

SUNDAY BEFORE EPIPHANY

HISTORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST PREPARATION FOR BAPTISM THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS A CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

**January 3, 2010
Revision B**

GOSPEL: John the Baptist's Message: Prepare to be Baptized

Eve of Sunday before Epiphany:	Matthew 3:1-11
Sunday before Epiphany:	Mark 1:1-8

EPISTLE:

Eve of Sunday before Epiphany:	1 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Knowing the True Church	
Sunday before Epiphany:	2 Timothy 4:5-8
Goal: A Crown of Righteousness	

In the West, today's Gospel reading from Matthew 3 is also used for the Sunday before Epiphany and sometimes for the Second Sunday in Advent. The Gospel reading from Mark 1 is occasionally also used for the Second Sunday in Advent. The Epistle readings from Timothy are not used in the West as often. When used, a portion of the 1 Timothy reading (3:14-17) is used for the Sunday before Advent and the 2 Timothy reading is used for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost.

The theme for today is one of preparation for baptism, where baptism itself will be the theme of Epiphany. In addressing John's preparation, we will use all four Gospel accounts together to piece together a history of the life of John. The Epistle lessons complement this by addressing three things one needs to know before being baptized: (1) What is one being baptized into? (2) How does one know the true church as opposed to some of the heresies current in the First Century? (3) What is the reward and what will it cost us?

GOSPEL LESSONS: HISTORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

The following account pieces together the life of John the Baptist from references in all four Gospels. To clarify some events in his life, the Gospel accounts are supplemented by historical accounts.

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The Birth of John

His Parents: Zachariah (or Zacharias) was the Chief Priest of the 8th Lot (Luke 1:5, 1 Chronicles 24:10). This meant he was in charge of the 8th Lot priestly duties for one week, then went home for 23 weeks until his turn came up again. Elizabeth was a cousin of the Virgin Mary. This means John and Jesus were second cousins.

The Announcement to Zachariah: While Zachariah was offering incense to the Lord on the Altar of Incense (Exodus 30:1-9) in the Holy Place as part of the morning and evening continual burnt offering (Exodus 29:38-42), the Archangel Gabriel appeared at the right side of the Altar of Incense. This was a very fitting occasion since the incense represented the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8). Gabriel announced that Zachariah's and Elizabeth's prayers for a child had been heard, that they would have a son and that his name should be John. Zachariah was puzzled, since he and Elizabeth were already in their 70's (Luke 1:18). However, he shouldn't have been too puzzled since he had witnessed the birth of the Virgin Mary 14 years earlier to Joachim and Anna when they were in their 70's. Because Zachariah doubted, he was made mute for 9 months. This caused quite a stir when he came out of the Holy Place to offer the Benediction and couldn't talk (Luke 1:21-22).

The Visit by the Virgin Mary: When Elizabeth was in her 6th month, Gabriel also announced to the Virgin Mary concerning Jesus (Luke 1:26-35) and also told her about the conception of John (Luke 1:36-37). Mary immediately left Galilee for Elizabeth's house in the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39), a three day journey. On her arrival, John leaped in Elizabeth's womb as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting (Luke 1:41). And Elizabeth prophesied concerning the "mother of my Lord" who had just begun her first month of pregnancy (Luke 1:42-45). Mary, in turn, spoke what we call the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maid servant..." (Luke 1:46-55). The name *Magnificat* comes from the first word of this passage in the Latin translation of the New Testament. Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months, leaving just before the birth of John (Luke 1:56).

John's Birth: The occasion of John's birth brought great rejoicing among all their neighbors and relatives (Luke 1:58). Since Zachariah was a nationally known public figure, even Herod took note of these events. When it came time to circumcise John on the 8th day, Zachariah's muteness was finally released and he spoke praising God (Luke 1:63-79). Fear came upon all who dwelt around them and they wondered "what kind of child will this be?" (Luke 1:66).

John Growing Up

The Birth of Jesus: Jesus was born just six months after John. This had a significant effect on John's father Zachariah because it came to be his week to serve as priest in charge of Temple services when the Virgin Mary came for the rites of purification after childbirth (Leviticus 12). This occurred 40 days after Jesus' birth and Zachariah treated Mary different from the other women who had just had babies. Zachariah had Mary stand in the place reserved for virgins where married women had no right to stand. (Zachariah was supported in this position by the midwives that attended Jesus' birth -- that Mary remained a virgin after childbirth.) Thus Zachariah proclaimed the virgin birth. [For more details, see "The Life of the Virgin Mary, The Theotokos", Holy Apostles Convent, 1989, p. 236.] The Pharisees who witnessed this were as much bent out of shape by Zachariah as they were later by Jesus who referred to Himself as The Son of God (John 8:37-42) and as the Great I AM (John 8:58) who spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The Pharisees then went to Herod to plot Zachariah's death.

The Massacre of the Holy Innocents: John was about 18 months old when the Wise Men arrived. In today's terminology, Herod would be described as seriously mentally ill and he had a number of the members of his own family and his wives' families executed just on the suspicion that they were plotting his overthrow. When the Magi arrived from Persia with an air of royalty and with a small army, Herod came unglued when they said they came to worship the newborn King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-8). When Herod then found out they double crossed him (Matthew 2:8, 12), he went ballistic and sent his troops out to massacre every boy two years old and under (Matthew 2:16-18).

Jesus had already left for Egypt with Joseph, Mary and Joseph's son James (Matthew 2:13-15). Zachariah, at the same time, sent Elizabeth out into the desert with the toddler John. Herod had suspected that John was the child the Magi were searching for and gave instructions to his troops to show no mercy to anyone. When Zachariah wouldn't tell where John was, the soldiers murdered him right in front of the Temple where he was serving. Zachariah's blood left permanent stains in the marble paving as a reminder of the treachery of the Pharisees (Velimirovic, Prologue, June 24). Thirty two years later, Jesus spoke to the scribes and Pharisees, "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the Temple and the Altar" (Matthew 23:35). Not only was Jesus accusing them of the murder of His uncle Zachariah, but He was also calling them sons of Cain!

Growing up in the Desert: When Elizabeth took John to the desert (or the Wilderness of Judah just west of the Dead Sea - see Matthew 3:1), they hid in a cave during the massacre. Forty days after Zachariah's death, Elizabeth (who was in her mid 70's) also died leaving the toddler John alone in the wilderness. According to tradition, John was fed and guarded by angels until his public appearances about 30 years later (N. Velimirovic, Prologue, September 5.)

This may have a lot to do with why John was received so strongly for several reasons. First, John was not the only one to come out preaching some message. According to Gamaliel, Theudas in the First Century B.C. and then Judas of Galilee about the time of the birth of John rose up claiming to be somebody. But they were killed and their followers were scattered (Acts

5:35-37). Second, John was not the only one living in the Wilderness of Judah. Much excavation has been done on Essene monastic communities in that area, where the most famous of these is the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some people today even claim that John and Jesus were Essenes. Church tradition has consistently denied this, however.

When John began his public appearances, he is not recorded as performing any miracles (John 10:41). He may have done so since he came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but that was not his focus. However, if John had been raised and guarded by angels and everyone knew it (since that area was well traveled), then everyone would definitely start listening when John began speaking.

As John grew up, he “became strong in spirit” (Luke 1:80). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15) and did not drink wine or strong drink at all. This means he was most likely a Nazarite similar to Samson (Judges 13) and the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1), both of whom were also born to barren women. A Nazarite vow separated the individual to a monastic-like life for a period of service to the Lord. During his vow he neither cut his hair nor ate anything made from grapes (Numbers 6). Most Nazarite vows lasted less than three months, and the Apostle Paul took Nazarite vows often (Acts 18:18, 21:23-25). John’s Nazarite service lasted his entire life.

John was described as dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt (Matthew 3:4). Clothing made of camel’s hair or goat’s hair (sometimes called sackcloth) resembled burlap today and was very scratchy and uncomfortable (compare Matthew 11:7-8). People sometimes wore this kind of clothing during times of mourning or repentance. John was doing both: mourning the sins of Israel and calling for her repentance. John’s food (Matthew 3:4) was described as locusts and wild honey. (Locusts are among the kosher foods in Leviticus 11 but may not be the most appetizing). He and his disciples were also described as fasting often (Luke 5:33).

In the following centuries, many monasteries were constructed in the Wilderness of Judea and farther south into the Sinai Peninsula, especially near Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Many of these were destroyed during the Moslem conquest of the 6th and 7th centuries, but some survived intact; others have been rebuilt and others are currently being excavated. The entire issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept./Oct. 1995 is devoted to these desert monasteries.

John’s Ministry

His Message: Before John’s birth, the Archangel Gabriel quoted Malachi 4:5 to Zachariah (Luke 1:17). The complete text from Malachi is, “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse”. Gabriel added that this was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

John began his ministry in the region around the Jordan (that is, just north of the Dead Sea) preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:3). See Figure I on page 448 for a map of the region where John was baptizing. All the Old Testament prophets also issued a

call to repentance. And included in the Old Testament purification rites was washing in clean water. But Old Testament remission of sins was by blood sacrifice, not by water. Water just cleaned up the offerer to qualify him to offer the sacrifice. John is thus preparing the people to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24) where there is no Temple to offer animal sacrifices at. The content of what John said can be broken down as follows:

- Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2)
- Be baptized with confession of sins (Matthew 3:5-6, Luke 3:7, Mark 1:4-5)
- Clean up your life (Luke 3:10-14)
- Messiah is coming (Matthew 2:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:15-17)

John's message really struck a resonant chord and everyone was coming to him to be baptized (Matthew 3:5, Mark 1:5). Even the scribes and Pharisees came out to be baptized. [Could the Apostle Paul have been among them?] These were the same people and their descendants who had orchestrated his father, Zachariah's murder about 30 years earlier. To them, John said, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7). John went on to tell them to bring forth fruit in keeping with their supposed repentance and that the ax is already laid to the root of the trees that don't bear fruit. They will be cut down and thrown in the unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:8-12). And John refused to baptize them (Luke 7:30).

In iconography, John is pictured as having wings like an angel. This is a reference to Malachi 3:1 (quoted in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27), "Behold, I am going to send my messenger (literally my angel), and he will clear the way before Me". In Hebrew, *Malachi* means "my angel".

John's Methods: John was a very humble man who knew his place. He stated, concerning Jesus, that he was not worthy even to carry or untie Jesus' sandals (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16). John stated that while he baptized with water, the One coming after him who was mightier than him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-17, Acts 2:2-4). John stated that he is but the friend of the Bridegroom (i.e. Jesus) who stands by and hears Him and greatly rejoices because of the Bridegroom's voice. This was John's joy and he stated: "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:29-30).

In this regard, John pointed out Jesus, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36). When John did this, some of his devoted followers began to follow Jesus instead. Among those doing so were Peter, Andrew, James and John Zebedee, Philip and Nathanael from among the Twelve, plus probably many others (John 1:36-45).

John most likely had a loud voice that carried well outdoors. Not everyone can speak to 5,000 men plus women and children outdoors and still be heard over the disruptive noise of squirming children as Jesus did (Matthew 14:13-21). John had probably a similar kind of "presence" when he spoke.

John was also very outspoken. To call the religious leaders of his day a bunch of snakes and tell them they were going to hell took courage (Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-9). John did not confine his outspokenness to religious leaders. He also publicly criticized Herod the Tetrarch (the son of his father's murderer) for the incest of marrying his brother Philip's wife Herodias (Matthew

14:3-4). This landed John in prison where Herodias later arranged to have John beheaded and his head brought to her party on a platter (Matthew 14:6-11). According to tradition, John then continued his announcement of the coming of Messiah to souls in Hades, (compare Ephesians 4:8-10, John 20:15-17, 1 Peter 3:18-20) and John is considered a forerunner there as well as on earth (Orthodox Study Bible, footnote to Matthew 14:1-12).

After John was beheaded, his disciples buried his body (Matthew 14:12) while Herod had his head thrown in the garbage dump (called “Gehenna”) outside the city. Joanna (the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward) who was later one of the myrrh-bearing women and who contributed to the support of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:3), retrieved John’s head during the night and secretly buried it in the Garden of Gethsemane (Velimirovic, Prologue, June 27).

To the people of his day, John was considered to be a prophet, and very much so. This is illustrated in the questions the chief priests and scribes posed to Jesus during the week before His crucifixion: “By what authority do you do all these things? Who is He who gave you this authority?” Jesus returned a question to them: “The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from man?” They reasoned among themselves that if they said “from heaven”, Jesus would ask why they didn’t believe him. But if they answered “from men, all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet” (Luke 20:1-6). Not only did the people consider John to be a prophet, but this belief was so strongly held that they would have stoned their religious leaders for blasphemy if they denied it.

Jesus confirmed what the people felt. He stated flatly that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:24-28, Matthew 11:8-14). Yet Jesus went on to say that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John (Luke 7:28). John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15). But the least in the kingdom of God has a body that is the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and united in one new man with the risen Christ (Ephesians 2:15-21). This was not possible under the Old Covenant; God provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us (Hebrews 11:40).

Thus, as John prepared the people of his day with baptism, so the spirit of his message prepares us for baptism today. The four points of his message illustrate an agenda that new comers to the faith need to do:

- Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand
- Be baptized with confession of sins
- Clean up our lives
- Messiah is coming.

The Epistle lessons illustrate the first, second and last of the above items.

THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

**January 3, 2010
Revision B**

BACKGROUND: TIMOTHY, BISHOP OF EPHEBUS

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 of Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul probably met Timothy on his first missionary journey. 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 over 20 years when Paul met him.

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written 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.

Paul had recently left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) to set some things straight. The words Paul used for Timothy's mission there are very strong. In 1 Timothy 4:11, Paul instructs Timothy, "These things command (Greek: *paragello*) and teach (Greek: *didasko*)". The Greek word *paragello* comes from the Greek work *agellos* meaning "angel" and an adverb meaning near or close. Thus Paul is saying that Timothy's work in Ephesus is the Word of God coming to the Ephesians as in an angelic visit. These are strong words; it's not something that's optional whether they receive it or not. [The same word *paragello*, is also used in 1 Timothy 1:3, 1:5, 1:18, 5:7, 6:13, 6:17.]

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.

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Paul wrote his first Epistle to Timothy probably from Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3) where he went after leaving Timothy in Ephesus. From there he went to Nicopolis in Pontus (Titus 3:12) for the winter. A couple years later, Paul had been arrested again and Alexander the Coppersmith had been instrumental in Paul's accusation (2 Timothy 4:6), and he looked forward to being with the Lord (4:8). Thus 2 Timothy is the last letter he wrote.

Timothy: A Pillar in the Church - 1 Timothy 3:14-4:5

In the verses preceding, Paul described what type of person to look for to fill the role of bishops (vv.1-7), deacons (vv.8-13) and deaconesses (v.11). When he addressed Timothy's role in the House of God (v.15), he was definitely speaking of a leadership role.

Timothy's focus was to be in the House of God, which is the Church, the pillar and support of the truth (v.15). The Church has the Holy Spirit, called the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13), and by Him, we know that we are of the Truth (1 John 3:19, 4:6). The Head of the Church is the Lord Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). Therefore the Truth supports the Church and the Church supports the Truth. One might contrast this with the world's view of truth as expressed by Pontius Pilate "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Having no spirit of truth for an absolute reference, any "truth" is relative.

This allusion to pillars in v.15 had greater significance in ancient architecture than it does today. In the Greek New Testament, just one word, *stulos*, is used to describe a pillar. In the Hebrew Old Testament, two different words are used to describe pillars: *ammud* (large pillars or column) and *matstsebah* (a small pillar or monument). Usage of pillars is shown in Table I.

From the use of pillars in Table I, the implications of Paul's letter to Timothy is

- Just as pillars are the sole support of a large building so the Church is the sole support of the truth.
- The Lord and His angels are described in terms of pillars; thus the Church is also since she is His Body.
- Leaders in the Church who stand for the truth are also called pillars.
- These pillars define the location of the House of God (i.e. Bethel).

As Paul wrote to Timothy, he fully expected that Timothy would be a pillar in the Church in Ephesus.

The Mystery of Godliness

As a pillar in the Church, Timothy would be involved with the mystery of godliness (v.16). In connection with this, Paul quoted an ancient creed or hymn that Timothy knew. Each of the lines or items in this creed is a mystery in itself (see Table II). Put together as godliness in us, "great is the mystery of Godliness." And Timothy, like Paul, was one of the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

**TABLE I
SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO PILLARS**

WORD	OCCASION	REFERENCES
Ammud	The Lord was a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud in the wilderness.	Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19, 24
	The entire temple of Dagon rested on 2 central pillars; when Samson pushed these over, the temple collapsed.	Judges 26:25-29
	Hiram made huge pillars for Solomon's Temple	1 Kings 7:15-21
Matstsebah	Jacob set up a pillar to mark the spot God spoke to him at Bethel (i.e. House of God). He anointed the pillar with oil	Genesis 28:18, 22; 31:13
	Jacob returned to Bethel and God spoke to him again. He set up another pillar and anointed it with wine and oil.	Genesis 35:14-20
	A pillar to the Lord will be a sign and witness as Egypt returns to the Lord.	Isaiah 19:19
	A pillar marked the covenant between Jacob and Laban.	Genesis 31:45-52
	Sacred pillars to idols were strictly forbidden	Deuteronomy 16:22 2 Samuel 18:18; 2 Kings 3:2
Stulos	Those overcoming will be a pillar in the Temple of God.	Revelation 3:12
	James, Peter and John were pillars in the Church of Jerusalem.	Galatians 2:9
	A strong angel was described as having feet like pillars of fire.	Revelation 10:1

**TABLE II
THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS**

ITEM	MYSTERY	REFERENCE
God manifested in the flesh by the Church	The Incarnation Further revealed	Luke 1:35 Ephesians 3:10
Justified in the Spirit	Holy Spirit as Dove at Baptism He committed no sin	Matthew 3:13-17 1 Peter 2:22
Seen by Angels	Angels watch over Christ	Luke 4:10-11; Psalm 91:11-13
Preached among the Gentiles	Paul's Ministry	Ephesians 3:8-10
Believed on in the World	Gentiles grafted in	Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:23
Received up in Glory	The Ascension	Acts 1:9-11

As one approaches baptism, one needs to realize that there is a mystery to what is being considered and that it is unlike anything else in the world. Baptism itself is a mystery whereby we are buried and raised with Christ (Romans 6:4).

The Mystery of Lawlessness

Working counter to the mystery of godliness, Paul wrote that there is also a mystery of lawlessness at work (2 Thessalonians 2:6-12), except this lawlessness is currently being restrained (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Just before the Lord's return, the restrainer will be taken out of the way (2 Thessalonians 2:8) and this mystery of lawlessness will be revealed. In the meantime, the Epistle lesson describes some of the activity that is at work by the mystery of lawlessness.

- Some will depart from the Faith (v.1)
- They will give heed to deceiving spirits (v.1)
- They will give heed to doctrines of demons (v.1)
- They will speak lies in hypocrisy (v.2)
- Their conscience will be seared with a hot iron (v.2)
- Their personal life may be very impressive; they may be monks; they may fast and be very restrictive about some foods (v.3)

John Chrysostom stated regarding those involved in this mystery of lawlessness, that "this implies that they utter not these falsehoods through ignorance and unknowingly, but as acting a part, knowing the truth, but having their conscience seared; that is, being men of evil lives" (Homily xii on 1 Timothy 4).

Fasting is fine (Luke 5:33-35) and has been practiced by the Church a great deal; remaining celibate is great if one can do it without burning inside (1 Corinthians 7:9). But more important is discerning the mysteries of God from the mysteries of lawlessness. Regarding discernment, Anthony and Athanasius of Alexandria wrote about how it is one of the greatest of the spiritual gifts (Hausherr, Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East, 1990, chap. 3). Before considering a long program of fasting or celibacy, one needs to be prepared to discern the mysteries of God, because one will be partaking of the Lord's Supper - the Lord's Body and Blood in a mystery - immediately after baptism. (Compare also 1 Corinthians 11:28-30 regarding discerning the Lord's Body).

Paul wrote to the Colossians at about this same time to address a Gnostic heresy that was developing there. For more details, see the Epistle lesson for the 29th Sunday after Pentecost. One of the Gnostic tenets involved certain kosher foods and ascetical practices. Here Paul said, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving. For it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (vv.4,5). This refers to meat that does not meet the conditions specified in Leviticus 11 for being "clean". John Chrysostom comments as follows: "First, no creature of God is unclean. Second, if it were to become so you have a remedy: seal it (with the sign of the Cross), give thanks, and glorify God, and all the uncleanness passes away" (Ibid.).

A CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

**January 3, 2010
Revision B**

EPISTLE LESSON: 2 Timothy 4:5-8

Another important consideration before baptism is the reward at the end and the cost of getting there. As Paul wrote this Epistle, he was very near the end of his life (v.6). According to tradition, he was beheaded by Nero shortly after writing this Epistle (N. Velimirovic, Prologue, June 29). He likened his life to fighting the good fight and to finishing the race (v.7).

To the Corinthians, Paul used the same imagery: many run in a race, but only one receives the crown or prize. Everyone who competes is temperate in all things; they discipline their body and bring it into subjection. Thus Paul ran the Christian life; thus he fought the good fight. Not with uncertainty; not as one who flailed at the air. He ran in such a way that he might obtain the crown (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

In the verses preceding the Epistle lesson, Paul wrote of those who ran the race differently. “They will not bear with healthy teaching but according to their own lusts; they will heap up for themselves teachers who tickle the ear (i.e. teachers who say what they want to hear.) On the one hand, they will turn away their ears from the truth; on the other hand, they will be turned aside to fables” (vv.3-4, 1 Timothy 1:4). In this way they are not temperate and disciplined in the faith and will not attain the crown.

There are many allusions to crowns as the reward for the righteous at the end of time. Not only are there references to different crowns but to crowns that have different meanings. Table III traces references in the Scriptures to the Greek word *stephanos* and the Hebrew word *atarah*, both meaning crown. As one can see, there are many different varieties of crowns at the end of time and even within these varieties of crowns there are differing aspects.

For example, Proverbs dwells a lot on acquiring wisdom, where “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Wisdom is contrasted with foolishness and wisdom leads one to righteousness. (For a detailed comparison of Wisdom vs. Foolishness, see the 9th Sunday of Luke: The Parable of the Rich Fool.) Solomon advised men to “acquire wisdom; prize her and she will exalt you; she will present you with a crown of beauty” (Proverbs 4:5-9). Later Isaiah wrote that “the Lord of Hosts will become a crown of beauty to the remnant of His people” (Isaiah 28:5); and yet “Jerusalem will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord” (Isaiah 62:3). In other words, the Lord and His people are crowned for each other. The illustration here sounds similar to the Orthodox wedding service where the bride and groom are each crowned for each other. (The crowns in the Orthodox wedding represent martyrs crowns.)

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**TABLE III
USE OF CROWNS IN SCRIPTURE**

TYPE OF CROWN	USAGE	REFERENCE
At the end of time		
Crown of Righteousness		2 Timothy 4:8
Crown of Life		James 1:12, Revelation 2:10
Crown of Glory		1 Peter 5:4, Proverbs 16:31
Crown of Loving Kindness and Compassion		Psalms 103:4
Crown of Beauty		Proverbs 4:9, Isaiah 28:5, 62:3
Crown of Martyrdom		Tradition
In this Life		
Crown of Old Men	His Grandchildren	Proverbs 17:6
Paul's Crowns	Churches of Philippi & Thessalonica	Philippians 4:1 1 Thessalonians 2:19
Crown of the Wise	His Riches	Proverbs 14:24
Crown of a Husband	His Wife	Proverbs 12:4
Crown of Gold	For Kings	Esther 8:15 2 Samuel 12:30 Psalm 21:3

Thus the crown of beauty seems to speak of some mystical aspect of the Body of Christ. Like the other crowns, we probably won't know very much details about them until the Lord returns. The point we need to understand, however, is that the rewards for the faithful at the end of time are significant and well worth the effort spent during this life in running the race and fighting the good fight. In the Parable of the Minas, one of the rewards was authority over ten cities (Luke 19:17). In other places we are spoken of as kings and priests to God the Father (Revelation 5:10; 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 61:6).

In our Epistle lesson, Paul stated that a crown of righteousness is also laid up for all who have loved His appearance (v.8). Examples of people who loved His appearance are Simeon (Luke 2:25), Anna (Luke 2:38) and Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:51) among others.

As part of our calling, however, we must "be watchful in all things and endure afflictions" (v.5). In Paul's case, he described his state of affairs as he wrote this Epistle as one of being poured out as a drink offering (v.6).

Every reference in the Scripture to a drink offering (or libation) offered to the Lord is also in conjunction with a whole burnt offering and a grain offering. (For example, see Leviticus 23:18, 37, Numbers 29). The drink offering was always wine (Numbers 28:14) and it accompanied the burnt offering whether it was the morning and evening continual burnt offering,

a special Festival burnt offering or a private burnt offering (Numbers 28, 29). The burnt offering represents the entire surrender to God of the offerer. The Hebrew word *olah* meaning burnt offering comes from the word that means to ascend like smoke; thus the burnt offering was entirely consumed on the altar (Leviticus 6:8-13). Paul refers to this same type of offering relative to us: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

The drink offering itself, being wine, refers to joy (Psalm 104:15, Ecclesiastes 10:19, Proverbs 31:6). Together with the burnt offering they both speak of one joyfully surrendering himself to the will of God. Paul spoke of this also to the Philippians: “And if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and liturgy (Greek *leitourgia*) of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Philippians 2:17).

After speaking of himself as a drink offering, Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith” (v.7). John Chrysostom wrote that he had difficulty at first understanding why Paul spoke so loftily. Chrysostom concluded, “Paul was desirous to console the despondency of Timothy, and therefore bid him be of good cheer, since he was going to his crown, having finished all his work, and obtained a glorious end. You ought to rejoice, he said, not to grieve. As a father whose son was sitting by him bewailing his orphan state might be consoled, Paul said in effect: ‘Weep not my son, we have lived a good life, we have arrived at old age, and now we leave you. Our life has been irreproachable, we depart with glory and you may be held in adoration for our actions. Our King is much indebted to us’ ” (Homily ix on 2 Timothy).

There is a lot of depth in baptism and its preparation. Few new converts will understand all of it, but then we are encouraged to remember our baptism all our lives (Romans 6). And with our baptism as a firm foundation, we are able to look forward to taking our turn with the joy that is set before us that we may endure our crosses and despise the shame that the world gives us (Hebrews 12:2).