
	Jephthah	Judges 11
	Samson	Judges 14
	David	2 Samuel 5:17-25; 8-10
Wrought Righteousness	Samuel	1 Samuel 12:4
	David	2 Samuel 8:15; 9:1
	Nathan	2 Samuel 12
Obtained Promises	Christ will come from David	2 Samuel 7:11-17
Shut Mouths of Lions	Samson	Judges 14:6
	David	1 Samuel 17:34-35
	Daniel	Daniel 6:16-22
Quenched Power of Fire	Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego	Daniel 3:19-27
Escaped Edge of Sword	Moses from Pharaoh	Exodus 18:4
	David from Saul	1 Samuel 23, 24
Empowered from Weakness	Elijah	1 Kings 19
	Elisha	2 Kings 6
Became Strong in Battle	Gideon	Judges 7, 8
	Samson	Judges 15, 16
	David	2 Samuel 8, 17
	Joshua	Joshua 5-12
Put Armies to Flight	Gideon	Judges 7
	Elisha	2 Kings 7
Women Received Dead by Resurrection	Elijah	1 Kings 17:19-23
	Elisha	2 Kings 4:31-37
Tortured, Beaten to Death	Jeremiah	Jeremiah 37:15-16
	Amos	Prologue, June 15
	Ezekiel	Prologue, July 21
Tried by Mocking & Scourging	Jeremiah	Jeremiah 20:2
Endured Chains & Imprisonment	Joseph	Genesis 39:7-23
	Micaiah	1 Kings 22:12-28
	Jeremiah	Jeremiah 37:15-16
Stoned	Zechariah, the Priest	2 Chronicles 24:20-22
	Naboth	1 Kings 21:11-15
	Jeremiah	Prologue, May 1
	Baruch	Prologue, September 28
Sawn in Two	Isaiah	Prologue, May 9

Table 1 continued

Statement in Hebrews	Person	Reference
Murdered with Sword	Many Prophets	1 Kings 19:10
	John the Baptist	Matthew 14:3-12
	Uriah, the Prophet	Jeremiah 26:20-24
Wandered about in Sackcloth, Destitute	Elijah	1 Kings 19:13, 19
	Elisha	2 Kings 2:12-15
	Other Prophets	Zechariah 13:4
Lived in Deserts, Caves	Isaiah	Isaiah 20:2
	100 Prophets	1 Kings 18:4, 13
	Elijah	1 Kings 19:9
	David	1 Samuel 24:1-4
	John the Baptist	Prologue, June 24

In the section preceding the Epistle lesson, the Patriarchs Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses were introduced as accomplishing something by faith. Yet they waited for the city, which has solid foundations and whose craftsman and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10). The section following the Epistle lesson (Hebrews 12:22-25) lists various aspects of this city that we have come to:

Mount Zion
 The City of the Living God
 The Heavenly Jerusalem
 An Innumerable Company of Angels
 An Assembly and Church of Firstborn Ones
 God, the Judge of All
 Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect
 Jesus, the Mediator
 The Blood that Speaks Better Than Abel's

This list describes how we are perfected with the saints and prophets and patriarchs of the past. We join together with them as we all join in the worship of the Lamb around the Throne of God as we come to the Lord's Table in Faith. And we get a glimpse of those who have gone before through the windows of heaven (the icons). And today we remember those who fought to preserve these windows of heaven at the 7th Ecumenical Council.

Examples of the Saints Being Perfected

Clement of Alexandria stated⁸ that Paul brought forward a swarm of divine examples of the saints acting by faith to indicate that there is one salvation for those who lived before Christ and those who lived after Christ's Advent. Martyrdom for them was purification.

"Was not this endurance 'by faith' that they acted nobly who had these trials? They were not made perfect without us. He specifies one salvation in Christ of the righteous. He has expressed nothing less respecting Moses, adding that he esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt,

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 16.

for he had respect for the recompense of the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:26-27)

“The divine Wisdom says of the martyrs: ‘They seemed in the eyes of the foolish to die, and their departure was reckoned a calamity, and their migration from us an affliction. But they are in peace. Though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope was full of immortality’ (Wisdom 3:2-4 LXX). He then adds, teaching martyrdom to be a glorious purification, ‘And being chastened a little, they shall benefit much; because God proved them’, that is, allowed them to be tried, and to put to shame the author of their trial. He found them worthy of Himself, plainly to be called sons. ‘As gold in the furnace He proved them, and as a whole burnt-offering of sacrifice He accepted them. And in the time of their visitation they will shine forth, even as sparks run along the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and rule over the peoples, and the Lord shall reign over them forever’” (Wisdom 3:5-8 LXX)

Cyprian of Carthage compared⁹ the Maccabee brothers with the Prophets, the Apostles and the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem. All were martyrs for putting into deeds what the Lord had said. Their death pointed to Christ, who suffered in innocence that He might make us sons of God; we have no excuse if we refuse to do as He did.

“What shall we say of the cruel tortures of the blessed martyrs in the Maccabees (Hebrews 11:35), and the multiform sufferings of the seven brethren, and the mother comforting her children in their agonies, and herself dying also with her children? Do not they witness the proofs of great courage and faith, and exhort us by their sufferings to the triumphs of martyrdom? What of the prophets whom the Holy Spirit quickened to the foreknowledge of future events? What of the Apostles whom the Lord chose? Since these righteous men were slain for righteousness’ sake, have they not taught us also to die? The nativity of Christ witnessed the martyrdom of infants, so that those who were two years old and under were slain for His Name’s sake. An age not yet fitted for the battle appeared fit for the crown. That it might be clear that those who are slain for Christ’s sake are innocent, innocent infancy was put to death for His Name’s sake. No one is free from the peril of persecution, when even these accomplished martyrdoms. But how serious is the case of a Christian man, if he, a servant, is unwilling to suffer, when his Master first suffered. Are we unwilling to suffer for our own sins, when He who had no sin of His own suffered for us? The Son of God suffered that He might make us sons of God, and are we, the sons of man, unwilling to suffer that we may continue to be a son of God? If we suffer in this world exile and tortures, the Maker and Lord of the world experienced harder things than these, and He also warns us, saying, ‘If the world hates you, remember that it hated Me before you. Remember the world that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you’ (John 15:18-20). Whatever our Lord and God taught, He also put into deeds, that the disciple might not be excused if he learns and does not put into deeds what He says”.

⁹ Cyprian, Epistles, LV, 6.

Clement of Rome stated¹⁰ that Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, was saved on account of her faith, her hospitality and her foreknowledge of the will of God.

“When Joshua sent the spies to Jericho, the king of the country sent men to seize them to put them to death. But the hospitable Rahab received them, and concealed them on the roof of her house under some stalks of flax. She said to the men, ‘I know that the Lord your God has given you this city, for the fear and dread of you have fallen on its inhabitants. When you have conquered it, keep me and the house of my father in safety’. And they said to her, ‘It shall be as you have spoken to us. As soon as you know that we are at hand, gather all your family under your roof, and they shall be preserved, but all that are found outside of your dwelling shall perish’ (Joshua 2:9-19). They gave her a sign to this effect, that she should hang from her house a scarlet thread. Thus they made it clear that redemption should flow through the blood of the Lord to all that believe and hope in God. You see, beloved, that there was not only faith, but prophecy, in this woman”.

Basil the Great, writing to the Alexandrians, referred¹¹ to the persecution of the Christians by the Arians (who were also called “Christians”), especially by Valens in Alexandria. It was so bad that Basil wondered out loud whether the end of the age was coming! Those that suffered, he compared to the saints that Paul listed in Hebrews.

“I have already heard of the persecution in Alexandria and the rest of Egypt, and, as might be expected, I am deeply affected. I have observed the ingenuity of the devil’s mode of warfare. When he saw that the Church increased under the persecution of enemies and flourished all the more, he changed his plan. He no longer carries on an open warfare, but lays secret snares against us, hiding his hostility under the name which they bear, in order that we may both suffer like our fathers, and at the same time, seem not to suffer for Christ’s sake, because our persecutors too bear the name of Christians. With these thoughts for a long time we sat still, dazed at the news of what had happened, for our ears tingled on hearing of the shameless and inhuman heresy of your persecutors. They have revered neither age, nor services to society, nor people’s affection. They inflicted torture, ignominy, and exile; they plundered all the property they could find. They were careless alike of human condemnation and of the awful retribution to come at the hands of the righteous Judge. All this has amazed me and all but driven me out of my senses. To my reflections has been added this thought too; can the Lord have wholly abandoned His Churches? Has the last hour come, and is ‘the falling away’ thus coming upon us, that now the lawless one ‘may be revealed as the son of perdition who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God and is worshipped?’ (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4) But if the temptation is for a season, bear it, noble athletes of Christ. If the world is being delivered to complete and final destruction, let us not lose heart for the present, but let us await the revelation from heaven, and the manifestation of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. If all creation is to be dissolved, and the fashion of this world transformed, why should we be surprised that we, who are a part of creation, should feel the general woe, and be delivered to afflictions which

¹⁰ Clement of Rome, 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, 12-13.

¹¹ Basil, Letter to the Alexandrians, CXXXIX, 1.

our just God inflicts on us according to the measure of our strength. He will not let us 'be tempted above that we are able, but with the temptation giving us a way to escape that we may be able to bear it?' (1 Corinthians 10:13) Brothers, martyrs' crowns await you. The companies of the confessors are ready to reach out their hands to you and to welcome you into their own ranks. Remember how none of the saints of old won their crowns of patient endurance by living luxuriously and being courted. The fire of great afflictions tested everyone. 'For some had trial of cruel mocking and scourging, and others were sawn in half and were slain with the sword' (Hebrews 11:36-37). These are the glories of saints. Blessed is he who is deemed worthy to suffer for Christ; more blessed is he whose sufferings are greater, since 'the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us'" (Romans 8:18).

Cyprian of Carthage, commending one of the African martyrs, spoke¹² of their fighting the good fight in innocence. They followed the example of the Lord Himself, who was steadfast in faith, patient in suffering, victorious in tortures, and united by the bond of confession. As we struggle, Christ in us struggles with us. If peace intervenes, and we are not called to martyrdom, we are given a leave of absence to praise God.

"I exhort the rest of you, that you all should follow that martyr now most blessed, and the other partners of that engagement, — soldiers and comrades, steadfast in faith, patient in suffering, victors in tortures, — that those who are united at once by the bond of confession, and the entertainment of a dungeon, may also be united in the consummation of their virtue and a celestial crown. By your joy, you may dry the tears of our Mother, the Church, who mourns over the death of very many. By your example, you may confirm the steadfastness of others who stand also. If the battle shall call you out, if the day of your contest shall come, engage bravely, fight with constancy, as knowing that you are fighting under the eyes of a present Lord, that you are attaining by the confession of His Name to His own glory. He is not such a One as that He only looks on His servants, but He Himself also wrestles in us, Himself is engaged; Himself also in the struggles of our conflict not only crowns, but is crowned. But if before the day of your contest, of the mercy of God, peace shall intervene, let there still remain to you the sound will and the glorious conscience (Hebrews 11:36-37). Don't let any one of you be saddened, as if he were inferior to those who before you have suffered tortures, have overcome the world and trampled it under foot, and so have come to the Lord by a glorious road. For the Lord is the 'searcher out of the reins and the hearts' (Revelation 2:23). He looks through secret things, and beholds that which is concealed. In order to merit the crown from Him, who will judge us, His own testimony alone is sufficient. Therefore, beloved brethren, either case is equally lofty and illustrious. The former is more secure, to hasten to the Lord with the consummation of our victory, but the latter is more joyous; namely a leave of absence being received to flourish in the praises of the Church".

Clement of Rome noted¹³ a number of prophets plus Abraham, Job and Moses as examples of great humility, who also proclaimed the coming of Christ.

¹² Cyprian, Epistles, VIII.

¹³ Clement of Rome, 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, 17.

“Let us be imitators of those who in goat-skins and sheep-skins (Hebrews 11:37) went about proclaiming the coming of Christ. I mean Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel among the prophets, with those others to whom a like testimony is borne in Scripture. Abraham was especially honored, and was called the friend of God (2 Chronicles 20:7, James 2:23). Earnestly regarding the glory of God, he humbly declared, ‘I am but dust and ashes’ (Genesis 18:27). Moreover, ‘Job was a righteous man, and blameless, truthful, God-fearing, and one that kept himself from all evil’ (Job 1:1). But bringing an accusation against himself, he said, ‘No man is free from defilement, even if his life is but one day’ (Job 14:4-5 LXX). Moses was called faithful in all God’s house (Numbers 12:7, Hebrews 3:2); and through his instrumentality, God punished Egypt with plagues and tortures (Exodus 7-11). Yet he, though thus greatly honored, did not adopt lofty language, but said, when the divine oracle came to him out of the bush, ‘Who am I, that You send me? I am a man of a feeble voice and a slow tongue’” (Exodus 3:11, 4:10).

John of Damascus referred¹⁴ to the saints as visible images of God, and encouraged us to imitate them, becoming images like them. As we emulate their way of life, we become sharers with them in their crowns of glory.

“Let us raise monuments to them and visible images, and let us ourselves become, through imitation of their virtues, living monuments and images of them. Let us give honor to her who bore God as being strictly and truly the Mother of God. Let us honor also the prophet John as Forerunner and Baptist, as apostle and martyr. Among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11), and he became the first to proclaim the Kingdom. Let us honor the Apostles as the Lord’s brothers, who saw Him face-to-face and ministered to His passion. Those whom God the Father foreknew He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29), first Apostles, second Prophets, third pastors and teachers (1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11). Let us also honor the martyrs of the Lord chosen out of every class, as soldiers of Christ who have drunk His cup and were then baptized with the baptism of His life-bringing death, to be partakers of His passion and glory, of whom the leader is Stephen, the first deacon of Christ and Apostle and first martyr. Also let us honor our holy fathers, the God-possessed ascetics, whose struggle was the longer and more difficult one of the conscience. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; they wandered in deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth, of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11:37-38). Let us honor those who were prophets before grace, the patriarchs and just men who foretold the Lord’s coming. Let us carefully review the life of these men, and let us emulate their faith (Hebrews 13:7), love, hope, zeal, way of life and endurance of sufferings and patience even to blood, in order that we may be sharers with them in their crowns of glory”.

¹⁴ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, IV, 15.

Impact of the Examples of the Saints on Our Lives

Gregory of Nyssa made¹⁵ an analogy between our hope for the promised good things and a farmer sowing crops. The crop will come if we take due diligence to prepare for it, and we don't need to rush it.

“We should not be troubled at the brief delay of what we hope for, but give diligence that we may not be cast out from the object of our hopes. If one were to tell some inexperienced person beforehand, ‘the gathering of the crops will take place in the season of summer, and the stores will be filled, and the table abundantly supplied with food at the time of plenty’, it would be a foolish man who should seek to hurry on the coming of the harvest, when he ought to be sowing seeds and preparing the crops for himself by diligent care. The harvest will surely come, whether he wishes or not, at the appointed time. He who has secured beforehand abundance of crops will look on it differently than him who is found destitute of all preparation at the harvest. Even so I think it is one's duty, as the proclamation is clearly made to all that the time of change will come, not to trouble himself about times. For He said that ‘it is not for us to know the times and the seasons’ (Acts 1:7), nor to pursue calculations for when it will occur. We need to make our confidence in the things expected, and to purchase for ourselves by good conversation, the grace that is to come”.

Gregory the Great advised¹⁶ that different people are best converted by different kinds of reasoning. The wise and receptive are best served by arguments of reasoning, while those slow to understand are sometimes better served by examples, such as Paul presented in Hebrews.

“The wise often profit by being vanquished in their own allegations; but for the slow it is sometimes enough to get knowledge of the praiseworthy deeds of others. Paul, the excellent teacher, who was debtor to the wise and foolish (Romans 1:14), admonished some of the Hebrews that were wise, but some also that were somewhat slow. He spoke to them of the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and overcame the wisdom of the former by argument, saying, ‘That which decays and grows old is ready to vanish away’ (Hebrews 8:13). But, when he perceived that some could only be drawn by examples, he added, ‘Saints had trials of mocking and scourging, bonds and imprisonment; they were stoned, they were sawn in half, tempted, slain with the sword’ (Hebrews 11:36-37). And again, ‘Remember those who were set over you, who spoke to you the Word of God, whose faith follow, looking to the end of their conversation’ (Hebrews 13:7). Victorious reason might subdue the wise, but the gentle force of example persuaded the dull to mount to greater things”.

Athanasius of Alexandria compared the heretics of his day with idolaters. He stated¹⁷ that it is not just idolaters who will be rejected, but also those who deny the Faith. Some of the saints did not have the opportunity to be made perfect by submitting to martyrdom, but they were instead justified by faith.

“The proof of a martyr lies not only in refusing to burn incense to idols; but also in refusing to deny the Faith due to the testimony of a good conscience.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man”, Philosophical Works, III, 22, 7.

¹⁶ Gregory the Great, Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 6.

¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, To the Bishops of Egypt, 21.

Not only those who left the Faith for idols were condemned as aliens, but those also who betrayed the Truth. Thus Judas was degraded from the Apostolic office, not because he sacrificed to idols, but because he proved a traitor. Hymenaeus and Alexander fell away not by entering the service of idols, but because they ‘made shipwreck concerning the faith’ (1 Timothy 1:19-20). On the other hand, the Patriarch Abraham received the crown, not because he suffered death, but because he was faithful to God. The other Saints, of whom Paul speaks, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, and the rest, were not made perfect by the shedding of their blood, but by faith they were justified (Hebrews 11:32-39). To this day they are the objects of our admiration, as being ready even to suffer death for piety towards the Lord”.

The Apostle Hermas, of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-20), in addressing pleasure stated¹⁸ that there are acts of luxury that are hurtful and there are acts of luxury that are beneficial. One leads to life, the other to death, and it is important to know the difference.

“‘What kinds of luxury, sir’, I asked, ‘are hurtful?’ ‘Every act of a man which he performs with pleasure’, he replied, ‘is an act of luxury; for the sharp tempered man, when gratifying his tendency, indulges in luxury. The adulterer, the drunkard, the back-biter, the liar, the covetous man, and the thief, and he who does things like these, gratifies his peculiar propensity, and in so doing indulges in luxury. All these acts of luxury are hurtful to the servants of God; on account of these deceits, they suffer, who are punished and tortured. And there are also acts of luxury which save men; for many who do good indulge in luxury, being carried away by their own pleasure; this luxury, however, is beneficial to the servants of God, and gains life for such a man. The injurious acts of luxury bring tortures and punishment upon them; and if they continue in them and do not repent, they bring death upon themselves.”

John Cassian noted¹⁹ that there are different grades and stages of perfection and different ranks of the saints in glory. We are called from high things to those still higher. There is also a great distinction between those who shall obtain mercy, and those who shall be considered worthy to enjoy the most glorious vision of God.

“In accordance with the condition and measure of every mind, Holy Scripture summons our free wills to different grades of perfection. For no uniform crown of perfection can be offered to all men, because all have not the same virtue, purpose or fervor, and so the Divine Word has in some way appointed different ranks and different measures of perfection itself. And that this is so the variety of beatitudes in the gospel clearly shows. They are called blessed, whose is the kingdom of heaven, and blessed are they who shall possess the earth, and blessed are they who shall receive their consolation, and blessed are they who shall be filled (Matthew 5:6). Yet we believe that there is a great difference between the habitations of the kingdom of heaven, and the possession of the earth, whatever it be, and also between the reception of consolation and the fullness and satisfaction of righteousness. There is a great distinction between those who shall obtain mercy, and those who shall be deemed worthy to enjoy the most glorious

¹⁸ Apostle Hermas, The Shepherd, “Similitudes”, III, vi, 5.

¹⁹ John Cassian, 1st Conference of Abbot Chaeremon, II, xi, 12.

vision of God. 'For there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for as one star differs from another star in glory, so also is the resurrection of the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:41-42). In accordance with this rule Holy Scripture praises those who fear God, and says, 'Blessed are all they that fear the Lord' (Psalm 128:1), and promises them a full measure of bliss for doing so. There are different stages of perfection, and that the Lord calls us from high things to those still higher in such a way that we become blessed and perfect in the fear of God. We go as it is written 'from strength to strength' (Psalm 84:7), and from one perfection to another; i.e., mounting with keenness of soul from fear to hope, we are summoned in the end to that still more blessed stage, which, is love. He who has been 'a faithful and wise servant' will pass to the companionship of friendship and to the adoption of sons".

The early monks admired the Prophets very much, and they even dressed like them. John Cassian described²⁰ the clothing worn by the Coenobitic monks, who sold all their possessions to live in their monastic community. They voluntarily imitated the clothing worn by the prophets.

"The last article of their dress is the goat-skin and a staff, which they carry in imitation of those who foreshadowed the lines of the monastic life in the Old Testament. Of these Paul says, 'They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being in want, distressed, afflicted; of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts, in mountains, in dens, and in caves of the earth' (Hebrews 11:37-38). And this garment of goatskin signifies that having destroyed all wantonness of carnal passions, they ought to continue in the utmost sobriety of virtue, and that nothing of the wantonness or heat of youth, or of their old light mindedness, should remain in their bodies".

John Chrysostom pointed²¹ out what an amazing thing it is that the saints who struggled so much have yet to receive their reward, because they are waiting for us! It is like we are the servants who came to work in the vineyard at the eleventh hour (Matthew 20:1-16), and receive the same reward as the rest of the saints.

"What then is the reward for so great a suffering? They have not yet received it, but are still waiting; and after thus dying in so great tribulation, they have not yet received it. They gained their victory so many ages ago, and have not yet received [their reward]." Even though they are with Christ now, they haven't received their reward yet.

"Do you also consider what a thing it is, and how great, that Abraham should be sitting, and the Apostle Paul, waiting till you have been perfected, that then they may be able to receive their reward? For the Savior has told them before that unless we also are present, He will not give it them. As an affectionate father might say to sons who were well approved, and had accomplished their work, that he would not give them to eat, until their brethren came. And are you bothered that you have not yet received the reward? What then shall Abel do, who was victor before all, and is sitting uncrowned? And what about Noah? And what about they who lived in those [early] times: seeing that they wait for you and those after you?"

²⁰ John Cassian, *Institutes of the Coenobia*, I, 7.

²¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews*, XXVIII, 2.

“Do you see that we have the advantage over them? For God (he says) has provided something better for us. In order that they might not seem to have the advantage over us from being crowned before us, He appointed one time of crowning for all. And he that gained the victory so many years before receives his crown with you. Do you see His tender carefulness?”

“And he did not say, that they without us might be un-crowned, but that they without us might not be made perfect; so that at that time they appear perfect also. They were before us as regards the conflicts, but are not before us as regards the crowns. He did not wrong them, but He honored us. For they also wait for the brethren. For if we are ‘all one body,’ the pleasure becomes greater to this body, when it is crowned altogether, and not part-by-part. For the righteous are also worthy of admiration in this, that they rejoice in the welfare of their brethren, as in their own. This is according to their wish, to be crowned along with their own members. To be glorified all together is a great delight”.

And this is what we look forward to at Pascha: the Resurrection of all our brethren. As we go through Lent, we are reminded of our brethren who are waiting as we look through the windows of heaven.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

February 21, 2010
Sunday of Orthodoxy
First Sunday of Lent
Revision F

Gospel Lesson: John 1:35-51

The Gospel lesson centers on the calling of Nathanael (also called Bartholomew meaning son of Tholmei) who was one of the Twelve. There is very little mention of Nathanael elsewhere in the New Testament and this passage gives us the clearest glimpse of Nathanael's personal life of any New Testament accounts. The Gospel of John is the only one of the four Gospels that includes this account and the context tells us that the writer, John, was personally involved. The Apostles John and Andrew were disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35-37, 40). When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as "The Lamb of God", Andrew and John became disciples of Jesus.

Word started to spread! Andrew went and brought his brother Peter (John 1:41-42). The next day Jesus called Philip who was from Bethsaida along with Andrew and Peter (John 1:43). And Philip went and got Nathanael (John 1:45). John the Baptist was not bothered at all that many of his disciples were leaving to follow Jesus. In fact, he welcomed this, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). John the Baptist saw himself as "the friend of the Bridegroom" and said that it is the Bridegroom that should have the bride (John 3:29).

From the context, then, we can say for sure that the Apostles Andrew and John (the writer) were disciples of John the Baptist and that probably Peter, James, Philip, and Nathanael were also. This is relevant in that we get a hint of what Nathanael spent a lot of time doing. John the Baptist fasted and prayed a lot and taught his disciples to do so also (Luke 5:33-35, Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22). Jesus linked fasting with mourning and said that His disciples will do so also after the Bridegroom leaves, and this is what we do during Lent. Thus Nathanael, as a devoted follower of John the Baptist, must have used a secluded spot under a fig tree for his fasting and prayer; and this was where Jesus "saw" him (John 1:48).

Nathanael's First Contact with Jesus

As Nathanael came to Jesus, Jesus pointed out Nathanael as an Israelite in whom is no deceit or hypocrisy. Nathanael knew the Scriptures -- that Messiah should come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth -- and wondered about Jesus. He was doubly surprised then that Jesus already knew him. John Chrysostom stated²² that Nathanael realized that he inquired of Christ as a man, regarding His humanity, but Christ responded to him with the foreknowledge and all-seeing eye of God.

"Nathanael inquired as of a man, but Jesus answered as God. For He said, 'I have known you from the first'. He knew him and the candor of his character, not as a man from having closely followed him, but as God from the first. 'But now I saw you by the fig-tree', when there was no one present there but only Philip and Nathanael, who said all these things in private. He named the time, the place, and the tree; because if He had only said, 'Before Philip came to you, I saw you', He might have been suspected of having sent him, and of saying nothing

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²² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, XX, 2.

wonderful. By mentioning both the place where he was when addressed by Philip, the name of the tree, and the time of the conversation, He showed that His foreknowledge was unquestionable. He did not merely show to him His foreknowledge, but instructed him also in another way. For He brought him to a recollection of what they then had said; like, ‘Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ And it was most especially on this account that Nathanael received Him, because when he had uttered these words, He did not condemn, but praised and approved him. Therefore Nathanael was assured that this was indeed the Christ, both from His foreknowledge, and from His having exactly searched out his sentiments, which was the act of One, who would show that He knew what was in his mind”.

John Chrysostom also stated²³ that Nathanael had wisdom, strength of character and great desire in sorting out the conflicting statements about Christ regarding Bethlehem versus Nazareth. He came to the correct conclusion: that Philip was probably mistaken about Christ being born in Nazareth.

“Nathanael had considered the writings of the Prophets more than Philip. He had heard from the Scriptures, that Christ must come from Bethlehem. This belief prevailed among the Jews, and the Prophet had proclaimed it of old, saying, ‘And you, Bethlehem, are by no means the least among the princes of Judah, for out of you shall come a Governor, that shall feed My people Israel’ (Matthew 2:6; Micah 5:2). When he heard that He was ‘from Nazareth’, he was confounded, and doubted, not finding the announcement of Philip to agree with the prediction of the Prophet. But observe his wisdom and truthfulness even in his doubting. He did not say, ‘Philip, you deceive me, and speak falsely, I don’t believe you. I will not come; I have learned from the prophets that Christ must come from Bethlehem. You say from Nazareth; therefore this is not that Christ’. He said nothing like this, but he went to Him himself. Thus he showed, by not admitting that Christ was ‘of Nazareth’, his accuracy respecting the Scriptures, and a character who was not easily deceived. By not rejecting him who brought the news, he showed the great desire, which he felt for the coming of Christ. For he thought within himself that Philip was probably mistaken about the place”.

John Chrysostom stated²⁴ that Nathanael’s approach to Christ contrasted that of the Jewish leaders. Their approach was with envy, malice and vainglory; Nathanael’s was with the humility of being a Galilean and simply seeking the truth. As a result the simple Galileans believed and the Jewish leaders didn’t.

“Nothing is worse than envy and malice, nothing more damaging than vainglory; it can mar ten thousand good things. So the Jews, who excelled the Samaritans in knowledge, and had been always familiar with the Prophets, were shown to be inferior to them because of these faults. The Samaritans believed because of the testimony of the Samaritan woman; without having seen any sign, they came out asking Christ to stay with them. The Jews, when they had beheld His wonders, not only did not detain Him among them, but also even drove Him

²³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XX, 1.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXV, 2.

away, and used every means to expel Him from their land, although His Coming had been for their sake”.

“The Samaritans and Galileans, that were so belittled, are found most to come to Him. Nathanael said, ‘Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1:46), and the Jewish leaders said, ‘Search and look, for no prophet arises²⁵ out of Galilee’ (John 7:52). They said these things to insult Him, because He was supposed by the many to be of Nazareth. They also accused Him of being a Samaritan; ‘You are a Samaritan’, said one, ‘and have a demon’ (John 8:48). Yet both Samaritans and Galileans believed, to the shame of the Jews, and Samaritans are found better than Galileans, for the Samaritans received Him through the words of the woman; the Galileans, when they had seen the miracles which He did”.

Jesus later spoke of doing one’s fasting and prayer in secret before our Father who sees in secret (Matthew 6:5-21). Nathanael had been doing it this way on his own! In keeping with this, Jesus also instructed His followers not to be like the hypocrites who like to be seen by men to be fasting. John the Baptist also instructed his followers not to be like the Pharisees and Sadducees (who were hypocrites just in coming to John for baptism). Nathanael had been living the life of fasting and prayer that both Jesus and John taught.

When Jesus said to Nathanael that He saw him under the fig tree -- which only Nathanael and God knew about -- Nathanael was understandably blown away that God in the flesh would answer his prayer. This is why he responded, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” John Chrysostom noted²⁶ that Peter had confessed the same thing (Matthew 16:16), but the Lord’s response was different; Peter was called blessed but Nathanael wasn’t. Chrysostom hints that there may be different stages of recognition involved and that Nathanael only recognized Jesus in His humanity as the King of Israel but not yet of the whole world. Peter’s blessedness was also linked to a revelation from the Father (Matthew 16:17).

“Peter, when after so many miracles and teaching, confessed that, ‘You are the Son of God’ (Matthew 16:16), is called “blessed,” as having received the revelation from the Father. Nathanael, though he said the very same thing before seeing or hearing either miracles or teaching, had no such word addressed to him, but as though he had not said so much as he ought to have said, is brought to things greater still. What can be the reason for this? It is, that Peter and Nathanael both spoke the same words, but not both with the same intention. Peter confessed Him to be ‘The Son of God’ but as being truly God; Nathanael, as being mere man. Note what Nathanael said after these words; for after, ‘You are the Son of God’, he adds, ‘You are the King of Israel’ (John 1:49). But the Son of God is not ‘King of Israel’ only, but of the entire world. And what I say is clear, not from this only, but also from what follows. For Christ added nothing more to Peter, but as though his faith were perfect, said, that upon this confession of his He would build the Church. In Nathanael’s case, He did nothing like this, but the contrary. For as though some large and better part were lacking from his confession He added what follows, that he should see heaven opened”.

²⁵ The Jewish leaders were incorrect in their bias against Galilee. They neglected the fact that Jonah came from Gath-hepher in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25) and Nahum also came from Galilee, according to Jewish tradition.

²⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, XXI, 1.
See also Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, XXI.

Because Nathanael had been receptive to Jesus as Messiah, He proceeded to state that Nathanael would see greater things than just a watchful eye on his private prayers: he would see heaven open and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51). That is, he would see Christ as God like Peter had. This statement about heaven opened to us has been chosen as the theme for today: Orthodoxy Sunday. John Chrysostom stated²⁷:

“Do you see how He leads him up by little and little from the earth, and causes him no longer to imagine Him as merely a man? One whom Angels serve, and on whom Angels ascend and descend, how could He be man? For this reason He said, ‘You shall see greater things than these’. And in proof of this, He introduces the service of Angels. And what He means is something of this kind: ‘Does this, O Nathanael, seem to you a great matter, and have you for this reason confessed me to be King of Israel? What then will you say, when you see the Angels ascending and descending upon Me?’ By these words He persuaded Nathanael to own Him as Lord of the Angels also”.

Heaven Opened

Orthodoxy Sunday commemorates the 7th Ecumenical Council, which restored and ratified the use of icons in the Church and rejected the Iconoclasts who sought to remove the icons. Over the centuries, the icons have provided windows into heaven such that we on earth join the saints in heaven to worship around the Throne of God. Thus in Church today, we also can see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. This is why Orthodox icons are “written”, not painted, because of the spiritual message in each.

The Scripture speaks of “heaven opened” in a number of places as follows:

At Jesus’ baptism where the Holy Spirit descended like a dove	Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke: 3:21
Stephen’s vision just before his martyrdom: Jesus standing at the Right Hand of God	Acts 7:56
Ezekiel’s visions of the Throne of God	Ezekiel 1:1
Peter’s vision of the sheet containing unclean animals: the vision of the Gentile Church	Acts 10:11, 11:1-18
John’s vision of the Throne of God and the end times	Revelation 4:1
Jesus’ second coming with the armies of heaven	Revelation 19:11-14

Others of the saints have seen similar visions, such as the Apostle Paul who was caught up to the Third Heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). In our Gospel lesson, the Lord promised that Nathanael would see such visions also.

Angels Ascending and Descending

The Patriarch Jacob also had a vision where angels were ascending and descending on a ladder (Genesis 28:10-19). This was the occasion when the Lord confirmed to Jacob the covenant He had made with Abraham. Jacob’s reaction was, “How awesome is this place! This

²⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXI, 1.

is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.” Some have likened Jacob’s ladder to a meeting of heaven and earth and see in it the Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18), where Jesus took on flesh (or earth) for our sake. Others see in Jacob’s ladder the Virgin Mary who contained heaven in her womb in the Incarnation. By becoming man, Jesus has linked heaven and earth. Other occasions where angels were present with Christ are listed below, where the last three Nathanael witnessed.

Event	Reference
The Annunciation	Luke 1:26-38
Informing Joseph	Matthew 1:20-21
Announcing His Birth	Luke 2:14
Commanding the flight to Egypt	Matthew 2:13
Commanding the return from Egypt	Matthew 2:19-20
Following His temptation	Matthew 4:11
In the Garden before the crucifixion	Luke 22:43
At His Resurrection	Matthew 28:2-3, John 20:11-14
At His Ascension	Acts 1:9-11

And we participate in this linkage through the windows of heaven in the Liturgy in Church, which is the House of God that Jacob spoke of (1 Timothy 3:15).