



St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church

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Be Prepared ...

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His Holiness Pope Tawdros the 2nd

Pope of Alexandria

& Patriarch of St. Mark's Diocese

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Introduction

At an hour we do not expect we will be called upon to stand before the Lord. We have been alerted to the importance of being prepared since Old Testament times. Our Lord's Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension have the main goal of preparing all human beings for that sacred and yet scary moment.

This book is an attempt to probe deep into how we should constantly bear in mind that we should "Be Prepared" for this holy encounter.

I would like to acknowledge the great effort that Mr. Guirguis Ishack, who is a blessed deacon at St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church, Ottawa, exerted in the distinguished and indeed very professional translation of this book into English in order for it to appear in this elegant English language format that I am sure all readers will enjoy. I pray and hope that the chapters of this book take you along an honest and fruitful trip of "Being Prepared"

Through the prayers of our holy father Pope Tawadros the second... May God keep for us his life for many years and peaceful times.

Pray for me ...

Fr. Daoud Lamei

1

**AT AN HOUR YOU DO
NOT EXPECT**



At an hour we do not expect we will be called upon to stand before the Lord. We have been alerted to the importance of being prepared since Old Testament times. In the Book of Amos we read:

Prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Amos 4:12)

Our Lord says that since we will surely stand before Him at some point in time, unknown and unannounced to us, we must always be prepared. Constant and consistent vigilance, fasting and prayer, are necessary prerequisites for a prepared soul. Being always ready is a virtue.

We are often complacent about this awesome meeting. The meeting with God will occur at an unexpected time, which should never be likened to an appointment for which we know we can set the alarm to give us sufficient time to get ready.

Some believe that God will always give us a chance to be ready before recalling us. They faultily think that in this way we will be prepared, and we will surely go to heaven. This is a falsehood, since our Lord asserted:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour

the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:35 - 40)

We recite this biblical passage each day in the third service of the midnight canonical hour. In this passage our Church is warning us against complacency, and urging us to be watchful, and to be prepared for our Lord's recall of our soul, at any time - even during our sleep. Thus, we must always ensure, every evening before retiring, that ***"our house is in order."***

Biblical examples of people being recalled during their sleep include: Sodom and Gomorrah (some were undoubtedly asleep when the cities were burnt), and the flood (again, some must have been asleep when the earth was flooded), the example our Lord Jesus gave of the wise virgins, Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16), etc...

Some of us feel that our work, our responsibilities, or our mission, on earth, is so important that God cannot possibly recall us. This is another fallacy, a self-imparted dangerous and erroneous belief. No one is indispensable, and God's master plan for the universe does not rely on individual feelings or convictions.

Only high-level saints, such as Saint Paul, may be privy to the time of their departure from this world. When he was brought before Nero, Paul was ready to depart, but God told him that his time had not yet come. On the other hand, when his time did come, he wrote to Timothy:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept

the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6 - 8)

Our Lord Jesus Christ mentioned this significant element of our Faith on numerous occasions in the Gospels, hence: Luke 12, Matthew 24, Mark 13, and others....Christ therefore urges us to be always watchful - not sleepless; rather, we should expect to be recalled anytime.

Although Noah spent one hundred years warning people of the impending flood, no one heeded his warnings. Christ – infinitely greater than Noah – is repeating such warnings. Hence, Christ reminds us:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler

over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:36 - 51)

Satan plants the stupid idea in our minds that "we still have a long time." In this regard, we are reminded of the parable which Christ said:

Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." 'But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:16 - 21)

The bottom line is: Never assume that the end is coming at a much later time: since we are too young, we are not sick, or any other such argument. This false sense of security is imparted by Satan. Departure from this world is not contingent on age or the

state of health. Many young and/or healthy people leave this world in a variety of circumstances, some explainable while others are not, simply because of the Divine provision that their time had come. Let us not erroneously and dangerously assume that "time is on our side" - this leads to a misguided cool down of our fervor: ***"...the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."***

On the other hand, some fall in the opposite fallacy of assuming that we have missed all our opportunities. This indeed is yet another satanic trap that causes man to fall in the sin of despair. There is chance as long as we have the breath of life in us and as long as we are ready to repent. Our forefathers said that each new day gives us new life, a fresh opportunity for repentance and a chance to bear fruit. However, at some point, opportunities will end. Pharaoh was given nine chances - the tenth was the final blow, and he perished. Another example is Jerusalem: it continued its obstinacy for fifteen hundred years since Moses' time; Christ finally declared that its chances were over:

See! Your house is left to you desolate. (Matthew 23:38)

Samson was another pitiful example of lack of repentance, and perseverance down the path of sin, despite God's patience, and God's granting him several chances to wake up and repent. The Bible tells us:

So he awoke from his sleep, and said, "I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!" But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him. (Judges 16:20)

Samson's one-track mind blinded him - a man of God - to God's calling. We should never assume that God's patience is such that He will grant us an infinite number of opportunities.

Let us not abuse Divine compassion. To what extent have we benefitted from past experiences? Are we stubbornly persisting in an ungodly lifestyle? God forbid that someday we come to the terrifying realization that the Lord had departed from us!

This message is addressed not only to those who turn a deaf ear to God's calling; rather, it also applies to anyone who permits his day-to-day preoccupations, even church service, to deflect his focus from God and eternity. Even during benign "family" tasks and chores (painting the house, fixing the car, etc.) we should remain focused on eternity. Remember what God told the rich man:

Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' (Luke 12:20)

Our soul's recall may not necessarily be at a time of deliberate sinfulness, wantonness, strife, hardships, cruelty or the like; rather, we may be recalled at a time of relaxation, enjoyment, or a time when we are being honored or exalted. In this regard, consider King Herod Agrippa. He murdered James the son of Zebedee, he persecuted the Christians and he arrested Peter, intending to kill him. Yet God's wrath was not immediately kindled against him. However, and quite unexpectedly, one day he gave an oration to the people - and when the audience shouted, ***"The voice of a god and not of a man!"***(Acts 12:22), an angel of God immediately struck him and he was eaten by worms and he died, because he failed to give glory to the Lord.

Saint Paul stated the above differently to the Thessalonians:

For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a

pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. (1 Thessalonians 5:3 & 4)

Sometimes we feel that, after a lengthy or tedious journey, we return to the comfort and safety of our home and the surrounding loving family; hence, our recall cannot possibly be imminent! This is also a fallacy. In this regard, the Bible gives us the example of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king. He had escaped the angel's massacre of 185 thousand of his troops, and he felt he would go home and relax in the perceived security of his home, his family and the temple of his idols. Nevertheless, we read:

Now it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword (2 Kings 19:37)

Once again, let us not lose sight of our eternity, relying on the false sense of security given by humans and worldly surroundings.

People sometimes embark on a lifestyle aiming to prolong their life span. They follow a strict diet; they go through routine medical check-ups and they exercise regularly. All this is commendable – indeed, we should take care of our health. However, we should not assume, as many do, that such actions prolong lives. We should always remind ourselves that our life span is determined by God, and God alone. A glaring historical example is that of Alexander the Great: he conquered most of the civilized world of his day; he was young and vigorous, yet he lost his life suddenly, in his early thirties:

....the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Being overly careful or conservative will also not lead to a prolonged life. One should not stay home, likely avoiding opportunities of service, with the pretext that it is unsafe to travel or to leave the safety of home/his comfort zone. This viewpoint is misguided and unsupported. Our faith in God should alleviate such unfounded concerns: let us not spend an undue effort attempting to preserve a short life, while losing sight of Eternity, which is infinitely more important.

Our ever-vigilant Church is strict in reminding us to ensure that our house is in order at all times; hence we recite daily, in several canonical hours:

Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation....(Luke 2:29 & 30)

How many of us can truthfully tell God: **"I have done my best - I am ready?!!!"**

Practically speaking, even/especially those who are involved in serving the Lord in any way, we should not let a day go by without ensuring that our due diligence is complete. We are committed before God to pray the canonical hours – not as a matter of routine; rather, because the psalms we recite purge our hearts before retiring. Bear in mind that the passing of a day may also carry the passing of our life. This equally applies to reading the Gospel daily - this is imperative. Procrastination of such matters has no place in our life if we have before our eyes this plain truth: the Son of Man is coming at an hour we do not expect.

Maintaining our internal Peace is yet another important factor in leading a life of readiness for the "unexpected hour" since it is unfitting to face the Lord while harboring feelings of tension and anxiety. That would mean that, as Christ's children, we failed

to trust the Promise He repeatedly made two thousand years ago, namely, to leave us His Peace, and to never forsake us. God also said that there shall be no Peace for evildoers. We cannot be prepared for Eternity in the absence of Peace in our heart.

As we embark on leading a life of readiness for the "unexpected hour", we must flee any situation that risks embarrassing us before God. Such situations include wasting time, gossip, unholy daydreams, strife, and the like. Living in constant flight from any sin is a sign of preparedness. Let us not be caught unaware – coz then it is too late. The notion of **"It's O.K. - I'll confess tomorrow,"** is counter-productive, since we do not know if there will be a **"tomorrow"** for us or not.

Living a life of readiness necessitates making peace at all cost. Therefore, we are called upon to do all we can to win even our own enemies over. At the gate to His Kingdom, we might expect the Lord to ask: **"Is anyone upset with you?"** No excuse will be acceptable if the answer to this awesome question is "Yes!" Christ came from Heaven and washed our feet so that we would love one another; He was crucified so that we would tolerate each other. The ultimate message is: ***win your enemies over, do your best, no matter what the reason is for our differences.*** That is why Saint Paul told the Romans:

If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. (Romans 12:18)

Finally, remember that Christ said:

Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you

will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny (Matthew 5:25 & 26)

Our forefathers have equated "the adversary" with our spiritual conscience; hence, we should obey our conscience if we feel it saying "deny yourself and apologize, pray, confess....." Keep your conscience satisfied.

In all the points given above, the golden rule is:

"The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

2

"WARNINGS"



Satan is unrelenting in giving us a false sense of security by trying to convince us that the time for our soul's recall is far into the future that we are too valuable, we have too many responsibilities, we are too young, or we are too healthy.

However, due to our Lord's love and compassion for us, He sends us warnings. As human parents we know that warning our children and lovingly chastising them are indispensable components of raising them; the Bible tells us in this regard: *"...bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."*(*Ephesians 6:4*) Thus God, out of His love for us, reprimands us using warnings.

Our Lord is raising us using Himself as an example to follow. He also gives us instructions, what to do, and what not to do, through the Bible, the Church and our conscience. Additionally, God admonishes us; this means that deviating from His instruction will result in a warning, which precedes chastisement.

God's warnings are analogous to soccer's "yellow cards." A player issued a yellow card will remain in the game; however, it also means that, if repeated, the player will be ejected from the game. A wary player will be extra careful, since the "yellow card" means that he has fewer chances. Conversely, a careless player forging ahead and mindless of his reduced chances, will likely face ejection, and may wake up to his plight to find that it is unfortunately too late ...

Christ's warnings to us are a sign of His infinite love and caring – they are not indications of severity or harshness. We should be thankful for Christ's warnings since it is through them that He tries to redirect us from the path that He sees is leading to death. In this regard, Saint Paul told the Ephesian elders

"....for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."(Acts 20:31) Christ's tearful message is that ignoring His warnings could lead us to perdition.

Jeremiah narrates an example of a clear Divine warning that was ignored:

The Lord has said concerning you, O remnant of Judah, 'Do not go to Egypt!' Know certainly that I have admonished you this day.(Jeremiah 42:19)

Through the mouth of His prophet Jeremiah, the Lord warned Judah against taking refuge in Egypt, from the Babylonians. The Lord thus warned them clearly against relying on human judgment for their protection. Instead of heeding the warning, they opposed, persecuted and imprisoned God's messenger (Jeremiah) and, as a result, fell into bondage.

The Bible cites many instances of warnings (some examples are given below), given to persons and nations, that went unheeded, with dire consequences. The unequivocal message to us is: **Are we heeding God's warnings? Are we learning from experience? Are we accepting the risk of ignoring those warnings?**

Lot, a Biblical example of someone ignoring God's warnings, suffered severe consequences as a result. He was given two clear warnings and, in each case, he failed to act in accordance to the Divine message. Firstly, he chose to continue living in a land (Sodom) that abound in wickedness, which adversely affected him morally and spiritually, not to mention the bad effects on his household. In this regard Saint Peter says that Lot:

... was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them,

tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds) (2Peter 2:7,8)

Secondly, during a war that involved several kings at that time, he and his household were taken captive, and he lost all his possessions. Abraham eventually rescued him. Yet he continued living in Sodom, until the Lord rescued him from the brimstone rained upon that city. He lost his wife (she was turned into a pillar of salt) during their flight. Lot thus paid a significant price for ignoring God's warnings.

Jonah is another Biblical personage that failed to heed God's multiple warnings. God had instructed him to preach to the Ninevites - a Gentile nation whom he disliked. So he decided to "run away" from God, thinking that he could escape from that God-given mission with which he disagreed. He boarded a ship sailing in the opposite direction from Ninevah and, behold, the first warning that he was displeasing God was a tempest at sea. He persisted in his "flight" from God and went to sleep in the lowest part of the ship. The wind grew stronger (a stronger warning) but he remained asleep. When the pagan sailors desperately started praying to their respective gods, the ship's captain tried to wake Jonah (the only passenger who was not praying) saying: *"...Arise, call on your God;..."* (Jonah 1:6). He finally confessed to the sailors that he was trying to flee from the face of the Lord and, in his obstinacy, he counseled them to throw him overboard. God compassionately directed a whale to swallow Jonah without harming him, thus continuing His warnings. Jonah finally heeded the warnings and prayed from the whale's belly:

I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. (Jonah 2:1)

In **Cain's** life we also find explicit Divine warnings. His parents taught him along with Abel his brother that the Lord was pleased with animal sacrifices - hence, choice sacrifices should be offered to Him each season. Abel obeyed and routinely offered his best livestock to the Lord. Cain, on the other hand, refused to believe, and considered it sufficient to offer the Lord some of the land's bloodless produce. God then showed His displeasure with Cain's sacrifice, and His pleasure with Abel's. The Bible tells us that

Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell ... "So the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" (Genesis 4:5)

This was just the prelude to God's warning. The warning then followed:

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it. (Genesis 4:6 & 7)

The Divine message is thus we can implore the Lord for His forgiveness for our harboring evil intentions and for strengthening us to be reconciled to our brothers. Cain, however, failed to seize the opportunity which the warning offered. We would definitely be incurring a very grave risk indeed when we ignore warnings and promptings of the conscience.

With respect to warnings given to nations, the **Jews** must qualify as the only nation in the history of mankind to whom the most warnings were given. They witnessed, on numerous occasions, those actions which pleased the Lord, versus those which displeased Him. God told them:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself (Exodus 19:4)

The warning in this case, was directing them to compare themselves with others – hence, by way of warning, I could be prompted to consider the adverse consequences which befell others who followed the path that displeases God.

Another warning that Christ gave to the Jews was when they told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Those were clear, pointed, warnings.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:1 - 5)

Warnings can, therefore, be varied: storms, sailors, comparison with others, adverse circumstances, previous experiences, etc ...

Let us consider warnings in Peter's life. **Saint Peter** was a great apostle, chosen and loved by Christ. He saw the transfiguration on the mount, he walked on water, he saw Lazarus walking out of the tomb, he cast out demons, and he had the unique testimony from Christ:

Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:17 - 19)

Nevertheless, Christ gave him a clear warning:

Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren. (Luke 22:31 & 32)

Here, Christ is warning Peter, and each one of us, to be ever watchful, since, "sin lies at the door." Although Christ warned Peter, only a few hours before his denial, Peter fell into Satan's trap, and denied Christ. Christ had even given him clear signs of his impending fall:

Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times. (Matthew 26:34)

On a prior occasion, Christ had also warned Peter saying,

Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. (Matthew 16:23)

Although Peter had failed to heed Christ's many warnings, he eventually repented.

On the other hand, **Judas Iscariot** received several warnings to turn back from his evil ways. When Christ said "*it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*"(Matthew 19:23), Judas was present and should have heeded the warning not to focus on material gain. Christ also praised Mary who poured

fragrant oil on His feet (*John 12*) - Judas was not only present, but he also objected to Mary's actions. Christ's reaction was that He told those assembled (especially Judas) that she had voluntarily spent that money for His benefit, rather than attempted to steal money from Him.

Judas continued to ignore the warnings, even when Christ washed his feet, and when He told the disciples that one of them would betray Him. Christ's final unheeded warning was when

Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it." And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot (John 13:26)

But Satan had already filled his heart and blinded him.

The warnings which we encounter may either be on a "case-by-case" basis - hence, warnings that specifically caution us against a particular activity or decision; or, the warnings may extend over a lifetime, telling us to change the path that we have chosen.

Examples of Warnings:

- News of people who had experienced severe circumstances – are they worse than we are? This is a falsehood that we should never entertain – what befell them could very well happen to us.
- An unexpected, very complicated, problem, that seems to "come out of the blue;" that could very well be a warning from God telling me to repent or to change direction.
- A clear, explicit, repeated, spiritual message, that could not have been random: a sermon, followed by a Biblical passage that conveys the same message, followed by hearing a song

over the radio that carries the same meaning; such repeated messages cannot be mere coincidences.

- A reproach given by a close person, (similar to the sailors' admonition of Jonah)
- Internal spiritual pressure, or spontaneous feeling to repent, or to have a personal session with God in seclusion;

The bottom line is therefore, we should never:

- resent God's admonishment and chastisement (He is our loving Father),
- procrastinate repentance (we do not know if we will live to see tomorrow)
- test God's patience (His infinite compassion does not mean unlimited opportunities)
- ignore His warnings (always heed Biblical and Church messages, godly council, and promptings of the Holy Spirit through our conscience).

3

"SATAN'S PLAN"



Our Sole Enemy

Throughout our struggle to be ready for meeting our Lord Jesus Christ, we must bear in mind that we have one enemy who will always try to impede our efforts. We should try to do everything conceivable and inconceivable that prevents us from reaching our goal. **This enemy is Satan.**

Our progression towards our goal (reaching Eternal Life) is analogous to climbing a ladder, at the top of which (the end of our life) Christ receives all who will make it. Catastrophic failure (falling off the ladder), due to Satan's continuous attempts, is possible at any stage, up to and including the very last minute of our lives. Such a fall could be fatal. This emphasizes the dangers of complacency (self-satisfaction). Sometimes we tend to think of ourselves as: "I am too spiritually advanced to fall," "I am too old for temptations," "my lifestyle is sinless,".....etc. All those are very dangerous signs that we are quite ready to fall.

Therefore, throughout our preparations to meet our Lord Jesus Christ, we must be alert to all the traps and tricks that our enemy consistently puts in our way in order to spoil our efforts. Saint Paul told the Corinthians:

lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices. (2 Corinthians 2:11)

Saint Peter gives the same message:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Defeating that enemy requires us to understand, and to be fully alert to his thoughts and his evil ways.

The Bible does not only permit, but it also teaches us that we have only one enemy that we should keep fighting. This enemy is Satan: the enemy of all good. **A person who is spiritually developed will see Satan behind every evil situation.** He is there behind every unpleasant colleague, difficult neighbor or bad confrontation. All have one thing in common: Satan's evil ways and motivation. Looking beyond any situation in this fashion will make it easier for us to carry out Christ's (seemingly difficult) commandment, i.e. to love our enemies. Our enemy is not the person dealing with us in a bad way. Rather, our real enemy is Satan manipulating those who respond positively to his calling.

Our struggle is, therefore, not with flesh and blood. It is with Satan who is forever hovering around us: in all places and at all times. We should remember that Satan tempted Christ in a holy place: ***"Then the devil....set Him on the pinnacle of the temple ..."***(*Matthew 4:5*). Satan's attacks are through evil thoughts which bombard us regardless of time or place. Saint John says:

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. (1 John 5:19)

Evil, darkness, oppression, hypocrisy and all the rest of Satan's specialties, abound everywhere in the world, though they take different forms.

On the other hand, light abounds in church - in the house of saints and angels. Light resides within the hearts of God's children. We would be mistaken to seek, and assume that we will find happiness, rest or deliverance in any part of the world, since ***"....the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one."***

To address and further emphasize this point, Christ said:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God. (John 3:19 - 21)

Let us not assume that those around us will accept the truth. In fact, when we speak the truth, we are often regarded as people who have lost touch with reality. Most people will avoid such morals as truthfulness, goodness, correctness, honesty, and humility. Those are usually considered outdated notions, having no place in the "real world."

Satan's Wicked Traps

- **Wealth Accumulation**

Let us think of Satan as a dishonest business-person who has many projects. Satan's most important project, that is unfortunately quite successful, is communicating to human beings the notion that our aim in life is the "accumulation of material wealth", and that "wealth" is the main source of happiness.

In today's materially-oriented world, a good marketing strategy assures business success. However, many people are fooled into buying a useless product, simply because the dishonest producer adopted a clever marketing strategy. Despite people's awareness of the tricks of the trade, up to ninety percent willingly fall into the trap devised by some of those strategies. Satan's

overall plan is to make the acquisition of wealth our ultimate purpose in life. The fight to make more money prevails in all nations, regardless of the extent of their development. However, all wise human beings eventually reach the conclusion that money will neither assure a long life, nor bring about happiness, nor solve problems. The root cause is the clever marketing strategy of Satan, the father of all liars. It is unfortunate that even the most pious Christians fall into that trap. The love of money blinds individuals, companies, politicians and nations. It amounts to causing catastrophes all over the world. Examples are:

- **The war industry:**

Some nations will create unrests in varied parts of the world to enhance their weapon sales. The fact that thousands may lose their lives as a result is disregarded simply because the beneficiary succeeds in accumulating wealth, by maintaining a flourishing war industry.

- **The pornography industry:**

Companies will market unethical perversions, earning huge amounts of money in the process. Their only aim is to gain money. They don't care about all the negative impacts, whether socially or morally or even health wise, of this dirty business.

- **The grain industry:**

Companies dump millions of tons of grain in the sea each year, simply to maintain the high price of grain, and secure for themselves high profit levels, regardless of the fact that this dumped grain could save the lives of starving millions.

We are constantly at war, battling Satan's advances. Regularly, the merchandise described above is delivered to our doorstep, packaged in a most attractive form, designed to lure

believers with false promises. This war is meant to be stronger as it targets those adhering to the faith, or those who believe they are too clever and therefore immune, to temptations. We must remember that Satan did not hesitate to tempt even our Lord Jesus Christ with promises: ***"All these things I will give You ..."***(Matthew 4:9).

Satan's ultimate goal will always be the ultimate downfall of all human beings, especially those who are trying to live a godly life. For this reason, Christ said clearly:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24)

In other words, God and mammon are incompatible. In this regard, Saint Paul also told his disciple Timothy:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (1 Timothy 6:9 & 10)

A wave of foolishness is sweeping through the world, disregarding Christ's warning: ***"Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?"***(Luke 12:20). Fools despise the wise who see and follow the truth preferring to store treasures in heaven. Many people relent to the lures of earthly wealth backed by false promises. Here is a wake-up call for Christ's children to alert them against falling in this common trap.

- **Worshipping the Flesh**

Satan's second "business" project is "worshipping the flesh." The highest sales in the world are realized by the food industry. Generally, any food outlet will flourish, regardless of the type or quality of food served. Although indulgence in food consumption is known to have detrimental health effects, Satan is out to succeed, by proclaiming the idea that the body reigns supreme. This is not simply a matter of eating and drinking; rather, Satan's intent is to focus our attention on our bodies, thus turning the body into the "god" of this world.

Consequently, we are daily exposed to programs, commercials, and the like, which glorify the flesh, portraying the desires of the body as imperative needs that must be satisfied. This trend is even manifested in children's cartoons, in an attempt to plant perverse ideas in children's minds during their early stages of development.

On the other hand, do we ever see commercials addressing morals, spiritual needs, humility or love?!! Despite the proven benefits of love, no one buys spiritual notions. Unfortunately, everyone seems to believe Satan, allowing themselves to indulge in the flesh, and to follow a pack of lies although it is a proven fact that the body will decay and return to dust. Hence, the blind allow themselves to be led by the blind, down the treacherous road to perdition.

For this very reason, Christ set the example for us to follow, by His very strong response to Satan:

It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'
(Matthew 4:4) Christ also told His disciples, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me (John 4:34)

Being conscious of our bodies needs and hurrying to find solutions to its problems is apparent in such examples like: rushing to take medication upon feeling the slightest physical discomfort, or seeking a bed to lie down and rest upon the least type of pain, or spending lots of money consulting physicians to cure our physical ailments. All this is not wrong. We surely have to do what we need to in order to make sure that our bodies are healthy. **The problem lies in the huge discrepancy between this and the negligence with which we deal with our spiritual weaknesses and problems.** It is actually quite rare that we treat those very serious weaknesses with the same kind of promptness and care, in spite of the fact that spiritual health is the one that guarantees for us Eternal Life. Addressing this issue, Saint Paul says:

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13)

- **The Race to the Top**

Satan's third and internationally rampant "project" is the race to the top, namely, "who is the greatest." This phenomenon is, quite unfortunately, found even within the Church service. Our Lord told His disciples:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25 - 28)

We are thus prohibited from attempting to be "greatest."

This unhealthy phenomenon is sadly evident not only within the church service, but also inside our families: servants and (I may dare say at times priests) compete with each other, the husband competes with his wife and even brothers and sisters compete. Let us not desire or envy the gifts, positions or attributes of others. All this is for Satan's benefit. It helps him succeed in eliminating love from our hearts, thereby losing track of our readiness to meet our Lord Jesus Christ in Eternity.

The Jews, for whom Christ originally came, fell into this trap and said: "*We have no king but Caesar.*"(John 19:15) This implies that they sided with Satan and preferred the world's vanity, appearances and throne. Therefore, our Lord Jesus Christ departed from them: "*Your house is left to you desolate.*"(Matthew 23:38)

- **Ruining Family Life**

Satan has other projects in progress which, although lesser in rank than the three expounded above, are nonetheless very important. One such project is that of ruining the family. Sadly, the concept of "family" is being gradually destroyed and has almost vanished in many countries. We often see parentless children – children whose parents could not be traced. Divorce has become commonplace. Being a single parent has developed into a normal way of life. Now, in some parts of the world, the decision to get married is met with expressions of amazement. The reason is that the sanctity of the concept of "marriage" (the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony) is being lost and replaced by non-committal Bohemian lifestyles. It is not unusual to encounter children fathered out of marriage. The result is that children grow up in an atmosphere that God never intended.

Usually, a family breakdown means the absence of God. A growing child to a single parent leading a Bohemian life is unlikely to lead a Christian life or to know God. Transferring such a child to the world of Christian enlightenment would indeed require a great effort.

Such is the world in which we live. This is the reason why the world wages war against us. We insist on our godly principles, and retention of the sanctity of the family, and we refuse to be swayed by the latest ungodly tendencies.

- **Easy Fornication**

Another Satanic project that has achieved much success is "easy fornication," including pornography. Through present day media evolution, fornication has spread in an unprecedented fashion. One reason is that it can be practiced anywhere and does not pose an appreciable financial burden. This awful sin, abounding in the nine-to-ninety age range, is not restricted by marital status, is encouraged by widespread permissiveness, and is subject to the most devious and successful marketing strategies. Among the corollaries are sex addiction, promiscuity, and perversion. Natural love has become absent, and humans have thus sunk below the status of animals.

The biggest lie that Satan has promoted is that of "free will." People are led to believe that freedom is absolute and limitless. We must acknowledge the fact that we are bound by the laws of nature, outside which we lose our status as humans, the way God intended.

- **Legalized Killing**

One more Satanic project is that of "legalized killing." This concept started by legalizing abortion. That concept was further

developed to include euthanasia (or mercy killing), i.e. to permit the disconnection of life-support to reduce hospital expenses. Some countries even encourage ending lives of handicapped in order to "end their suffering."

- **Abuse of the Sciences**

One of Satan's projects is the abuse of "Science." Science sometimes seems to attempt to compete with God. In many developed countries, science has become their god. One example is the "Church of Scientology" where science is literally being worshiped. We see here a perfect example of how Satan mocks and manipulates people. This ridiculous approach blinds people and clouds their senses, inducing them to worship a moving, evolving, target. It is a proven fact that science is constantly correcting, changing and evolving (mistaken) concepts. **We worship an unchanging, unchangeable God Who was, is, and will be the same from eternity unto eternity.** But unfortunately for those so-called "wise" scholars/scientists, who relent to this satanic project, the Bible is an old-fashioned, outdated document.

However, our Lord Jesus Christ foresaw such tendencies as He prayed to the |Father saying:

I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. (Matthew 11:25)

Saint Paul also said:

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where is the wise? Where is the scribe?

Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (1 Corinthians 1:19 & 20)

In addition to science, we also have a major role played today by politics, economy, philosophy and other branches of knowledge which contribute to the spread of atheism. Even psychologists now portray the Bible as nothing but a book addressing various psychological aspects, unrelated to God.

This is by no means a sweeping condemnation of all scientists and wise men. There are many God-fearing scientists who acknowledge their shortcomings and the shortcomings of modern science, and who believe in a "Higher Power" managing the universe. At the other extreme, it is common to find dishonest scientists distorting and falsifying facts to suit their personal gains.

- **The Abuse of the notion of "human rights"**

Finally, Satan has managed to spoil the charter of human rights. The concept of human rights was proposed by pious Christians more than one hundred years ago. This charter called for various rights of every human, such as the right to live, eat and drink, receive education, receive medical treatment, defend oneself, etc. **This concept, as initially suggested, is well-supported by the Bible. As a matter of fact, it is founded in the Bible.** Unfortunately, this charter has developed into a distorted version, primarily and erroneously, putting God (if ever) in a secondary position. For example, some countries would consider that building a church for worship ranks a much lower priority than another project filed under "human rights." Another example is that parents are now not permitted to discipline their children under the guise of the child's "human rights." God is thus completely side-stepped. There has come up many faulty

thoughts and attitudes under the title of human rights: for example, the completely erroneous concept of the so-called "human rights of gays and lesbians". This is a striking example of the abuse of the concept of "human rights" as it clearly defies our Lord's teaching.

Where are God's rights and how are they defended? God the Creator has every right - we would be significantly ill-advised to abuse His patience and long-suffering, by ignoring His rights

To sum up, the main message is:

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

(1 Peter 5:8)

4

"WHERE DO WARS COME FROM?"



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is imperative to note, and understand, that **God gives ample warnings and loving chastisement for His children**, whom He prepares for heaven. It is our responsibility to be sensitized to the signals God sends our way. In order to qualify for eternity, we are required to be constantly preoccupied with our preparedness to meet Christ.

"Prepare to meet your God,...."(Amos 4:12) is the final, awesome, message that God gave to Israel after they consistently failed to repent and heed His repeated warnings and chastisements - hence,

Yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord.(Amos 4:6 - 11)

Our Church encourages us to focus on our readiness to meet the Lord. In the twelfth canonical hour we say: "Behold I am about to stand before the just Judge, frightened and terrified of my many sins, for a life spent in pleasures deserves condemnation..." Also,

Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation (Luke 2:29 & 30)

The Groom comes at an hour we do not expect - blessed is the servant whom He will find watchful. On the other hand, woe to the unprepared servant, the target of Saint Peter's warning,

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night (2 Peter 3:10)

The ensuing discussion addresses the issue of **"Where do wars come from?"** We live in an age where the fear of God has left our hearts. Its return in our lives should be uplifting!

Saint James invokes the question of spiritual warfare:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:1 - 4)

The first principle to follow is that **the source** of hard feelings, misunderstandings, strife, grudges, and the like, **lies within us**. This principle, which has no exceptions, applies **even if we were the wronged party**. Bear in mind that we continue to offend Christ, yet His love for us is unchangeable. The main reason for ongoing strife is our insistence that the problem is with "the others." We fail to acknowledge Saint James' assertion that *"wars and fights...come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members....."*. In other words, **spiritual warfare originates within us**.

Many people in today's world are living proof of the viability and validity of this idea. Although they are faced with worse circumstances (than many of us), they are capable of leading loving and tolerant lives. The problem therefore is within us. Our lack of faith, love and hope is the root cause of our anxieties, heartaches and anguish. People around us are not the cause of our tension and uncertainty; rather, these are due to our wavering relationship with God. The disciples' alarm was not due to the sea; rather, to their lack of faith. Christ proved this by calmly walking on the water and inviting them to join Him. We circumvent the problem by focusing on worldly challenges: lack of money, sickness, challenging situations, unfairness, etc. Saint

John Chrysostom said: ***"No one can harm the man who does himself no wrong."***

A striking example is suffering from loss of money. We tend to believe, erroneously, that it is justifiable to be upset upon losing money. The fact is that our attachment to worldly wealth is really the reason for our feeling upset. Our belief that money is able to solve all problems and is the only way that can provide us with the security we need, leads to anguish upon losing it. **That is definitely not the kind of faith that God wants.** We should always remind ourselves that **Whoever gave will provide** - as Job said:

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

Our trust should not be in money. We encounter many poor and/or sick people who are indeed much happier and more thankful than wealthy and healthy people. The problem is always within us. The lesson learnt is that as soon as we feel ourselves starting to judge or accuse someone, **we should immediately revert to examining the depths of our heart, and pray for God's enlightenment;** hence, once more, ***"...wars and fights...come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members...."***

Causes behind Desires of Pleasure

- **Greed**

Here are some more examples illustrating the phrase ***"....come from your desires for pleasure."*** **Greed leads to strife.** However, we tend to interpret our greed through the argument that, "this is my right." Under the guise of "I am defending my rights, and my children's, rights." Avarice is often the cause of

years of strife, court action, and family break-ups. **All such grief can be avoided if money were at our feet, instead of ruling our heart.**

The following encounter with Christ further illustrates this point:

Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses. (Luke 12:13 - 15)

- **Envy**

Envy is another example of "*.....desires for pleasure.*" Similar to greed, envy leads to hatred and strife under the guise of "justice." **Envy and covetousness are not caused by lack of justice; rather, they are the result of impure hearts.** Christ addressed this problem in a parable:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle,.....and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.....And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle,.....He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' So when evening had come,.....when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour,

they each received a denarius. But when the first came,.....they likewise received each a denarius. And whenthey complained against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us.....' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend,....Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way.....Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' (Matthew 20:1 - 16)

Our just God gives to whoever He pleases and administers perfect justice. **Envy is thus caused by the evil eye – not lack of justice.**

Consider also the case of Joseph's coat of many colors, that his father had bought him, sparking envy among his brothers. If any of them had taken into account the fact that Joseph's mother was dead, they would have sympathized with him, and regarded the entire incident from a loving, simple, perspective. But, unfortunately, the opposite happened: they conspired against him, and almost killed him, because of his garment! The evil in their hearts led them to reason that Joseph received his coat because of their father's unfairness and unjust treatment. Unfortunately, we often reason in the same way.

- **Pride**

Pride is another problem that leads to much strife. The argument in this case is "We understand - they don't!" The underlying problem is that our stubbornness drives us to look down upon others under the guise of "they do not understand." We proceed to fights, strife and enmity accordingly. Here again,

the problem is within not without: "...wars and fights...come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members....."

Spiritual Desires

Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, we need to consider a question often raised by our forefathers; namely, has the issue of preparedness spawned "**spiritual desires**" in our hearts or not? To illustrate the point, we usually yield to our body's needs to eat, drink or sleep whenever we feel hungry, thirsty or tired. Analogously, do we feel the need to serve, the yearning to pray, or the desire to read the word of God? Many have hungered for poverty, suffering and martyrdom for the sake of Christ ... **If such desires are not generated in our hearts, we can be sure we are not ready to meet the Groom** – simply because the bride yearns for her Groom through spiritual desires (love, service, giving, purity, humility, doing good, tolerance, compassion, wisdom, eternity, etc.) whose absence should warn us that we are not ready! Saint Paul told the Galatians in this respect,

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. (Galatians 5:17)

Experience has shown that **worldly desires can never be fully satisfied**; that is the reason for Saint James' saying: "**You ask and do not receive.**" Whether we eat, drink, rest, be merry, experience honor and praise, or any other worldly pleasure, **the feeling of need and emptiness will always return.** Christ confirmed this, saying:

Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again (John 4:13)

On the other hand, **once acquired, spiritual desires yield lasting virtues** (such as wisdom, tolerance and compassion). The obstacles to having spiritual desires, and their fulfillment through lasting virtues, are the worldly lusts embedded in our hearts, which give rise to internal warfare. Furthermore, Christ confirms this in His discussion with the Samaritan woman:

but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:14)

In James 4 we read: ***"You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask."*** The fact is we DO ask, but we are sometimes fixated on a certain goal towards which we strive. On the other hand, the same goal may be achieved with much less effort if we awarded more time to prayer. Far too often we struggle depending solely on our own efforts, totally ignoring Christ's promise:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7 & 8)

Christ is waiting for our cry for help - He is always close by, but He will never take over by force or against our will. That is the reason why it is said: ***"You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask."***

So rather than exhausting ourselves in futile strife with humans, let us devote our efforts to getting closer to God, seeking His support. **This requires a significant change in our**

priorities which, in turn, will result in much improvement in many aspects of our lives.

These days our minds seem to turn round and round forever like a whirlwind. However, if we stopped for a moment and cast our burdens on the Lord, everything will become simpler. Let us follow Saint Paul's instruction:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6 & 7)

All we need is trust in God's promises: faith and hope will move mountains.

It should be emphasized that most of our efforts attempting to calculate and allow for each and every eventuality, are futile. The simple reason is that no one knows what will happen tomorrow – the future in many instances is like shifting sand. But **we do have one certain rock to lean upon: our Lord Jesus Christ. He is our only certainty;** so why not start by approaching Him?

Saint James says (given above): ***"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."*** We should not ask God from our own perspective: "Please give me money. Please hurt them because they wronged me....." We must **ensure that our petitions are not harmful and are within the teachings of Christ.** It is likely that God will grant what we asked for, in HIS own BEST time, not ours. God's response to our petitions may either be "yes - right away," "yes - later," or "no." We just need to be sure that **no matter what His answer is, it is indeed for our best interest.**

It should be noted that, out of His infinite fatherly love, God may reject some of our requests, because He knows that they are not for our own good. When He says "later," that is because His timing is always perfect. Sometimes, when we yield fully to God and wait patiently for Him (rather than taking matters "in our own hands"), His response turns out to be far better than what we had requested.

Proceeding to psychological hardships, we often feel stressed when dealing with others. The reason we give is that "So-and-so is a difficult person." Applying the Bible's teaching, what we should really say is "I need to be more tolerant," or "I am too demanding."

Our ultimate aim is finding sufficiency in Christ; then, it would not matter whether people are difficult, or we lost our money, or we fell sick. **Let us lower our expectations, and focus on Christ,** rather than on worldly acquisitions and desires, which are here one day and gone the next. We must always remember that Christ said:

***do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; ... Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap ... yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ... Consider the lilies of the field ... Now if God so clothes the grass of the field ... will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?'... For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow"** (Matthew 6:25 - 34)*

Psychological hardships could also be due to our attachment to someone. **Being attached to God is infinitely more rewarding than being attached to a person** - although persons may be very dear to us. We should strive to shift our attachments from people to God.

Oppression, or perceived oppression, can lead to internal warfare, though, indirectly. A wife may feel badly treated by her spouse. Children may feel they are getting unfair treatment by parents. A person may feel unjustly reprimanded or fired. However, the fact is that deep down what really troubles us is comparison with others. Our perception is often, **"Why is this happening to me? Why am I being singled out?"** "Why are my expectations not met?" "Will I be able to continue providing for my family?" The answer is always "We have the wrong focus." **We must focus on Christ: our Forgiver, our Champion, our Provider, and our Rock of Salvation.** Remember, at all times and under all circumstances, Christ's promise: *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you"*. Hence, preparation to meet Christ should start from within, and by focusing on Him.

We should also ask ourselves whether external pressures are overwhelming, or troubles are really originating within our hearts. The internal turmoil could also be due to our harboring permanent feelings of guilt - for sins that God had already forgiven! Why needlessly torture ourselves, and spend sleepless nights? We must learn to forgive ourselves just as we forgive others, and just as God forgives us, having repented and confessed. God's compassion is such that He obliterates our sins:

I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you. (Isaiah 44:22)

The discussion given above leads to several key messages:

- **We should not wait for people or circumstances to change.** The problem here is that we will remain depressed as long as we continue expecting the elusive change - it may never occur! It is much more practical and rewarding to initiate changes within ourselves.
- **Our goal must always be attaining peace and love as a first priority - and despite all circumstances.** This is the key to having the kingdom within us, transcending all problems, experiencing internal triumph, ensuring readiness to meet the Groom, and reaching eternity. Thus, **our focus should be on reshaping our hearts (internal), NOT waiting for others or circumstances (external) to improve.**
- **All external pressures and problems will crumble, upon experiencing God's lasting presence.** Having Christ always before our eyes will result in everything else fading away. The perfect illustration of this point is given in Peter's encounter with Jesus as He walked on top of the waves. As Peter continued to focus on Christ, the raging storm and buffeting waves paled and did not matter anymore. If we succeeded in leading a life of constant prayer and in saying

"I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved" (Psalm 16:8),

We will then be able to say:

"Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope." (Psalm 16:8 & 9)

- **If we become a sealed paradise, we will not be concerned with the surrounding trash.** This is what Solomon said:

"A garden enclosed Is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." (Song of Solomon 4:12)

Hence, a soul that is fully immersed in prayer and a close relationship with God is like a paradise completely isolated from, and immune to, external influences.

When reverting to correcting ourselves internally, **we must be careful not to fall in the trap of "excuses and justifications"**. As long as we try to justify each error we commit, we will never move forward. Consider the parable of the prodigal son. When the son woke to his plight of sin, filth and hunger, he decided to return to his father, confess, and beg for forgiveness. However, if the son had started to blame his father and the surrounding circumstances, for allowing him to leave, and for failing to warn him of the possible consequences of his actions, he would have neither repented nor returned. Simply put, **sincere repentance is incompatible with blaming others.**

- **While correcting ourselves, we must ensure that we NOT consider others' transgressions.** The parable of the prodigal son never mentions that the young son sensed his older brother's resentment. On the other hand, we find reference to the elder brother's negative feelings towards the younger. The younger son, in fact, **attributed all blame to himself**, looked up to his brother, and considered him to be "Mr. Perfect." The elder son, however, was far from perfect: he hated his brother,

despised his father, and refused to celebrate his brother's safe return.

- **When correcting ourselves we should NEVER favor people's preferences and tendencies over God's commandments.** Current perceptions, traditions, and "political correctness," lead people to accept lies, hypocrisy, and deviation from God's clear instructions, as a perfectly acceptable way of life. **We should be careful to adhere to the word of God, as opposed to pleasing people** and "going with the flow." In this respect, Christ told the Pharisees:

".....Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips,.....and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For.....you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition." (Mark 7:6 - 9)

- Sometimes as we attempt to correct ourselves, we tend to go to extremes, both of which are wrong: we may see ourselves faultless, or hopeless. **What we should really do is compare our conduct to God's will** - then we can identify where we went wrong. We would also be misguided to say either "We are the best," or "We are the worst" - followed by self-pity and despair.
- An essential component of our true picture is **God's great love for us.** Of course, we should add to that our sinfulness and shortcomings.
- When correcting ourselves, **let us beware of excessive praise, or excessive criticism.** We can be entrapped by misleading, surrounding, voices. An example is Herod, who

murdered James and tried to murder Peter; yet, when he delivered an oration, he believed the people when they

"...kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"...immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God." (Acts 12:21 - 23)

Conversely, exaggerated criticism leads to depression. Let us be fair to ourselves, and choose a wise course of action. **Simple facts and reference points are: God's commandments and God's infinite love.**

To recap...

- God gives ample warnings and loving chastisement for His children, whom He prepares for heaven - we must be sensitized to the signals God sends our way.
- The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.
- Hard feelings, strife and misunderstandings originate within us even if we were the wronged party - we always offend Christ, yet His love for us is unchangeable.
- No one can harm the man who does himself no wrong.
- Material losses are trivial - He Who gave will provide.
- Envy and covetousness are not caused by lack of justice, rather, by impure hearts and an evil eye.
- Internal warfare comes from our desires for pleasure warring in our members.
- All grief can be avoided if money were at our feet, instead of ruling our heart.

- Spiritual desires in our hearts are necessary for our preparedness to meet the Lord. They yield lasting virtues once acquired.
- Christ is always close by and waiting for our cry for help - but He will never take over forcibly.
- All we need is trust in God's promises: faith and hope will move mountains
- We have one rock to lean upon: our Lord Jesus Christ, our only certainty.
- Our ultimate aim is finding sufficiency in Christ.
- We must focus on Christ: our Forgiver, our Champion, our Provider, and our Rock of Salvation.

When correcting ourselves we should:

- not wait for people or circumstances to change
- aim for attaining peace and love as a first priority
- experience God's lasting presence
- not be concerned with our surroundings
- not fall in the trap of "excuses and justifications"
- ensure that we NOT consider others' transgressions
- NEVER favour men's preferences over God's word
- never go to the extremes of our faultlessness or hopelessness
- never lose sight of God's commandments and great love for us

**I have set the Lord always before me; because He
is at my right hand I shall not be moved.**

**But seek first the kingdom of God and His
righteousness, and all these things shall be added
to you.**

I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your
transgressions.

5

"ERRORS WE MAKE WHEN PREPARING OURSELVES TO MEET THE LORD"



Travelling to another city involves preparations such as packing and ensuring we have all our necessities. These include personal effects, money, identification, knowledge of the means of transport that would take us there, and arranging for someone to meet us at our destination.

Our inevitable departure from this world also requires preparations. But, given that the departure time is unknown, and there is no turning back, the consequences of error would be far graver in this case. Unfortunately, many are inadequately prepared for this awesome, one-way, trip. Here are some necessary things that we should never make mistakes about in order to ensure safe arrival.

- **Packing our Necessities:**

The first common error is failing to pack our necessities for our destination. Not ensuring that we have our needs awaiting us in heaven is a grave error. Our Lord said:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... (Matthew 6:19 - 21)

Simply put, do we have in Heaven the equivalent of our wealth on earth?!!

The most effective vehicle for transporting wealth to Heaven is the **poor**. Whatever we give to the poor, is immediately stored, and even multiplied, to our credit in heaven. Giving the poor is not restricted to "money" or material objects. It includes time, effort and any other needs. While, before and after giving, you have to be sure of one fact, namely that nothing is lost. The Bible tells us:

He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness endures forever. (2 Corinthians 9:9)

So why not make sure that we have adequate credit in heaven!!!

- **Someone waiting for us:**

Another important matter that we usually put into consideration when travelling abroad, is ensuring that someone we know is waiting to receive us at the airport. Failure to have such a person at our destination may cause us a lot of inconvenience or even regret.

The two kinds of persons who await us in Heaven are: **either a saint who preceded us, or a poor person whom we helped.** Those are the people who will escort us to meet our Lord Jesus Christ. The absence of such escorts will result in our feeling lost or out of place. This is why our Lord said:

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. (Luke 16:9)

As a matter of fact, we may jeopardize the trip and lose the way to Heaven if we don't make sure during our preparation time that we will have those escorts ready for us when we reach our final destination.

- **Having the Correct Currency**

A similar problem is neglecting to take the necessary currency that you will need for any kind of transaction. In Heaven, **the primary currency that is in use is Faith.** Our credit in Heaven is directly proportionate to our Faith and Trust in God. Saint Paul emphasizes this in Hebrews 11, by enumerating the forefathers who realized their achievements through faith.

Those include Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and others. The Psalmist tells us:

It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes. (Psalm 118:8 & 9)

We should make it a habit of putting our trust in the Lord throughout our lives. We should look at the confidence of the Saints and Church Fathers and learn to follow their steps in sticking firmly to our Faith.

• **Holding on to our One Identification Document**

Forgetting our passport or identification documents is a significant problem. We will be banned from entering heaven if we present ourselves without proper spiritual documentation. Our spiritual passport to Heaven is **love** - since God is love. Being Christ-like requires that we be steeped in love. We must cater to the needs of others. Our Lord demonstrated this clearly in Matthew 25:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory ... He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him ... And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food ... Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You ... And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Then He will also say to those on the left

hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food ... Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31 - 46)

Not missing a chance to do good, to serve others, and to be merciful is the Christians' distinguishing attribute and main identification document to allow us to enter the Kingdom of God.

- **Arriving on Time/Not missing the set Time**

Another problem is arriving too late and missing our flight. Christ said:

When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' (Luke 13:25 - 27)

This refers to those who keep thinking that the end is still far – that ample time remains. It is particularly dangerous to believe that, given our good health, we have many more years to look forward to, on earth. Those will be like the rich fool who said:

"Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' (Luke 12:19 & 20)

We must always be ready, and join the Psalmist in saying:

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast (Psalm 57:7)

The Psalmist also entreats our Lord to open our eyes to the fact that time passes quickly, and that **we must remain alert:**

So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)

Saint James emphasizes the same notion, saying:

whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:14 - 16)

Boasting and arrogance refer to each time we place our confidence in the future, neglecting to subject our lives and trust to God's will.

• **Boarding the Correct Flight**

Boarding the wrong flight is a catastrophe. Unfortunately, some do commit this error. Jonah gives us a biblical example of someone who set off in the wrong direction, and almost perished; this is typical of people who, having discovered they were travelling in the wrong direction, persist down that path. Practically, this category of error includes those who persist

down the path of amassing wealth, knowing full well that **worldly treasures perish, and are not transferable to Heaven**. Our Lord Jesus Christ put it clearly:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13 & 14)

Let us be careful of the wide gate, the effortless way of life. Let us watch out from some wrong doctrines that claim that fasting, prayer, vigilance, repentance, and struggling for eternity are all needless. God told Moses:

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days (Deuteronomy 30:19 & 20)

There are two types of wisdom: godly wisdom, and earthly, Satanic, wisdom. Saint James tells us how to discern between the two:

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. (James 3:14 - 17)

It is godly wisdom that we all need to be able to watch out not to fall in errors that make us lose our way to Eternal Life.

**Let us therefore ensure that we are well prepared,
and that we are fully alerted to the errors and
pitfalls that can hinder our journey to Heaven.**

6

"WATCH OUT FOR YOURSELVES"

(MARK 13:9)

WATCH OUT!

Christ was sitting on the Mount of Olives with four of His disciples, overlooking the temple's splendor, when he started foretelling about the beginning of sorrows, warning them not to be troubled, to remain steadfast and to watch out for themselves:

Then as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" And Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?" And Jesus, answering them, began to say: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many. But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows. But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. (Mark 13:1 - 10)

There are several important messages in this passage that are relevant to our being prepared.

- **First Message: Man-Made Structures**

The first focal point is Christ's statement: ***"Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down."*** Here, our Lord warned His disciples against being awestruck by man-made structures. Such awe impedes our spiritual life. The message is that **we should not allow ourselves to be awestruck by any material, man-made, structures or otherwise, since all will be *"thrown down."*** Nature's beauty is quite another matter - admiring nature is admiring God's creation, thanking Him for giving us the privilege of witnessing the splendor of His workmanship. On the other hand, Satan exploits human achievements to block our spiritual development, and to divert our attention from serving, praising and witnessing. It should be emphasized that acquisitions, per se, are not "sinful." Worldly possessions become problematic only if they constitute our focal point in life ... if they occupy and control all our thoughts and energy; or, put differently, if they divert our attention from serving the Lord, which is our primary aim in life. Thus, Christ's first message is that **we should be vigilant lest our lives be wasted in the pursuit and boasting of perishing material acquisitions, and lest we be controlled by what we are controlling.**

- **Second Message: Elements of Deceit**

Christ's second message is: ***"Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many."*** We must be wary of the fact that both deceivers and deceived abound.

1. The End is Distant

One prevalent and particularly deceptive notion nowadays, is that the end remains in the very distant future and that, consequently, we have much time, and need not fret about preparing to meet Christ.

2. All is Well

A second aspect of deception is the conviction that "all is well;" thus, we have no need of doing anything differently, or of attempting to improve or change our lifestyle. Let us not be overtaken by complacency, and the belief that all we are required to do is confess, commune and tithe periodically. Such a false sense of security blinds us to the necessity of loving and forgiving others, of witnessing, and of being watchful, to name but a few. Our watchfulness must never wane, and the Bible reminds us: *".....through knowledge the righteous will be delivered."*(Proverbs 11:9)

3. No Need for Repentance

A third element of deceit is harbouring the false impression that we are in no further need of repentance! Some say, "We are "ok" - we're not doing anything wrong - why confess? Repent from what?" This is a grave misconception, along with the belief that "we do not need Church - all we need is direct prayer to God."

4. Inaction

A fourth element of deceit is inaction, or lack of positive response, following a passionate hymn, sermon or prayer in church. We would be deceiving ourselves if, having been particularly moved or affected by a church service, we fail to follow this up by a correspondingly positive action in our life: do

we indeed love, forgive, tolerate, witness.....? Spontaneous reactions and emotional bursts without concrete works are a form of deception. We should bear in mind that Christ will not recompense us for "emotional spontaneity."

5. Doubting His Words

Doubting Christ and His words constitutes a glaring element of deception. Throughout the generations, spreading doubts concerning the deity of Christ has been the most significant element of deceit; such a path immediately shuts us out of heaven.

6. Permissiveness

The deceptive path of permissiveness, or pursuit of the "easy, wide open gate," leads straight to perdition. This path consists of allowing ourselves much more permissiveness than is deemed acceptable in our Faith. An example would be spending much time, during a fast, in devising "lenten" dishes, and means for ingesting much food, while ignoring the purpose and essence of the fast itself; such an attitude constitutes the "easy, wide open gate," which completely defeats the fast's purpose, and dangerously deceives us into believing that we have fulfilled our religious duties.

7. Focusing on Appearances

Focusing on form and appearance, rather than on essence and substance, is yet another widespread pattern of deception. An example is observing all the fasts and liturgy attendance, without attempting any change in our attitude towards, treatment of, or feelings for, others. If our internalities, hence, lifestyle and modus operandi remained essentially unchanged, what benefits would

we have gleaned from the externalities of fasting and church attendance?

- **Third Message: Do Not Be Troubled**

Christ's subsequent message is: *"...when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen....."* Wars, are a direct result of evil in the world, and serve to prompt the elect to repentance. Regardless of the cause of wars, the message to us is clear: let not such evil-induced disturbances perturb the peace and tranquility residing in our hearts and imparted by Christ - fear and anguish are against Christ's wish and expectation.

Sources of Fear:

1. Humans

We should not fear, or be troubled by, humans. We are all God's creation ... subject to His will ... and will return to the dust from whence we originated. We must always remember what Christ told Pilate: *"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above."*(John 19:11) We should therefore rest assured that whatever comes our way is permitted by God towards our ultimate benefit.

2. Death

We should not fear, or be troubled by, death. Someday our sojourn on earth will end; the more important issue is our destiny thereafter. A true Christian is thus characterized by his preoccupation with the life of the coming age, after leaving this world. Our hope in eternal life eliminates our fear of death or,

more appropriately, our fear of ending our temporary material existence.

3. Evil or Oppression

We should not fear, or be troubled by, evil or oppression – whereas those do have passing, adverse, psychological effects, our sentiments should transcend them knowing full well that Satan, the embodiment of wickedness and lies, is in his last throes, and will not give up his wiles and evil darts.

• Fourth Message: The Beginning of Sorrows

Having forewarned His disciples, Christ goes on to say: *"These are the beginnings of sorrows. But watch out for yourselves."* We thus know for a fact that there will be sorrows, and that things will not improve: hence earthquakes, famines, wars and pestilence. In this regard, the clear message to us is to ensure that current politics, troubles, tendencies and forecasts do not divert our focus from preparing to meet the Groom - by being watchful for ourselves. The *"end is not yet"* because we have not repented yet. The "end of the world" is being delayed pending completion of our repentance. Hence, all troubles and sorrows should be viewed as invitations to repentance. Under these circumstances, Satan seeks to occupy us with worldly issues - ultimately delaying our repentance. Let us never forget that we will never be held accountable for world politics at heaven's gate!

Traversing an era of sorrows offers us the golden opportunity of re-examining our lives, shedding worldly preoccupations, refocusing on eternity, giving generously, loving and forgiving, ardent prayer, and sincere repentance. Giving should not be solely in the material sense: some people need moral support, psychological counseling, a shoulder to lean on, a word

of encouragement,.....Re-orienting our frame of mind thus, will increase our desire to proceed to the life thereafter, as opposed to clinging to this material world.

The "*beginnings of sorrows*" means that "countdown" has begun. In this respect, the Bible gives us the analogy of a woman giving birth:

A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.
(John 16:21)

A woman giving birth has the mixed feelings of pain (experienced through the delivery) and joy (in anticipation of the new life). The "*beginnings of sorrows*" thus refers to the start of labor preceding birth. The lesson from this analogy is that once one of our trials is over (e.g. the onset of labor pains) we should not assume that "all is well - there is no more," rather, as in labor pains, we should expect more frequent, and more severe, hardships, culminating in the incomparable joy of being united with Christ - forever. Once started, sorrows will not end. Summing up, **sorrows will always be accompanied by two diametrically opposed feelings: pain (naturally, because of the occurring physical hardship) and joy (because of the anticipated end-point of reunion with Christ).**

Let us be wary of the importance of preparedness for meeting with Christ - this carries the dual sentiments of fear (has our faith been sufficiently steadfast - have we done enough?) and hope coupled with joy (we are heading for heaven and eternity).

The advent of the beginning of sorrows carries with it the obligation for thanksgiving. Analogously, an expectant mother,

delivering her newborn, will thank the Lord for granting her the privilege of carrying, and delivering, new life.

We, believers who have been warned, must also be thankful when we compare ourselves with those who suffer around us, while being unaware of the realities. Our role in this respect is to comfort and console, and impart hope that evil is not without purpose. At this stage, **we are thus left with two, and only two, courses of action: sincerely repenting with a pure heart, and helping others with love and tenderness, and our enemies with pity and prayer.** Watching for ourselves is crowned by our looking up towards heaven, saying: *"Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"*(Revelation 22:20)

- **Fifth Message: Watch out for Yourselves**

We note the progression in Christ's message: first, He cautioned against being awestruck by the temple's splendor, saying that it was destined for destruction; He then cautioned against being troubled by the occurrence of wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilence, saying those are the beginning of sorrows; Christ's bottom line is: *"But watch out for yourselves."* Christ is telling us clearly not to focus on world events, leaders, and developments - Satan exploits all these distractions for the purpose of steering us away from being watchful for ourselves - as Christ instructed.

All world events will unfold in accordance with God's perfect master-plan; our primary responsibility is preparing to meet Christ. Are we prepared to meet Him, to endure trials for His sake, to testify before rulers, to face martyrdom unflinchingly and, ultimately, to repent sincerely?

"Watch out for yourselves" means "do not allow yourselves to wallow in worldly details, when your primary responsibility is purity of heart." We can work towards this goal by spending, daily, a few minutes taking stock of everything we did that day, that week and, indeed, our entire life. Such an exercise will identify faults that we might have either glossed over, or failed to recognize, in the past.

Rather than dwell on external atrocities; we should contemplate the dreariness within us. We need to let Christ's light eliminate the darkness pervading our hearts. We continue to lack the purity of heart that permits us to see God, and the childlike innocence which Christ called for.

Human nature is such that we extol external changes, satisfying our ambitions, furthering our careers, and perfecting our lifestyles - briefly, our dream is heaven on earth!

None of the aspirations given above, though, qualifies us for heaven. The real changes which should preoccupy us and constitute our quest are those which renew and purify our hearts, strengthen our faith, fill our lives with prayer and hope, and render us Christ-like.

- **Sixth Message: Preaching the Gospel to all Nations**

Our Lord concluded His message with, ***"the gospel must first be preached to all the nations."*** We must be cognizant of the fact that all events on earth are unfolding, as mentioned earlier, in accordance with God's perfect master-plan. Furthermore, the Church is a direct beneficiary, since, whenever politics waver, evangelization flourishes. Whatever occupies the media's headlines and top stories, is diametrically opposed to that which heaven records. **Hence, whereas the world travails**

under sorrows and uncertainties, heaven rejoices as the master-plan unfolds, as Satan approaches his bitter end, as the number of faithful increases, and as repentant souls return to the Church's fold. Let us follow the celestial, not the terrestrial, agenda, remembering that God *".....desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."*(1 Timothy 2:4) As God's children, we must share this mission with Him - even at the risk of suffering and humiliation.

While the earthly forces struggle, the heavenly harvest multiplies. Let us therefore be alert and sensitized to the spiritual warfare, rather than immersion in material strife. There is a secret, current, fight between Christ and Satan, over millions of hearts. Christ is repossessing those hearts which Satan had claimed, as He said in His parable: *".....how can one [Christ] enter a strong man's [Satan's] house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man?"*(Matthew 12:29)

May God grant us the spiritual eyes with which we can *"watch out for ourselves,"* enabling us to focus on God's, rather than man's, agenda.

To recap...

- Focusing on, and being awestruck by, material, man-made, perishing, objects, constitutes a diversion from our real purpose in life, and an impediment to our spiritual growth.
- We must never allow ourselves to be controlled by what we are controlling.
- We must be particularly wary of deceptions and deceivers: hence, the notion that the end is in the distant future, complacency and the attending false sense of security, the

misconception that we are doing no evil and that church is unnecessary, doubting Christ's words and deity, permissiveness and the "wide gate" approach, and focusing on form rather than substance.

- Wars, famines, earthquakes and pestilence are evil-induced disturbances which should not perturb the peace and tranquility which Christ imparted to our hearts.
- We should not fear or be troubled by humans, death, evil, or oppression; whatever comes our way is permitted by God towards our ultimate benefit.
- Current politics, troubles, tendencies and forecasts should not divert our focus from preparing to meet the Groom - by being watchful for ourselves. Troubles and sorrows are invitations to repentance.
- Sorrows are a chance for re-examining our lives, shedding worldly preoccupations, refocusing on eternity, giving generously, loving and forgiving, ardent prayer, and sincere repentance.
- Experiencing sorrows is cause for giving thanks: it heralds the approach of our union with Christ, and enables us to repent with a pure heart, while lovingly helping others and praying for our enemies.
- As the world travails under sorrows and uncertainties, heaven rejoices as the master-plan unfolds, as Satan approaches his bitter end, as the number of faithful increases, and as repentant souls return to the Church's fold.

May God grant us the spiritual eyes with which we can ***"watch out for ourselves,"*** enabling us to focus on God's, rather than man's, agenda.

7

"THE UNJUST STEWARD"



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is important to understand Christ's parable of the unjust steward. The steward was given a short notice prior to being relieved of his duties. Analogously, what would we do if the Divine voice were to tell us that we had twenty-four hours to clean up our act?? **The lesson to be learnt from that steward is that he was able to ready himself in one day;** he was able to acquire a blessing not a curse, and to turn from the darkness of oppression to the light of repentance. That is why his boss praised him. Christ neither praised the steward's dishonesty, nor extolled unfairness. Rather, **Christ focuses on the possibility that unjust or dishonest persons may still repent and change direction.**

The clear message of this parable, is that **we do have a chance to change our ways:**

He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he

said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Now the Pharisees ... derided Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." (Luke 16:1 - 15)

A steward is tasked with collecting, on behalf of the owner, amounts from the individual farmers, proportional to the produce of their respective assigned plots of land. In this parable, the unjust steward had been collecting more than he declared to the owner, and had been pocketing the difference. He was thus hated by all, and he had to devise a plan, on short notice, to change this hate to love so that, once he had been relieved of his duties, he would find friendly doors welcoming him. So by instructing them to reduce their documented debts he was simply returning to them what was theirs - and they were grateful to him for doing

this. Therefore, upon the master's return, **he commended the steward for his quick decision to change course, and to act wisely.** The parable praises neither unfairness nor dishonesty.

Projecting this parable onto our lives within the context of preparing ourselves to meet the Lord, at an hour we do not expect, the lesson learnt is thus:

What should we start doing now, to make up for the time we spent unjustly treating God and others?

The answer lies in nine principles which we must apply.

The Nine Principles:

• **First: Understanding the Meaning of Stewardship**

The first principle is **understanding the grave error the steward had initially committed, and understanding the meaning of stewardship.** The steward assumed he had a free hand to do as he pleased, given his master's long absence. He understood his stewardship to imply that he was accountable to no one. Analogously, we tend to feel that we have a free hand with respect to acquired wealth, health, family and other worldly acquisitions. We fail to appreciate the fact that **all belongs to God**, Who entrusted us with those talents, and Who will hold us accountable for them, at His appointed time.

It is thus imperative for us to **understand the meaning of the stewardship that God entrusted to us, and act, and be prepared, accordingly – at all times.** The third service of the midnight canonical hour constantly reminds us:

And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. (Luke 12:42 & 43)

In the same chapter we also read:

and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. *Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them.* (Luke 12:36 & 37)

Hence our understanding of stewardship must start with the often-forgotten fact that we own nothing - we will leave this world in precisely the same state we came into it: penniless and naked. Let us not trick ourselves into believing that we are "owners"; rather, **we are simply "stewards" administering that with which God entrusted us.**

- **Second: Judgment Day is a Reality**

The second principle is our **full conviction that Judgment Day is a reality and is approaching.** Therefore, being stewards, we will definitely **be held accountable.** In this regard, Saint Paul told the Corinthians:

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. (1 Corinthians 4:1 & 2)

Thus, the very notion of being accountable someday, is sufficient motive to **be prepared to meet the Groom anytime.**

- **Third: We will be Held Accountable**

The third principle is: knowing that He will hold us **accountable according to His measure, not according to our standards.** In other words, our rationale in conducting ourselves in a certain way is quite irrelevant. As stewards, He will judge us according to His commandments and expectations, regardless of any explanations or excuses we believe we might have.

- **Fourth: Waking up and Acting**

The fourth principle is, "**Waking up and deciding on a course of action.**" We note in the parable that: *"....the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do?'"* The same notion was repeated in the parable of the Prodigal Son: *"**But when he came to himself,...**"* (Luke 15:17) As soon as we "come to ourselves" we find the solution. Both the prodigal son and the unjust steward made the right decision when they thought carefully within themselves. Hence, our key question is: *"**What shall we do given the short time left - what must we do to avoid perdition?"**"*

The steward wisely formulated a decision:

"....I have resolved what to do."

Similarly, the prodigal son decided:

"I will arise and go to my father,...." (Luke 15:18)

It is very important for us to engage, periodically, in "solitary, clear, thinking" - we should be honest with ourselves, and the key to our problems will always be found.....

In both parables we note a common, very significant, point: they both **acted immediately**. Taking prompt action saved them both from their respective plights. Procrastination is counter-productive, unwise, dangerous, and leads consistently to negative results. When taking a decision our focus should be on eternity which we may often neglect in our day-to-day dealings.

Christ emphasized the steward's decision: "....I have resolved what to do." Saint Anthony resolved what to do and acted promptly accordingly. Saint Augustine also confessed his resolve to Saint Ambrose. Christ did not leave us clueless as to what our resolve should be. Let us consult the numerous examples, teachings and parables given in the Bible; additionally, the Church and our conscience are two significant resources available to us.

- **Fifth: Making Amends**

The fifth principle is derived from the steward's subsequent actions: he **made amends with other humans** - meaning, he neither lamented his ordeal, begged for mercy, indulged in self-pity, nor anything of the sort. **He resolved to redeem himself by mending fences with other humans.** This point was stressed by our forefathers - one of their sayings being: "*Your salvation is in your neighbor's hands - loving him earns you heaven and, failing this, earns you perdition.*"

We now ask ourselves: **What does "making amends with others" entail? and what does "your salvation is in your neighbor's hands" mean?** Preparing ourselves for heaven is achieved through having good relationships, and being at peace, with others. This is the same message given in Matthew 25;

Christ will receive us in heaven **if we served Him by serving others:**

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.
(Matthew 25:34 - 36)

Thus, our ticket to eternity lies in serving others.

That was precisely the avenue which the unjust (yet wise) steward chose when he came to himself. He quickly concluded that he had no time for fasting, praying, or pleading his case - the only course of action left was making amends with those whom he had wronged. The Bible tells us that ***"he called every one of his master's debtors to him."***

Let us therefore recall all our previous dealings, and hasten to make amends with each and every person we feel we might have wronged in some way: have we been unfair, unforgiving, dishonest, judgmental, harsh, haughty, neglectful, abusive? **Now is the time to call every one and make amends.** If everyone loves and accepts us, God will love and accept us, and we will have won eternity. For those whom we cannot reach, we can pray that God forgive us for any wrong we did them. It is important to note that **we must be sincere and generous** with everyone we contact - we note that the steward dealt generously with all whom he had wronged.

- **Sixth: Realization**

We note that: *"...the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly."* The steward's shrewdness, or wisdom, lies in **his realization of both the meaning of stewardship, and his approaching demise.** Therefore, in our preparation to meet Christ, we must realize that we are fast approaching the moment when we will be held accountable for everything with which God had entrusted to us: hence life, health, acquisitions, talents, etc. will come to an end. This simple wise realization, is the sixth principle.

We must be prepared for a clear and open meeting with Christ. This carries the implication that **we must be honest with ourselves**, and avoid any scenarios which give us what might seem like "plausible" excuses - leading us to dangerous complacency. During that awesome meeting Christ will compare, with painful clarity, what He said versus what we did.

Let us make sound corrections with quick decisions: make amends with those we have wronged, lessen people's burdens, follow the commandments we have neglected or ignored. We should take this necessary step regardless of whether we have been wronged or not.

- **Seventh: Repentance**

The seventh principle is repentance. This parable can be considered to be a story of repentance. The steward's acknowledgment of his faults, followed by taking corrective action, constitutes repentance. Preparing ourselves includes repentance. Repentance, in turn, implies thinking of others as opposed to thinking of ourselves. Note that the steward, in making amends, considered the good to be done to others. The

result is that he won everybody's love and, consequently, he won his eternity. In preparing ourselves for eternity, we must forget about "me, myself and I." Giving priority to those three (me, I and myself) entails non-repentance.

It is never too late to mend. We must strive to correct whatever we can, and entreat God for His merciful intervention to make up for the rest. Even parents, having raised mature children, would be wise to ask their children's forgiveness for any shortcomings they might have experienced at their parents' hands. Parents might have unknowingly short-changed their children in: spending quality time with them, setting the perfect example for them, being patient or understanding, impressing on them the Church's importance or our Faith's principles, getting them closer to God. **Such an apology, delivered with sincerity, could save the children.**

Zacchaeus found it insufficient to say simply "I am sorry," rather, he gave the perfect example of a sincere and practical apology:

Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold (Luke 19:8 & 9)

- **Eighth: Wise Generosity**

The eighth principle is wise generosity. The unjust steward changed to a **generous giver**, from being a miserly, dishonest, person. This was Christ's conclusion:

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.

In other words, Christ is calling on us to “buy people's affection”. We can befriend poor people, and acquire their affection much more readily than the wealthy. It is vital, for our eternity, to consider the number of poor people whom we have befriended, and who could testify for us before Christ. Those are Christ's beloved, sitting at His table, who suffered on earth and are being comforted in heaven (remember: Christ said that He was represented by the hungry, thirsty, strangers, unclothed, sick and imprisoned

Can any one of those consider us friends - can any of them vouch for us before Christ?

Let us give, and give generously.

The bottom line is: **we possess nothing - we simply administer what God gave us - giving is better than receiving.**

Let us not be attached to wealth or material belongings. The steward detached himself, on short notice, from a lifelong practice of greed and amassing wealth. In the parable, our Lord praised wisdom coupled with honesty:

So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly.....He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much.... Therefore if you have not been faithful.....who will commit to your trust the true riches?

Christ was thus ensuring that His parable is not taken out of context, and erroneously interpreted to mean that we should be dishonest in order to be praised. The steward won his master's praise because **he exercised wise damage control.**

- **Ninth: Wisdom**

Finally, the ninth principle pertains to wisdom: Wisdom is knowing and following the will of God. Wisdom requires that we think and act outside the confinement of "me, myself and I." We should be very careful not to make our change conditional upon God's giving us more. If we were unfaithful in the little that God gives us, we will certainly be unfaithful even if He were to give us more. Hence, if we failed to give from our time, intellect and modest resources, we will also fail in giving from increased resources. Leading a life of giving and selflessness is a necessary prerequisite for eternity, and should not be conditional on being endowed with wealth.

The person who has succeeded in devoting his/her life to serving others, is indeed a "Wise" person most prepared to meet the Groom. Blessed indeed are those who lead a life of service to others! God desires that we give not take; God desires honesty not unfairness. Christ concluded the parable by saying:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Clearly, Christ warned us against being unwisely attached to money.

We note that the Pharisees, who were outwardly religious, were listening to the parable:

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is

highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Christ's warnings went unheeded by them - preparedness and eternity for their Satanic ilk are thus a lost cause. Christ told them that as long as they continued to feel righteous, and to have money dominating their hearts, there was no hope for them to enter heaven. By contrast, the **unjust steward's starting point was recognition and acknowledgment of guilt and wrongdoing.** "*Abomination in the sight of God*" means that loving money is tantamount to idolatry - which God abhors and constitutes an abomination in His sight.

To recap...

we can learn several lessons and principles from the parable of the unjust steward:

- Unjust and/or dishonest persons are always given a chance to repent and change course.
- We should spend time in seclusion to rethink our course and to make a quick decision to change and to act wisely, focusing on eternity, with no procrastination.
- We must appreciate and understand the meaning of stewardship: God will hold us accountable for everything He entrusted to our care in this world. We own nothing. Judgment Day is a reality, and is approaching.
- God will hold us accountable according to His measure - not according to our standards. Christ will compare, with painful clarity, what He said versus what we did.

- Our resolution should be derived from teachings in the Bible, guidance from Church, and prompting of our conscience.
- It is never too late to mend. We must make amends with each and every person we feel we might have wronged, even if, in reality, we were the wronged party.
- We must acknowledge our faults, repent, entreat the Lord for forgiveness, and forget the deadly trio "me, myself and I."
- Make friends with the hungry, thirsty, destitute, sick and strangers - they will testify on our behalf before Christ. Devoting our life to serving others is our ticket to heaven.
- Let us be wise and faithful in administering whatever God entrusted to our care, whether that be little or much. It is better to give than to receive - let us give generously.
- Let not money rule our hearts - this is equivalent to idolatry and is an abomination to God.

Your salvation is in your neighbor's hands - loving him earns you heaven and, failing this, earns you perdition.

8

FULFILLING THE LAW

"ROMANS 13:8 - 14"



It is important to note that

"...the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword ..."(Hebrews 4:12)

Hence, the constant presence of the Word of God in our minds and hearts protects us, and helps in achieving our goal. Saint Paul's writes in his *Epistle to the Romans*:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, knowing the time [this refers to our readiness to meet Christ], that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed [since we know for a fact that Christ is coming, and that the hour is not known to anyone, we must always assume that "the hour of His coming is right now"] . The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Romans 13:8 - 14)

In the verses given above, "fulfillment of the law" is mentioned twice: ***"has fulfilled the law"*** and ***"the fulfillment of the law."*** It should be noted that we **do** have "the law" in

Christianity. Some have this wrong idea that Christ abolished the law. It is true that Christianity does not apply a **literal** interpretation of the law. However, the truth is that the Christian commandments are far stricter than the law which God gave Moses. For example, we are not only required to refrain from murder, but we are also **not allowed** to be angry. Christ said:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." (Matthew 5:21 & 22)

God handed to Moses the Jewish law - labeled "the law of Moses." Now, over and above, we have "the law of Christ," expounded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 - 7).

However, it should **never** be understood that God gave Moses a deficient law that Christ eventually had to "correct." Our Perfect Unchangeable Lord gave Moses the best and most suitable and appropriate law for humanity's level of development, thinking and understanding **at that time**. When humanity matured further, Christ demonstrated perfection, and gave us the "ultimate" commandments, which could be summed up in **"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."**(Mark 12:31) These commandments represent Christianity's perfect constitution, which no human can change.

Saint Paul put it differently to the Galatians: **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."**(Galatians 6:2) We can say that it is impossible for us to carry someone else's burden if we hate, judge, covet, or steal from, them. Sharing one another's burden implies that we love, tolerate and forgive one another. That is precisely what Christ (the Owner of the New

Testament law) did, when the multitude confronted Him with the woman caught in the act of adultery. He took over her burden. He tolerated her weakness. He loved her. He forgave her; thus fulfilling the law. Fulfilling this commandment is surely our ticket to heaven. The Good Samaritan reaped this reward with flying colors, despite his lack of knowledge/application of "Jewish law." The priest and the Levite knew the law, but they lost the heavenly reward.

Saint James emphasizes this point:

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25)

Such a person is indeed ready to meet his God.

Saint Paul did not oppose the law. Rather, he opposed the literal interpretation of Jewish law. He was against the wrong notion that salvation can be achieved only through the motions of circumcision, observing the Sabbath, and the like.

Initiative taking

"Love your neighbor as yourself" consists of several elements. One main element in loving one's neighbor is taking "initiative." Do we take the initiative to help someone, without their asking, if we just feel they need help - or do we walk away quickly lest we should be asked for a service? This question is applicable whether we know the person or not. The Good Samaritan did not know the wounded person by the wayside. Going off one's way to help someone in need especially those who are total strangers to us is a great act of love. Volunteering to serve the needy and destitute in Africa is an excellent example.

Christ took the initiative and came to us on earth. So let us follow His example and take the initiative to help others, especially strangers. Helping the stranger involves the willingness to sacrifice effort, time and resources - which is precisely what the Good Samaritan did. It is unfortunate nowadays that the tendency is the exact opposite since a lot of Christians fail to help even our closest relatives.

Saint Paul tells the Romans: ***"Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*** Lack of satisfying the real intent and essence of love, is a daily sin that we must repent of. Judging, disrespecting, upsetting, humiliating, or boasting of superiority over others are all examples of the sin of failing to satisfy the real intent and essence of love.

Be Alert

Saint Paul furthermore emphasizes that ***"now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed."*** He is urging us to take the matter seriously, and to wake up and be vigilant. Waking up at the final awesome sound of the trumpet means that we were not ready, and we woke up too late.

Allowing our bodies to slumber or "snooze" unchecked carries the implication that we are too indulgent to our earthly bodies. Being too lazy and not sufficiently attentive to the needs of our souls indicates that we are not aware of the fact that we ought to be always on the alert that we are indeed heading to heaven. Remember: no excuses are acceptable.

A person leading an upright, godly, life, is comforted and indeed encouraged to think and feel that the end is near. Saint Paul expresses this notion philosophically as ***"The night is far***

spent, the day is at hand." As the righteous person's life progresses, he becomes more and more eager to meet his Maker at the end of the journey, just as we are eager for daybreak at the tail end of the night.

A corollary of the approaching dawn is: "***Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.***" It is quite improper and shameful that Christ comes and finds us asleep and unprepared - Saint Mark tells us in his Gospel:

And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. (Mark 14:40)

As the years go by, we should be constantly assessing our achievements with respect to our credit in heaven: Could we have performed better? Could we have wasted less time? Thus, let us ensure that each day includes prayer, service, and reading the Bible.

Signs of the approaching end are clear: whether that is the end of our life, or the end of the age. Christ told us the signs of the beginning of sorrows (wars, earthquakes, disease, famines). Departure of those around us to heaven constitutes signs and warnings for us - we should always ask ourselves: "Could I be the next in line?"

Armors of Light

The "***armor of light***" qualifies us to meet Christ.

- ***Prayer***

The first weapon of this "armor" is **prayer**; let us develop the habit of continuously repeating the words: " Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me; Lord Jesus Christ, forgive me; Lord

Jesus Christ; I thank You." This is the name that protects us from Satan's evil.

- ***The Bible***

The **Bible** also is a powerful protective weapon: *"... the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword ..."*

- ***Service***

A third weapon is **service**. It is easy to find a "Lazarus" waiting for us to serve him.

- ***Solitude***

Solitude is a powerful weapon that enables us to pause and contemplate our lifestyle: Are we ready? Do we have unconfessed sins? What are the areas of weakness that we need to work on in our spiritual life?

- ***Love***

The fifth obvious weapon is love - do we love everyone? are we loved by all? Do we bear any feelings of grudge or unforgiveness towards anyone?

- ***Walking "Properly"***

Saint Paul gives one of the most important weapons, namely, *"Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy."* Here, Saint Paul groups together all permissiveness. We sometimes misguidedly "classify" sins to suit our purpose. So, while we consider adultery to be particularly abhorrent, we feel that jealousy, envy and strife are part of our "normal" everyday life. This is a gross misinterpretation of the word of God. Those

so-called "lesser" sins are listed alongside all the others. Saint Paul beseeched the Ephesians **"...to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,...."**(*Ephesians 4:1*)

The calling is a calling to the heavenly wedding. We ought to be prepared to stand before the Son of God, alongside the pure angels, holy saints and virtuous martyrs. Our Lord addressed the very point of being prepared and walking properly, in the parable of the king's son's wedding - the king told the unprepared guest:

'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen. (*Matthew 22:11 - 14*)

The proper wedding garment consists of love, humility, meekness, mercy and service. Let us therefore ensure that we are clothed with such a suitable garment.

Putting on our Lord Jesus Christ

Saint Paul concludes this chapter to the Romans with the superb clause: ***"put on the Lord Jesus Christ,.."*** Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ sums up all the virtues, without necessarily having to enumerate them again. Being Christ-like in every respect is the ultimate state of readiness. The false call of body desires is our obstacle. This is why the final words in this chapter are ***"...make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."*** In this context, "provision" means "excessive or constant preoccupation." The body surely has its needs, but let us not focus exclusively and excessively on them. The inner reality is far more important than the outward appearance.

Acquiring or putting on our Lord Jesus Christ is our ultimate goal. We should therefore try to be as close to Christ as possible. Frequent prayers, reading His word, repentance, confession and partaking of the Holy Sacraments are all ways of ensuring that we are constantly as close to our Lord Jesus Christ as we possibly can.

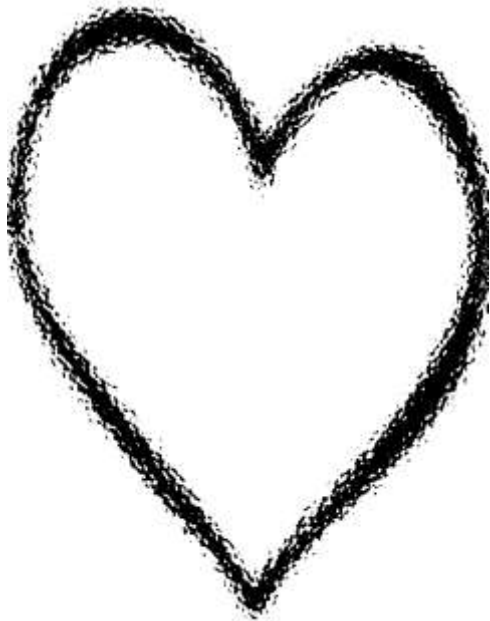
The paramount message is:

In our continuing efforts to be ready to meet Christ, let us award more importance to our minds and souls than to our bodies - let us focus on being Christ-like in love, mercy, forgiveness, humility and service to others.

9

“DO NOT LOSE HEART”

"2 CORINTHIANS 4:16 - 5:10"



The following excerpt from Saint Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians is quite relevant to our preparedness to meet Christ:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10)

Saint Paul's faced many challenges within the Church he thought he had well established, not to mention persecutions and strife. Any of those trials would have been enough to discourage many servants, leading them to think that they had failed in their mission. Nevertheless he never gave up and he told Timothy (knowing that his - Paul's martyrdom was approaching):

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (2 Timothy 1:7)

Saint Paul starts the passage above by the encouraging statement **"we do not lose heart."** We should never lose sight of the fact that God does not desire perdition for anyone. **As long as we continue to focus on, and seek, Him,** we should never assume that our weaknesses, sins, and stumbling, constitute impediments to eternity. We should persevere, stumble and recover, sin and repent, knowing that God is on our side. Consequently, **the word "failure" should never exist in the believer's dictionary** - since it implies lack of trust in God. It should also be noted that Saint Paul repeated the same exhortation earlier in the chapter:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. (2 Corinthians 4:1)

Paul continues:

Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day."

As we grow older, our outward "shell" deteriorates. However, aging is a fact of nature and should never be construed as "failure." We must realize that, through God's work, our inner person grows and is constantly renewed. Unbeknownst to us,

God is readying us for heaven - we are His children. In this regard, Paul also said,

knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:14 & 15)

Our hope does not lie in our efforts or attempts, rather, in the grace of God. Hence, Peter said:

rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1Peter 1:13)

St. Paul goes on to say:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory

Trials that befall us are an essential component of God's grace, qualifying us for heaven. God knows that hardships constitute a bitter medicine for our own good. He is leading us through the straight gate - the only way to eternity: ***"For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."*** One of the saints said that, in Christ's presence, the trials through which we passed will carry the most weight - more so than our prayers and services.

St. Paul emphasizes that **we should focus on the things which are not seen, which are eternal.** Things which are not seen are not imaginary. They are factual but simply invisible to us; examples are the beating heart and radio waves. Analogously, the eschatological world is a reality that is not visible to us. Other

realities are God's promises, heaven, eternal life, and angels. Our focus should thus be constantly on the eternal, unseen, things. This is what sets us apart from the world. Our philosophy, therefore, should be **"let us detach ourselves from the world - it should not be our focal point."**

St. Paul cited Moses as an example:

By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.
(Hebrews 11:27)

We should also bear in mind that Moses' circumstances were infinitely more extenuating than ours – yet he focused on the invisible, and had faith in God. Thus, in our preparation to meet Christ, we must train ourselves to see, and aim for, the invisible.

St. Paul continues to expound this principle:

looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Also,

For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Our preoccupation should be with the eternal building which God prepared for us in heaven, in the company of our heavenly family; rather than with earthly, perishing, structures.

St. Paul told the Hebrews in this respect:

for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods,

knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. (Hebrews 10:34)

He continues:

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened [weariness, aging, struggles between right and wrong,...], not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life [we must not cling to mortal matters - rather look forward to the unseen eternal which awaits us].

The bottom line is that during life's journey on earth, there will definitely be groaning for Christ's chosen. Our consolation is that we are heading towards all that is pure, true, serene, and loving. On the other hand, those who feel at home and comfortable in a world of lying, deception, oppression, and hatred, will have no place in heaven.

St. Paul continues:

Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God [trials and our groaning are not by chance - God deliberately permits them - these are not an indication of God's wrath], Who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee [His Holy Spirit Who indwells us consoles and comforts us, and supports us in times of hardship]. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord [as long as we remain in this body and continue to be preoccupied with worldly matters, we are strangers to heaven].

Nevertheless we continue to be detached from this world's norms and ungodly practices.

St. Paul goes on saying:

For we walk by faith, not by sight [we continue to have faith that heaven is our real abode]. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body [meaning we should look forward to leaving this body through death] and to be present with the Lord.

He continues:

Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him [we must take care to please God at all times - our preoccupation must be to please Him not people]. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad [it is an inescapable fact that we all appear before Christ and be accountable for our deeds].

To recap...

- Preparedness to meet Christ requires awareness that:
 - We should not be troubled by setbacks.
 - Our inner self evolves through God's grace.
 - Trials are an integral part of God's plan for our life's journey.
- We should always follow Saint Paul's example, and never lose heart, or consider ourselves failures, regardless of trials and setbacks.

- We must always seek, and keep our focus on, Christ, and remember Saint Paul's message: **"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."**
- We should always hope, and aim, for things unseen and eternal (heaven), and detach ourselves from worldly practices and preoccupations. Heaven is our real abode.
- The Holy Spirit indwelling us consoles, comforts, and strengthens us through trials.
- It is an inescapable fact that we all appear before Christ and be accountable for our deeds.

"We walk by faith, not by sight."

10

"HEAVEN'S AMBASSADORS"



Witnessing for Christ constitutes our primary mission on earth. By definition, being "Christian" means being "Christ's ambassadors and witnesses." Saint Paul says:

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Corinthians 5:20 & 21)

Offering God to others is the most precious gift we can offer Him. **When we stand before Christ, we should be able to say that we witnessed for Him,** just like Christ said to the Father:

I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. (John 17:6)

It is important to emphasize the fact that **our primary mission is serving, or witnessing for, Christ** – since health, families, and other worldly preoccupations fall into the category to which Christ referred as *"all these things shall be added to you."* (Matthew 6:33)

The Mission of Ambassadors of Christ:

Our primary mission as ambassadors is to achieve our country's plan, intent and interests, with respect to the country to which we are sent. Hence, we should strive to realize our country's (heaven's) interests on earth - namely, that earth be reconciled to heaven. That is the reason for saying *"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"* in the Lord's Prayer. Simply stated, God desires that the earth becomes a part of heaven. This implies that we - Christ's ambassadors - are required to purge the

earth from evil, corruption and hatred, and fill it with good will, peace and love.

An ambassador's importance stems from his/her success in carrying out the mission s/he is assigned with. We would thus be worthless, as ambassadors, if we failed to deliver or discharge the message and responsibility entrusted to us. This is precisely what Christ was referring to when He said:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. (Matthew 5:13)

Characteristics of a Good Ambassador of Christ:

Ambassadors have several characteristics in common. The first is that **they originate from, and represent, the respective countries** which sent them. Therefore, **being labeled "ambassadors" means that we originate from, and represent, heaven on earth. Our primary mission is thus to draw heaven and earth closer together, and to reconcile one with the other.** This is exactly what Christ's mission was: He came to reconcile terrestrials (earthly matters) with celestials (heavenly matters). We are required to reinforce this reconciliation. We note that the Divine Liturgy starts with the "Prayer of Reconciliation." In a nutshell, we are not simply "human beings performing worldly jobs." Rather, we have the much more significant task of **continuing Christ's work on earth, prior to our return to heaven to give account of our deeds.**

Furthermore, given that ambassadors represent their respective sovereigns, they must be particularly attentive to what they say. Thus, being representatives of Christ, **we must rule our**

tongues and watch every word before uttering it. For this very reason, Christ said:

*But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For **by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.** (Matthew 12:36 & 37)*

As Christ's ambassadors, it is also incumbent on us to **facilitate relationships between heaven and earth** by speaking, among other things, in their respective, understandable, language. Consequently, those who are able solely of speaking in worldly terms, are incapable of discharging their responsibilities as Christ's ambassadors. Put differently, **not knowing how to pray results in the person's inability to communicate with the Lord, and to present Christ to others** - or, at best, such presentation will be deficient.

In worldly terms, an ambassador's qualifications include graduation from a recognized educational program. **To qualify as ambassadors in the spiritual realm, we must possess an understanding of the workings of heaven:** hence, an understanding of heaven's plan for salvation, and of Christ's redemption of humanity. Our primary preoccupation should thus be that *"...all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* (1 Timothy 2:4) This is heaven's constant and consistent aim, from which we should never be diverted.

We must always remember that we remain in the care of Him Who sent us; aggressing or attacking an ambassador is tantamount to attacking the sovereign who sent him/her. This immediately imparts to us particular importance, since **those**

who aggress us are, in fact, aggressing the apple of Christ's eye(*Psalm 17:8*).

Being Christ's ambassadors also necessitates **constant communications, back and forth, between heaven and earth, through us.** This concept is reflected in the cross embroidered on both front and back of a Coptic celebrant's alb (known as "tonia"): those two crosses refer to the celebrant's dual role of communicating God's words to the congregation, as well as the congregation's words to God. This is the role of any ambassador (or Christian on earth): we relay people's petitions to the Lord, then we submit to the Lord's will and tell the people His instructions.

An ambassador is also required to submit detailed reports to his/her sovereign: analogously, **we are required to report to our Lord all the detailed events on earth** (although, of course, He is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all powerful). We subsequently obtain from Him directions as to how to proceed.

Challenges facing Ambassadors of Christ:

One problem that ambassadors face is the likelihood that the country in which they reside rejects the policies of the represented country. Hence, policies of the two countries could be discordant. For us Christians, speaking to others of love, truth, honesty and fairness, constitutes an incomprehensible language to the world; nevertheless, this is our message to which we must adhere - no matter what ... It is part of our mission as ambassadors to try to spread the desire to learn our language.

Thus, **the first problem we encounter is our rejection by the world.** In this regard, Saint John tells us: "*Do not marvel,*

my brethren, if the world hates you."(1 John 3:13) Furthermore, Christ said: *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you."* (John 15:18) In other words, we should not be surprised by such rejection, given and knowing that our Master Christ, Who was the embodiment of sinlessness, love and truth, was mocked and crucified. Saint Luke puts this clearly: *"For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?"*(Luke 23:31)

Estrangement is yet another problem with which ambassadors must deal. Our Christian Faith and principles are incompatible with the society in which we live. Their focus on worldly acquisitions and practices renders our message quite foreign to them - we live and think on a different plane. Thus, it is difficult for us to communicate our totally different message, due to the "language" barrier.

To recap...

- There is a much more sublime purpose for our life in this world than mere material sustenance: we are required to satisfy a significant mission, namely, witnessing for Christ, for which we will be accountable when meeting the Groom.
- We must never forget that we are not working alone, rather, we are supported by Him Who sent us - He is always behind us and will never forsake those who serve His word. This fact imparts to us the joyous feeling that all who aggress us must answer to Him - who can stand against Him?
- We are the world's focal point: we represent our King, and everyone is curious about heaven - which they see through their dealings with us. Hence, the heaven they see us

representing is a place devoid of strife, lies, oppression and hatred.

- Leading a Christ-like life obviates the need to speak of Christ: because others see Him in us - hence they see humility, love, forgiveness, truth, purity, kindness, and all of Christ's attributes.
- We must be cognizant of the fact that decisions are not ours to make. We represent our Lord. We must continually refer back to Him to receive our marching orders. An ambassador is "His Master's Voice" and does not have absolute liberty to formulate decisions. Saint Paul said in this regard:

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?" (1 Corinthians 3:5)

- Ambassadors will always bear in mind that they are different from the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, they are required to remain and deliver their message. Thus, Christ said: ***"They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."*** He also said: ***"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one."*** And: ***"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."***(John 17:15 - 18)
- Witnessing for Christ is founded on variance with the world. We must nevertheless steadfastly maintain our differences in goals, beliefs, attitudes, practices and traditions. The Bible says: ***".....do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you."***(Deuteronomy 31:6) Also, ***".....do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled."***(1 Peter 3:14)

- Persevering in our differences will induce others to ask us about the underlying reasons for our tranquility, hence, ***".....always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;..."*** (1 Peter 3:15)
- We should not expect praise for our differences - we will more likely incur abuse, because they know that we do not respond in kind. The rule is consistent: we are rejected, yet we continue to exist to deliver the message entrusted to us.
- Our ambassadorship requires that we deal with everyone - the only way for bringing Christ to everyone. This necessity dictates our obligation. Since our King is the King of Peace, our mandate must be peacemaking. Since our King is love, our mandate must be spreading love. This is the reason why Saint Paul told the Romans: ***"I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise."*** (Romans 1:14) His debt is his feeling obliged to impart to others the grace and knowledge of Christ to which he was privy.
- We are indebted to those around us, who constantly hate, oppress and abuse us. We are indebted to convey to them the message of salvation, which Christ entrusted to us.

11

“BE READY FOR EVERY GOOD WORK”

(TITUS 3:1)



Our readiness to meet the Lord is intimately tied to our daily, and momentary, preparedness for doing good work, for carrying out God's will, and for being constantly alert, sensitized and programmed to satisfy Christ's expectations.

In Amos we read:

I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," Says the Lord. "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Amos 4:9 - 12)

God's repeated warnings went unheeded, and their preparedness for their imminent meeting with the Lord had become imperative.

In Titus we read:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work (Titus 3:1)

The Bible therefore instructs us clearly to be always ***"ready for every good work."***

Saint Paul portrays the perfect Christian saying:

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Saint James furthermore tells us that sin is not simply an act of **commission** (something that we do); rather, it can also be an act of **omission** (omitting to do good):

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.(James 4:17)

In our day-to-day life we sometimes miss opportunities for doing good. These may be very little "acts of love" that wouldn't take much effort. However, they are of great value in the eyes of our Lord. Unfortunately, missing such opportunities could have the grave consequence of rendering us unprepared to meet our Lord Jesus Christ.

Opportunities to do Good:

- **Encouragement**

Saint Paul writes:

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

It is safe to assume that everyone we meet in today's world could be one of the aforementioned: (fainthearted = meaning "lacking self-confidence" or weak), at least to some extent. Therefore, our lifestyle should embody encouragement. It costs nothing; yet it is an opportunity to do good, and is counted to our credit. **A word of encouragement may lift a person out of the pit of frustration or despair.**

Another example of people who need our support and encouragement are those who have a longing to serve but feel inadequate for service. These people need us to seize the opportunity to encourage them to join the service trying to humbly mention that none of us is worthy of the service; but that it is our Lord's Grace that works in the "weakest". St. Paul asserts this by saying:

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me (2 Corinthians 12:9)

- **Showing love and care**

It is not enough to love or to care for someone "silently," without **clearly** expressing our love and care. For example, we all love our children and all spouses love their life partners; but some of us never express our love openly. We assume they know we do love them, not realizing that it is important for every human being to "hear" it clearly. It is indeed recommended by our Lord that our love should be well expressed. So let us share our true feelings for one another in an explicit manner, and let us demonstrate this love.

Our Lord Jesus Christ's Incarnation is the best example of how God the Father wished to demonstrate His love to all human beings explicitly. He thus came to us, as the Logos (God's Word) and illustrated His love in the most wonderful way. The Bible says: *"...God demonstrates His own love toward us ..."* (Romans 5:8)

- **Giving**

We are sometimes so sensitized to being exploited, that we miss golden opportunities **to give generously**. It is true that we are called upon to be wise. But this shouldn't reach the point where we refrain from "giving" anyone who asks us. Let us not be too strict in this respect. We should bear in mind that Our Lord knows the motives of every person and that we should give in love. And that He who gave us knows our hearts and the intentions of those who ask us. In all cases, let us not be extra-sensitive to being exploited and give in good heart.

- **Evangelization**

It is indeed a great pity to be engaged in conversation with someone, then abruptly end the conversation while there is a chance to proceed to a better end. This could happen when someone asks us about our faith. Let us remember that we are called upon to:

... always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15)

So, all Christians should try their best to have answers for this purpose.

We should always seize the opportunity of evangelizing even if it is in an indirect way, speaking of our Faith to whoever we see has a potential of interest in knowing more about it. This is a chance to "do good".

- **Sharing someone's grief or pain**

Sharing someone's grief or pain is a significant treasure laid up for us in heaven. Conversely, omitting such an act is a missed opportunity. We are called upon to:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15)

This is why it is considered one of the acts of "love" that we share with others' their feelings, especially those of grief or pain. However, we need to be careful of our attitude that should be sympathetic and supportive. We should try to avoid being critical of their feelings, or negating their right to feel the pain or to grieve over their loss. We should remember not to be what the Holy Bible calls: ***"Miserable comforters"*** (Job 16:2)

- **Constant Prayer**

Prayer presents an opportunity for us to improve ourselves, and to get closer to God. Developing a lifestyle that embodies prayer as a constant act, not just at particular times of the day or night is highly recommended. Sometimes God sends problems our way simply to induce us to pray – such God-given opportunities should not be missed.

All of the above are simple acts of doing good that we can undertake and reap heavenly rewards for - none of them represents a significant achievement or a major undertaking. We are required, in this regard, to be wise and to remain alert at all times for such opportunities of doing good. Every single day of our life offers us opportunities to do good - it is up to us to seize those opportunities. Our alertness is a measure of our preparedness.

Tips while doing good ...

- **Do not treat others like they treat you**

One other important tip while doing good is that we should not treat others the way they treat us. This is far from being Christ-like. Our Lord is always extremely generous with us. This is why we should always strive to imitate Him. We should not limit our "positive" reactions to a "bare minimum." We must bear in mind that God consistently gives us more than we deserve. Hence, we must always be ready to "go an extra mile" in doing good to all around us. Our Lord said:

"And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise."(Luke 6:31)

- **What's in it for me**

Unfortunately, the world has taught us to always ask "What's in it for me?" This is also not Christ-like. The Good Samaritan never sought personal gain; he reaped the credit which was initially available to the priest and the Levite – both of them brushed it aside. We should always be alerted to the fact that people are invariably in need of something – not necessarily money: they may be in need of a simple smile, companionship, encouragement, a shoulder to cry on, prayer, help in the area of our expertise, etc.

- **Act Cheerfully**

Always be cheerful – a smiling person. A smile never fails – at the same time it gains us credit without much effort on our part. Your smile could be a source of comfort for lots of people. On the other hand, a frown could inadvertently have many negative effects ...

- **Take the Initiative**

Let us take the initiative to do good, rather than wait for someone to start, then follow their example. Again, the Samaritan took the initiative to do good - he did not say, "Well, the priest and the Levite went on their way, they must know better!"

Waiting to be asked for help results in the weakest kind of help offered. Personal initiative is stronger, more effective and more appropriate. I must not wait for a dying person to scream for help before rushing to his aid. Let us bear in mind that the Samaritan was not a physician - he was just a human being rushing to help a fellow human being in need. Our Lord said: *"Go and do likewise."*(Luke 10:37)

- **Give Generously**

When we give, we should give generously. Remember that generosity is a virtue. Saint Paul told the Corinthians:

....prepare your generous gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation....He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.(2 Corinthians 9:5 - 7)

- **Do not worry**

Never fear loss. Once we focus on being *"ready for every good work,"* we should never worry about time spent doing good, the possibility of material loss, or any health risk.

Compensation, on earth and in heaven, is assured at all times – this is God's promise.

- **Be ready to listen**

Always lend a listening ear. Many people need simply someone to listen to them. But unfortunately most of us prefer to talk, rather than listen, to others. Many people feel much better just by having someone listen to them emphatically, i.e. in a sympathetic and understanding way. The Bible tells us:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.(Galatians 6:2)

- **Don't hurry to give advice**

Let us not hasten to give advice. Bear in mind that your advice could be wrong and could serve to increase the person's burden. So try not to give straight advice to someone unless this is in keeping with the wisdom of the teachings of the Holy Bible and the Church Fathers. If you are not sure of what you are saying, it is better not to offer any advice.

- **Act in humility**

Being ready for every good work goes hand-in-hand with humility. Whenever you get a chance to do something good, don't think too highly of yourself. Instead, keep thanking our Lord for having granted you the opportunity and the capability to do it. **Remember that it is not you but the Grace of our Lord to whom all the credit goes. Had He not granted you the opportunity, the ability to seize it and the capability to do it, you could not have done it in the first place.** If you fall in the sin of pride, the whole situation will back fire on

you, causing the situation to be falling in sin, rather than getting the blessing and credit of doing an act of love.

Finally, let us pray at all times that we be "*ready for every good work,*" through the Holy Spirit Who dwells in each one of us.

Let us pray that He grants us the Wisdom to seize every opportunity to do Good and the Grace to do it in accordance to His Holy Will at all times.

12

BEING PREPARED THROUGH "OTHERS"

"MEDITATIONS ON MATTHEW 25:31 - 46"



One important aspect of being prepared is one which we often ignore or overlook; namely, we should be prepared **via a third party**, i.e. the people around us. The significance of involving others to help us in getting ready to meet the Son of Man was emphasized by our Lord Jesus Christ:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:

for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe

Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31 - 46)

Leading a Godly life

On Judgment Day, the phrase "**He will separate them**" means "**He will judge them.**" The shepherd dividing sheep from goats never makes mistakes. Likewise, the Son of Man will certainly recognize those who should be on His right, versus those on His left.

"**Righteous**" refers to those who lead **godly** lives filled with prayer, love, forgiveness and repentance. Although those attributes are not explicitly mentioned, the implication is that you cannot possibly be merciful to others, while leading an ungodly life.

In the Old Testament we have a similar message:

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Were the righteous, on the right, really humble – in what way? Despite all the good they did, they told the Lord that they failed to see how they had ministered unto Him. The services they did, for which they claimed no credit, was counted to them as humility – hence, "walking humbly with the Lord."

Seeing Christ in “the Needy”

The first question which should preoccupy us is whether we seek to help the disadvantaged, or whether we avoid them – given that they constitute our ticket to Heaven. A typical example is that of a needy person knocking on our door for help. We could react spontaneously by not answering the door, with the pretext that we have been approached too many times and we have nothing to give. Unfortunately, we sometimes turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to pleas for help, from people who may be sick, hungry, or simply seeking moral support. Our attitude should be the exact opposite: we must search for such opportunities, since they qualify us for Heaven.

We should be capable of **seeing Christ in each needy person**, regardless of their appearance; this clearly is what we are required and expected to do, since Christ said: *“I was hungry ... I was thirsty ... I was a stranger ...”* We should look beyond our priorities and interests, and let our boundaries extend past those who love and support us.

Consider the following parable:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores [sick], who was laid at his gate [a stranger - homeless], desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table [hungry and thirsty]. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his

bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me,.....for I am tormented in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.....' (Luke 16:19 - 31)

Although the rich man saw the destitute Lazarus at his gate daily, **he failed to see Christ in him**. He constantly passed him by and missed the opportunity of ministering unto Christ:

...I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me,...

From the above, we conclude that **Lazarus constituted the rich man's salvation and ticket to heaven**. The rich man perished because he chose to ignore Lazarus. Put differently, the rich man's conscious choice was perdition, since he *"... gave Me [Christ] no food ... gave Me [Christ] no drink ... did not take Me [Christ] in ... did not clothe Me [Christ], sick ... and ... did not visit Me [Christ]."*

The parable of the Good Samaritan is equally valid in this context. Both the priest and the Levite failed to see Christ in the wounded man by the wayside. It is true that they did see the man, physically speaking, but they ignored him and went their respective ways. Unfortunately we behave in a similar way: we see needy people by the wayside, but choose to pass by with the pretext that we are too busy – we may even be on our way to perform a particular church service.

Action not just Good Wishes

The second question is related to "over-promising and under-delivering". In other words, we promise but we fail to deliver. We sometimes make promises, but coincidentally we are unwilling to spend the necessary time, effort or money. Talk is cheap. Examples are encountering a panhandler and telling him, "Go in peace - God will provide for you," or telling a sick person "Your cure is in God's hands."

Those afflicted do not need our "good wishes" – Christ will take care of them without our sentiments. A positive reaction would be transporting them to hospital, providing them with necessary medication, offering them food, or any action that represents our true and sincere service (to Christ), or even beyond, our physical means. In this regard, Saint James tells us:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14 - 17)

Going the Extra Mile

The third question is: **Do we do that which is expected from us by our Lord, or just the bare minimum?** That is to say, when we encounter a hungry man, do we give him a bite to sustain him in the immediate future, or do we offer him a meal to satiate him?!!! When Christ encountered the hungry multitude, He fed them, and there were leftovers. It is incumbent on us to give beyond the bare minimum.

Again, this is evident in the parable of the Good Samaritan: he did not simply dress the man's wounds – rather, he transported him to the inn on his own animal, and promised the innkeeper to pay all expenses on his way back. He did all that, given that the wounded man was neither a relative, nor an acquaintance, nor even someone from the same religious affiliation. **This is the attitude which qualifies us for Eternal Life.** Isaiah emphasized this further:

When you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:7)

The phrase "*when did we see You*" was repeated by both the ones on the right and the left. The ones on the right said it innocently and joyfully, while those on the left said it defiantly. Those on the right served all the disadvantaged, and were pleasantly surprised to learn that they all represented Christ. The ones on the left were blind. **This teaches us to be alert, and not to avoid the needy, thereby missing our chances to serve Christ.**

The meaning of "hungry or thirsty" can be broadened to include those who hunger or thirst for moral support, for words of encouragement, for love, for companionship, for guidance, or for security. Such needs may be found even in one's own household or within one's sphere of work. We have to be sensitive to the feelings and needs of those around us. **Doing what we have to do with such cases stores for us treasures in heaven.** Bear in mind that the Samaritan capitalized on his opportunity to do good which, by contrast, was foolishly ignored by the priest and the Levite – a foolish act that cost them their eternity.

Often, we are careful to observe our religious rites and rules, but neglect the commandment of love. Christ tells us clearly:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21 - 23) Christ also said: "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say? (Luke 6:46)

We must bear in mind that heaven will be denied to those who ignore the needy - even though they might have been strict observers of all fasts and church services.

Love and mercy are "the will of My Father in heaven" and therefore more important than constantly crying out: "Lord, Lord."

Other than those who are spiritually satiated in Christ, the rest of humanity needs love and security. It is safe to assume that anyone we meet has those basic needs - and it is up to us to offer love and mercy to all around us, and store credit in heaven.

A naked person is not necessarily unclothed – he may be in need of covering shame, guilt, embarrassment, or the like. A Biblical example is the woman who was caught in the act of adultery – she needed someone to cover her awful feeling of shame. **Christ covered her shame. This falls precisely under: "I was naked and you clothed Me."** Practical applications include leading someone to a confessor who would offer the needed

guidance and absolution, and bringing someone to church to find comfort within her fold.

It should be noted that Christ did not say "I was sick and you cured Me." Rather, He said "***I was sick and you visited Me.***" We are not required to heal the sick, rather, to visit them, feel their pain, and offer moral support.

To recap ...

The people around us offer us an assured place in Heaven if we give love and mercy, if we are sensitized to the needs of others, and if we see Christ in each and every needy person.

13

"DENY YOURSELF"



The exhortation to be ready to meet Christ at an hour we do not expect was mentioned in Amos 4. This passage reflects God's tolerance and the numerous chances He gave Israel to return to Him.

I gave you cleanness of teeth.....And lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I also withheld rain from you,yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. ".....your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword,.....yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,.....yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel;.....prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Amos 4:6 - 12)

Christ's coming, and our meeting with Him at an unpredictable time, is an inescapable reality. The awesome statement "***prepare to meet your God***" is alarming, especially if we feel we are not quite ready to stand before our Creator "immediately". It will then be too late for any "corrective actions". Therefore, we should be **always** preoccupied with preparing ourselves for this unexpected moment. The reason for this is our Lord Jesus Christ's very clear words:

***you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.** (Matthew 25:13)*

Preparing ourselves involves all the well-known, and necessary, spiritual implications: prayer, repentance, faith, hope, love,..... However, we ought to be always alert to the fact that the

first and foremost obstacle to being ready is the "self." In Matthew 16 we read:

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me (Matthew 16:24)

The first step is often the hardest. Denying yourself means "forgetting all about yourself." The pronoun "I" is at the origin of most of our problems; it is a major hindrance to spiritual development. Consequently, eliminating "I" will immediately render the world a far easier, and much more beautiful, place to live in.

If we are seriously getting ready to meet our Lord, we must start by denying, or forgetting all about, ourselves. Consider the rich man who came to Christ, having four good, very promising, qualities. He came running to Christ, knelt before Him and asked the right question. He had 'apparently' done all the right things:

one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" So Jesus said to him ...You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.' "And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth."

But when our Lord declared to him the "one missing thing" he ought to do:

Then Jesus said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and

you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.

He seemed to have a problem ...

But he was sad....., and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:17 - 22)

The rich man could not get himself to do what Christ required. It was apparent that this young rich man was unable to distance his "self" from his wealth. His perception seemed to be: "I am rich - I stand on firm ground because of my wealth...." In other words, "I will follow the commandments, as long as my wealth (my "self") is unaffected."

- **Self-centeredness**

Focusing on the "self" carries with it a host of problems. The first outcome of concentrating on oneself all the time is "self-centeredness." This invokes a behavioral pattern that causes those self-centered persons to live in constant tension, fear, and anxiety. Unfortunately, most of us are torn by such feelings; the simple reason is the dearness of one's self. Saint Paul told the Ephesian elders:

But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself ... (Acts 20:24)

The "self" is a generic term which embodies all worldly possessions, namely, one's wealth, property, children, etc. If our starting point is that we do not count our "self" to be dear, then there is no cause for tension, fear or anxiety. We cannot be ready to meet our Lord, being primarily preoccupied by any component of our "self."

Self-centeredness results in a number of negative attitudes and behavior that definitely carries us away from any readiness

or preparedness to meet our Lord Jesus Christ "at an unexpected moment". Some of these are the following:

- **Aggression**

A major outcome to self-centeredness is "aggression." This includes anger, envy and judgment. All these feelings reflect one's high esteem of one's self. Such sentiments signal a failure in denying the self, and will block attempts at spiritual development. As long as our own interests are the main focus and drive, our spiritual development remains illusory.

- **Pride**

Pride is usually reflected in our daydreams. Constantly daydreaming about our own interests should warn us that our self is at the center of our attention. We can determine the importance we award to our self by being sensitized to the object(s) of our daydreams. If this is the case, we are certainly not ready.

- **Haughtiness**

Haughtiness is another problem that emerges from self-centeredness. This is not necessarily manifested by outward behavior. We could keep repeating: "Forgive me Lord, for I have sinned," while harboring feelings of haughtiness or superiority in our hearts. It is not enough to behave as though I am full of humility while in my heart I could be fully convinced: "I am definitely much better than others!" Boasting of one's superiority could be in several domains: education, material acquisitions, spiritual development, social standing, achievements, etc... Any of those feelings is a sufficient hindrance to our preparedness, regardless of, say, the sincerity of our service. Insistence on denying that we are indeed suffering from this problem is an indication that we are. We should be always alert to this devilish

trap that can negate all the efforts to be prepared for our encounter with our Lord.

- **Egocentricity**

Being egocentric is yet another problem. Egocentricity causes us to be too worried about ourselves and not about others. An egocentric person believes s/he should always be at the center of attention. Although we may feel we need to improve aspects of our character or behavior, the focus remains on our self. Hence, whether we focus on our "good" or "superior" traits, or on what we perceive as our weaknesses, the attention in both cases is one's self. Christ's instruction is clear:

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself.."

- **Depression and Isolation**

Another indication that we are focusing on the self is being depressed, dejected or isolated. Denying one's self, or believing that one's life is not dear (as Saint Paul said), will obviate such feelings. Those negative feelings, in turn, usually result from comparing ourselves with others coz focusing on the self leads one to be continuously comparing oneself. This brings about the mind's tormenting wanderings, turmoil in the heart, struggles with conflicting feelings of envy, grudge, anguish, sadness or anger.

- **Self- Denial**

This brings up an important question: If we deny ourselves and follow Christ, as He commanded, with what should we be preoccupied? The answer is that we have a choice of focusing on one of two: either our Lord Jesus Christ or the person before us or both, depending on the situation we are in. That is the Christ-

like approach. Looking inside Christ's mind at any moment, we find that His main preoccupation has always been either the Heavenly Father, or the human race. He never thinks about Himself. Even at the peak of Christ's suffering - on the Cross - He thought of the well-being of His mother, and of all the humans who would perish because of their ignorance.

"When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" 27 Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26 & 27) And, "Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Christ thus teaches us not to put ourselves first, even under the most justified circumstances to do so.

Obstacles to Achieving Self- Denial:

- **Faulty upbringing**

Defining a strategy for achieving self-denial reveals that although children are born having the "I" attitude, yet a correct Christian upbringing trains a growing child to give up this self-centered attitude. A child is initially inclined to possess/be self-centered. S/he repeats as soon as s/he learns to speak: "I want this or that.....give me this or that.....I feel hungry, ignored, tired, etc." The first step to help the child learn to give up this attitude and get out of the "I" enclosure and out of the "self" boundary is encouraging him/her to share. This teaches him that not everything belongs to him alone and that **giving** is a highly recommended behavior.

Here, again, we train the child to include others within his sphere, and to do things for others' benefits. Sharing and giving

are basic principles of love. Conversely, continual yielding to the entire child's desires nurtures his "self" and contributes to his developing self-centeredness.

Another problematic method of raising children is impressing on them the notion that they are either successes excelling above others, or failures falling behind everybody else. The problem here is in the comparative nature of the approach. Instead, we should encourage a child to do the required work, and accept the degree of success, which could be anywhere on the scale, and which could be shared by others. Thus, we should try to eliminate the concepts of comparison, exclusivity, racing to the top, or dejection.

An important point to note is that our children look up to us; they absorb and copy even our simplest behavioral traits. If your child sees that your life is dedicated to others, and that being considerate and sensitive to the needs of others is paramount in your life, s/he will have no difficulty being programmed with the right attitudes - leading a life of self-denial. The converse is equally true.

- **Insecurity**

Feelings of insecurity will foster the "I" attitude. Thinking more of ourselves is directly proportional to our feelings of insecurity. Even children recognize insecurity, and such feelings remain with them into adulthood. Conversely, both children and adults need warmth and security, to alleviate the natural tendency of reverting to defend the "self."

A child is also encouraged, and can be programmed, to be selfless, by perceiving and living with loving, considerate and tolerant parents: towards each other, towards others, and towards him. The child thus learns that life is richer and more

meaningful when others' interests come first. Parents should demonstrate spontaneity in exhibiting such traits.

Feelings of insecurity may be invoked by crises, such as loss of a loved one (whose presence had contributed to our sense of security), significant loss of property (such as being robbed, hence, loss of physical security through invasion of privacy), or the like. These are uncontrollable or natural feelings of insecurity, which give rise to an augmented focusing on the "self."

- **Absence of Recognition or Encouragement**

Absence of recognition or encouragement could also lead us to think more of ourselves in "selfish" terms. Hence, achievements, coincident with lack of others' recognition, could lead us either to congratulate, or reprimand, ourselves. The lack of recognition could be wrongly interpreted in one of two ways: either those surrounding us are unappreciative of our hard work, or whatever we did was not good enough - which points to our failure. A typical example is that of a hard-working housewife: her husband's lack of support may lead to resentment and self-congratulation, or to dejection and self-pity.

- **Under-achievement**

Under-achievement, due to personal and/or physical limitations, could also lead to focusing on the self. This leads to comparisons with others, unsuccessful attempts at meeting high standards, and a downward spiral to dejection and self-pity.

Achieving Self-Denial

Denying oneself and following Christ requires overcoming all the obstacles cited above. It requires a recognition and admission of one's shortcomings, a conscious and firm decision to

change, and a resolve to take positive corrective actions towards becoming Christ-like: hence, being preoccupied with the Heavenly Father, and with other humans - as opposed to focusing on our own self, desires, needs and aspirations.

Christ told us to deny ourselves because failing to satisfy this requirement will result in failure to love God. Put differently, we cannot love God if our self is paramount.

Love starts by getting out of the "mold," which is our "self." A good example is a mother's loving care for her sick child: she forgets all about her fatigue, discomfort and lack of sleep - her love leads to spontaneous self-denial, and to being entirely focused on her child. Applying this concept to ourselves, we find that self-love impedes our love of God.

The primary focus on the "self" also impedes our love for others - even the closest. The greatest pity at home is finding a selfish spouse, parent, sibling or child. It is an unfortunate home indeed where family members seek their own interests and self-gratification with no due regard to others.

Failing to deny our "self" implies rejecting the Cross. The reason is that the Cross is the self's bitter enemy, since it means sacrifice, pain and labor, all of which are incompatible with the self's quest. This can be illustrated by the contrast in the attitude of two persons: while one gives thanks whenever confronted by hardships, the other complains and rebels when exposed to the slightest discomfort. The former denies the self, and the latter extolls it.

Correct self-denial starts by understanding our own self and understanding the magnitude of the problem. One measure is finding out the extent by which we love "praise" and detest any kind of "criticism". Do we feel over exhilarated by praise and

greatly depressed by criticism? It is hard to find someone who is unperturbed by continual criticism, and equally difficult to find anyone who is completely indifferent to praise or encouragement. The message is that being too sensitive to either praise or criticism is an indication of an exaggeratedly "dear self".

The love of God suffices to transcend any expressions of praise by others. Criticism should be ignored if unfounded, or appreciated if constructive, leading to improving our performance. Let us be cognizant of Saint Paul's message:

by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things. (2Corinthians 6:8 - 10)

Examining the "self" also includes the degree to which we tolerate adverse circumstances or situations that negatively affect, or derail, our plans. Our agitation under such conditions is a measure of the dearness of our "self".

Feigning forgiveness, pretending to serve sincerely, artificial kindness, and outward piety and devotion are all indications of self- glorification. Let us not be ensnared by a wicked heart or a devious "self".

The path to self-denial is analogous to the Israelites' exodus from Egypt: it takes a miracle to succeed in denying one's own "self". It takes the staff of Moses and a struggle in order to materialize. It needs Christ to lead the way (Moses), the Cross (Moses' staff), and obedience. The difficulty arises from the willingness to change coupled with the feeling of being in

uncharted waters. This, however, is the essence of self-denial, carrying our cross, and following Christ.

The three players in the "self" scenario are God, others and the "self". That is the precise order that should be manifested in our lifestyle: the largest percentage should go for our Lord and the lowest should go to the "self".

Keys to Stepping outside the "Self"

- **Obedience**

The first key to stepping outside the self's borders is obedience within the boundaries of the Lord's commandments. Obedience should not be "selective": restricted to what we would like to hear. We should practice systematic obedience - acceptance of laws, rules or requests. Pride impedes obedience. Difficulty accepting instruction, direction or rules, even though they may disagree with our personal reasoning or expectations indicates dearness of our "self". An illustration is the hypothetical case of a dedicated, devoted, hard-working servant, from whom a component of the service was taken and reassigned to others: a negative, vigorous reaction would indicate clearly that his service was only for self-gratification and self-assertion.

- **Concentrating on the Others' Needs**

The second key to stepping outside the self's borders is the constant effort towards eliminating the "I." Once we recognize that we keep repeating: "I want...." or "I feel..." etc., we should be alerted that the "self" is dominating and we should change course. At this point we should try as hard as we can to seek the comfort, feelings and aspirations of others, rather than concentrate on our own wishes and desires. A spiritual person will always think: What does it take to please the Lord? What

does God want me to do? How can I make this person comfortable? What are the needs of my spouse? This constitutes a certain avenue to denying the self.

- **The Word of God**

The third key to stepping outside the self's borders is the Bible - the word of God. Saturating the mind with the word of God purifies the thoughts. Remember "*..the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,..*"(Hebrews 4:12) And, "*You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.*"(John 15:3) The disciples started their service with our Lord Jesus Christ filled with self-inclinations. However, having constantly listened to His teachings, they developed self-denial, humility, and love for each other and for all.

To conclude, let us remember that a key factor in preparing ourselves to meet our Lord Jesus Christ is doing what He Himself did in His journey of saving all human beings, i.e. self-denial. We should recognize our weaknesses; admit our shortcomings, be intent on a conscious and firm decision to change, and a resolve to take positive corrective actions towards becoming Christ-like. Our path to realizing self-denial is through being preoccupied with the heavenly Father, and with our fellow humans - as opposed to focusing on our own "self" with its desires, needs and aspirations.

Let us draw on, and pray for, the grace of God, to help us embark on the right path to deny ourselves.

The main steps towards self-denial are:

Obedience within the law of God, putting God and others before ourselves, and saturating our minds with the word of God.

14

"THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS"



While earnestly preparing to meet the Lord, we need to bear in mind that God warned us that the road to eternity is hard and that:

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)

Christ also said,

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13 & 14)

These verses tell us that, if our quest is the kingdom of God, trials are unavoidable and should not be cause for anguish and despair; rather they should bring about hope and cheer, because trials are a sign that we are on the right track towards eternal life. Being fully convinced that the gate is narrow alleviates all feelings of desperation.

In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit told the disciples,

Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. (Acts 13:2)

In the next chapter we read about Paul's first evangelical journey in Asia Minor and Europe, and the Jews' resistance:

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made

many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:19 - 23)

The disciples and others must have wondered why God had permitted Paul's stoning; but Paul reminded them that experiencing many trials was/is normal, since that was the only way leading to the kingdom of God.

We encounter several situations throughout our lifetime when either we or others experience extenuating, sometimes repeated, hardships; a frequently asked question is "Why?"

The answer to this question consists of two parts; Saint Paul addressed the first part by saying,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" (Romans 11:33 & 34)

The second part of the answer lies in the verse previously quoted: *"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."*

From the above we conclude that: no human can or will ever understand God's wisdom and knowledge, and no one can aspire to enter the kingdom of heaven without having passed through the narrow gate of trials and hardships. We do know that

whatever God permits to come our way is ultimately to our credit in heaven.

The discussion given above leads to several messages.

The first is stated by Saint Peter:

do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you (1 Peter 4:12)

We may have often experienced God's long-suffering, and His tolerance of our sins, without significant chastisement; that may come when we least expect it - and this may surprise us because we had grown accustomed to God's kindness.....

The second message is given by Saint John:

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. (1 John 3:13)

Hardships are part of our salvation journey, and are sign that we are on the right track. Conversely, our eternity is at risk in the absence of tribulation. Saint James further confirms this by saying:

***My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials** [these could be loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of property, etc.], knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2 - 4)*

Another reason why we should not marvel at our many trials is what the Bible states:

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken. (Psalm 34:19)

Being subjected to severe trials is not necessarily an indication of the seriousness of our transgressions; rather, it could simply mean that we are righteous, and that God will deliver us in the end, and that we will emerge in heaven unscathed.

In Jeremiah's Lamentations, our Lord expressed His sentiments on the Cross, as well as the sentiments of anyone experiencing hardships: "***He has hedged me in so that I cannot get out; He has made my chain heavy.***" (*Lamentations 3:7*) This means that He has shackled me such that I am unable to escape.

The **Third** message is that we should not wait for trials; rather, we should be "proactive," subjugate ourselves, and not indulge in the "easy life," yielding to complacency, as long as we are not experiencing trials. Therefore, it is better to narrow the gate voluntarily, rather than wait for the inevitable trial which God may permit to come our way. Christ said, "***Enter by the narrow gate....***" - this is tantamount to an invitation by Christ to ensure that the gate we are passing through is indeed narrow.....

The "Narrow gate," does not mean exclusively hardships; rather, it also refers to our struggle to attain eternity. The way to heaven is not easy ... it involves a struggle, part of which could be trials. Thus, let us pray longer and harder ... let us read the word of God more frequently ... and let us fast more ardently. We should not wait to be prompted by disease or other tribulations. Hence, "***...narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.***"

In Saint Luke's gospel we read: "***Let your waist be girded....***" (Luke 12:35). This means "tighten the belt around your waist." In this respect, "tighten" means be harsher on your needs, your tongue, and your habits. Continuing with Luke's passage we read:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. (Luke 12:35 - 38)

In his second epistle to Timothy, Saint Paul said:

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. (2 Timothy 2:3)

In other words, Saint Paul likens our life on earth to a battle, during which a successful soldier endures a harsh life of difficulties, austerity and vigilance, while having his eyes set on the goal, namely, Eternity. It should be noted that frequent complaints constitute a disturbing sign, since they are an indication of a lack of understanding of the path to Eternity, and a lack of appreciation of the meaning of the "narrow gate." In other words, "adequate understanding of the narrow gate," and "complaints," are contradictory.

The fourth message is given in Joshua 1:

Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you (Joshua 1:9)

We should neither complain nor be dejected. Let us accept, and be fully convinced, that the way to Eternity is full of hardships and that there is no other way. Saint Paul accentuates this to the Corinthians:

We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Corinthians 4:8 - 10)

This is simply what Christ foretold and promised – our perseverance will be rewarded with Eternity:

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

In James 1 mentioned above, the apostle says "... ***knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.***" Hence, patience results after a series of trials – not one or two. It should be emphasized that "patience" does not in any way mean "giving up;" rather, it means that we must relentlessly continue in our struggle and our quest for Eternity.

Saint Paul echoes this message in his Epistle to the Romans:

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint. (Romans 5:3 & 4)

Thus **James and Paul exhort us to be joyful, and to glory, in tribulations.** "Glory and joy" in this context refer to inner contentment that we are on the right path to Eternity, and that we have the required "passport".....

The fifth message is: "do not hasten the termination of your trial, rather, ask for help." We would surely be ill-advised to

attempt to bypass or "accelerate" God's will – let us submit to God's will both in hardships and in His timing to end them. We should bear in mind that, for every difficulty we go through, there is a particular goal that God intends to satisfy; **the difficulty will not end until its purpose has been achieved.** Therefore, instead of complaining to God, we should entreat Him to strengthen us, to help us traverse our trial(s), and to help us achieve His intended goal. That is why the Psalmist says:

Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord! (Psalm 27:14)

In his first epistle, Saint Peter reinforces the fifth message above by saying:

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. (1 Peter 4:7)

The "*end of all things*" means that not only will all trials end, whatever they may be, but also our life and our earthly bodies will transpire. Therefore, instead of waiting impatiently for the hardship to end, we must struggle to perfect our prayers, our reading the word of God, and our hearing His voice and seeing Him. Saint Paul furthermore says:

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:12)

In other words, it is incumbent on us to purify our souls in preparation for Christ's coming.

The sixth message is given by Isaiah:

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I

will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

Our focus must always be on Christ. In trials we should not put our trust in humans and seek human help and support. All this comes from God who is our ultimate Help and Only Support (of course this does not imply that a sick person must not consult a physician). Saint Paul also said:

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

A good example was given us by Jehoshaphat when the Ammonites and Moabites advanced against Judah; he cried to God saying:

O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You. (2 Chronicles 20:12)

Again, our focus should be on Christ our only solace and refuge.

The seventh message is: "**do not focus on the 'self.'**" In many instances of difficulties we may face, we have the tendency of envying others for not having to endure the same hardship, especially when we feel that our hard work and efforts seem to have been met with reproach, while others' laxness reaped for them good rewards. Such an attitude significantly makes one lose the blessing of that difficulty. We must have absolute trust in God, Whose will is simply to shape us and prepare us to qualify for Eternity.

We fall into this trap because of self-pity. Happy indeed is the person who weathers the trials without envying others, without focusing on himself, and without succumbing to self-pity. We ought to remind ourselves that all humans are subjected to hardships – we just do not know the details of each person's life. Therefore the only outcome of self-pity is an increase in the adverse psychological effect that the hardship is causing us.

Carrying someone else's load and sharing in his/her difficulty lightens our burden – this can be achieved through the avenue of service. Saint Paul addressed this by saying:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)

In Saint Peter's second epistle we read:

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

It should be very clear to us that **the ultimate purpose of trials is repentance**. Our forefathers refer to repentance as stripping ourselves from the "self," which can not be reached without self-denial. Repentance can only be successful if the self is denied – if we stop our preoccupation with the self. Continuing to focus on the self will only impede God's work towards our salvation. The Psalmist thus says:

My times are in Your hand (Psalm 31:15)

Saint Paul also said:

But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy (Acts 20:24)

Looking at the hardships which others endure, and have endured, will make ours seem light. Reading the word of God will give us insights into what others have endured to qualify for eternity. One of the saints started laughing, just before being tortured; when asked for the reason why he laughed at such a difficult moment he replied:

"When I contemplated your torture, I thought, well, if you cast me into the fire, I will find the three young men; if you cast me into the lion's den, I will find Daniel; if you cast me into the sea, I will find Jonah; if you behead me, I will be find Paul; if you crucify me I will find Peter; if you stone me I will find Stephen; therefore regardless of the kind of torture you have in store for me, I will always find friends, and I will always find that I was not the first one. They all had to endure this hardship to enjoy Christ's company at the end - so will I."

To recap ...

- ***"...do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;..."***
- ***"Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you."***
- Do not wait for trials, rather, be proactive and narrow the gate voluntarily.
- ***"....do not be afraid, nor be dismayed,...."***
- Do not hasten the termination of your trial, rather, ask for help.

- *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you,..."*
- Do not focus on yourself.
- The Lord is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

"Enter by the narrow gate."

15

"FILL YOUR HEART"



While earnestly preparing to meet the Lord, we need to understand that, in the end, God's focus will neither be on major achievements nor on the list of good works and virtues. God said through Jeremiah:

I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind (Jeremiah 17:10)

God also said:

My son, give me your heart... (Proverbs 23:26)

And,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ... (Matthew 22:37)

In the process of preparing to meet the Lord, what resides within the heart is of primary importance. Outward preparation without due attention to the inner state, like the foolish virgins, is common. The wise virgins, on the other hand, took care of their appearances through prayer, good deeds, and fasting, **while taking equal care** of their hearts by repentance, humility, contrition, and satiation with the Spirit.

Therefore, in preparing for our meeting with the Groom, we must ensure that our hearts are pure, and full with love, holiness, and beautiful feelings. This accompanies the principle of denying ourselves.

"Filing the heart" is analogous to the Biblical example of a tree planted by running waters. We know that the Holy Spirit is the One Who fills the heart, and is likened in the Bible to living water. This is seen in Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman:

Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the

water that I shall give him [the Holy Spirit] will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:13 & 14)

Other Biblical mentions of the life-giving water are the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2 - the afflicted man was healed), and the pool of Siloam (John 9:7 - the blind man was enlightened through opening of his eyes).

Satiation with the Holy Spirit satisfies all our needs. He cures us from our sins and enlightens us, enabling us to see God, His glory and His kingdom. A good exercise to achieve this state is repeating **"Dear Lord Jesus Christ, fill me with Your Spirit,"** whenever we drink water.

In Jeremiah 17 we read:

Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:5 - 9)

Continuing with the theme of filling one's heart with the Holy Spirit, we also read in Jeremiah:

I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings. As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right; it will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool. (Jeremiah 17:10 & 11)

Most of us toil, talk and expend a lot of external effort - but are still minimally filled with the Spirit. The main reason for this is that we are primarily preoccupied with outward coverage, service and appearance. We aren't really giving due or proportionate attention to depth, repentance and the heart's contents. Any large flourishing tree must have deep roots and must be well-watered. What we do not see within the tree is precisely the internal care which nourishes its fruitfulness and outward appearance. The parable of the ten virgins illustrates the dire consequences of neglecting inner care (lack of sufficient oil).

If the Spirit of God fills our hearts, our preoccupations will shift away from caring for the "self" and focusing on appearances. This is the differentiating factor between us and saints. The focus of saints is on the love of God and the love of others rather than self-love. They assign no value to their "self", feelings, life and pride.

The excerpt from Jeremiah 17 starts with:

Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength

The problem is therefore identified to be our dependence on our own resources and capabilities as well as our being more careful to please men rather than God. The inevitable effect is fear and anxiety when dealing with fellow humans. God requires a reversal to this approach: we must redirect our hearts and

attention to Him. We ought to fill our hearts with His Spirit and we must focus on pleasing Him rather than men:

We ought to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29)

In the same passage, God points out to the consequences of continuing down the path of reliance on, and pleasing, men:

For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness

This is the person who is unable to submit to God, and who consistently fails to find peace in prayer, closeness to God, or comfort in the word of God. The answer is simple: that person has neither drunk, nor nourished himself sufficiently, from the living water.

In His encounter with the Samaritan woman, Christ teaches us:

Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him [meaning the Holy Spirit] will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life..... My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. (John 4:13, 14 & 34)

The message is therefore: being mainly focused on ourselves and on pleasing 'people' leads to emptiness, fruitlessness, and spiritual poverty, and to heaping anxiety and anguish. By contrast, pleasing God and being filled with His Spirit is a virtue leading to fruitfulness, joy, peace and wisdom.

The recipe for achieving the virtue of having a heart full of His Spirit is also given in the same passage: ***"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord."***

Our attitude in life should always be: "I focus on Christ - He is my guide, life and refuge - I have no other aim or preoccupation." This guarantees success, and leads to becoming:

a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.

Quoting and obeying the Lord's words is the ultimate "position" of any person placing his entire trust and reliance on our Lord. Nothing else matters as long as we are following the Lord's instruction and flawless teaching. We are the brides of Christ - we should have our fill from Him. Such principles are easily applied since the Holy Spirit is within us and, ***"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart..."***(Romans 10:8)

Considering the Lord's saying ***"he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,"*** it should be noted that we are all "trees". However, not all of us are planted by the waters. The tree planted by the waters is the strong one which weathers storms, bears fruit, and gives good results. This is the tree which pleases God. Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us chances to be ready, time and time again. This is clear in the parable of the gardener who pleaded with the vineyard owner:

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the

ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.' (Luke 13:6 - 9)

We actually recite the notions given above daily in the Matins' psalms:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper. The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. (Psalm 1:1 - 5)

Therefore, let us ask ourselves daily, as we recite this psalm, whether we are indeed prepared, and whether we are fruitful trees planted by the waters, ready to confront the world with the word of God, and ready to meet Christ at His appointed hour. Let us keep on toiling hard to achieve this blessed state.

God also tells us:

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. (Psalm 92:12 & 13)

We can deepen and strengthen our roots by expanding our sincere efforts and very hard work, rather than keeping prayer,

service, giving, humility, and reading the Bible to the bare minimum.

Jeremiah's passage given above concludes with:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?

This refers to **the dangers of complacency**. At some point our hearts may fool us telling us that we have now achieved our goal or that we are better than others having satisfied all the requirements. This may dangerously lead us to think that we are now "good" and need not toil further in more prayer, fasting or repentance. If this happens, be sure that you are in great danger of losing eternity. It would be a terrifying shock to hear the Groom say "Depart from Me - I do not know you," when we thought we were "perfect."

This is quite clear from the virgins' parable. Those foolish virgins obviously thought the same way. Their hearts must have given them the same message assuring them that the Groom would definitely welcome them if He comes at any unexpected time. However, our Lord's parable shows clearly that they were totally self-betrayed. For when the moment came, He disowned them completely! This is why we should be always alerted against complacency. We must always feel the need to continue our labor and our quest for readiness, trying to reach much deeper levels of being "filled with His Spirit" unto the end of our days.

Accentuating this warning, the Lord warns the Church of Laodiceans:

Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Revelation 3:17)

In Isaiah we read:

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! (Isaiah 5:21)

The genuinely wise person is the one who is wise in the eyes of the Lord, and unwise in his own eyes; the converse is true.

Our Lord says:

I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind,...

Let us not be fooled by appearances. The heart is the ultimate measure. Let our hearts be filled with purity, love, humility, and praise, rather than greed, lust, unclean thoughts and envy. Let us entreat our Lord, the perfect Physician, to cure our hearts from all spiritual ailments and impurities. This is why the Psalmist said:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23 & 24)

Saint Paul emphasized this in his ***Epistle to the Corinthians:***

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. (1 Corinthians 4:3 - 5)

Jeremiah 17 warns us against the consequences of an impure heart ...

As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right; it will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool.

Such a person is likened to the partridge that robs another bird's eggs, hatches them, and claims them as her own. This is analogous to stealing someone's money. Such is an impure heart. Let us beware of unlawfully harvesting wealth: honor and wealth accumulated thus will not last, and an impure heart will be made known.

Readiness to meet the Lord does not only require self-denial but also a pure heart filled with the living waters of the Holy Spirit. It requires the preoccupation with obeying the word of God, rather than being worried about people's views.

Let us therefore ask Christ like the Samaritan woman:

"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst,...."(John 4:15)

And follow St. Paul's instruction:

"...do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit..." (Ephesians 5:18)

16

"BUILD ON IT"

(1 CORINTHIANS 3:10)



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is important to understand the meaning and implications of the following chapter of Saint Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (1 Corinthians 3:5 - 19)

The backdrop of this chapter was the divisions in the church caused partly by biases that Corinthians had towards either Paul or Apollos. Hence, some favored one over the other. Paul thus harshly criticized this attitude, emphasizing that focusing on the servant rather than God was wrong, and that spiritual growth is the work of God, regardless of the person who had planted the seed.

The first principle that Saint Paul accentuated is:

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."

This principle is manifested throughout our lives: many people contribute to, and nurture a specific aspect of, our spiritual development, e.g. parents, Sunday School servants, confessors, and others. They are God's tools. Nevertheless **our spiritual growth is entirely the work of God** since our salvation is His preoccupation.

It is important to note that God's compassion is such that we may indeed be growing spiritually in areas not immediately obvious to us. Our immersion in church services and rites will, without our realizing it, contribute to our spiritual growth. We may become more tolerant, more watchful, and/or more regular in Bible studies, without any special efforts in that direction. Therefore, **let us not worry, and let us persevere in doing what we have to do, even though it may seem to us that we are not becoming "better" in any given area of our life.** We should also bear in mind that our spiritual growth is a mystery beyond the realm of human abilities.

Sometimes our God-instituted spiritual growth results in the elimination of a specific vice in our character. As an example, it is likely that our prayers never focused on our love for money.

However, over the years, we may find that we have somehow been cured of this vice, and that we no longer attach much importance to money. We therefore must be aware that, in our struggle to prepare ourselves to meet Christ, **it is in fact God Who prepares us for that moment.** God desires salvation for everyone - that is the focal point of our hope.

We must, therefore, be vigilant yet hopeful, and very careful that our hope does not degenerate into complacency. We should always entreat the Lord to rectify our shortcomings before our time comes - hence, the Psalmist says:

O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days (Psalm 102:24)

The fact that God increases our spiritual growth deserves thanksgiving. This is an aspect we often neglect to include in our prayers. Let us, therefore, remember to give thanks for our continuing to participate in church rites, to heed the sermons, to adhere to the Faith, and to serve. Saint Paul subsequently says:

Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."

Paul's intent is that we de-emphasize the names of servants or preachers, and focus on benefitting from the message, confident that God will reward each one according to their labor. This excerpt addresses a weakness that many have, namely, being attached to a certain servant; objectively, all are sent to deliver a message. So **let us focus on the message, not the messenger.** Emphasizing this point, Paul concludes the chapter with:

whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas ... all are yours. And you are Christ's (1 Corinthians 3:22 & 23)

The statement *"he who plants and he who waters are one"* also refers to the **unity of mind, soul and purpose**. Servants must always join hands to send consistent messages, and ensure that they neither negate nor contradict each other's work. This leads to the very important point of "friendly wars" within the service. Conflicts within the church are, unfortunately, not uncommon – we simply fail to love each other as we should. We indeed fail to recognize the fact that, despite differences in approaches and personalities, God accepts all. Proof is evident in Christ's apostles: despite differences in their individual characteristics, all were great apostles. **We tend to amplify each other's faults - God does the opposite: He accentuates our strengths and downplays our weaknesses.**

Satan endeavors to destroy what we seek to build. This is because servants are already on the path to heaven. Satan demonstrated this by attempting to sow strife between Paul and Apollos. Focusing on weaknesses renders us too short-sighted to recognize significant potential in persons, whom we may sometimes dismiss as "unfit" for service; but, from God's perspective, these persons may very likely be considered very good servants. This is why we need to accept, and fellowship with, each other following Paul's example who never criticized Apollos. The most beautiful and rewarding feature of service is fellowship - **we are all fellow workers serving the same cause and the same God.**

Saint Paul laid down a further principle: *".....each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."* Preparing to meet our Lord, therefore, implies that we must labor accordingly. Labor constitutes the most precious element qualifying us for heaven. On the other hand, natural gifts are of

very little value in terms of our readiness for eternity. Hence, having a beautiful voice, or being gifted with eloquent delivery, are not qualifiers for heaven. Such gifts pale when compared to someone who toils through sleepless nights, lengthy tiresome trips, and the like, in order to carry out necessary, service-related, responsibilities. **We should thus be alerted to one of Satan's tricks, namely, attaching importance to appearance, status, and "prestigious" tasks.** Thinking along those lines, we will end up focusing more on the intensity of our labors, as opposed to the quality of our talents.

In our meeting with Christ, **the first and foremost decisive factor is the extent of our toil for His name's sake.** The Bible gives us numerous examples of people who labored for Christ - those include Mary, Joseph, Paul and others. Comparing himself with the other apostles, Saint Paul said:

I labored more abundantly than they all (1 Corinthians 15:10)

This may be demonstrated in our day-to-day dealings with servants at various levels, be they clergy or laity. Despite our feeling uncomfortable with a certain servant's trait, or way of doing things, we should bear in mind that our Lord likely gives that person much credit for other reasons, while minimizing the fault(s) which we may consider to be "glaring."

Let us love each other - **lack of love and tolerance for others automatically negates any amount of toil or service.** Hence:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. (1 Corinthians 13:1)

We must therefore seek labor and hard work in service, accepting others, and accepting thankfully and humbly whatever task is assigned to us. **We must be very careful not to harbor in our hearts grumbling, judgment or anger against others.** Any one of those vices definitely constitutes "the pinch of salt which ruins the dish," and will outweigh and negate any amount of service.

Paul also said: ***"For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building."*** Being able to boast truthfully that we are ***"God's fellow workers"*** is a significant testimony to our credit. God will never disown anyone who was His fellow worker. **Any element or degree of service carries with it a lasting recognition with God - it will never be unnoticed or forgotten;** Christ confirms this saying:

where I am, there My servant will be also (John 12:26)

Preserving the title of "God's fellow worker" is sufficient motivation for us to serve, and to persevere in our service, as a high priority. Furthermore, when the seventy returned to Christ rejoicing because the demons were subjected to them in His name, He told them:

do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you ... rejoice because your names are written in heaven. (Luke 10:20)

The most important point in this discussion pertains to Saint Paul's assertion that:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

We often place our emphasis on quantity rather than quality. We focus on "What are we doing?" And "How much are we doing?" Sadly, we neglect the more significant aspect of "HOW are we doing it?" Saint Paul also took care to emphasize that we all build on One foundation: ***"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*** This is consistent with our Lord's statement to Peter: ***"...on this rock I will build My church,..."***(*Matthew 16:18*) Hence, while the foundation, the rock, is the same, services across churches may differ.

The issue therefore is not how much time we spend praying, which age group we are serving, or the classroom size, rather, **"How do we pray, how do we serve, and do we have the spirit of service?"** Hence, do we love, and pray for, those whom we serve ... do we toil sincerely in our service ... and are we setting good examples for them to follow?

The ultimate question for servants and parents alike is: "How are we building - how have we raised our children?" Saint Paul categorizes the quality of service as ***"gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw."*** One servant may build a "gold service" that withstands the test of fire; while the "straw service" of another burns, and its ashes strewn to the wind. **Prior to building, we must agree that the foundation is the same -** hence, Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Faith (proclaimed in the Nicene Creed), and the same spiritual principles.

Those six levels of quality are applicable to any type of service. We should consistently evaluate the quality of our prayers and services accordingly. Saint James confirms the notion that we can have prayers of "straw" as opposed to prayers of "gold" - hence, ***"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous***

man[gold] **avails much.** "(James 5:16) This principle applies also to loving others (are we sincere and tolerant?), to reading the Bible, and to other aspects of our overall attempts to prepare ourselves to meet Christ. The statement **"the fire will test each one's work"** means that there will be a final evaluation for each person's work. Although we seek, pray for, and rely on, God's mercy and compassion, we must not lose sight of the fact that **we are required to be faithful and honest in our work.**

Applying the principles given above to the lives of saints, we find that saints gave us examples of "works of gold." **They have set the standard for us, and we must strive to meet this standard.**

We also note that Paul classifies even weak services into three levels: **"wood, hay, straw."** Those are types of superficial, or "apparent," service - as opposed to genuine or productive service. If, for example, a deacon dons his vestments but does nothing else in particular, he would simply **appear** to be serving..... Another example is the servant who is solely concerned with the number of attendees (to a given talk or sermon) without due attention to their level of interest or participation - this is superficial service. Irregular service also belongs to the weak categories which Paul outlined. **The servant's primary goal is to bring people closer to God - that is the determinant of the quality of service we are rendering.**

Referring clearly to our readiness to meet Christ, Paul says:

each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

The value of our lifetime's work will be determined by the test of fire. Will our work emerge pure and shiny, or will it burn due to its worthlessness? **Our eyes must thus be always focused on the Final Day's test.**

In view of the points mentioned above, we should strive to adorn ourselves with the **two necessary virtues of fear and hope**. Fear will foster seriousness and chase out any tendencies towards laziness. We should take care though, that fear does not lead us to despair - simply because no one can claim perfection in any type of work. Hope, on the other hand, could lead to complacency. **A balance between fear and hope implies that we should stand humbly before the Lord, fully cognizant of our shortfalls, yet hopeful and trusting in God's mercy.** Christ has both encouraged and warned us. This principle applies equally in raising our children: we should encourage and give them hope, but we should also be strict in instilling within them the spirit of faithfully following instructions and sticking to good deeds and ethical behavior.

The test of fire determines whether our work have a lasting value or not. Some forefathers interpreted this to mean that we will see the fruit of our labors whether good or bad. Raising a child, apparently within the fold of the Church, should not produce an adult atheist. Such an eventuality points to a "service of straw," since the fruit of the labor (the believing child turned atheist adult) failed to withstand the test of time. Analogously, a failed marriage indicates that the relationship was not "gold," built on the rock of love and tolerance; rather, on a "foundation of straw" which was easily destroyed when tested with the pressures and trials of life.

Similarly, **fervent "gold" prayers produce results - whereas insincere "straw" prayers are ineffective.** The "fire" could be represented by hardships, unholy desires, pressures by other servants, or the like. Another example could be that of a servant who, while successfully discharging his obligations, is suddenly faced with another servant making life difficult for him. Will he persevere (gold service) and tolerate his colleague, or will he antagonize him, give up, and discontinue his service (straw)? **The latter course of action negates all his efforts since he would have failed the "test of fire."**

Saint Paul continues with the logical statement:

If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

A servant whose labor bears good fruit that withstood the test of time, will certainly be rewarded accordingly. Conversely, a servant whose toil leads to bad fruit or fails under the hardships of life, will have labored in vain, and receives no credit.

The statement *"but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire"* has been interpreted in different ways by our forefathers. Saint John Chrysostom proposed an "extreme" interpretation, namely, those whose labors produce either no, or bad, fruit, will indeed rise, along with all the righteous and wicked on the Last Day, but will be denied heaven, because of their unproductive service. Other forefathers have proposed a more "benign" interpretation; namely, even if your labors were unfruitful, you would still be given credit for "good intentions."

The case of Lot illustrates the more "benign" interpretation. Lot had good intentions, yet a very weak resolve

- he remained in Sodom and Gomorrah despite his evil surroundings, the loss of his family's chastity, and the angels' warnings (at any point he could have returned to the safety of his father Abraham's camp). Finally, Lot lost his wife and daughters, but was saved *"as through fire."* In other words, we cannot say that Lot perished (he escaped by "the skin of his teeth") because the Bible says that the Lord

delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds) (2 Peter 2:7 & 8)

The moral of all this is that we do not wish to belong to any of the categories which yield marginal or questionable results. **Let us serve, toil, and pray with sincerity, honesty and fervor.** Let our goal be the service and prayer of "gold," simply because we cannot bear the loss resulting from a lesser level.

To crown his argument, Saint Paul says:

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

This is sufficient incentive for us to provide a "service of gold" seeing that the Holy Spirit in-dwells us - we are the altar of God. The essence of the matter is that we need to exercise due diligence. **This can only be achieved through "gold" toil, recognizing that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.** This leads to building on a solid foundation.

Saint Paul's concluding argument is:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

This addresses the catastrophic assumption that some might have: namely, that they are providing a "service of gold" when, in fact, theirs is a "service of straw." **We must, therefore, make sure to humble ourselves before the Lord and plead for wisdom and for His guidance to enable us to deliver the best possible service within our means and knowledge.**

Discipleship is the key element that transports us up the scale from "straw service" to "gold service." **Let us be open to learning and acquiring knowledge and wisdom, through discipleship.** We must strive to progress from the lowest to the highest level. We must harbor the desire to learn, to advance, and to act accordingly.

To recap...

- Our focus must be on God and the message, rather than on the servant or the messenger.
- Our spiritual growth is entirely God's work.
- We must persevere in doing what we have to do, even though it may seem to us that we are not becoming "better" in any given area of our life.
- We must be fearful and vigilant, yet hopeful, and very careful that our hope not degenerate into complacency, and our fear not lead to despair.
- We must continually thank God for our spiritual growth.

- Servants must ensure a unity of mind, soul and purpose, in order to send consistent messages, reinforcing rather than contradicting each other.
- We should love each other, accept each other's weaknesses, build on our strengths, and recognize that we are all fellow workers serving the same cause and the same God. Lack of love, grumbling, judgment or anger will negate the service.
- In our meeting with Christ, the first and foremost decisive factor is the extent of our toil for His name's sake.
- In service, quality is much more important than quantity. Let us serve, toil, and pray with sincerity, honesty and fervour.
- The servant's primary goal is to bring people closer to God - this determines the quality of service.
- We must strive to meet the standard that saints have set for us.

**But let each one take heed how he builds on it.
For no other foundation can anyone lay than that
which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.**

17

“QUALITY NOT THAN QUANTITY”



In our relationship with God, it is of extreme importance to focus on the quality, rather than quantity of our spiritual practices. Hence:

How do we give?

How do we pray?

How do we read the Bible?

How do we serve?

As Satan perceives our progression in our spiritual lives, he tries to divert our focus to quantity rather than quality. The Lord's emphasis, on the other hand, is more on quality rather than quantity. The Bible tells us:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood." (Mark 12:41 - 44)

Christ was watching "how the people put money into the treasury." Christ's emphasis was on people's attitudes and hearts as they gave ... the amounts they gave constituted a secondary consideration. He subsequently drew His disciples' attention to **the poor widow**, whose attitude led Him to single her out of the crowd.

Problems Arising from Concentrating on Quantity:

1. Dulling our Conscience

We sometimes fall into the trap of trying to dull our conscience by increasing the time we spend praying, the number of chapters we read from the Bible, and the frequency of reciting canonical hours. The following verses illustrate this point further:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:25 & 26)

Usually, two important issues are associated with reading the word of God: **What we read, and how much we read**. The more important question, though, of "how we read" is rarely asked or addressed. Saint Paul emphasizes this view to the Ephesians: "*See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise,*" (Ephesians 5:15)

2. Vain Prayers

It is thus clear that God focuses on **how** we conduct ourselves, **how** we serve, and **how** our lifestyle unfolds. Christ specifically warned against verbosity in prayer:

And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. (Matthew 6:7 & 8)

We should be particularly sensitized to this fact, since a person could spend years dutifully repeating lengthy, insincere, prayers, unaware of the worthlessness of these efforts.

The importance of sincerity and heartfelt prayer, as opposed to eloquence, is also demonstrated in the publican's very short prayer, versus the Pharisee's boastful one:

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men-- extortionists, unjust ... I fast twice a week; I give tithes ...' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other;"(Luke 18:11 - 14)

We are also sometimes fixated on "how much we should give - should it be 10 or 15 percent...."? In fact, God is in no need whatsoever of our money - rather the Lord seeks a **cheerful giver**.

3. Anxiety

Focusing on quantity and numbers would also tend to promote anxiety; we note that when Christ fed the multitude on the mountain, Philip's concern was how much money they needed:

Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them" (John 6:7)

Christ, on the other hand, brushed aside this concern.

4. False Sense of Security

The trap of "quantity" could also give a false sense of security when, for example, we manage to read ten biblical chapters a day - we would thus feel that we have read much and, therefore, we must be "good." Nevertheless, when asked whether we retained, understood, or practiced, any of the material we

purport to have "read," we would fail to find a satisfactory answer. It should be emphasized, that reading ten chapters is, of course, not wrong per se - rather, the point to make is that "how we read" is infinitely more important than "how much we read." Our Lord furthermore accentuated this view when He said, "*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees,*"(Matthew 23:14) despite the fact that those scribes and Pharisees knew much more about the law than anybody else. Since the entire Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, in-depth reading of any part of it is beneficial - the question remains: How are we reading it?

5. Strict Application of Rites

Another problem that some of us face is strict application of the letter, rather than the intent, of our rites and traditions. For example, reciting a particular psalm or canonical hour is not restricted to a specific time of day: heartfelt, sincere prayers are always welcomed in heaven, and are not a function of time - adherence to a rigid schedule of prayer has no effect on the heart's sincerity. Christianity does not impose a prayer mold to which we must conform.

Three Practical Approaches to apply the 'HOW' Principle

The following sections outline three practical approaches for applying the "how" principle:

- a) How should we read?**
- b) How should we pray? and**
- c) How should we give?#**

A) How should we read?

The spirit of prayer should dominate our reading. Hence, rather than attempting to study what we read, let us try to convert that biblical passage into prayer. For example, if the passage depicts good deeds of a certain personage, we can convert this into a prayer entreating God to grant that we conduct ourselves like that personage. **Hence, we implore our Lord to help us forgive like David, pray like Samuel, raise our arms like Moses, have strong faith like Joshua, etc.** Conversely, for personages who conducted themselves badly, we pray that God shield us from behaving like them. This approach applies to all books of the Bible; for example when reading *"The name of the Lord is a strong tower"*(Proverbs 18:10) our prayer would be "Help us dear Lord to call upon Your Holy Name."

When reading the word of God we should also have an inquisitive mind searching for a particular message. Anyone seeking God's voice by reading His word will definitely hear His voice. Clearly, this attitude is quite different from reading quickly to appease our conscience before going to bed; by reading thus we deprive ourselves from absorbing Christ's life-giving message, since He said: *"The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."*(John 6:63)

To maximize our benefit, **we should read the word of God with full deference and submission;** hence, our state of mind should be reflective of God's presence beside us. This cannot be realized by reading the Bible while fully relaxed, sipping a coffee! An attitude of deference and submission implies our willingness to act on what we read - regardless of our opinion.

When reading the word of God, we need to decide, a priori, whether we are reading in order to preach to others and answer questions, or we are reading for **our own benefit and discipleship**. The latter course should be our choice since, foretelling the flourishing of the Church, Isaiah says: "**All your children shall be taught by the Lord**"(Isaiah 54:13)

Reading the word of God **must also be accompanied by constant, not momentary, meditation**. One of our forefathers once said: "*Whoever prays only while praying has yet to pray.*" Analogously, whoever reads only while reading has yet to read. This means that, our meditation on a given passage should last the entire day, not simply during the few minutes it takes to read. Our benefit will thus be maximized.

B) How should we pray?

Here, again, the emphasis is on the quality, rather than length or wordiness, of our prayers. Prayer from the heart is the most effective, and has been surely practiced by everyone at some point.

David says: "**Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord;...**"(Psalm 130:1) Such an experience - crying to the Lord from the depths of our heart - is never forgotten; why then, can we not incorporate such heartfelt sincerity in all our prayers? Hence, let us express **genuine love, grateful thanks, humble repentance, and tender imploring for mercy, for ourselves and others**. We must remember that God said: "**My son, give me your heart.**" (Proverbs 23:26) Also, the reason that the publican **went down to his house justified** was that he prayed from the bottom of his heart.

When we pray **we must ensure that our minds are focused.** It is not befitting at all that we "pray" to our Creator with no understanding of what we are saying. In this regard, Saint Paul said: *"I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding."*(1 Corinthians 14:15)

Prayer must be accompanied by humility and a repentant spirit. Laziness, relaxation and carelessness are unbecoming, and have no place in, prayer. Speaking to our Maker requires tears, struggle, sincerity, and a broken heart. Remember, Christ said clearly:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."(Matthew 7:21)

When praying **we must pay much attention to what we say, and what we ask.** Spending a lifetime asking for what we receive implies that we have failed to understand what prayer is all about. Prayers should not consist of asking for health, wealth, well-being or success; Christ said, *"**seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.**"*(Matthew 6:33)

A Christian prayer consists of spiritual petitions, which is how Christ taught us to pray; hence: *"**hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ... forgive us our trespasses...**"* All these are spiritual petitions. A Christian would also normally ask in prayer for the salvation of all, for wisdom, for meekness, for mercy, and for purity of heart – these are the elements of the kingdom of God.

Love for others should be reflected in our prayers. God's pleasure lies in carrying humans' burdens - we should likewise take pleasure in relieving others of their burdens, and in

praying for them with the same fervor as we pray for ourselves. This would give us great credit in heaven. Saint Paul said in this respect: *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*(Galatians 6:2)

Our prayers should be permeated with the spirit of repentance, joy, praise and thanksgiving. May our prayers not be dominated by complaints.

C) How should we give?

Although all believers and servants give in a variety of ways (money, food, clothing, time, etc), the question remains: How do we give?

First and foremost, we should give cheerfully and generously - not grudgingly! In this regard, Saint Abraam said: *"Giving from what we have, constitutes generosity; but giving from what God gave us, constitutes discharging our debt."*

We should be aware of the fact that everything we possess was/is God-given. Therefore, when we give, we are simply giving from what is God's, thus partially giving back our debt to Him. When we give we are simply giving back to God a small portion of His huge blessings. We are thus in no way giving "generously" from what we wrongly believe is ours.

We should not be biased or partial when we give. We should always remember that we are giving back to God - thus our giving should be indiscriminate, and independent of the receiver's looks or personality.

We should take care to give from our needs, rather than from our leftovers. This makes a huge difference. It is quite

unfortunate that some of us donate worthless or useless objects ... this is likely among the worst examples of "giving." Other very poor examples of giving are worn-out clothing, and leftover food destined, otherwise, for the garbage. **Ideal giving is setting aside from our needs, and offering from our best.** Christ set the example by giving His life and shedding His blood for us - He gave out neither money nor clothing, because He had none. His focus was on *"how the people put money into the treasury."*

It is important to have faith while giving: are we certain that God is watching, and that He is the recipient? Our faith is built on Christ's promise when He said:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one

of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.
(Matthew 25:31 - 40)

Finally, **it is more important to give of ourselves than to give material objects.** Giving from our sentiments, time, effort and thoughts carries more weight than giving money - which is the easiest form of giving.

To recap...

- The Lord's emphasis is on quality, rather than quantity, of service: when Jesus sat opposite the treasury He saw HOW people were putting money into the treasury. Hence, God focuses on how we behave, how we serve, and how we pray.
- In prayer, God seeks sincerity and a pure heart - He rejects boastfulness and verbosity.
- We must pay particular attention to how we read the word of God, how we pray and how we give.
- It is much more important to satisfy the intent, rather than the letter, of our rites and traditions.
- When reading the word of God we must ensure:
 - the spirit of prayer dominates our reading,
 - we have an inquisitive mind searching for a message,
 - we are reading with full deference and submission,
 - we are reading for our own benefit and discipleship, and we are constantly meditating on what we are reading,
- When praying we must ensure:
 - our prayer is from the heart,

- our minds are focused,
 - we are humble and contrite,
 - we pay attention to what we say and what we ask,
 - our prayers reflect love for others, and
 - our prayers are permeated with the spirit of joy, repentance, praise and thanksgiving.
- When giving we must ensure:
 - we are giving cheerfully and generously,
 - we are giving from our needs not from our leftovers,
 - we are giving indiscriminately,
 - we have faith that Christ is watching and that we are giving Him, and
 - we are giving of ourselves (effort, feelings, time,.....) rather than simply money.

"Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury"

18

"HARD LABOR"



Laboring hard to achieve readiness reflects the importance of being prepared to meet Christ at all times. **We need to train ourselves to continue focusing on eternity despite any distractions**, however pressing they might seem.

Amos, a prophet who preceded Christ by about seven hundred years, said the following to the Israelites, at a time when they were worshipping idols, having significantly strayed from the Lord's precepts:

I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord [clearly, the Lord permitted these hardships for the purpose of turning the people back to Him]. "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord [this indicates that the Lord tried all possible means for turning them back, and that the Lord's goal is that all be saved]. "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, Who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, Who treads the high places of the earth [this symbolizes Christ's incarnation]-- the Lord God of hosts is His name. (Amos 4:9 - 13)

The message in Amos' words (one which applies to all of us to date) is that **the Lord desires repentance and salvation for all**. The alternative is eternal perdition, against which our omnipotent and omniscient God warns by numerous means.

Christ came the first time to save the world. Christ will come the second time, at an hour no one knows, to judge the living and the dead, and to reward each one according to their deeds. **We must therefore be in a state of constant readiness.**

We find a similar message in the New Testament, in Saint Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (labeled the "epistle of problems," as opposed to the second, which was more encouraging and conciliatory). The background is that Corinth, like all booming ports, was not only successful commercially, but also rife with immorality and perversion. The converts were feuding among themselves and leading un-Christ-like lives, to the extent that Saint Paul was tempted to give up on them. Christ, nevertheless, appeared to Saint Paul and told him to persevere in Corinth since He had chosen some of the Corinthians for His service. Saint Paul thus said:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things [all participants ensure they are fit for the race]. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty [Paul says that his focus remains on a definite, certain, goal towards which he races]. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air [Paul says that he is constantly struggling against the very real Satan - not against an imaginary foe]. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to

others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24 - 27)

Our lives end at the finish line of the race. Most people run in a race of some kind; yet, unfortunately, in the wrong direction. They tend to spend their lives racing towards wealth (the most likely), honor, and/or worldly desires and lusts. In the end, at the finish line, everything they had amassed, and paid for with their lives, amounts to nothing at all.

Christians, on the other hand, run in a completely different direction. We are required to persevere in our race, but do we have full appreciation of, and confidence in, the prize towards which we are racing, i.e. Eternity?!!! Do we fully appreciate the fact that we are constantly struggling against the powers of Satan?!!!!

Consider Paul's first statement:

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it."

The Holy Spirit gently prompts us not to fall back in the race, whenever He perceives a relaxation in our lifestyle. We may be spending insufficient time reading the Bible, our prayers might have cooled off, our confessions, repentance and Communion less frequent. **The Christian perception of "running" is thus "expending more effort, and laboring more, in the spiritual domain."** Let us neither relax, nor loiter, along the path. Although all great saints were humans like us, they chose to exercise strict self-control, and they persevered forcefully in the race. **Preparing to meet Christ requires determination in our race.** Blessed indeed are those whose life ends amidst their peaking service, and spiritual labor.

Jeremiah tells us:

If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, In which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan? (Jeremiah 12:5)

The essence of this verse is Jeremiah's super sensitivity, coupled with the difficulty of being tasked with preaching to the Jews. God thus responded to his dejectedness by telling him: "What will you do in a horse race, if mere footmen have wearied you?" This translates to: more difficult times are ahead - and in no way should minor setbacks depress you. This is as applicable to us today as it was in Jeremiah's time.

The second part of the verse conveys a similar message: we should not be complacent and slack in our lives when peace reigns. What, then, will we do when storms rage?!!! **Let us consider all trials we encounter in our lives as promptings to stricter self-control and more determined running.** It is somewhat ironic that we all know precisely what is required of us in terms of struggle, diligence, spiritual growth, and service! God's grace is such that He planted around us many, who are seriously focused on the race, and on the precious prize awaiting them; such God-given examples leave us with no excuse whatsoever.

An analogous meaning is given in Saint Paul's epistle to the Philippians:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead [we should never focus on the past - past successes could

lead us to future slackness], **I press** [the same meaning as run] toward the goal for the prize [our prize is eternal life] **of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind** [our mature minds should tell us that, despite past success, much remains to be done, failing which, God will intervene and prompt us with this message]; **and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.** (Philippians 3:13 - 15)

In the epistle to the Colossians we read:

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak [it is incumbent on us, in our preparations to meet Christ, to seize every opportunity to evangelize, spread the word of God and bring people to Christ]. **Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time** [time is of the essence - let us not waste time that could be spent in bringing others to Christ]. **Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.**"(Colossians 4:2 - 6)

We also read,

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time [running a race implies that we are racing against time - as mentioned in Colossians, let us not waste precious time that could be spent in saving souls], **because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.** (Ephesians 5:15 - 17)

One clear message is that "running" does not refer only to fasting and prayer – it also embodies salvation of souls. Furthermore, it is foolish to race in the wrong direction, and equally foolish not to run along the spiritual path. Misguided souls tend to persist in running blindly towards perishing goals; they reject changing direction even when sensing that the finish line (end of life) is fast approaching.

Saint Paul continues saying, *"And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown."* Regrettably, we tend to relax our self-control. Strict self-control is a prerequisite for success (receiving the prize at the finish line), and a sign of readiness to meet Christ. Consequently, self-control should be exercised in our senses, speech, relationships, habits and conduct; on the other hand, failure to do so indicates absence of focus on eternity, and lack of appreciation of preparedness to meet Christ.

Shortly before his departure to Heaven, Saint Paul told Timothy:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7 & 8)

Thus, Saint Paul practiced everything that he preached. He also said:

But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.
(2 Timothy 4:5)

Strengthening our self-control is a necessary principle that should be applied in all facets of life; being permissive in some aspects is unacceptable and counter-productive. An example is "sleeping-off" our fast. The intent of fasting is to sharpen our senses and alert us to fervent prayer - hence, "sleeping - off" a fast completely defeats the purpose. Corroborating this view, Paul says to Timothy:

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine(1Timothy 4:12 & 13)

Foremost in our minds should be the conviction that **we are different from all others: we run in a completely different direction, and we do not share their worldly concerns.** We are neither preoccupied with amassing earthly treasures, nor afraid of ending our sojourn on earth. Unlike them, we race towards a heavenly prize; hence,

they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable." Saints Peter and John corroborate this: ".....sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15)

And

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

Let us therefore seize every opportunity to witness for Christ through good conduct, honesty, love, humility, purity,

service and wisdom. In behaving thus we would be satisfying Saint Paul's statement:

that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.(Titus 2:10)

Further contemplation of the concept of "imperishable crown," from the viewpoint of readiness to meet Christ, points out that **one incentive for running is our meditation on the prize awaiting us.** Hence: Do we really know what awaits us? Do we fully grasp the implications of eternal life, and experiencing everlasting joy devoid of worries, tears, trials or heartaches? Can we imagine what it is like to be surrounded by angels and saints, and to see Christ welcoming us, saying:

Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord. (Matthew 25:21)

This is the very reason why Christ exhorted us to

lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6:20)

In the Book of Psalms we read:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:2 - 5)

This means that **the hand of God is constantly protecting us from hell**. Being consistently preoccupied with our destiny, and fearful of the ominous moment of meeting Christ, is sufficient motivation for us to labor, and to run in the right direction.

His full realization of these facts led St. Paul to say:

therefore, I run thus: not with uncertainty [meaning with certainty].

Regardless of what others say or do, we must run, with the certainty, understanding and appreciation of the imperishable prize awaiting us. Following Saint Paul's example, we fight against Satan's kingdom with prayer, watchfulness, asceticism, and service.

St. Paul thus exhorted his disciple Timothy saying:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:10 - 12)

Christ promised to take care of us, so that nothing in this world merits our anxiety or emotional strain. It is infinitely wiser to devote such efforts to our spiritual growth and to the pursuit of eternal life.

"Not with uncertainty" means that **our preparedness to meet our God is carried out with clarity of vision and**

purpose, and with full knowledge that no human can ever ascertain the moment of his/her demise from this world. Furthermore, now is the time to prepare ourselves since, once the final moment has arrived, there will be no chance for turning back to effect any corrections or improvements.

Saint Paul told the Romans:

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:38 & 39)

St. Paul is saying that **all the satanic powers combined are incapable of separating him from Christ.** Saint Paul accentuates further his certainty of the imperishable prize awaiting him by saying,

I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. (2 Timothy 1:12)

In other words, he entrusted his soul into Christ's caring. By saying that he does not "beat the air," Paul is telling us that **our constant fight is against Satan and his powers:**

we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

We neither hate nor antagonize humans; **we are required to love**, but **our lasting enmity is against Satan**, and his powers of evil embodied in corruption and immorality currently being spread throughout the world.

Let us be clear: **we love all humans, but abhor, and fight against, Satan's principles and his evil powers of darkness.** There is a constant struggle between them, seekers of darkness, and us, followers of Christ, the light of the world. **It is our responsibility to be "the light of the world:"**

Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp-stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. (Matthew 5:15)

This struggle starts from within us, as soon as we seek to vanquish evil as it rears its dark head; hence hatred (darkness) wrestles against the commandments (light) - light will always emerge as the vanquisher:

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds (2Corinthians 10:4)

Finally, Saint Paul says, **"I discipline my body and bring it into subjection."** Strict self-control is reflected in disciplining and subjecting our body, following Saint Paul's example. St. Paul furthermore recognized the never-ending struggle between body and spirit saying,

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. (Galatians 5:17)

David gives the same sentiment of subjecting the body in his psalm:

Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, or go up to the comfort of my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a

*place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty
One of Jacob. (Psalm 132:3 - 5)*

The clear message is that we must give priority to seclusion with God, over our body's comfort.

A servant's service could be rejected if he/she is unprepared. Put differently, **servants are not exempt from preparedness simply because they offer a particular service.** Saint Paul warned us against such potential complacency, saying,

***Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.** (Hebrews 4:1)*

Many indeed, such as Judas, have failed. Saint Peter in his epistle also emphasizes God's impartiality - although we all call upon Him saying, **"Our Father...."** Our heavenly Father is just. Our fear of God motivates us to run in His precepts towards His reward.

To recap...

- We must be in a constant state of readiness, and we need to train ourselves to continue focusing on eternity despite any distractions.
- The Lord permits hardships for the purpose of turning us back to Him; He desires repentance and salvation for all.
- We are constantly fighting struggling against the very real Satan - not against an imaginary foe.
- All trials we encounter in our lives are promptings to stricter self-control and more determined running.

- We should never focus on the past - past successes could lead us to future slackness.
- In our preparations to meet Christ, we must seize every opportunity to evangelize, spread the word of God and bring people to Christ.
- It is foolish to race in the wrong direction, and equally foolish not to run along the spiritual path.
- Strict self-control should be exercised in our senses, speech, relationships, habits and conduct.
- We are different from all others: we run in a completely different direction, and we do not share their worldly concerns - we race towards the imperishable crown.
- The hand of God is constantly shielding us from hell.
- Christ promised to take care of us, so that nothing in this world merits our anxiety or emotional strain.
- We neither hate nor antagonize humans; we are required to love, but our lasting enmity is against Satan, and his powers of evil embodied in corruption and immorality currently being spread throughout the world.
- It is our responsibility to be the light of the world.
- We love all humans, but abhor, and fight against, Satan's principles and his evil powers of darkness. This struggle starts from within us, as soon as we seek to vanquish evil as it rears its dark head; light will always emerge as the vanquisher: ***"...For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds,..."***

- We must give priority to seclusion with God, over our body's comfort.
- Servants are not exempt from preparedness simply because they offer a particular service. God is impartial when rendering justice.

"I discipline my body and bring it into subjection."

"GOD THE CHASTISER"



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is imperative to note, and understand, that **God's loving chastisement is inevitable for His children**, whom He prepares for heaven. The degree or severity of the chastisement varies from one person to another.

In the Book of Psalms we read:

The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death. (Psalm 118:18)

By **"death"** the psalmist is referring to "eternal death". God will not leave us to perish, unless we persist down the path to perdition. Thus, **God will chastise us, maybe severely at times, but He will not deliver us unto eternal death.** Chastisement, therefore, closes hell's doors for us.

Jeremiah says:

I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself: "You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained bull; restore me, and I will return, for You are the Lord my God. (Jeremiah 31:18)

Ephraim, the most obstinate of Israel's tribes, writhes under the Lord's chastisement, which leads to repentance. Therefore, despite the severity of God's disciplinary measures, **His goal when chastising us, is to steer us away from perdition and to lead us to repentance.** Hence, we pray daily in Matins: ***"O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure."***(Psalm 6:1) The Psalmist implores God to refrain from being displeased with us - in other words, **we submit to God's chastisement, but shudder at His anger or displeasure.**

The Bible furthermore tells us:

For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? (Hebrews 12:6 & 7)

A father disciplines his son out of love; although it might be painful for the father to administer punishment; he knows that he is driven by love, and he knows that, in the long run, it is for the son's own good.

Levels of God's Chastisement

- **First: Abandonment**

There are different degrees of chastisement. The first is abandonment. At times, God might abandon us briefly, hence,

For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54:7 & 8)

An example of feeling abandoned is when we pray and feel that we are talking to ourselves, and that God does not seem to be listening. This, sometimes, is God's way of expressing displeasure, and His way of prompting us to examine our actions, identify our sin, and take corrective actions. God's infinite compassion, nevertheless, is such that **He will not leave us for long. We must be sensitized to God's actions towards us.**

In the third canonical hour we pray:

Lord, by Your favor You have made my mountain stand strong; You hid Your face, and I was troubled. I cried out to You, O Lord; and to the Lord I made supplication: "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your truth? Hear, O Lord, and have mercy on me; Lord, be my helper!" (Psalm 30:7 - 10)

Hence, the Psalmist was first troubled when God hid His face, then **he cried desperately at the Lord's abandonment.**

We should be careful to note that, in the absence of one's sensitization to God's abandonment, one risks straying for a long period which, in turn, leads to complacency and luke-warmness towards God. Our plight is thus compounded by failing to recognize that we are on the wrong path, by increasing indulgence in sin and, consequently, by falling easy prey to Satan.

- **Second: The Rod**

We now move up on the severity scale of chastisement. The next step, if abandonment does not work, is the use of the disciplining "rod." The Biblical analogy here is the case of Jonah's whale. Prior to the whale, there was abandonment, because when God commanded Jonah saying, *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it;...."* Jonah ignored the voice of God and decided, instead, to disobey Him:

Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.(Jonah 1 - 3)

Jonah furthermore declined the seamen's request to pray. He insisted on continuing to sleep, despite the raging storm and

God's obvious displeasure. The "rod" was thus necessary; hence, being swallowed by the whale.

God's children should expect the second step of chastisement, if they fail to heed the first step, fail to cry for mercy, and fail to rush to repentance. Had God, in His infinite mercy, not clobbered Jonah with the whale, Jonah would have most certainly perished.

Similarly to the case of Jonah, we find that God also chastised David on several occasions, to correct his many faults. One example is that at a moment of luke-warmness towards God, close to the end of his life, David desired to boast of his people, and initiated a census. Having been lax in his relationship with God, David overruled his general's advice to refrain from counting the people – since God had not commanded it:

And Joab answered, "May the Lord make His people a hundred times more than they are. But, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why then does my lord require this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt in Israel?"

Coincidentally, God saw that His people, the children of Israel, had started deviating from His worship, allowing idolatry to creep into their midst, under the watchful eye of David. This situation was preceded by a period of abandonment: lack of prayer, and distance from God. God therefore presented David with a choice among three options for punishment:

So Gad came to David and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: "Choose for yourself, either three years of famine, or three months to be defeated by your foes with the sword of your enemies overtaking you, or else for three days the sword of the Lord--the plague in the

land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.

David chose the plague saying:

Please let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are very great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man. (1 Chronicles 21:3, 11, 12 & 13)

David's rationale was that it was better to cry out to God, even belatedly, and beg for His infinite mercy, rather than fall into the hands of men.

From that day onwards, David's prayer was unceasing, and God mercifully ended the plague after a few days. Solomon's temple was built on the spot where the plague ended, as David charged Solomon, since he felt unworthy to undertake that task himself.

King Nebuchadnezzar is another biblical personality whom God clobbered with His rod. In Daniel's second chapter we read that Nebuchadnezzar had confessed that the Lord is God:

The king answered Daniel, and said, "Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets (Daniel 2:47)

In the third chapter, however, his pride got the better of him. He declared himself god, and demanded that everyone bow down before his image. He thus abandoned the God Whom he had previously acknowledged and worshipped. He had a dream:

I was looking, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth ... The tree grew and became strong; its height reached to the heavens ... and in it was food for all. ... and there was a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He cried aloud ... "Chop down the tree

and cut off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. ... Nevertheless leave the stump and roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field. ... Let his heart be ... the heart of a beast, and let seven times pass over him. This decision is ... the word of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men

Daniel interpreted the dream saying that God's chastising rod would descend severely on the king giving him a punishment that would last for seven years. Daniel's interpretation was realized. At the end of God's appointed punishment, the king returned to his senses, repented, and praised the Lord; his kingdom and honor were restored:

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever:...My counselors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven (Daniel 4:10 - 18 and 34 - 37)

Another example of God's chastising rod is given in Numbers 12 when,

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married

They also claimed a status equal to that of Moses, saying:

Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it ... So the anger of the Lord was aroused against them

*... suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow
... So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "Please heal
her, O God, I pray!" (Numbers 12:1, 2, 9, 10 & 13)*

We thus see that, **if necessary, God will punish severely, even the upright saints.** Despite Moses' pleadings, God chose that Miriam remain a leper for seven days. Murmuring against Moses constituted being distant from God - hence, abandonment.

Even Abraham, God's friend, was punished because he did something which displeased the Lord. As always, the punishing rod of God descends after a period of luke-warmness and abandonment – which was the case in this circumstance with Abraham. When Abraham heard of a famine in the land, he decided to travel to Egypt **instead of praying and seeking God's guidance. He distanced himself even further from God by asking Sarah to lie** and say she was his sister, because he feared for his life, if the Egyptians found out she was his wife:

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there,....And....he said to Sarai his wife, "Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance.....say you are my sister,.....that I may live because of you." So.....the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful.....And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house.... But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plaguesAnd Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?.....and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had. (Genesis 12:10 - 20)

Abraham learned his lesson: **distancing himself from God almost cost him his beloved wife, Sarah.**

• **Third: Punishment**

Moving up on the chastisement scale we come to God's third level of severity, to which we would be subjected upon our failure to respond either to God's abandonment or to His rod. One Biblical example is that of David when he committed his grave sin, namely, he ...

".....despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight.....killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword.....taken his wifeand.....killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon."

God therefore sent him Nathan the prophet who pronounced David's ominous punishment, which would affect his entire household:

Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor ... For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.

David confessed, and the Lord put away his sin:

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die

Nevertheless this sin was too grave, and Nathan told him,

because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die.

David understood perfectly God's ways and God's punishment, and he passed his remaining years in misery without

grumbling, since **he knew that chastisement was his ticket to Eternity.**(2 Samuel 12:9- 14)

Moses is another example of sustained punishment. Moses committed many errors. Prior to his calling, he killed an Egyptian; this earned him a punishment of forty years' wandering in the desert of Midian, followed by his demotion to shepherd, from being a prince of Egypt. On the other hand, he was not punished when he smashed the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, because his anger on that instance was well-intended, righteous, anger, against evil. God replaced the tablets.

On another occasion though, the Israelites tested Moses' patience as they clamored for water in the wilderness, and they rebelled against him and Aaron. Moses lost his temper and disobeyed God by smiting the rock twice instead of speaking to it as he was commanded:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water ... and give drink to the congregation ..." So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock;.... Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly ... Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." (Numbers 20:7 - 12)

God thus punished Moses by not permitting him to enter the Promised Land.

The discussion of God's punishments at the third level of severity brings us to the case of Samson. God's chastising rod descended on him when the Philistine woman that he had intended to marry was given instead to his companion, who was a Philistine. Samson, thinking that as a man of God he was punishment, did not learn his lesson, and persisted in his inappropriate relationships with the Philistines. His blind persistence led him to the third level of God's punishment, at the hands of Delilah. After she had cut his hair, he still believed that his strength was intact, and that the Lord was with him. He was sadly mistaken, though, for God had left him:

..... "I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!" But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.

God's punishment was indeed severe:

Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters, and he became a grinder in the prison.

One day when the Philistines were celebrating in the temple of their god Dagon, they brought Samson to entertain them. Samson, having finally understood God's chastisement, cried unto the Lord:

Then Samson called to the Lord, saying, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!" ...Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he pushed with all his might, and the temple fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had

killed in his life ... He had judged Israel twenty years.
(Judges 16:20 - 31)

He had acknowledged his punishment, and died with his enemies – but God's chastisement was severe.

Jacob is yet another example. Initially, Jacob was a selfish, devious, liar, who tricked his brother out of his birthright, and tricked his father into blessing him instead of Esau. He had distanced himself from God (through lack of prayer) and God had started using the disciplinary rod. The first was Jacob's having to leave his father's abode. The second "rod" was Laban's forcing him to marry Leah instead of Rachael, for whom he had to labor for a second seven-year period. Despite this chastisement, he neither repented nor prayed. Yet God did not desire his perdition. He finally woke up and cried unto the Lord, when he saw Christ face-to-face:

I will not let You go unless You bless me!" (Genesis 32:26)

So **despite Jacob's repentance, he was chastised**, for what he had done in the past, and for dishonoring the seed of Abraham. Hence, Rachael and Joseph died (Joseph was alive but Jacob thought, for twenty years, that he had died), and he spent the rest of his life weeping; he thus told Pharaoh:

few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.
(Genesis 47:9)

The lesson learnt is that **sin should never be taken lightly.**

We find another example in Gehazi, Elisha's servant. He witnessed a life of holiness in his master, the great prophet Elisha. Nevertheless, Gehazi was focused on money. After Elisha had cured Naaman the Syrian, and declined all the gifts that Naaman had offered, Gehazi ran after Naaman and falsely stated that his master Elisha had suddenly found himself in need of some money and clothing. The Bible tells us:

So Gehazi pursued Naaman ... and said "My master has sent me, saying, "...two young men of the sons of the prophets have come to me ... Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of garments."..." Naaman ... urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments ... and [Gehazi] stored them away in the house ... Now he went in and stood before his master. Elisha said to him, "Where did you go, Gehazi?" And he said, "Your servant did not go anywhere." Then he said to him, "Did not my heart go with you when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is it time to receive money and to receive clothing ... Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever." And he went out from his presence leprous, as white as snow. (2 Kings 5:21 - 27)

We do not know whether Gehazi repented or not, but we do know that the punishment was severe, and that some forms of chastisement are far more severe than the "rod."

The New Testament gives us the example of the lame man at the pool of Bethsaida. He had led a sinful life and, as a result of God's chastisement, he had contracted a disease that left him paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Christ desired to end the punishment and, at the man's request to be made whole, Christ

healed him and told him to carry his bed and walk. Nevertheless, Christ cautioned him:

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." (John 5:14)

By "**worse thing**" Christ meant eternal perdition, since the man had already been subjected to the highest level of chastisement. Failure to lead an upright life subsequently, signals his insistence on the path to perdition.

Given that we have briefly addressed three progressive forms of chastisement, we should note that, **prior to being chastised, we would usually be warned.** This means that we would be alerted by fellow humans - although we often pay no attention. This was the case with Jonah: despite the raging sea, the blowing wind, and the seamen's' pleas, he persisted in his sleep and refusal to pray. Had he responded, repented, and begged for God's forgiveness, the whale's chastisement would have been avoided.

Conversely, we read in 1 Samuel 25 an example of a **warning that was heeded.** Namely, David heeded Abigail's warning, as he was on the way to destroy Nabal (a rich man) and his men, because Nabal had dared to refuse David's request, thus insulting his pride:

David sent ten young men ... to Nabal, [They asked him] "Please give whatever comes to your hand to your servants and to your son David." [But Nabal refused David's request] So David's young men ... went back.....and told him [David] all these words. Then David said to his men, "Every man gird on his sword."... And about four hundred men went with

David,.....Then Abigail [Nabal's wife].....took two hundred loaves of bread [and many other gifts] ...when Abigail saw David, she ... fell on her face before David ... and said: "On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be! ... Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal ... And now this present ... let it be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant. For the Lord will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, ...Then David said to Abigail: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! And blessed is your advice and blessed are you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed ... See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person. (1 Samuel 25:5 - 35)

Thus, David heeded the warning and averted a potential disaster that would have been followed by chastisement.

Therefore, let us always be alert to warnings: Do we pray regularly? Do we read the Bible frequently? Is there any sin entrenched in our hearts?

A warning could come directly from God, hence, Cain's case. Cain's falling started by his hating Abel, and carrying a grudge against God. He was, nevertheless, warned prior to the chastising rod:

So the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it. (Genesis 4:6 & 7)

Unfortunately, Cain ignored God's warning; as a result, his punishment was eternal.

Eli the priest is another example of someone who failed to heed God's warnings concerning his sons' transgressions and incurred, as a result, God's chastisement:

Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the Lord.....the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men abhorred the offering of the Lord.....and he [Eli] heard everything his sons did to all Israel ... So he said to them, "...I hear of your evil dealings from all the people ... You make the Lord's people transgress ... " Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father ... " (1 Samuel 2:12 - 25)

Consequently, because Eli honored his sons more than God, God sent him the following message via young Samuel:

In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, ... because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them. And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever. (1 Samuel 3:12 - 14)

God also warned Judas - Christ told His disciples:

Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me. (John 13:21)

Christ also warned His disciples that they would all stumble that night:

Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night (Matthew 26:31)

Indeed they all stumbled that night, and one of them even denied Christ.

Ignoring warnings results in committing significant transgression that may result in bringing upon oneself God's chastising rod.

Amos 4 demonstrates the progression of God's warnings, followed by His abandonment and chastising rod:

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord [warnings]. "I also withheld rain from you ...yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I blasted you with blight and mildew ...yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; [abandonment] your young men I killed with a sword ... yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord. "I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah ...yet you have not returned to Me," says the Lord [severe chastisement] "Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel ... prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:6 - 12)

Here, again, we see that God, in His infinite compassion, tries to steer us towards Eternity by giving us warnings, then chastisements increasing in severity. Consciously choosing to ignore his warnings and loving chastisement leads to perdition at the final meeting where there is no turning back. God will not force us along any path. He simply points out the way for us, telling us that **a life of repentance and purity is the necessary prerequisite for Eternity.**

It should be noted that **God's chastisement is always out of necessity, and always calm and loving** – quite unlike humans when rage gets the better of them. This is an aspect that parents and educators should imitate: disciplining a child must never be

accompanied by resentment, uncontrolled anger, regrettable behavior, or verbal abuse. The underlying sentiment must always be love – the door to dialogue, remorse and redemption must be open at all times.

Job's case constitutes an example of God's compassion, loving kindness, long-suffering and philanthropy. When Job grumbled against his plight, God calmly answered him:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: "Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:7 & 8)

The Bible tells us that David's sin displeased the Lord:

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.(2 Samuel 11:27)

Yet God's calmness in approaching and correcting our wrongdoings is demonstrated when Nathan confronted David with his sin, by telling him a story and asking him to be the judge! Let us therefore ensure that, **chastising our children whenever necessary, we should remain calm and in full control of our reactions and language.**

An important conclusion is that when our Lord dialogues with us, His chastisement could be severe; but the dialogue remains calm. **Our God is the King of peace, and we derive our peace from Him.** We conclude with some challenging questions:

- Is there punishment associated with each and every sin?

Answer: "I do not think so."

- Would repentance obviate chastisement unequivocally?

Answer: "Not necessarily."

- Would chastisement be proportional to the level and stature of the transgressor?

Answer: "Usually."

- Would the innocent be influenced by chastisement?

Answer: "Sometimes."

The ultimate message is therefore:

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"

(Romans 11:33)

20

"FEARING GOD"



The important issue related to "the fear of God" is neither sufficiently addressed nor understood or appreciated. Is our conviction that God is loving and compassionate leading us to be complacent and too relaxed in our spiritual life?!!

The fear of God is sometimes the strongest incentive for changing the course of lives. Many of us harbor the wrong belief that fear has no place in Christianity, since "*God is love.*" The verses given below, among many others, not only correct this misconception, but also demonstrate that **the notion of "fearing God" is, indeed, at once necessary and holy.**

Love neither negates nor eliminates fear. Love for our parents leads us to fear hurting them, and to fear endangering our relationship with them. Furthermore, fear and respect do not impede, in any way, a spousal loving relationship.

The clearest verse stressing the importance of fearing God is given in Proverbs (and elsewhere in the Bible):

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.(Proverbs 9:10)

This means that no one can claim any degree of wisdom if, primarily, they do not fear God.

Fearing God will not ruin our relationship with Him. Saint Paul himself, who expounded on love, the Cross, and having close relationships with God, said: "*.....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;*..."(Philippians 2:12) In the Divine Liturgy, the deacon therefore calls: "**Worship God with fear and trembling.**"

When Saint Paul saw many Christians reverting back to Judaism, to escape persecution, he told the Hebrews:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. (Hebrews 4:1)

Despite God's promises to His children, **some of us fail to live up to His expectations.** Examples are the prodigal son and his elder brother: one left home despite a promise for inheritance, and the other left home out of spite and envy. **May we never leave home.**

Fearing God leads one to doing everything one can to obey His commandments. Any complacency or relaxation in our lives is a direct indication of lack of fear of God. Interspersing our lifestyle with the landmines of pride, enmity, judging, lying, dishonesty, adultery, un-forgiveness, immorality, or the like, is a certain way to getting lost, since these all emanate from Satan's camp, and they all imply:

***There is no fear of God before their eyes.** (Romans 3:18)*

The absence of the fear of God from our lives portrays sin as an easy and acceptable way of life - in other words, we would simply "go with the flow" like everybody else. Such a belief is dangerous and misleading since Christ's statements are very clear: those who disobey Him will perish. God desires that all be saved - but the wages of sin is death. Saint Peter said:

***And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear** (1 Peter 1:17)*

Saint Peter means that, although we call upon God as "*Our Father Who art in heaven....*," His nature is such that He is just, shows no partiality, and does not "accommodate" any

irregularities, or deviations from the truth. Hence, we must regard Him in fear and awe. The message is thus, while we are greatly encouraged by our heavenly Father's love **we must, at the same time, follow His commandments meticulously, while continually meditating on them.**

It should be noted that Psalm 119, the longest psalm, revolves around God's commandments and precepts, and their importance in preparing ourselves to meet the Groom: ***"I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad....."*** (Psalm 119:96) By incorporating this psalm in the canonical hours, the Church is telling us that **eternal life is only through God's commandments.** Quite regrettably, we may scrupulously observe people's wishes, and follow their directions or instructions - yet God's commandments do not seem to matter much!

Consider what the Bible says about Noah:

By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household" (Hebrews 11:7)

Consequently, Noah's fear of God, and trust in His words, motivated him to spend one hundred years building the ark, as God had instructed, despite human criticism. Doubting the word of God is a problem we often face in this respect: hence we may doubt that hell exists, that Christ will separate the good from the evil on judgment day, that any sin leads to perdition applying human reasoning leads us to doubt the words of Christ. We conclude that fear is directly linked to commandments – fearing God emphasizes the importance of obeying each and every commandment.

Christ said:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca! [any verbal abuse]' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21 & 22)

Christ was most certainly not exaggerating when He said those awe-inspiring words. Unfortunately we do not quite appreciate the seriousness of these commandments - hence our fear of God is far below the required level. Of course, the door of repentance remains open: **true repentance means changing direction, not simply lip-service, reverting to old habits means that no repentance has taken place.....**

Let us therefore be strict with our tongues and actions, and flee sin. **A God-fearing person will flee sin.** In His sermon on the mount – the constitution of Christian living - Christ started with the reassuring and encouraging beatitudes. Nevertheless, He continued with some terrifying statements:

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. (Matthew 5:29 & 30)

Our loving God tells us the truth "as it is" - no sugar-coating! He loves His children and, at the same time, warns quite clearly that sin - disobeying His commandments - leads to hell. The implication here is that we must, decisively and uncompromisingly, remove from our field of vision any offensive scenes, we must similarly sever any relationships that risk drawing us into sin. **The clear message is that we must eradicate the root cause of anything that leads, potentially, to hell.**

On the other hand, those who consider hell to be a far-fetched idea do not find committing sin a matter of particular concern. They feel they can stumble and rise endlessly, since the door of forgiveness is always open. Of course, such an attitude gives a false sense of security; since in the context of being prepared to meet Christ, **nobody knows when the door of forgiveness will close.**

We also read:

Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire [This includes all evildoers who had no time to repent](Matthew 13:40 - 42).

Furthermore, Saint Paul says:

The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly (Romans 13:12 & 13)

Rejecting fake righteousness represents another manifestation of the holy fear of God; in other words, **feigning righteousness is abhorrent to a God-fearing person.** In this regard, Christ said:

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

In other words, fasting and prayer are worthless if the aim is to induce others to praise us for doing so.

Christ also said:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness! (Matthew 7:21 - 23)

In other words, on the Day of the Lord, many who had assumed they were among the elect, on the right path, will discover that they had been misled, and that Christ grouped them with those **who practice lawlessness.** This demonstrates the dangers of "outward righteousness" while evil remains rooted in the heart.

Christ said: **"Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things?..."** (Matthew 12:34) A Christ-like person will not boast of his/her service; rather, remaining inconspicuous, while being honest with ourselves and serving with a sincere heart, will earn us eternity. We should also avert leading double lives: preaching certain principles, and behaving in a certain way, inside

the church, while conducting ourselves in a completely different manner outside.

Fearing God means fleeing comfort and honor – both of which are much sought-after. Comfort and honor are cause for concern for a God-fearing person; simply, because Christ said,

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate [comfort] and broad is the way [honour] that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it [many will perish]. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13 & 14)

The importance of fleeing comfort and honor is also reflected in Christ's saying:

And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:24)

Hence, although nothing is impossible with God, those who have been granted all the luxuries of life must be extra careful. We can never be too conscientious in thanksgiving, in giving, in repentance..... because ***narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life.*** This is Christ's assertion - it merits every consideration, and it drove many to abandon this world and embrace monasticism.

We should also note: ***"So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."***(Matthew 20:16) This is indeed cause for concern for servants, both clergy and laity: we could very well be laboring under the impression that we are among the "first" but discover that, alas, we committed a grave miscalculation which cost us our eternity.....

Fearing humans, regardless of their worldly standing, will fade in the background for those who enjoy the virtues of believing in, and practicing, the holy fear of God. The corollary of this approach is that **once we have assigned the highest priority to the fear of God in our lives, accommodating people's views will immediately become a secondary consideration** – as indeed it should. A perfect example is given in the Old Testament: **Ahab**, the king of Israel, was consistently terrified when confronted with Elijah, a penniless, homeless prophet – but standing before, and serving, the Most High.

Christ said:

It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house [Christ] Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household [Christians]! Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known [all lies will be exposed]. "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:25 - 28)

Hence, hell incorporates both souls and bodies. The clear commandment is thus "fear God in Whose hands rests the fate of all humans."

Zealousness constitutes another feature of the fear of God. A lifestyle embodying holy zeal is characterized by faithful adherence to Christ's commandments, fervent prayer, continual repentance, and being ever watchful. In this respect Christ said:

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force [*zeal drives us to cease every opportunity at perfecting our spiritual lives and getting closer to God*].
(Matthew 11:12)

Another warning and reproachful statement by Christ is:

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:41 & 42)

Those statements put us to shame: we believed, and heeded Jonah who emerged from the whale's belly, and declared his sinfulness – yet we disregard Christ, Who rose from the dead, and proclaimed He is the Son of God! Furthermore, the Ninevites, young and old, abstained from food and drink for forty days in sackcloth while we, on the other hand, devise ways for rendering the Great Lent as imperceptible as possible!

Fearing God will lead us to fear Satan's wiles. Fearing God means fearing separation from Him, and fearing ensnarement by Satan - many indeed have fallen prey to Satan's tricks. We note that, despite Christ's warning, Simon fell:

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren. (Luke 22:31 & 32)

The reason for Peter's fall was his having lost the holy fear of God, boasting his own courage.

Christ also said:

Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!(*Matthew 18:7*)

This emphasizes further the extreme importance and urgency of separating ourselves from any actual or potential source of offences.

Finally, we must avoid fruitlessness which is an indication of a weakening fear of God. Christ's warning against fruitlessness is clear:

And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. (*Matthew 21:19*)

Let us bear in mind what Christ said:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.(*John 15:1 & 2*)

This means that we must be increasingly fruitful in love, joy, peace, longsuffering, faith, chastity, salvation of souls. On the other hand, the absence of any of these qualifies us for perdition. Leaves on a tree are beautiful – but of no practical use; likewise, simply having the appearance of virtues does not qualify us for Eternity; that is why Christ said:

You will know them by their fruits.(*Matthew 7:16*)

To recap...

- With the grace of God, let us persevere in the fear of God. Such fear will induce us to be strict with ourselves.
- Many of our residual faults, and many of our impediments to our spiritual growth can be traced back to our indecisiveness with respect to fearing God.
- Appreciating the reality of hell and perdition will propel us back into the God-fearing path.
- Fearing God means painstakingly obeying His commandments.
- Those who do not fear God and disobey His commandments will perish.
- A God-fearing person will flee sin, seek the narrow gate, and shun comfort and honour.
- Let us decisively separate ourselves from any path potentially leading to God's disobedience.
- Let us focus on increasing our fruitfulness in love, joy, peace, longsuffering, faith, chastity, and salvation of souls.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

21

**"RECEIVING THE
INCARNATE
KLAHK'S SUNDAYS'
PSALMS"**



Receiving the Incarnate Christ is quite relevant to receiving Christ at His second coming and, hence, is relevant to our preparedness for meeting Him. The psalms read during the Kiahk Sundays guide us progressively through the stages leading up to Christ's birth.

In the vespers' psalm of **Kiahk's first Sunday**, we entreat the Lord to **remember us**,

Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation. Give heed to the voice of my cry, My King and my God, for to You I will pray. (Psalm 5:1 & 2)

The matins' psalm builds on this prayer to say that the Lord looked down from heaven and heeded the groans of those crying out to Him,

For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven the Lord viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death, to declare the name of the Lord in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem (Psalm 102:19 - 21)

This reflects the incarnation's philosophy: **Christ's advent was in response to humanity's suffering and groaning under Satan's yoke of sin.** This is analogous to God's response to the Israelites' suffering during their years of bondage in Egypt:

the Lord said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people....and have heard their cry....for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:7 & 8)

Thus, the Lord saw His people's oppression, heard their cry, and came down to save them. The psalmist, furthermore, confirms this:

For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now I will arise," says the Lord; "I will set him in the safety for which he yearns. (Psalm 12:5)

Thus, for deliverance from suffering, we must cry out to the Lord through sincere, fervent, heartfelt prayers.

Continuing with Kiahk's first Sunday's psalms, we read during the liturgy:

You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favor her, yes, the set time, has come.....For the Lord shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory. (Psalm 102:13 & 16)

The Church now takes us closer to the momentous event, when Christ walks on earth in the flesh. The prophecy "***He shall appear in His glory***" is echoed in John's gospel:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The phrase "***the time to favor her***" is fully consistent with the fact that the name "John," Christ's forerunner, means "***the grace or favor of God.***"

In the vespers' psalm of **Kiahk's Second Sunday** we entreat the Lord,

Bow down Your heavens, O Lord, and come down; touch the mountains, and they shall smoke ... Stretch out Your hand from above; rescue me and deliver me. (Psalm 144:5 - 7)

Christ's incarnation is the only credible interpretation of this verse - otherwise, how can the Lord "***come down***" without incarnation? Bowing down the heavens refers to the Holy Virgin,

who was the ladder Christ used to come down (this is analogous to Jacob's ladder of the Old Testament).

The heavens were indeed "bowed down" at Christ's incarnation, since heaven and earth joined in celebrating that great event, hence,

there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"
(Luke 2:13& 14)

The phrase "*touch the mountains, and they shall smoke*" reflects God's glory and might - the mountains smoke at His touch. This was also manifested in the Old Testament when Moses and the Israelites came to meet the Lord at the foot of the mountain:

Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. (Exodus 19:18)

The Psalmist also said (in the second Sunday's vespers): "*Stretch out Your hand from above; rescue me and deliver me.*" The Church's forefathers have interpreted "the hand of God" or "the right hand of God" to mean the Incarnate Christ; this is the saving hand of God through the Cross.

The "*finger of God*" also refers to Christ, since Christ told the Jews:

But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Luke 11:20)

In another psalm we read:

He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing, like showers that water the earth. In His days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace, until the moon is no more. (Psalm 72:6 & 7)

The Church's forefathers have drawn a parallel between the rain watering the grass, and the Holy Virgin's womb being refreshed by Christ's incarnation within her (while the rest of the world remained dry awaiting Him). Upon Christ's birth, the world was refreshed by His presence - hence, the blessings of His incarnation.

Christ's incarnation may be expressed in terms of several actions or expressions: hence, God was incarnate, God came down, God shone, God walked amongst us, God appeared, God was born and, **God entered** (this is particularly important, and it means "**God was present prior to His birth, and entered our world**").

This latter expression was further accentuated by Saint Paul in his epistle to the Hebrews: "***But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him."***"(Hebrews 1:6) The "Firstborn" means Christ the Word of God.

The psalmist's prophecy "***In His days the righteous shall flourish, and abundance of peace,***" refers to Christ's presence on earth, since He said "***I am the way, the truth, and the life.***"(John 14:6) It also refers to the King of peace - Who is Christ.

The angel's annunciation to Saint Mary occurred on Kiahk's second Sunday; the following liturgy psalm, addressed to Saint Mary and referring to the incarnation is thus befitting:

Listen, O daughter [Saint Mary], consider and incline your ear; forget your own people [all of humanity] also, and your father's house; so the King [Christ] will greatly desire your [Saint Mary the queen] beauty; because He is your Lord, worship Him. (Psalm 45:10 & 11)

During the **Kiahk's Third Sunday** we read:

For the Lord has chosen Zion [Zion refers to Saint Mary]; He has desired it for His dwelling place [meaning that she was chosen as the dwelling place for Divinity, and she was chosen to give birth to Christ]: ".....here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread [this refers to humanity's satiation, through the body and blood of Christ, after His birth, crucifixion, and resurrection]. (Psalm 132:13 - 15)

We must remember that **without Christ's incarnation, we would have no communion. The mystery of the Eucharist is the extension of the mystery of incarnation.**

In another psalm we read:

Show us Your mercy, Lord, and grant us Your salvation. I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace to His people [hence, "on earth peace"] and to His saints (Psalm 85:7 & 8)

Here, again, salvation cannot be realized without incarnation: "He came and saved us." Isaiah furthermore said:

Unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)

It is thus essential to note that **peace reigned on earth through Christ's advent - that was the first blessing which incarnation brought into the world.** This is also echoed in the Divine Liturgy according to Saint Basil; in the "Prayer of Reconciliation" the celebrant says: *"You have filled the earth with heavenly peace...."*

In the third Sunday's liturgy's psalm we read:

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. (Psalm 85:10 & 11)

Without Christ's incarnation it would have been impossible to say: *"Truth shall spring out of the earth,"* since Christ said *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* (John 14:6). We thus see the light of truth shining on earth - we have no need to raise our eyes to heaven to see it.

Some Church's forefathers have interpreted *"Mercy and truth have met together"* thus: as though our Lord was torn between His infinite love for humanity (created in His image), versus the penalty of death which humanity brought on itself through sin. Therefore, God's mercy is such that He does not desire perdition for humanity; on the other hand, humanity deserved perdition, according to God's truth.

Therefore, **God reconciled His mercy with His truth by coming in Person (incarnation) and offering Himself as an atoning sacrifice on the Cross.** Christ was incarnate to acquire a nature susceptible to death, thus enabling Him to pay our sin debt in full, by shedding His precious blood. In this way, both mercy and truth were fully satisfied, through Christ's birth, then death on the Cross. We witnessed Christ's mercy through His

incarnation for the purpose of saving us; and we also witnessed God's righteousness on the Cross, since there was no way for humanity to avoid perdition except through Christ's sacrificial death. God's justice is such that the wages of sin is death, hence:

***And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ".....of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.* (Genesis 2:16 & 17)**

Saint Paul tells us that "the first man Adam" has now been replaced by "the last Adam:"

And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.....The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. (1Corinthians 15:45 - 47)

Thus, the first Adam and all his seed were sentenced to death. The second (last) Adam acquired all humanity's nature in His body, and offered Himself to die, instead of us. Divine Justice was therefore served, motivated by Divine mercy.

On **Kiahk's Last Sunday** psalms, we read the definitive message:

Behold "This one was born there. And of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her." (Psalm 87:4 & 5)

Saint Mary (Zion) is thus saying that the Man (Child) to Whom I gave birth has created me. This is analogous in its incomprehensible theological depth to what John the Baptist said:

This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me [in the human sense - Christ was born six months after John the Baptist] is preferred before me, for He was before me [in the Divine sense - our Lord Christ was, is and will be forever - He was begotten of the Father before all ages].'" (John 1:15)

The last Sunday's matins psalm says:

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and all its fullness; let the field be joyful, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the woods [reference to the saints] will rejoice before the Lord. For He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth. (Psalm 96:11 - 13)

Christ judgment is along two stages: He bore the first one Himself on the Cross - there He carried all sins, over all ages:

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The second stage is when Christ comes to judge those who rejected the benefits of the first stage. Thus, if we fail to believe and submit to Christ's atoning death for our sins, we will be held accountable for them on the Last Day. The first judgment which Christ bore on our behalf is reflected in several readings on Good Friday.

One very important point to note is "***For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth.***" "Christ came and saved us" is a central concept in the Orthodox Faith. This is reflected clearly in Isaiah's prophecy:

O Zion, you who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain ... lift up your voice with strength ...

say to the cities of Judah, "Behold, the Lord God shall come" (Isaiah 40:9 & 10)

Zechariah also echoes the same message:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9)

During the last Sunday's liturgy we read:

You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth [He Who was unseen is now seen and He Who was intangible has now been touched]! Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, [this is the region of Galilee where Christ lived]....come and save us! Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved! (Psalm 80:1 - 3)

Furthermore, in the Paramon's vespers we have:

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty [because He was sinless, unlike humanity that was disfigured by sin], God will shine forth. Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent.....and to him who orders his conduct [meaning his way] aright I will show the salvation of God. (Psalm 50:2, 3 & 23)

This is perfectly consistent with Christ's saying,

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)

It should also be noted that, prior to Christ's incarnation, even the heavenly orders could not see God in the splendor of His glory. **They, along with humanity, were able to see Him ONLY after His incarnation;** Saint Paul expounded thus:

to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10)

The matins' psalm tells us:

*In Judah **God is known**; His name is great in Israel. In Salem also is His tabernacle, and His dwelling place in Zion. (Psalm 76:1 & 2)*

Hence, our Lord's Incarnation allowed us to see and touch the Incarnate God - which was impossible previously. Hence,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life. (1 John 1:1)

This is the beauty of Incarnation: God appeared in the flesh.

In another psalm we read:

The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! Your people shall be volunteers In the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, You have the dew of Your youth. (Psalm 110:2 & 3)

The sentiment of this psalm is also given in Isaiah's prophecy:

For unto us [humanity - hence, He is the "Son of Man"] a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government [the Cross] will be upon His shoulder (Isaiah 9:6)

Hence, **Christ purchased humanity, acquiring it unto Himself, with His precious blood on the Cross.** The phrase

"from the womb of the morning" means *"begotten of the Father before all ages."* Therefore, Christ, our God, was born before all ages. **"The womb"** implies that there is a second birth.

It is worth noting that the Maggi, who had no knowledge of Old Testament prophecies, **knew that a great King was born to rule over the entire universe**, and journeyed from afar to see and worship Him. Hence, those pagan kings, knew that ***"the government will be upon His shoulder...."***

It should be understood that **Christ's birth on earth pertains solely to His humanity.** His Divinity existed before all ages:

begotten of the Father before all ages, light of light, true God of true God.....who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man.

Hence, Christ, as a human, was born at a certain time, and walked among us in the flesh in certain places; as God, Christ was, is, and will be, at all times and in all places.

Finally, from the readings preceding the Nativity Feast we have this amazing psalm:

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him. (Psalm 72:10 & 11)

Hence, several hundred years before Christ's birth, it was prophesied that (pagan) kings would come from the ends of the earth to offer Him gifts!

It is also worth noting that the Biblical passage read during the morning of the Feast's eve (not during the Feast's eve) is that from Luke's gospel about the shepherds. During the Feast's eve we read the passage pertaining to the Maggi. The reason is that the shepherds saw Christ in the manger, and failed to appreciate the significance of that event, and that the Child they beheld was the King of kings. On the other hand, the Maggi had a deeper knowledge of the event, and had travelled a very long distance to see and to worship the King of kings. In other words, **the Church celebrates, with the shepherds, Christ's birth as a human; and the Church celebrates, with the Maggi, Christ's advent as God among us.** Hence, the Maggi accentuated the fact that He Who was born was not simply a Child; rather, He was the King of kings. The grandeur of Christ's incarnation is emphasized through the Maggi's worshipping Him.

In the Feast's eve's matins we read:

And He shall live; and the gold of Sheba will be given to Him; prayer also will be made for Him continually, and daily He shall be praised." (Psalm 72:15) We also have the liturgy's psalm: *"The Lord has said to Me, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession [this corroborates Isaiah's prophecy]. (Psalm 2:7 & 8)*

"You are My Son" – this is theologically speaking – hence, the only begotten Son of God has no human intermediary. *"Today I have begotten You"* refers to the incarnation, hence, a second birth, which is the human birth on earth. John's gospel expounds this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God [Christ's Divinity before all ages] ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us [Christ's humanity and birth on earth], and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 2 & 14)

Christ's advent rallied all humanity: the extremely conservative Jews along with the pagan Gentiles, the destitute along with the wealthy, the illiterate along with the most knowledgeable - hence, the shepherds and the Magi. He also greatly exalted women through the Holy Virgin, thus bestowing on them unprecedented honor. In so doing, Christ re-established on earth the heavenly atmosphere, where there is no differentiation between types, nationalities, gender or societal levels.

To recap...

- Receiving the Incarnate Christ is quite relevant to receiving Christ at His second coming and, hence, is relevant to our preparedness for meeting Him.
- The psalms read during Kiahk Sundays guide us progressively through the stages leading up to Christ's birth.
- Christ's advent was in response to humanity's suffering and groaning under Satan's yoke of sin.
- For deliverance from suffering, we must cry out to the Lord through sincere, fervent, heartfelt prayers.
- Upon Christ's birth, the world was refreshed by His presence - hence, the blessings of His incarnation.

- Without Christ's incarnation, we would have no communion - the mystery of the Eucharist is the extension of the mystery of incarnation.
- We witnessed Christ's mercy through His incarnation for the purpose of saving us, and we also witnessed God's righteousness on the Cross, since there was no way for humanity to avoid perdition except through Christ's sacrificial death.
- Incarnation allowed us to see and touch the incarnate God - which was impossible previously.
- Christ's birth on earth pertains solely to His humanity - His Divinity existed before all ages.
- The Church celebrates, with the shepherds, Christ's birth as a human; and the Church celebrates, with the Maggi, Christ's advent as God among us.
- Christ's advent rallied all humanity, and greatly exalted women through the holy virgin, thus bestowing on them unprecedented honor.

Christ's advent:

responded to humanity's cry for help,

rallied all humanity, brought peace on earth,

reconciled terrestrials with celestials, and

paved the way for all humans, who believe on Him, to be saved, rather than perish.

22

**"IMITATING GOD THE
FATHER"**



Our readiness to meet Christ is a function of our resemblance to the Father. This stems from Christ's saying, during His sermon on the mount: "*that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*"(Matthew 5:45) **We are thus required to imitate our Father Who is in heaven.** Whenever we recite the Lord's Prayer, we also exhort our consciences to follow the example of our heavenly Father. Our access to heaven is conditional upon imitating the Father. Note that the qualities of an exceptional father are given in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son (*Luke 15:11 - 32*).

It should be emphasized that **Christ's objective, from that parable, was to draw attention to the father** - not the sons. The sons, generally speaking, represent various types of humans - since no human is without sin. This discussion will focus on the qualities which the father demonstrated.

Qualities of a Good Father

- **Respect**

The first quality of a good father is **respect of the freedom of others.** The parable demonstrates to us the degree of freedom which that ideal father gave his sons. When the youngest son demanded his portion of the inheritance from his father, while the latter was still alive, the father complied with no hesitation whatsoever, despite his full awareness that his son might squander the money and indulge in evil living. Analogously, **our Heavenly Father fully respects our freedom;** this respect is manifest in the fact that He allows us to sin constantly - on a daily basis. By contrast, we rarely respect each other's freedom - which we should: **humility breeds respect for the liberty of others.**

- **Humility**

Again in the parable we see that the father's love and **humility** were such that he bore their nasty confrontations with no retaliation: the youngest demanded his inheritance and squandered it, and the eldest accused the father of unfairness and insensitivity to his loyalty and needs. By projecting such an attitude into our day-to-day lives, **do we indeed respect the views and freedom of others, at home and elsewhere?** and do we concede that the opinions of others matter at least as much as ours?

Respecting freedoms includes maintaining our silence when faced with wrongdoings or evil. In the parable, we note that the father was silent throughout his son's wrongdoings. We also note that our God remains silent throughout humanity's transgressions. This has led many to doubt God's existence. In His humility, God tolerates even atheists, who not only deny the existence of their Creator, but also mock Him. Nevertheless, He does not cease to provide them with the necessities of life, and even to permit them good health and success. Projecting this once more to our lifestyles, **are we able to remain silent when humiliated, hurt, or abused?**

We notice that the father never had a moment of painlessness or happiness: no sooner had he started rejoicing at his younger son's return, than the elder started complaining and accusing him of being insensitive to his loyalty. This is as though God is constantly hurting at our repeated iniquities; analogously, **are we able to suffer in silence? Such an attitude requires much humility.**

- **Condescendence**

Another quality that the father demonstrated was **his willingness to forgo his rights as a father**. He never asserted his rights, denying any of his sons whatever favor or request they made. On the other hand, both sons invoked their rights, while the father remained silent. God, in His humility, does not impose His rights on humanity; **can we imitate Him and forgo our rights? A true Christian will seek to satisfy the rights of others before his own.....**

- **Hope/Joy at Wrongdoers' Repentance**

The father's desire for wrongdoers' repentance is another virtue. We note that his only joy and preoccupation is having his sons in his bosom. The father's pain changed to joy as soon as his son returned. He also sought the second son's return, after their unpleasant confrontation. **Do we rejoice in others' return to God? Do we seek to bring all to repentance and the love of God?** In this regard, Saint Paul says:

the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5)

This sentiment is also given in Luke's gospel:

there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7)

Let this be our primary preoccupation:

God our Savior ... who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3 & 4)

We should never lose hope, since **"hope does not disappoint"**(Romans 5:5). We note in the parable that the father never gave up hope. Hope is a typical Christian characteristic - **we lose our resemblance to God once our hearts are devoid of hope.**

Having hope also implies praying, while waiting for the materialization of God's will - the power of sincere, heartfelt, prayer should never be underestimated. Going back to our parable, we note that the father knew how to wait, in silence, for God's will. Furthermore, we read in the parable: **"...And they began to be merry."**(Luke 15:24) The inference here is that prior to the son's return there was no joy at home - the father suffered silently, hoping and waiting patiently ... Repentance is God's cause for joy - likewise, **people's repentance should be our ultimate quest, and our main source of rejoicing.**

- **Readiness to Forgive and Forget**

The most significant virtue gleaned from the parable is **the father's pity, and his forgiving attitude:**

But when he was still a great way off, [that was the father's dream and hope: to see his son] his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him [the Father's yearning to see us return repentant to Him is greater than ours - we note that it was the father who kissed the son]. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father [the father interrupted his son in his loving and forgiving attitude] said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and

sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry (Luke 15:20 - 23)

Let us always have a forgiving attitude, pity those in dire need of repentance, and pray for their return to God - such is imitating God the Father. Unconditional love is our ticket to heaven. All evil should be attributed to Satan - the only one whom we are permitted to hate.

In addition to unconditional love, the parable demonstrates **boundless giving and unqualified forgiveness** - the product of a **pure heart**. Hence the father welcomed his prodigal son into his home, restoring his full stature, with no conditions attached, and without a single word of reproach. Sincere repentance is the key. Only a Father-like comportment is capable of such behavior - the essence of our Christian faith.

- **Consistency**

A father is also **consistent** in his feelings and conduct – **he never changes, no matter what**. This is clearly demonstrated in the father's sentiments of love, tolerance and forgiveness, which were consistent all through: when his son demanded his portion, when he squandered the money, when he returned repentant, and when the eldest son complained.

It is said that a **genuine Christian is father-like figure to all creatures**. In this regard, Saint Paul (who never married and never fathered anyone biologically) describes perfect fatherhood saying:

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. (2 Corinthians 12:15)

To reinforce this view, Saint Paul says:

*For the children ought not to lay up for the parents,
but the parents for the children. (2Corinthians 12:14)*

Fatherhood is thus sentiments that God plants in the hearts of those who follow Him.

To recap...

- Our readiness to meet Christ is a function of our resemblance to the Father. We are thus required to imitate our Father Who is in heaven.
- The first quality of a good father is respecting others' freedom. Our heavenly Father fully respects our freedom, tolerating our constant iniquities. Humility breeds respect for others' liberty. We should respect each other's freedom.
- Respecting freedoms includes maintaining our silence when faced with wrongdoings or evil. In His humility, God tolerates even atheists, deny the existence of their Creator, and mock Him. We must remain silent when humiliated, hurt, or abused.
- A true Christian will seek to satisfy the rights of others before his own.
- We should never lose hope - we lose our resemblance to God once our hearts are devoid of hope.
- People's repentance should be our ultimate quest, and our main source of rejoicing.
- Let us always have a forgiving attitude, pity those in dire need of repentance, and pray for their return to God - such is imitating God the Father.

- The essence of Christianity and a Father-like comportment is a pure heart yielding unconditional love, boundless giving, unfettered freedom, and unqualified forgiveness.

A genuine Christian is father to all creatures. Fatherhood is sentiments that God plants in the hearts of those who follow Him.

23

"TEACHING AND INFLUENCING OTHERS"



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is imperative to note that a servant's salvation is tied to his success as a servant. Servants are not responsible solely for their souls but also for the souls of others. Hence, although this might seem like a challenging task, attempting to avoid this responsibility is serious, and could lead to judgment for failure to save the souls who relied on that service. Servants, therefore, must be faithful to their mission. A humble servant thus considers his service to be a responsibility, rather than a prestigious or an honorary job.

A perfect example was set by our holy father Pope Tawodross II: he wept on the day of his enthronement – because at that moment, all he could see and feel was the enormous burden and responsibility that was placed on his shoulders. He neither boasted nor exulted for having attained this high-ranking position. Servants having such an attitude will succeed. They must resist Satan's attempts at emphasizing the worldly aspects of prestige that accompany a servant's mission, and they must persevere in steadfast, committed, service. Those who are served should see Christ in their servants. The latter should thus demonstrate Christ-like humility, faithfulness, piety, and relentless service.

Servants should appreciate the big difference between teaching and influencing others. Throughout our life we are exposed to a lot of teaching, without necessarily being touched or influenced. On the other hand, we may feel touched by a minor, seemingly insignificant incident, much more than a series of sermons. Similarly, we may do a certain act whose lasting effect on others surpasses any sermon they might have heard. Consequently, it is much more important to try to have a good influence on others and leave a lasting effect, rather than to

instruct and deliver information. Nowadays we are overwhelmed with information - but we are rarely touched.

The first question for a servant is whether s/he received any instruction and training on service, or whether reliance was simply on what that person already knew (or thought s/he knew). Many servants spend long periods of time (months or years) without attempting to receive any instruction, under the false impression that they possess all the knowledge and skills they need and are in no need of further instruction. Such an attitude is harmful.

Learning should be an integral part of a servant's life, regardless of age. A servant should never assume that there is nothing more to be learned. It should also be borne in mind that learning does not necessarily imply acquiring additional knowledge; it could mean gaining new insights, and being influenced, by considering different perspectives about something, or maybe on a parable, we already knew. The bottom line is therefore: have we been touched by this information/instruction (regardless of whether we had prior knowledge of it or not) - has it influenced us in any way?

Saint Paul told the Romans:

How then shall they call on Him in Whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of Whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:14 & 15)

This means that salvation is through the word of God. Thus, let us not underestimate the words and instruction of

servants. A well-delivered, touching, message, can make the difference on the audience between perdition and Eternity. The question is whether the servant is well-prepared to deliver such touching messages.

We sometimes receive impractical instruction. In Saint John's first epistle we read:

But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:17)

This means that sermons, service and church attendance are all of no worth, if we shut out the needy from our hearts. In other words, **service is useless if not applied practically towards the needy through mercy, love and giving.**

The following golden verse from the Book of Isaiah expounds the intent of practicing, and being touched by, instruction, which must be the word of God:

The Lord God has opened My ear; and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away. (Isaiah 50:5)

This means that Christ must always be the source of our instruction, through the word of God, regardless of the carrier, be it Isaiah, Matthew or Paul. The second meaning conveyed by this verse is the importance of obedience (or being "*not rebellious.*").

Finally, "*nor did I turn away*" means that every word of God touches us, and moves us a step forward; conversely, each word we ignore, pushes us back one step. For example, having forgiven someone, we should not rethink the matter and revoke our decision. Once we close a door to sin, we should never reopen

it. This verse thus expresses precisely the intent of being influenced by the word of God we hear.

Isaiah furthermore says:

The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned.
(Isaiah 50:4)

The message here is that God gave us the capability of teaching, but before doing that, we must seek instruction. It is counter-productive to speak while lacking knowledge. Successful servants must seek spiritual nourishment and enlightenment through influence of the word of God, listening to His voice, responding positively to His messages, participating in spiritual gatherings, fasting and praying ardently.... Acquiring knowledge without being influenced is futile and dangerous for our preparedness for Eternity.

Despite the importance of our sensory inputs, we must never lose sight of the importance of our sentiments, and our will, being touched and positively influenced by the word of God. In other words, we should be receptive to, and capitalize on, those inputs which touch our hearts to the extent that our sentiments and will are moved.

Being touched is not necessarily a result of sermons, or of reading articles – it could be the product of a certain situation, an act of kindness, a discussion with a cheerful yet afflicted person, a thankful sick person, a needy family helping others, and the like; we can learn much more through positive service than through traditional meetings.

Each instance of success in service represents a Divine touch, and an indication of Christ's supportive hand - we should therefore be touched by, and thankful for, those successes. We should also follow Job's example and pray on behalf of others:

So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did regularly. (Job 1:5)

To a certain extent, a servant should be sensitized to, and touched by, nature. Consider David the Psalmist; he said:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. (Psalm 19:1 - 3)

David had achieved such a high level that nature spoke to him about God's glory and the beauty of His creation. When Job was dismayed at his plight, God presented him with numerous questions about his knowledge concerning nature, animals and their habits, and the fact that all lived in harmony – humans being the only species of God's creation that lacks understanding.

In the Psalms we read:

God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. (Psalm 53:2)

God seeks our understanding of what He is doing rather than complaining and rebelling. In this respect, we note that Christ always quoted from, and interacted with, nature: the sea,

mountains, plants, birds, fields, etc. By distancing ourselves from nature, our hearts consequently become hardened. Let us ask ourselves: Are we touched by God's creation?!! Do we react to nature's wonders and beauty, meditating His beautiful creation and thanking Him for it?!!

We can also be touched by godly people. Throughout our lifetime we interact with many whose lives are a model of uprightness, humility and kindness, yet we fail to profit from such encounters. We may be touched by a child's innocent smile, an elder's relentless submission to God's will, a poor man's gratitude despite his obvious needs, or the unconditional love and cheerful disposition of a destitute.

At the other extreme, we can also be touched by evil-doers. Their actions, plight and fate should induce us to hate evil, to hate their sinful deeds, and to hate their satanic principles.

Therefore God speaks to us daily, and touches us every moment. The question remains: **Are we paying attention to Him?**

He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 11:15)

It is impossible for servants to teach, if they do not learn; it is equally impossible for them to influence others if they are immune to being touched. **Being a successful servant implies having our hearts open to God's prompting, and receptive to touching situations.**

The word of God should be at the tip of a servant's tongue at all times and in all conversations and interactions.

If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. (1 Peter 4:11)

Those servants who put on their "servants' hat" only when they are scheduled to be in the classroom, are sorrowfully misguided. Servants should follow Christ's example: the word of God never left His lips. Furthermore, it is obligatory for servants to **seize every opportunity to invoke the word of God and to direct people to His path.**

Servants should constantly seek to influence others, and to leave a permanent impression on them, through their actions: hence, humility, purity of heart, kindness, spontaneous honesty, mercy and love. These are virtues that the Holy Spirit imparts to us if we allow Him to rule our lives. Servants must ensure that others see them living what they teach. Hence, we need true Christians, rather than experienced preachers. It is more important for servants to live the Faith, rather than to study it.

To conclude, servants should never lose sight of the fact that their salvation is tied to their success as servants. Servants are not responsible solely for their own souls; rather, for the salvation of all around them. Those served need to be loved and touched by Christ's servants; they need to see Christ in them.

Failure to learn and to be touched adequately will result in failure to teach and to influence others.

Servants must ensure that they are responsive to God's prompting, that they lead Christ-like lives, and that their lives and actions touch and influence others.

24

"DIVINE LITURGY"



Within the context of our readiness to meet the Lord, it is imperative to note that, although our Church rehearses this awesome event each evening during the eleventh and twelfth canonical hours, **the Divine Liturgy constitutes the most beautiful replica of our meeting with the Groom.**

Standing throughout the Divine Liturgy represents our loveliest rehearsal for our final, genuine, audience before Christ. Our Church trains us for this meeting each and every Divine Liturgy. Consequently, **if we knew how to meet Christ during the Liturgy, we would know how to prepare ourselves to meet Him on the Last Day.** The importance, therefore, of our readiness for the Liturgy, should not be under-estimated.

Our Faith is such that **when we stand during the Liturgy, we are indeed standing before Christ.** Hence, we say "Worship God in fear and awe," also, "We worship Your Holy Body," and "I believe and confess to the last breath that this is the Life-giving Body...." Therefore we are definitely standing before Christ. The only difference is that while here on earth we celebrate Him as a Sacrifice atoning our sins, the next time He will come in Person to transport us to heaven with Him.

We should also note that, early on in the Liturgy, the deacon calls, "*Stand in fear and awe....*" because we are before the altar, where the Lord is present surrounded by the awe-inspired angels. This reflects the memorable moment of our meeting Christ on the clouds. **Being used to meeting Christ during the Liturgy will thus render our encounter with Him on the clouds, familiar.** Conversely, those who are not used to appropriate preparedness for meeting Christ during the Liturgy, will find the final encounter quite sinister.

We should pay much attention to the last litany that the altar deacon recites: *"Pray for the worthy communion, from these holy, pure and heavenly mysteries,..."* In order to qualify for Heaven, we need to harbor certain "pre-requisite" sentiments.

Prerequisite Sentiments to Qualify for the Liturgy/Heaven

In order to qualify for Heaven, we need to have certain "pre-requisite" sentiments.

- **Feeling of Unworthiness**

The first such sentiment, whether we are on the clouds or attending Liturgy, is the feeling of unworthiness. A feeling of "worthiness" for approaching Holy Communion immediately disqualifies us. Similarly, feeling confident that we qualify for Heaven automatically eliminates us. Our Church is careful to make us call upon the Lord, each Liturgy saying, *"Make us worthy..."*, which is an implicit admission of unworthiness. Consequently an attitude of unworthiness, grants us worthiness.

The Celebrant (priest), while preparing the altar at the very beginning of the Liturgical celebration, prays inaudibly, *"You know, O Lord, that I am unworthy, unprepared, and unfit..."* Each participant in the Liturgy should have the same sentiment: *"Dear Lord, I am unworthy."* In other words, we should be constantly repeating to ourselves: *"We are unworthy to approach You, to touch Your altar, or to partake of the Holy Communion"*. Having this genuine feeling means that we are worthy of partaking in the Holy Communion, and consequently of entering heaven.

This is precisely what Christ meant when He said: ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:3) The ***"poor in spirit"*** is the person standing before the Lord, prompted spiritually by the Holy Spirit to say, ***"I am a poor, sinful, unworthy person."*** That was the first beatitude (declaration of blessedness) in Christ's Sermon on the Mount; He stated that **the *"poor in spirit"* are guaranteed unconditional entry to heaven.**

Conversely, the confident rich, replete, and righteous have no place whether in Church on earth or in heaven. Christ said: ***"....I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."*** (Matthew 9:13) **Church is for sinners - which is a rule that seems to defy logic.** But the parable of the Pharisee and the publican illustrates this point: God turned down the Pharisee, who declared that he was perfect and righteous - yet the sinful publican who confessed his unworthiness was justified.

Christ testified that John the Baptist was the greatest man to walk the earth, after Christ. Yet, he gave the perfect example of humility before God, by saying: ***"There comes One after me.... whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose."*** (Mark 1:7) The feeling of unworthiness never left Saint John's heart; even after baptizing Christ, he said:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30)

Saint John's extreme and inseparable humility guaranteed him his place in heaven, and earned for him Christ's testimony:

Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ... A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in

kings' houses ... A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet ... Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist ... "(Matthew 11:7 - 11)

Comparing ourselves to him, do we really feel worthy to partake of communion?!

- **Faith**

The second pre-requisite feeling that we must have in our hearts, before entering Church or Heaven, is **faith**. As acknowledged sinners, we must come to Church **fully confident of God's love, while trusting His promise to embrace us and forgive our sins**. Absence of such faith makes us unworthy to receive Communion, and disqualifies us from entering Heaven. Christ said:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)

That is the reason why **we repeat "Amen" countless times during the Liturgy - faith is our key to heaven.**

We must ensure that such a feeling of confidence dominates our hearts each Liturgy. Hence, we know that we are steeped in sin, yet we believe firmly and we repeat in our hearts that:

"You are our Father ... You love us ... we are redeemed through Your blood ... this is indeed the Body and Blood of Christ ... and You are faithful to Your promise"

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day....He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. (John 6:54 & 56)

Correct application of the Coptic Orthodox rite of Communion is such that the person receiving Holy Communion must say "**Amen**" prior to receiving the Sacraments. **The person is thus confirming his/her belief as stated above.** This is also a re-affirmation of the previous congregation's response of "*Amen*" to the priest's proclamation "*This is the true and holy flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our God.*"

Failure to believe in God's Fatherhood, in the atoning death of His Son Jesus Christ, and in the forgiveness of our sins and His abiding in us, through eating His flesh and blood, disqualifies us from Heaven, regardless of any good deeds we might have done.

- **Repentance**

Closely associated with the feeling of unworthiness, is the third pre-requisite qualifying us for Heaven, namely the necessity of repentance. By saying "*we are unworthy*" we are entreating the Lord to have mercy on us and to forgive us. However, it is a grave error to conclude that, since we are unworthy, we are rejected and must walk away. This is the avenue which Judas chose. **Throughout the Liturgy, we must be in a constant state of repentance.** Just as our Church has programmed us to repeat "*Amen,*" we have also been programmed to say "*Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).*"

The feelings listed above should thus become our "way of life," and our hearts should be fully programmed accordingly. Hence, when the Lord summons us to stand before Him, the Holy Spirit would have already perfected within us those qualifying sentiments.

The Divine Liturgy, and the lectionaries (Bible readings) throughout, help in instilling within us those three sentiments (unworthiness, faith and repentance). The lectionaries serve as a mirror for our souls, inducing us to say "*We are unworthy,*" "*Amen (we believe),*" and "*Have mercy upon us and forgive us our sins (repentance.)*" Members of the congregation are thus always urged to arrive sufficiently early, at least to listen to, and be part of, the lectionaries, precisely because they are an integral part of preparedness.

The Liturgy furthermore reviews God's work with humanity - it presents the story of salvation. Hence, it starts with God's creation and humanity's fall from grace, followed by the countless prophets that humanity ignored, and ending with God's atoning death on the Cross, leading to His offering to us His Body and Blood on the altar, and His promise to return. **Each and every Liturgy presents this scenario for the express purpose of eliciting from us repentance.**

Frequent adoration throughout the Liturgy completes the picture. Adorations and prostrations express our humility, submission and repentance.

- **Love of God**

The fourth, and very important, feeling we must have, is our love of God. We must profess our love for God, despite our conduct which always seems inconsistent with such a sentiment. Laxness in prayer, an unforgiving spirit, irregular fasting do not indicate love for our God! Nevertheless, we do have residual love of God in our hearts. This is analogous to Peter's saying:

"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." (John 21:17)

Despite Peter's earlier denial, he was convinced that he loved Christ. Christ believed him. **Loving Christ qualifies us to partake of the Holy Communion and to enter Heaven.** The reason is not because we are sinless. Rather, the Holy Sacraments are intended for the beloved ones - the pure in heart – for those who have sincere feelings of love to our Lord.

It is imperative that, during the Liturgy, our hearts be filled with love. Conversely, harboring anger or un-forgiveness negates and poisons the entire atmosphere and essence of the Liturgy. It is thus totally not recommended to focus on cosmetics, people's behaviors, deacons' errors, or the like. "Worthiness" to partake of the Holy Sacraments is eliminated through such sentiments, which shatter any feelings of love. That is precisely the reason why the deacon cries ***"Greet one another with a holy kiss....;"*** it is also the reason for the litanies, which proclaim **our love for God's entire creation.** Filling our hearts with love for everything and everybody qualifies us for Communion.

The Divine Liturgy transforms us from sinners to saints. This is the miraculous transformation which will also take place at Heaven's gates. We are sinners up till the last moment of our existence. That is why the Priest prays inaudibly, at the conclusion of the Liturgy, ***"May Your Spirit descend upon us, and upon these oblations, transporting and revealing them, as holies for Your holy."*** He then cries, ***"The Holies for the holy!"*** This means that the oblations have now become Holies, and the communicants are no longer sinners. All who present themselves to partake of the Holy Sacraments have become saints through the work of the Holy Spirit. **Hence, during the Liturgy, and at Heaven's gates, the Holy Spirit miraculously bestows sainthood upon us, as a Divine gift, and not as a result of**

human efforts. Then, and only then, do we become qualified to enter heaven. Saint Paul addresses this transformation thus:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Philippians 3:20 & 21)

- **Changing Fear to Confidence**

Preparedness during the Liturgy also involves changing our fear to confidence. We enter the Church filled with fear and apprehension: How can we possibly sit among angels? This fear, nevertheless, changes to confidence in God's love. This is similar to Isaiah's vision when he saw the Throne and the angels

So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged." Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me. (Isaiah 6:5 - 8)

Instead of reproaching Isaiah for his iniquities, the Lord voices His concern for the perishing humanity, and asks Isaiah whom He should send to preach to the people. Applying this to ourselves, **we start by trembling at our sinfulness, and end by**

our full trust that God has rendered us holy through His infinite love and mercy.

- **Evangelization**

Finally, during the Liturgy we must experience feelings of evangelization. This means that, **our hearts should be zealous towards others' salvation, failing which we would have missed the point of the Liturgy.** This is the sentiment which should fill the heart of the person about to meet the Groom. Standing before the altar, we should see the Lord's care for humanity in its entirety, through the eyes of Christ. **The Liturgy should thus inflame our hearts with the desire of bringing all to salvation.** This is the reason why the congregation chants: *"Amen, Amen, Amen, we evangelize Your death, O Lord, and we profess Your holy resurrection and ascension to heaven."* Unfortunately, we do not evangelize - an indication of our failure to appreciate and understand.

The Coptic rite therefore spreads the calling to everyone - not to a select sub-group. Our Church applies Christ's parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come ... Then he said to his servants, '... go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good."
(Matthew 22:1 - 14)

It is good for us to feel that **since we, the undeserving, are accepted others must also be accepted.** This is what the Church bells proclaim:

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8)

This is also what the icons and the Church's Apse proclaim. The beautiful hymns, the bright lights, and the white vestments all carry one message: **We are ready to enter heaven.**

The love in our hearts, the spirit of evangelization, our hope, the Throne and the Sacrifice, are all the replica of our meeting Christ on His Throne. **The entire Liturgy points to our ultimate quest: "He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead..... We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the coming age."** All what we do, therefore, is readying us for the moment when we stand before Christ.

To recap...

- The Divine Liturgy is the most beautiful replica of our meeting with the Groom.
- When we stand during the Liturgy, we are indeed standing before Christ.
- The pre-requisite sentiments qualifying us for Communion and heaven are unworthiness, faith, repentance, love of God, and confidence in God's promises.
- Feelings of worthiness and righteousness disqualify us from Communion and Heaven
- The Liturgy should inflame our hearts with the desire of bringing all to salvation through evangelization.

**We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the
life of the coming age**

25

**"THOSE WHO WERE
READY WENT IN WITH
HIM"**



Although they were all virgins, only the five wise ones were ready. The term "**virgins**" refers not only to the baptized souls, who belong to Christ, but also to the monks and nuns, to the clergy, and to the servants; this is because all those groups are supposedly living to serve the Groom. However, the problem is that **not all Christians are wise - hence not all of them are ready.**

It follows that simply belonging to a particular group, regardless of its title or nature of service, does not by itself mean that we are prepared. Rather, the Lord seeks specific traits within us which determine our preparedness. Christ emphasized this by saying:

But many who are first will be last, and the last first.
(*Matthew 19:30*)

In other words, we may think that certain people are surely a model for readiness when, in fact, they are not, and vice versa. Christ said:

For many are called, but few are chosen (*Matthew 22:14*)

The fact that "**few are chosen**" gives us reason for concern and, at the same time, is sufficient incentive for us to work harder. In other words, **being called does not guarantee that we will be chosen.**

Matthew 25 amply addresses the question of how one should be prepared to meet the Groom. Let us have a close look at the parable of the ten virgins.

Be Watchful

We need to be constantly watchful of our spiritual conduct avoiding those sins that may cause us to lose our path to Eternal Life. Here are some things we need to be watchful about.

- **Self-Righteousness**

The five wise virgins are the key to the first part of the answer, namely, be watchful. The only problem with the five foolish ones was that they "*.....took their lamps and took no oil with them ...*"(Matthew 25:3). All ten virgins slept while waiting for the Groom. When He finally arrived, the only differentiating feature between the wise and the foolish was that the former's lamps had oil, while the latter's had not. **The foolish virgins took no oil because of their feeling of sufficiency or self-righteousness.** In other words, they felt that they were righteous because of their adherence to the rites and requirements of the church and services. Such activities, although good and necessary, could lead to the feeling of self-sufficiency. Let us not conclude that we are righteous, just because we act "righteously"; rather, we should always say "we are unfaithful stewards." **Believing in our hearts that "acing righteously" makes us self-sufficient immediately equates us with the Pharisees and the five foolish virgins.**

Feeling self-sufficient implies telling God that we are "good" and are not in need of His mercy, or His grace, or His salvation or His atoning blood. Self-righteousness also carries with it "spiritual arrogance" – a sense that we have prayed enough, or that we do not have to fast anymore, or that confession and repentance are unnecessary. On the contrary, **our prevailing feeling should be that we are constantly and consistently in**

need of repentance and of His mercy to cover our weakness and insufficiency.

Second: Judging Others

A sentiment which would likely accompany that of self-righteousness is that of judging others. We would thus look at others and mock their deeds and way of life, while extolling ours – just like the Pharisee. **Judging others is not only an indication of foolishness, but it also constitutes a mortal sin.**

The wise virgins demonstrated their constant need. We have several psalms (42, 63, 143 plus others) which emphasize this sentiment. A position of constant need for God's mercy, forgiveness and presence throughout our lives, renders us wise. **We should also perceive ourselves as ranking least compared to others.**

- **Not Abundant Love**

Having oil in our lamps symbolizes having an abundance of love for others. Having "oil in our lamps" is equal to "love in our hearts." **A loving and repentant heart is a wise heart.** Conversely, an extinguished lamp implies a loveless heart – the appearance of observing rites is then worthless. The Holy Spirit is always symbolized by oil – the warming feeling of love for God and others.

- **True Humility**

We should also note the response of the wise virgins to the foolish ones: *"...But the wise answered, saying: 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you...'"*(Matthew 25:9) This very sentiment of not having enough reflects the **constant need for**

repentance, and the soul's relentless quest for readiness – this is wisdom.

The wise virgins demonstrated their humility by their sentiments of not having enough. We should always strive to love more, to serve more and to repent constantly. Such feelings should not be confused with faintheartedness, loss of self-confidence, or feelings of inadequacy. It should be noted that the foolish virgins realized their lack of oil because their lamps had been extinguished. This terrifying realization means that **they woke up to their sorrowful insufficiency after their lives had expired – when it was too late**. Let us ensure that, while we still have the breath of life within us, we continue to give, love and repent.

The ultimate message of the oil within the lamps is that what resides within our hearts is much more important than our outward appearances. What God sees within is infinitely more important than our reflection in the mirror. **The wise person is s/he who constantly examines her/his inner self and emotions.**

- **Hard Work**

Hard work and labor are more important than rest and honor. Rest and honor are credit to the foolish - they represent worldly appreciation and applause. Toil and labor are credit to the wise - they are treasures in heaven. Furthermore, our personal relationship with our Lord and our closeness to Him are much more important than our service and piousness. We note here that the **focus remains on what the heart harbors, rather than what appears to others.**

Terrifying Warning

The most terrifying statement in the parable is: ***'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.*** (Matthew 25:12) Christ repeated this warning several times, hence:

Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:22 & 23)

The Lord's message is clear from the above: we will hear the awesome pronouncement ***"I do not know you"*** if we:

- prayed without loving others,
- prayed without helping the needy,
- prayed for the sake of being seen by others,
- prayed and served others for the sake of being honored by them,
- prayed without heeding the will of the Father.

That is why Christ emphasized that what He seeks is our true effort to help the needy, as we would help Him, for the glorification of His name, not for showing off our capabilities. We are not required to perform miracles or cast out demons. The answer and solution are simply:

Serve, Give, Toil and Love Mercifully and Wholeheartedly

Consider this parable:

A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and

said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? (Matthew 21:28 - 31)

Here, the will of the father is equivalent to the oil in the lamps, to serving the needy, and to faithfulness in the talents. When the chief priests and elders answered Christ: "***the first***", He said: "***Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.***"(Matthew 21:31) The reason is that those sinners' repentance will be sincere, and they will take care to obey – despite their late arrival. On the other hand, some pious people will pay lip service to the commandments without really doing the Father's will.

It is indeed to our shame to be inside the church, and not to love one another – while others, outside, do love one another, although they may not even know God in the first place.

Let us pray each and every night, entreating our Lord to grant us wisdom, help us discern the Holy Spirit's love filling our hearts, and be watchful in accordance with His will. We would be on the right track if our toil and watchfulness were spent on sincerely loving and serving others.

