

HEALING THE PARALYTIC
Body and Soul
ANGELS AND OUR SALVATION

March 31, 2013
Sunday of Gregory Palamas
2nd Sunday of Lent
Revision E

GOSPEL: Mark 2:1-12
EPISTLE: Hebrews 1:10-2:3

Today's Gospel lesson is used in the West for the 7th Sunday after Epiphany (or around this time of year.) However, only the first three verses of the Epistle lesson are used in the Western Lectionary.

In the Orthodox Church, the 2nd Sunday of Lent has been chosen to remember Gregory Palamas who was a Greek monk and theologian of the 14th Century and who stressed the Biblical notion of man as a single and united whole, body and soul together. A brief summary of his life from the Prologue is included as Appendix I. Gregory's teaching is illustrated in the Gospel lesson where the Lord deals with both the body and soul of the paralytic.

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1st Century Palestine House Construction

To understand the mechanics of today's Gospel lesson, (that is, how a paralytic on a bed could be lowered through the roof) we need to understand how houses were constructed in 1st Century Palestine. Most houses were constructed out of sun-dried brick and were one-story dwellings. The walls were whitewashed inside and outside with lime or gypsum. Windows were small and few, had no glass, and were covered with a latticework that could be opened -- like simple Venetian blinds. Better houses had a courtyard on the interior, where windows usually opened to the courtyard. Well-to-do houses may have had several courtyards.

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Roofs of houses were generally flat. For most houses, roofing consisted of boughs on top of rafters and covered with stomped dirt. A better class of houses had roofs of clay tile and stone. Tile roofs were obviously more watertight during heavy rains where dirt roofs may drip for days after a heavy rain (Compare Proverbs 19:13). In the parallel account (from Luke 5:20) we find that the house in the Gospel lesson had a clay tile roof. This better class of houses also had a railing around the edge to prevent accidental falls.

Roofs were not delicate areas like today; they were a part of the living quarters where people lived and moved about. There was generally a stairway to the roof from the courtyard and also a stairway to the roof from outside the house. When Jesus warned him who is on the housetop not to go down to take anything out of the house, but to flee quickly (Matthew 24:17), the implication is to use the outside stairway, not the inside stairway.

Some uses of the roof area mentioned in the Scriptures are:

**TABLE I
USES OF THE ROOF IN SCRIPTURE**

ACTIVITY	REFERENCE
Private discussions	1 Samuel 9:25
Sleeping, especially in hot summers	1 Samuel 9:26
Construction of Booths during the Feast of Tabernacles	Nehemiah 8:16
Watching for the approach of an enemy	Isaiah 22:1
Waiting for good tidings	2 Samuel 18:24, 33
Making announcements	Matthew 10:27, Luke 12:3, Acts 2:14-40
Lamentation	Isaiah 15:3, Jeremiah 48:38
Home altars for family idols	2 Kings 23:12, Jeremiah 19:13, Zephaniah 1:5
Harem of Absalom's concubines	2 Samuel 16:21, 22
Elijah lived in an "upper room" on the roof	1 Kings 17:19
Elisha stayed in the "upper room" of the Shunammite woman	2 Kings 4:10, 11
Jesus ate the Passover meal in an "upper room"	Mark 14:14, 15
The Apostles met in the "upper room"; Peter preached from the railing at Pentecost with the Eleven at his side	Acts 1:13, 2:14

Gospel: Mark 2:1-12 (Matthew 9:1-8, Luke 5:17-26)

The setting is Galilee in Capernaum, near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The house in which Jesus was speaking belonged to someone who was well to do as indicated by the reference to a tiled roof (Luke 5:19). Thus the house was large with a large courtyard. Sometimes courtyards had a roof, so Jesus may have been speaking in a roofed courtyard.

Many people crowded into the house. If Jesus was speaking in the courtyard, people probably crowded into each room to listen through the windows that opened onto the courtyard.

Thus crowds cut off all access to Jesus. However, the outside stairway was not blocked since this was far away from the action. If Jesus was speaking in a covered courtyard, however, the inside stairway was certainly blocked.

The time of year was autumn of the first year of Jesus' public ministry. Some of the Twelve had been called, but not all. In the verses following today's Gospel lesson, Matthew, the tax collector, was called as an Apostle (Matthew 9:9).

The Paralytic Really Wanted to be Healed

The enterprising four men carrying the paralytic (Mark 2:3-4) could easily tell where Jesus was in the house. As a man who could preach outdoors to large audiences (e.g. 5000 men plus women and children, Luke 9:11, 14; Matthew 14:21), Jesus' voice could easily be heard through the roof. So they removed the tiles above Him, and let the paralytic down by ropes attached to the four corners of his stretcher-like pallet.

Jesus' first reaction was to forgive the sins of the paralytic. It is interesting to note that Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic after He saw the faith of the paralytic and the four men who carried him. Scribes and Pharisees (Luke 5:21) were present -- one of them may have owned the house -- and immediately began reasoning in their minds that this was blasphemy. To them, only God could forgive sins and even then, not without the shedding of blood in an animal sacrifice. But then, only God can read the thoughts and intents of men's hearts also. Jesus put this all in perspective by challenging their thoughts before they spoke their objections: "Which is easier to say 'your sins are forgiven' or 'take up your pallet and walk'"? Jesus continued, just to dispel any doubts, "But that you (the Scribes and Pharisees) may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins". He then healed the paralytic. The crowds' reaction was amazement and glorification of God, "We never saw anything like this!"(Mark 2:12)

John Chrysostom compared¹ the cases of two paralytics that Jesus healed. One had been paralyzed much longer as a result of sin in his life; the other exhibited considerable faith in seeking Jesus out.

"Penalties and punishments work to lead to forgiveness of sins; and this we might prove from many passages. It seems to me then that the reason why Christ said nothing to the paralytic by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-8) about remission of sins, but only secured him against the future, was because the penalty for his sins had been already worked out by the long duration of his sickness. Perhaps also he had not yet attained any belief concerning Christ that the Lord first addressed Himself to the lesser need, and one, which was clear and obvious, the health of the body. But in the case of the paralytic let down through the roof, He did not act thus. Inasmuch as this man had more faith, and a loftier soul, He spoke to him first concerning the more dangerous disease, and also exhibited His equality with the Father".

Chrysostom disagreed² with those who claimed that it was only the faith of the friends of the paralytic that resulted in his healing. The paralytic had faith himself also. Allowing himself to be lowered through the roof was a dangerous operation that could result in further injury if the

¹ John Chrysostom, "Homily on the Paralytic Let Down Through the Roof", 5-6, Post Nicene Fathers, Volume 9.

² John Chrysostom, "Homily on the Paralytic Let Down Through the Roof", 5, Post Nicene Fathers, Volume 9.

bed slipped. In other cases, where the person healed was too bound by demons or disease to know better, Christ healed them first, and then allowed them to acquire faith. Chrysostom gave evidence from the text to support his statements.

“Some say that this man was healed merely because they who brought him believed; but this is not the fact. ‘When He saw their faith’ (Matthew 9:2) refers not merely to those who brought the man but also to the man who was brought. ‘Is not one man healed’, you say, ‘because another has believed?’ For my part I do not think so unless he is in some way incapable of believing. How then was it in the case of the Canaanite woman that the mother believed but the daughter was cured? (Matthew 15:22) And how was it that the paralyzed servant of the centurion was healed? (Matthew 8:5-13) Because the sick persons themselves were not able to believe! How could she believe whose mind was darkened and possessed by a demon, and was never able to control herself? So also in the case of the centurion; his servant lay sick in the house, not knowing Christ, or who He was. How then was he to believe in one who was unknown to him, and of whom he had never yet obtained any experience? In the case before us, the paralytic believed. This is clear from the manner of his approach to Christ. Don’t look at just the statement that they let the man down through the roof; consider how great a matter it is for a sick man to have the fortitude to undergo this. You are surely aware that invalids are so faint-hearted and difficult to please that they often refuse the treatment administered to them on their sick bed, and prefer bearing the pain, which arises from their sickness, to undergoing the annoyance caused by the remedies. But this man had the fortitude to go outside the house, to be carried into the midst of the market place, and to exhibit himself in the presence of a crowd. It is the habit of many sick folk to die under their disorder rather than disclose their personal calamities. This sick man, however, did not do that. When he saw that the place of assembly was filled and the approaches blocked, he submitted to be let down through the roof. ‘For he that seeks finds, and to him that knocks it shall be opened’ (Luke 11:10). The man did not say to his friends, ‘What is the meaning of this? Why make this fuss? Why push on? Let us wait until the house is cleared and the assembly is over; the crowds will withdraw, we shall then be able to approach him privately and confer about these matters. Why should you expose my misfortunes in the midst of all the spectators?’ He said none of these things, but regarded it as an honor to have so many persons made witnesses of his cure”.

“We can also discern his faith from the actual words of Christ. After he had been let down and presented, Christ said to him, ‘Son! Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven’ (Matthew 9:2). And when he heard these words, he was not indignant, he did not complain, he did not say to the physician, ‘What do you mean by this? I came to be healed of one thing and you heal another?’ He spoke none of these things, but waited, allowing the physician to adopt the method of healing which He desired. For this reason Christ did not go to him, but waited for him to come, that He might exhibit his faith to everyone. Couldn’t He have made the entrance easy? He didn’t in order that He might exhibit the man’s zeal and fervent faith to everyone. As He went to the man who had been suffering 38 years, because he had no one to aid him (John 5:5-7), so He waited for this man to come to Him. This man had many friends; He made his faith clear by the manner of how he was brought to Him. Christ informed us of the other paralytic’s

loneliness by going to him. He disclosed the earnestness of the one and the patience of the other to everyone and especially to those who were present.

Chrysostom also stated³ that the faith that Christ required of people changed as He proceeded in His three-year ministry. As they got to know Him, He asked more of them. The paralytic also had a share in the faith that healed him.

“After they broke up the roof, and let him down, they put the sick man before Christ, saying nothing, but committing everything to Christ. In the beginning Christ Himself went about, and did not require so much faith of them that came to Him; yet in this case, they approached Him, and had faith required on their part. For, ‘Seeing their faith’; that is, the faith of them that had let the man down. He does not, on all occasions, require faith on the part of the sick only; as for instance, when they are insane, or through their disease, are out of their own control. In this case the sick man too had part in the faith; for he would not have allowed himself to be let down, unless he had believed”.

Gregory Palamas also stated⁴ that there was a substantial contribution of faith on the part of the paralytic.

“Recall the daughters of Jairus and the Canaanite woman and the centurion’s servant. The paralyzed man, by contrast, was present and in his right mind, although his body was paralyzed. It seems more likely to me that his bearers accepted faith in the Lord and ventured to approach Him as a result of the paralyzed man’s own hopefulness and faith. Persuaded by him, they took him and carried him up on the roof, and let him down from there in front of the Lord. They could not have done this against his wishes. Obviously, the racking of his body with paralysis had broken down all barriers and obstacles to faith, but not his reason”.

The Forgiveness of Sins

This was the only occasion where Christ forgave the sins of someone before He healed them. Obviously He knew the heart of the paralytic, but there was more to it than this. There was a drama being played out in the courtyard where Jesus was speaking. As the four men were taking the roof apart, which took some time, Jesus continued to speak. Finally they slowly lowered the paralytic in front of Jesus, and everyone wondered what Jesus would do. Gregory Palamas reasoned⁵ that the Scribes misperceived Jesus’ ability.

“It seemed to the Scribes that the Lord was unable to heal the paralyzed man, so He had resorted to something obscure, forgiving him his sins. Just to pronounce words of forgiveness, especially in such an authoritative and commanding way, was blasphemy; but it was also something easy that anyone could do. That is why the Lord said to them, “ If I wanted to utter empty words without any practical outcome, it would be just as easy to declare that the paralyzed man should rise from his bed as that his sins were forgiven, both statements being of no effect. But so that you may know that my word is not ineffectual, and that I did not resort to forgiving his sins because I was incapable

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXIX, 1.

⁴ Gregory Palamas, Homilies, X, 7, St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2002, p. 105.

⁵ Gregory Palamas, Homilies, X, 10, St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2002, p. 105.

of granting him healing of his illness, He then said to the paralyzed man, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house’ (Matthew 9:6).

John Chrysostom stated⁶ that Christ’s forgiveness was necessary since the sin was the root cause of the paralysis. Chrysostom included other examples also.

“Why did Christ not first address Himself to the cure of the paralytic, but said, ‘Son! Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven!’ (Matthew 9:2) He did this very wisely. For physicians seek to destroy the originating cause of the malady before they remove the malady itself. This is what Christ did; He repressed, first of all, the source of the evil. For the source, root and mother of all evil is the nature of sin. This is what enervates our bodies; this is what brings on disease. Therefore on this occasion He forgave the sin. And another occasion, He said, ‘Behold! You are made whole, sin no more lest some worse thing happen to you’ (John 5:14), indicating that both these sicknesses were the offspring of sin. In the beginning, disease as the consequence of sin attacked the body of Cain. After the murder of his brother, after that act of wickedness, his body was subject to paralysis. For uncontrollable trembling⁷ is the same thing as paralysis. When the strength which regulates a living creature becomes weakened, being no longer able to support all the limbs, it deprives them of their natural power of direction, and then having become unstrung they tremble and turn dizzy”.

“Paul also demonstrated this; when he was reproaching the Corinthians with a certain sin, he said, ‘For this cause many are weak and sickly among you’ (1 Corinthians 11:30). Therefore Christ first removed the cause of the evil by forgiving the sin. By doing so, He uplifts the spirit and rouses the downcast soul”.

Cyril of Alexandria also stated⁸ that sin was the cause of the paralytic’s problem, and that Christ removed the sin first in order to heal him completely.

“Now someone, I imagine, may say to this: what he wanted was to be delivered from his disease; and why, then, does Christ announce to him the forgiveness of his sin? It was that you may learn that God silently and noiselessly observes the affairs of men, and watches the course of each one’s life; and so it is written, ‘the paths of a man are before the eyes of God; and He looks at all his tracks’ (Proverbs 5:21). And as He is good, and wills that all men should be saved; He often purifies those who are entangled in sins by inflicting sickness upon their body. He says by the voice of Jeremiah, ‘You shall be taught, O Jerusalem, by labor and the scourge’ (Jeremiah 6:8). Proverbs also has said, ‘my son, despise not the teaching of the Lord, nor faint when you are convicted by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He accepts’ (Proverbs 3:11). Therefore, Christ announces that He will cut away the cause of the disease, and the very root, as it were, of the malady, even sin; for if this is removed, necessarily must the disease which sprung from it be taken away at the same time”.

⁶ John Chrysostom, “Homily on the Paralytic Let Down Through the Roof”, 5-6, Post Nicene Fathers, Volume 9.

⁷ Chrysostom’s comment on Cain’s “paralysis” comes from the Septuagint text: “When you till the earth, then it shall not continue to give its strength to you: you shall be groaning and trembling on the earth” (Genesis 4:12)

⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 20, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

Unfortunately, Jesus' warm reception in Capernaum was short-lived. A few months later, Jesus rebuked the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum because they didn't repent (Matthew 11:20-24). Perhaps this was because of the Scribes and Pharisees, who were present. Later Jesus accused the Scribes and Pharisees of shutting up the Kingdom of Heaven against men (Matthew 23:13). They didn't enter themselves and by their undercutting and false teaching, didn't allow some of those who were entering to go in. This can be compared to the Parable of the Sower where some seed fell on the wayside and some fell on rocky ground (Matthew 13:18-21). The Scribes and Pharisees snatched the Word away before the people understood it (i.e. the wayside); or if the people did understand it, the Pharisees threatened to put them out of the Synagogue (John 9:34-35) if they continued (i.e. the rocky ground).

The Deity of Christ

One might ask how the Gospel writers came to know that Jesus read the thoughts of the Scribes and Pharisees. Since they were so hostile to Him, it is unlikely that they would admit this! Included among the Pharisees, however, were Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who later believed and performed the burial rite for Jesus (John 19:38-42). They likely were present at Capernaum at this time, and were certainly included in private discussions among the Pharisees after this event.

Irenaeus, in addressing heretics⁹ who claimed another Father, stated¹⁰ that it was against Christ that Adam sinned in the beginning. The paralytic had also sinned against Him, and this resulted in his paralysis. In forgiving the paralytic, Christ brought him back to where Adam was before the Fall.

“The commandment was given to man by the Word. For Adam, ‘heard the voice of the Lord God’ (Genesis 3:8). Rightly then does His Word say to the man: ‘Your sins are forgiven you’ (Matthew 9:2). He, the same against whom we had sinned in the beginning, grants forgiveness of sins in the end”.

“When He had healed the paralytic, ‘the people, upon seeing it, glorified God, who gave such power unto men’ (Matthew 9:8). What God did the bystanders glorify? Was this indeed that unknown Father invented by the heretics? How could they glorify Him who was altogether unknown to them? It is evident that Israel glorified Him who has been proclaimed as God by the Law and the prophets, who is also the Father of our Lord. Therefore He taught men, by the evidence of their senses through those signs which He accomplished, to give glory to God. If, however, He Himself had come from another Father, and men glorified a different Father when they beheld His miracles, He rendered them ungrateful to that Father who had sent the gift of healing. But as the only-begotten Son had come for man's salvation from Him who is God, He stirred up the incredulous by the miracles, which He was in the habit of working, to give glory to the Father. To the Pharisees, who did not admit the advent of His Son, and who consequently did not believe in the remission of sins, which was conferred by Him, He said, ‘That you may know that the Son of man has power to forgive sins’ (Matthew 9:6). And when He had said this, He commanded the

⁹ Many heretics, beginning with Simon Magus, taught a very complicated system of gods, where Christ and God the Father were minor players among the gods. For more details, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, Unpublished Work, St Athanasius Press, 2004.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V, xvii, 1-2.

paralytic to take up the pallet on which he was lying, and go to his house. By this work of His He confounded the unbelievers, and showed that He is Himself the voice of God. By Him man received commandments, which the paralytic broke, and became a sinner; for the paralysis followed as a consequence of sins”.

Hilary of Poitiers stated¹¹ that Christ, in His humanity, sometimes professed ignorance, even though He knew all things. His supposed “ignorance” proceeds from His omniscience; He spoke in human terms, and if something hidden needed to remain hidden, He declared Himself to be “ignorant”.

“The Lord Jesus Christ, Who searches the heart and the reins (Revelation 2:23), has no weakness in His nature, that He should not know. As we perceive it, the fact of His ignorance proceeds from the omniscience of His nature. Yet if there are any who impute to Him ignorance, let them tremble, lest He Who knows their thoughts should say to them, ‘Why think you evil in your hearts?’ (Matthew 9:4) The All-knowing, though not ignorant of thoughts and deeds, sometimes inquired as if He were, as for instance when He asked the woman who touched the hem of His garment (Matthew 9:20, 14:36), or the Apostles, why they quarreled among themselves (Mark 10:35-41), or the mourners, where the sepulcher of Lazarus was (John 11:34). But His ignorance was not ignorance, except in words. It is unreasonable that He should know from afar the death and burial of Lazarus, but not the place of his sepulcher; that He should read the thoughts of the mind, and not recognize the faith of the woman; that He should not need to ask concerning anything (John 16:30), yet be ignorant of the dissension of the Apostles. But He, Who knows all things, sometimes professes ignorance, even though He is not ignorant. Thus, in the case of Abraham, God concealed His knowledge for a time (Genesis 18:17-18); in that of the foolish virgins and the workers of iniquity, He refused to recognize the unworthy (Matthew 25:12, Habakkuk 1:13). In the mystery of the Son of Man, His asking, as if ignorant, expressed His humanity. He accommodated Himself to the reality of His birth in the flesh in everything to which the weakness of our nature is subject. He did not become weak in His divine nature, but that God, born man, assumed the weaknesses of humanity. He did not reduce His unchangeable nature to a weak nature. He, Who was God, is man; but being man, He has not ceased to remain God. Conducting Himself then as one born man, and proving Himself such, though remaining God the Word, He often uses the language of man. God, speaking as God, makes frequent use of human terms, and ‘does not know’ that which it is not yet time to declare, or which is not deserving of His recognition”.

“We can now understand why He said that He did not know the day (Matthew 24:36). If we believe Him to have been really ignorant, we contradict the Apostle, who says, ‘In Whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden’ (Colossians 2:3). There is knowledge, which is hidden in Him, and because it has to be hidden, it must sometimes for this purpose be professed as ignorance; for once declared, it will no longer be secret. In order, therefore, that the knowledge may remain hidden, He declares that He does not know. But if He does not know, in order that the knowledge may remain hidden, this ignorance is

¹¹ Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, IX, 66-67.

not due to His nature, which is omniscient, for He is ignorant solely in order that it may be hidden”.

Soul and Body

Today’s Gospel lesson teaches us that the Lord is concerned about our human bodies. Some early heresies taught that the body didn’t matter; only spiritual things mattered. But the Lord created our human bodies on purpose and showed His care for the human body of the paralytic by healing him. We, in the meantime, glorify God in our bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). As we do so, we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies at the Lord’s return (Romans 8:23).

While we await this, we realize that sin has a paralyzing effect on our soul. We should let nothing hinder us from getting to Christ, and like the four men, we should help each other come to Christ. As Paul said, “It is no longer I doing things contrary to the law of God but sin that dwells in me” (Romans 7:15-17). This has a paralyzing effect in that “the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil that I will not to do, that I practice” (Romans 7:19). So part of the preparation during Lent is to subdue the flesh and its desires, to set our minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5) and to realize that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Gregory of Nyssa pointed out¹² that Christ came to heal the whole man, both body and soul. By His incarnation, He sanctified both soul and body.

“He Who came to seek and save that which was lost, both finds that which is lost and carries home the whole sheep on His shoulders, not just its skin, that He may make the man of God complete, united to the Deity in body and in soul. He Who was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin, left no part of our nature, which He did not take upon Himself. Now the soul is not sin, though it is capable of admitting sin into it as the result of being ill-advised. This He sanctified by union with Himself for this end, that so the lump may be holy along with the first-fruits. Therefore the Angel, when informing Joseph of the destruction of the enemies of the Lord, said, ‘They are dead which sought the young Child’s soul’ (Matthew 2:20). And the Lord said to the Jews, ‘You seek to kill Me, a man that has told you the truth’ (John 8:40). Now by ‘Man’ is not meant the body of a man only, but that which is composed of both soul and body. And again, He said to them, ‘Are you angry at Me, because I have made a man completely whole on the Sabbath day?’ (John 7:23) And what He meant by ‘completely whole’, He showed when He said to the man who was let down on a couch, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, which is a healing of the soul, and, ‘Arise and walk’ (Luke 5:23), which has regard to the body. Also after liberating the soul from its own sickness after He had given health to the body, He said, ‘You have been made whole, sin no more’ (John 5:14). That is, you who have been cured in both soul and body”.

Clement of Alexandria stated¹³ that physicians can sometimes heal the body and philosophers try to free the soul by wisdom. But Christ is the only real healer of both soul and body.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius, II, 13.

“Our Instructor, the Word, cures the unnatural passions of the soul by means of exhortations. The help of bodily diseases is called the healing art — an art acquired by human skill. But the paternal Word is the only physician of human infirmities, and the holy healer of the sick soul. ‘Save Your servant, O my God, who trusts in You. Pity me, O Lord; for I will cry to You all day’ (Psalm 86:2-3). For a while the ‘physician’s art’, according to Democritus¹⁴, ‘heals the diseases of the body; wisdom frees the soul from passion’. But the good Instructor, the Wisdom, the Word of the Father, who made man, cares for the whole nature of His creature; the all-sufficient Physician of humanity, the Savior, heals both body and soul. ‘Rise up’, He said to the paralytic; ‘take the bed on which you lie, and go home’ (Mark 2:11); and immediately the infirm man received strength. To the dead He said, ‘Lazarus, come out’ (John 11:43); and the dead man came from his coffin such as he was before he died, having undergone resurrection. Further, He heals the soul itself by precepts and gifts — by precepts in course of time; but being liberal in His gifts, He says to us sinners, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (Mark 2:5).

Gregory Palamas made¹⁵ an analogy between our life today and the circumstances of the paralytic. We have our own paralysis and our own roof to remove in order to draw near to God.

“Anyone addicted to sensual pleasures is paralyzed in his soul, and is lying sick on the bed of self-indulgence with its deceptive bodily ease. Once he has been won over by the exhortations in the Gospel, he confesses his sins and triumphs over them and the paralysis they have brought upon his soul. He is taken up and brought to the Lord by these four”

1. Self-condemnation
2. Confession of former sins
3. Promising to renounce evil ways from now on
4. Prayer to God

“They cannot, however, bring him near to God without uncovering the roof, scattering the tiles, earth and other building material. Our roof is the reasoning part of the soul, which is set above everything else within us, (i.e. in our mind). But it has lying on top of it, like a large quantity of building material, its connection with the passions and earthly matters. Once this connection has been loosed and shaken off by means of the above four things, then we can really be let down, i.e. humbled, fall down before the Lord, draw near to Him and receive His healing”.

Like the four men carrying the paralytic, we must let nothing deter us from this preparation. Other examples of this are:

1. The man who found treasure in a field and went and bought the field (Matthew 13:44).
2. The merchant who discovered a pearl of great price and sold all he had to get it (Matthew 13:45-46).
3. The Twelve Apostles who left everything to follow their Lord (Matthew 19:27-30).

¹³ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, I, 2.

¹⁴ Democritus was a 4th Century BC philosopher who authored the atomic theory that the universe is composed of simple atoms.

¹⁵ Gregory Palamas, Homilies, X, 12, St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 2002, p. 105.

And as we do our preparation, we realize that we do it together, for we are all the one Body of Christ and members individually (1 Corinthians 12:20-27). Cain was wrong! We are our brother's keeper (Genesis 4:9)! We need to imitate the four men who carried the paralytic.

Tertullian, speaking against heretics who separated the soul from the flesh, stated¹⁶ that the soul and the flesh are linked in both this life and the next, both in reward and in punishment.

“We do not withdraw from community with the flesh even in our thoughts, however isolated they be, however spontaneous into the act by means of the flesh. Whatever is done in man's heart is done by the soul in the flesh, with the flesh, and through the flesh. The Lord Himself, when rebuking our thoughts, included in His censures this aspect of the flesh, (man's heart), the citadel of the soul. ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’ (Matthew 9:4), and again, ‘Whoever looks on a woman, to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart’ (Matthew 5:28). So that even the thought, without operation and without effect, is an act of the flesh. The faculty, which rules the senses, the flesh, is the thinking place of the soul. The soul is never without the flesh, as long as it is in the flesh. The flesh transacts everything in company with the soul. Consider carefully, too, how the thoughts administer the flesh, since it is through the flesh that they are distinguished and known externally. Let the soul begin to meditate some intention, the face gives the indication — the face being the mirror of all our intentions”.

Athanasius of Alexandria pointed out¹⁷ how the Arians of his day were very much like the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Just as the Scribes and Pharisees grumbled when Jesus healed someone, the Arians persecuted the Christians for performing acts of mercy toward the needy.

“The Arians devised another yet more cruel and unholy deed; cruel in the eyes of all men, but well suited to their antichristian heresy. When the Duke gave up the Churches to the Arians, and the destitute persons and widows were unable to continue any longer in them, the widows sat down in the appointed places. And when the Arians saw that the brethren readily ministered to them and supported them, they persecuted the widows also, beating them on the feet, and accused those who gave to them before the Duke. Here then was a novel subject of complaint; and a new kind of court now first invented by the Arians. Persons were brought to trial for acts of kindness, which they had performed; he who showed mercy was accused, and he who had received a benefit was beaten. They wished rather that a poor man should suffer hunger, than that he who was willing to show mercy should give to him. Such are the sentiments of these modern Jews, for such they are, having learned from the Jews of old. The Jews of old, when they saw him who had been blind from his birth recover his sight (John 9:1-7), and him who had been paralyzed made whole (Matthew 9:6), accused the Lord who had bestowed these benefits upon them, and judged them to be transgressors who had experienced His goodness”.

¹⁶ Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh, II, vi, 15.

¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, History of the Arians, VII, 61.

Cyprian encouraged¹⁸ people to be disciplined in their prayer, addressing God with dignity as present and listening. He sees men's thoughts, and words are scarcely necessary. When we come into His Presence at the Divine Liturgy, we should be respectful, knowing that He reads our thoughts as He illustrated with the Jewish leaders.

“But let our speech and petition when we pray be under discipline, observing quietness and modesty. Let us consider that we are standing in God's sight. For as it is characteristic of a shameless man to be noisy with his cries, so, on the other hand, it is fitting to the modest man to pray with moderated petitions. Moreover, in His teaching the Lord has told us to pray in secret, which is best suited to faith, that we may know that God is everywhere present, and hears and sees all, and in the plenitude of His majesty penetrates even into hidden and secret places, as it is written, ‘I am a God at hand, and not a God far off. If a man shall hide himself in secret places, shall I not then see him? Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ (Jeremiah 23:23-24) And again, ‘The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good’ (Proverbs 15:3). And when we meet together with the brethren in one place, and celebrate divine sacrifices with God's priest, we ought to be mindful of modesty and discipline, not to throw abroad our prayers indiscriminately, with loud voices, nor to cast to God with tumultuous wordiness a petition that ought to be commended to God by modesty. God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart. He does not need to be clamorously reminded, since He sees men's thoughts, as the Lord proves to us when He says, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’ (Matthew 9:4) And in another place, ‘And all the churches shall know that I am He that searches out the hearts and reins’” (Revelation 2:23).

Soul versus Spirit

Most references to the invisible part of human nature refer to man's soul, but there are some references to the human spirit. Sometimes the terms “soul” and “spirit” seem to be used interchangeably¹⁹ as if they are referring to the same thing. In other places, there seems to be a special connection of the human spirit to the Holy Spirit. For example²⁰, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16), and “he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*” (1 Corinthians 6:17), and “The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (2 Timothy 4:22).

At other times there are references to the human spirit as being distinct from man's soul or at least some other aspect of man's soul. For example, “May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24), and “For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:12-13).

¹⁸ Cyprian, Treatises, IV, 4.

¹⁹ See for example 1 Corinthians 7:33, Colossians 2:5, James 2:26, 1 Peter 3:3-4.

²⁰ Other examples are 1 Corinthians 2:10-11, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 1 Corinthians 15:14-16.

John Chrysostom stated²¹ that Paul's reference in 1 Thessalonians to the human spirit refers to the Gift of Grace.

“What here does he call the spirit? The gift of grace! For if we depart from this life having our lamps bright, we shall enter into the bride chamber. But if they are quenched, it will not be so. For this reason he says ‘your spirit’. If that remains pure, the other (i.e. soul and body) remains also. For neither the one nor the other then admits anything evil.”

John Chrysostom also stated²² that the “naked and open” is a “metaphor from the skins which are drawn off from the (Old Testament sacrificial) victims. For as in that case, when a man has killed them, and has drawn aside the skin from the flesh, he lays open all the inward parts and makes them clear to our eyes. So also do all things lie open before God.”

Another aspect of the “division of soul and spirit” may be a reference to the “cutting in half” of the ungodly on Judgment Day (Matthew 24:51, Luke 12:46) and may refer to the eternal alienation of the soul from the Holy Spirit. Thus in hell there is no one who confesses, no one in death who remembers God, because the help of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3, Matthew 16:17) is no longer available”.

What makes this subject difficult to sort out is that the word for “spirit” in both Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*) also means air, breath or wind. John of Damascus had some things to say about man's body, soul and spirit, where he discusses various aspects of man's nature. He seems to use the terms “soul” and “spirit” largely interchangeably, but when he refers to relations with the Holy Spirit, he uses “spirit”, and when he refers to aspects of man's humanity, he uses “soul”. Noting the various meanings of *pneuma*, he said²³,

“The Spirit has various meanings. There is the Holy Spirit; but the powers of the Holy Spirit are also spoken of as spirits. The good messenger is also spirit; the demon also is spirit; the soul too is spirit; and sometimes mind also is spoken of as spirit. Finally the wind is spirit and the air is spirit”.

John of Damascus seemed to use²⁴ “soul” and “spirit” interchangeably as he spoke of our twofold worship of God, with both our visible and our invisible nature.

“It is not without reason or by chance that we worship towards the East. Seeing that we are composed of a visible and an invisible nature, that is to say, of a nature partly of spirit and partly of sense, we render also twofold worship to the Creator. Just as we sing both with our spirit and our bodily lips, and are baptized with both water and Spirit, so also we are united with the Lord in a twofold manner, being sharers in the mysteries and in the grace of the Spirit”.

“If the Evangelist said²⁵ that the Word was made flesh (John 1:14), note that in the Scripture sometimes a man is spoken of as a soul, for example, “with seventy-five souls Jacob went into Egypt” (Genesis 46:27 LXX, Acts 7:14); sometimes a man is spoken of as flesh, for example, “All flesh shall see the

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Thessalonians, XI, v. 23.

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, VII, 2.

²³ John of Damascus, An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, I, 13.

²⁴ John of Damascus, An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, IV, 12.

²⁵ John of Damascus, An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, III, 18.

salvation of God” (Isaiah 40:5, Luke 3:6). And accordingly the Lord did not become flesh without soul or mind, but man. He says, Himself, “Why do you seek to kill Me, a Man that has told you the truth?” (John 8:40) He assumed flesh animated with the spirit of reason and mind, a spirit that holds sway over the flesh but is itself under the dominion of the divinity of the Word”.

“Man’s body and soul were formed²⁶ at one and the same time, not first the one and then the other, as Origen so senselessly supposes. Man is spirit by grace, but flesh by exalted pride. He is spirit that he may glorify his Benefactor, and flesh that he may suffer; in suffering he may be admonished and disciplined when he prides himself in his greatness. In the present life, his life is ordered as an animal’s, but in the age to come, he is changed and becomes deified by merely inclining himself towards God. He becomes deified by participating in the divine glory and not by changing into the divine being”.

“The soul, accordingly, is a living essence, simple, incorporeal, invisible in its proper nature to bodily eyes, immortal, reasoning and intelligent, formless, making use of an organized body, and being the source of its powers of life, growth, sensation, and generation. Mind is its purest part and is not in any wise alien to it; for as the eye to the body, so is the mind to the soul. Further it enjoys freedom, volition and energy, and is mutable, that is, it is given to change, because it is created. All these qualities according to nature it has received of the grace of the Creator, of which grace it has received both its being and this particular kind of nature.”

In a more detailed description of the Creation and man’s life before the Fall, John of Damascus described²⁷ the spiritual relationship of man to God in the Garden. This was a spiritual battle involving man’s free will, choosing between the soul and the body. Satan had become firmly established in wickedness by his free choice of arrogance after he attained immortality; similarly the angels became immovably rooted in goodness. Man was given this choice as a test: if reason (that is, the soul) prevailed, man would receive eternal life; if he subjected the soul to the desires of the body, like an animal, with the soul as a slave to the body, he would become subject to death and corruption.

“This man He placed in Paradise, a home that was alike spiritual and sensible. He lived in the body on the earth in the realm of sense, while he dwelt in the spirit among the angels, cultivating divine thoughts, and being supported by them. He lived in naked simplicity a life free from artificiality, and was led up through His creations to the one and only Creator, in Whose contemplation he found joy and gladness”.

“When God had furnished his nature with free-will, He imposed a law on him, not to taste of the tree of knowledge. And with this command He gave the promise that, if he should preserve the dignity of the soul by giving the victory to reason, and acknowledging his Creator and observing His command, he should share eternal blessedness and live to all eternity, proving mightier than death. But if he should subject the soul to the body, and prefer the delights of the body, comparing himself in ignorance of his true dignity to the senseless beasts (Psalm 49:12), and shaking off his Creator’s yoke, and neglecting His divine injunction,

²⁶ John of Damascus, An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, II, 12.

²⁷ John of Damascus, An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, II, 30.

he will be liable to death and corruption, and will be compelled to labor throughout a miserable life. It was not profitable to man to obtain incorruption while still untried and unproven, lest he should fall into pride and under the judgment of the devil. Through his incorruption the devil, when he had fallen as the result of his own free choice, was firmly established in wickedness, so that there was no room for repentance and no hope of change. Similarly the angels also, when they had made free choice of virtue, became through grace immovably rooted in goodness”.

“It was necessary that man should first be put to the test, and being made perfect by the trial through the observance of the command should thus receive incorruption as the prize of his virtue. For being intermediate between God and matter, he was destined, if he kept the command, to be delivered from his natural relation to existing things and to be made one with God’s estate, and to be immovably established in goodness. If he transgressed and inclined rather to what was material, and tore his mind from the Author of his being, his fate was to be corruption, and he was to become subject to passion instead of passionless, and mortal instead of immortal, and dependent on connection and unsettled generation. In his desire for life he would cling to pleasures as though they were necessary to maintain it, and would fearlessly abhor those who sought to deprive him of these, and transfer his desire from God to matter, and his anger from the real enemy of his salvation to his own brethren. The envy of the devil then was the reason of man’s fall. For that same demon, so full of envy and with such a hatred of good, would not allow us to enjoy the pleasures of heaven, when he himself was kept below on account of his arrogance. The false one tempts miserable man with the hope of Godhead, and leading him up to as great a height of arrogance as himself, he hurls him down into a pit of destruction just as deep”.

ANGELS AND OUR SALVATION

March 31, 2013
Sunday of Gregory Palamas
2nd Sunday of Lent
Revision F

Epistle: Hebrews 1:6-2:3

Background to a Discussion of Angels

In the Epistle lesson, Paul compares the Son of God to angels. A portion of this Epistle is also used in the Orthodox lectionary for the Feast Day of the Archangels²⁸. In our culture, angels have been portrayed in many peoples' mind as small, gentle creatures with baby-like features. This is more a medieval Western understanding than it is Scriptural. When angels have appeared to men, they have often done so in the form of a young man, thus setting aside much of their glory because our human frailty can't bear it. But there are other times when angels have appeared to men without setting aside their glory.

Consider the scene when Elisha prayed that his servant's eyes may be opened, and the servant saw the mountain ridge above Dothan full of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:14-17). The mountain ridge above Dothan is very much like the mountain ridge above Santa Barbara, California. Camino Cielo, the road along the mountaintop above Santa Barbara, is about 8 miles from the ocean as the mountain ridge above Dothan is 8 miles away. If an angel stood on Camino Cielo, how tall would he have to be for someone with 20-20 vision to recognize him as who he is? This is a good science project to do with your kids. Pace off from each other until you're far enough apart that it is difficult to make out who each other are. Measure that distance with your paces and then, calculate how tall you would have to be to recognize each other 8 miles away. When I did this, my son and I concluded that if Elisha's servant squinted his eyes, he could just barely recognize a 180-foot tall angel standing on the mountain ridge above Dothan. And the context doesn't indicate that he had to squint.

We see something similar to this in the Garden of Eden where the cherubim with the flame of the sword whirling itself about guarded the way back to the Garden (Genesis 3:24). It was humanly impossible for Adam to get past these guys!

In John's vision, a strong angel is described coming down from heaven and standing with his right foot in the sea and his left foot on the land (Revelation 10:1-4). To do that, the angel had to be hundreds of feet tall.

Some people have encountered angels in all their glory. For example, the soldiers at the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 28:2-4) shook with fear and passed out. The Prophet Daniel, similarly, was trembling and passed out when an angel visited him in answer to one of his prayers (Daniel 10:5-11). The appearance of the angel visiting Daniel was similar to the appearance of the risen Lord to the Apostle John (Revelation 1:13-15, 2:18, 19:12):

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²⁸ See the Study for the Feast Day of the Archangels, November 8.

- white hair like wool
- face like lightning
- eyes like a flame of fire
- feet and arms like polished bronze
- dressed in long white robe with golden belt
- voice like a thundering waterfall

This seems to be the angels’ normal state as they serve around the throne of God (Revelation 15:6). Most of the time when they appear to us humans, they put most of their glory aside such as the appearance to the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-38) and the High Priest Zachariah (Luke 1:11-20). It is their human form (without their glory) that is displayed in Orthodox Churches on the various icons.

Epistle: Hebrews 1:6-2:3

In most English translations, there are two different Greek words, referring to angels that are both translated “minister” or “ministering” in our Epistle lesson. These are:

Word		Meaning	Reference
diakonos	n.	Deacon	
diakonia	v.	To serve as a deacon	Hebrews 1:14
leitourgos	n.	liturgist, one who performs the liturgy	Hebrews 1:7, 1:14
leitourgikos	adj.	liturgic	

The angels are both liturgists and deacons. Paul’s words literally translated are, “Who makes His angels spirits and His liturgists a flame of fire” (Hebrews 1:7). If they’re hundreds of feet tall, clothed in fire and speak with a voice of thunder, they make rather impressive liturgists! With hundreds of thousands of angels singing around the Throne of God, all with a voice of thunder, everything must vibrate and rock!

Paul also said, translating literally, “are they not all liturgic spirits sent forth to serve as deacons for those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14) We sometimes think of angels as our guardians but we don’t often think of them as our deacons. If we are to be kings and priests to God the Father (Revelation 1:5-6), it makes sense that the angels might serve as our deacons.

John Chrysostom added²⁹ that this should not be surprising, since the salvation of the brethren is an angelic work, directed by Christ.

“Why marvel if they minister to the Son, when they minister even to our salvation? See how he lifts up their minds and shows the great honor, which God has for us, since He has assigned to angels, who are above us, this ministration on our behalf? As if one should say, for this purpose He employs them; this is the office of angels, to minister to God for our salvation. So then it is an angelic work to do everything for the salvation of the brethren; or rather it is the work of

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, III, 4.

Christ Himself, for He indeed saves as Lord, but they as servants. And we, though servants, are yet angels' fellow servants. They are servants of the Son of God, and are sent many ways for our sakes, and so they are partners in service with us".

Our place in the heavenly order of things is that the Lord is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11). This is what we saw three weeks ago at the Sunday of the Last Judgment, where the criterion for judgment was how everyone had treated the least of Christ's brothers (Matthew 25:31-46) as part of His Body. The punch line of our Epistle lesson is that we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away (Hebrews 2:1). For the Word that we have received is unalterable and has been delivered by angels (Hebrews 2:2). Chrysostom stated³⁰ that the angels were present at the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai and that they created the thunder, lightning, and the very loud trumpet sound (Exodus 19:16). Stephen testified to this as he was being martyred (Acts 7:53). Others of the Prophets and the Patriarchs were visited and guided by angels much of their lives.

The Role of angels

In the New Testament we see a strong presence of angels with the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Joseph (Matthew 2:13), the shepherds (Luke 2:9-15), the Myrrh-Bearing Women at the tomb (Matthew 28:1-8), at the Ascension (Acts 1:10-11), at the release of the Twelve from prison (Acts 5:19-20), at Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:7), to Philip (Acts 8:26), to Cornelius (Acts 10:3) and to Paul (Acts 16:9).

Athenagoras the Athenian noted³¹ that God has posted angels to watch over many things, including the elements, the heavens, the world, the things in the world and the goodly ordering of them all.

Athanasius of Alexandria compared³² the visits of angels to men with the visits of God with men. Everyone who has seen either angels or God knows what he has seen, and there is no mistaking the visit of an angel with the Presence of God.

"When the Father works, it is not like an angel works, or like any other creature; for none of these creatures is a first cause, but they are created things. Being separate and distinct from the only God, different in nature, and being created works, they can neither do what God does, nor can they give grace with God. On seeing an angel, would a man say that he had seen the Father? Angels, as it is written, are 'ministering spirits sent forth to minister' (Hebrews 1:14), and are heralds of gifts given by Him through the Word to those who receive them. The angel, on his appearance, himself confesses that his Lord sent him; as Gabriel confessed in the case of Zachariah (Luke 1:19), and in the case of Mary, bearer of God (Luke 1:26-30). And he who beholds a vision of angels, knows that he has seen the angel and not God. For Zachariah saw an angel; and Isaiah saw the Lord (Isaiah 6:1-5). Manoah, the father of Samson, saw³³ an angel (Judges 13:11-22);

³⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, III, 6.

³¹ Athenagoras the Athenian, A Plea for the Christians, 10.

³² Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, III, xxv, 14

³³ At one point, Manoah thought he saw God when he saw the angel, but his wife corrected him. Manoah wanted to prepare a meal for the angel out of gratitude, but the angel instructed him to offer a sacrifice to the Lord instead. Manoah's wife saw the angel for who he was; Manoah himself was confused.

but Moses beheld God (Exodus 33:9-11, 34:5-8). Gideon saw an angel (Judges 6:11-22), but to Abraham appeared God (Genesis 18:16-22). And neither he who saw God, beheld an angel, nor he who saw an angel, considered that he saw God. Sometimes when the angel was seen, he who saw it heard God's voice, as took place at the burning bush. 'The angel of the Lord was seen in a flame of fire out of the bush, and the Lord called Moses out of the bush, saying, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:2-6). Yet the angel was not the God of Abraham, but in the angel God spoke. And what was seen was an angel; but God spoke in him. For as He spoke to Moses in the pillar of a cloud in the tabernacle (Exodus 33:9-10); so also God appears and speaks in angels. So again He spoke by an angel to Joshua, the son of Nun (Joshua 5:13-15). But what God speaks, it is very plain He speaks through the Word, and not through another. And the Word is not separate from the Father, nor foreign to the Father's Essence; what He works, those are the Father's works, and His framing of all things is one with His. What the Son gives, that is the Father's gift. And he who has seen the Son, knows that, in seeing Him, he has seen, not angel, nor one merely greater than angels, nor in short any creature, but the Father Himself. And he, who hears the Word, knows that he hears the Father; as he who is irradiated by the radiance, knows that he is enlightened by the sun".

Christ Compared to Angels

Athanasius of Alexandria, in addressing the Arian heresy, which claimed that Christ was a lesser being than the Father, contrasted³⁴ Christ with the angels, showed that He was not a created being. Comparison can be made with like objects, but no comparison can be made between Christ and the beings (angels) that He created. We need to understand what Paul meant by Christ being "better" than the angels. The Arians took this to mean that Christ was can be compared to angels as a lesser being than God.

"Comparison involves subjects of the same kind, not to those that differ. No one, for instance, would compare God with man, or man with animals, nor wood with stone, because their natures are unlike. But God is beyond comparison; man can be compared to man, and wood to wood, and stone to stone. Now in such cases we should not speak of 'better,' but of 'rather' and 'more'; thus Joseph was good looking rather than his brethren, and Rachel was better looking than Leah. One star is not better than another star, but is rather more excellent in glory. In bringing together things which differ in kind, then 'better' is used to mark the difference, as has been said in the case of wisdom and jewels (Proverbs 20:15). Had then Paul said, 'by so much has the Son precedence over the Angels,' or 'by so much greater,' you would have had a plea, as if the Son were compared with the Angels. But, as it is, in saying that He is 'better,' and differs as far as Son from servants, the Apostle shows that He is other than the Angels in nature".

"Moreover by saying that He has 'laid the foundation of all things' (Hebrews 1:10), he shows that He is other than all things originate. If He is different in essence, what comparison of His essence can there be, or what likeness can there be to them? Even if they entertain such thoughts, Paul refutes

³⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, I, xiii, 57 & 59.

them saying, 'For to which of the Angels did He say at any time, You are My Son, this day have I begotten You? And of the Angels He said, Who makes His Angels spirits, and His ministers a flame of fire'" (Hebrews 1:7).

"Paul's own reason for saying, 'so much better than the Angels' (Hebrews 1:4), was not any wish to compare the essence of the Word to things originate. Regarding the Word's visitation in the flesh (i.e. the Incarnation), he wished to show that He was not like those who had gone before Him. He excelled in nature those who were sent before by Him; similarly also the grace, which came from and through Him, was better than the ministry through Angels. It is the function of servants to demand the fruits and no more; but of the Son and Master to forgive the debts and to transfer the vineyard" (Matthew 21:41).

Ambrose of Milan explained³⁵ the meaning of the word "alone", that is used in several places, as it is associated with the work of the Son at the Creation. All His works were done together with the Father. Man and all the other creatures of God cannot be separated as if they were alone either, since they are all in fellowship with God, where only man and the angels are rational creatures.

"But that they may know, when they see the word "alone," that the Son was not separated from the Father. Let them remember it was said by God in the Prophets, 'I stretched forth the heavens alone' (Isaiah 44:24 LXX). The Father certainly did not stretch them forth without the Son. For the Son Himself, Who is the Wisdom of God, says, 'When He prepared the heavens I was present with Him' (Proverbs 8:27 LXX). And Paul declares that it was said of the Son, 'You, Lord, in the beginning had laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands' (Hebrews 1:10, Psalm 102:25). The Son made the heavens, as Paul would have it understood that He certainly did not alone spread out the heavens without the Father. As it stands in the Book of Proverbs, 'The Lord in wisdom has founded the earth, in understanding has He prepared the heavens' (Proverbs 3:19). Neither the Father made the heavens alone without the Son, nor the Son without the Father. And yet He who spread out the heavens is said to be alone".

"To show how plainly we must understand the expression 'alone' of the Son, consider, 'Who alone spreads out the heavens, and walks as it were on a pavement over the sea' (Job 9:8 LXX). For the Gospels have taught us that it was not the Father but the Son that walked on the sea, when Peter asked Him, saying, 'Lord, allow me to come to You' (Matthew 14:28). But even prophecy itself gives proof of this. For holy Job prophesied of the coming of the Lord. He said that He would vanquish the great Leviathan (Job 41:1-42:2), and it was done. For that dread Leviathan, that is, the devil, He struck down in the last times by the Passion of His own Body" (Isaiah 27:1).

"The Son therefore is only and true God for this also is assigned to the Son as His sole right. For of no created being can it be accurately said that he is alone. To man belongs fellowship in creation with the other created beings, and he cannot be separated from the rest as though he were alone. Thus man is seen to be a rational being among all earthly creatures, yet he is not the only rational being. For we know that the heavenly works of God also are rational, and we

³⁵ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, V, ii, 29-31.

confess that angels and archangels are rational beings. If then the angels are rational, man cannot be said to be the only rational being”.

Why Are We Here?

Sometimes it is easy to get caught up in the busy-ness of life and lose track of why we're here and what we're supposed to accomplish. Lent is a time to focus back on what's really important.

The Sunday of the Last Judgment three weeks ago spells things out very carefully: we will be judged based on our own works. No man can protect us then if we are betrayed by our own deeds. The key to the proper understanding of the important things in life is *change*. Isaac of Nineveh stated³⁶, “Every rational creature suffers changes without number, and every man is different from hour to hour”. Our Epistle lesson addresses this also: all of creation will change, but God remains the same (Hebrews 1:10-12). In striving for the things of God, we need then to direct our change -- in body, soul and spirit -- to better prepare us for life with God in eternity.

The days of our lives are our opportunity to do this and thus store up treasure in heaven (Luke 12:21, 33). Paul encouraged the Corinthians in this regard, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). John Chrysostom commented³⁷,

“Let us therefore strive for the mastery in the time of this gift. It is the day of Grace, of Grace Divine, wherefore with ease even we will obtain the heavenly crown”.

So how do we use this “accepted time” to obtain treasure in heaven? Chrysostom said that the Church has made available to us Baptism, Confession, Communion, Holy Oil, etc. But these cannot help us without our own contributing effort and without humility. For example, what good is baptism if one is buried in the mire of subsequent sin? What good is a superficial confession? What good is communion without the fear and love of God? What good is holy oil without belief in its power? Such are a mockery and a sacrilege. None of these are any good if one has a hardened heart that won't change. Chrysostom continued,

“Wherefore I entreat³⁸ and beseech, and lay hold of your very knees, that while we have this scant provision for the journey of life that you would become better men. That we may not, like that rich man, lament to no purpose in that world after our departure, and continue thereafter in incurable wailings. For though you should have father or son or friend or anyone who has confidence toward God, none of these will ever deliver you if your own works have destroyed you”.

“What is the profit³⁹ of this present life, when we do not use it for our future gain”.

When we consider what we have been given: a Temple of the Holy Spirit and access to the mysteries of God; and when we consider what we have been promised: a resurrected body and serving as kings and priests to God the Father with the enormously powerful angels as our

³⁶ Isaac of Nineveh, [Directions in Spiritual Training](#).

³⁷ John Chrysostom, [Homilies on 2 Corinthians](#), XII, 1.

³⁸ John Chrysostom, [Homilies on 1 Corinthians](#), XLII, 5.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, [Homilies on Matthew](#), XC, 3.

deacons (to name a few), “how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation” (Hebrews 2:3)?

Appendix 1

The Life of Gregory Palamas

Gregory's father was an eminent official at the court of the Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus. The gifted Gregory, completing his secular studies, did not want to go into imperial service at court, but withdrew to the Holy Mountain (Mount Athos) and became a monk, living in asceticism at Vatopedi and the Great Lavra. He waged war against the heretic Barlaam, and finally overcame him. He was consecrated Metropolitan of Salonica (i.e. Thessalonica) in 1347, being glorified both as an ascetic and a theologian, both as a hierarch and a wonderworker. The Virgin Mary, the Apostle John, Dimitrios, and Antony the Great, John Chrysostom and angels of God all appeared to him at different times. He governed the Church in Salonica for twelve years, of which he spent one year in slavery to the Saracens in Asia. He entered peacefully into rest in 1359, and entered into the Kingdom of Christ. His relics are preserved in Salonica, where there is a beautiful church dedicated to him.