



St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church

Heliopolis, Cairo - Egypt

*Lord,
What do you
want me to do?*

Father Daoud Lamei

Dr. Inas Barsoum

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The Writer: Father Daoud Lamei

Dr. Inas Barsoum

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Introduction

“Lord! what do you want me to do?” is a prayer that opens the doors of deeply knowing God and experiencing a real new life in Him. It denotes a continuous pursuit of what our Lord wishes, not only at every turning point in one’s life or every decision, but for each word we utter and every action we take on a daily basis.

Living in accordance to God’s Holy Will needs us to realize that we ought to struggle to be on the same wave length with Him. This is a trip that starts with the “Discovery” of the importance of living according to His will, on to struggling with all kinds of “Obstacles, Discouragements and Perplexities” that the evil one puts our way; over to enjoying our Lord’s “Incentives” as we struggle to “Change our Mindset” to gain the grace of “Wisdom”; never to fear that as we cling to our spiritual fathers’ example and advice, “Pray as a church with One Accord” to gain holy “Discernment”, in order that we eventually reach the level of “Spiritual Maturity” that allows us to always realize His Holy Will to our lives.

This book would not have been out without the faithful enthusiasm of a group of dedicated servants who worked hard on putting it together. Special thanks go to Mr. Guirgis Ishack, a deacon at St. Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church, Ottawa, who exerted great efforts in the translation of this book. May our Lord reward all who work for the glory of His Holy Name. Amen

Lord, help me to find out my mission in life,

Lord, open my ears and heart to listen carefully to Your Voice.

Lord, let the scales fall from my eyes, so I can see clearly like St. Paul and live in your likeness.

Lord, let Thy kingdom come and Thy will be done.

Glory be to Your Holy Name for ever and ever, Amen.

Pray for me ...

Fr. Daoud Lamei

CHAPTER 1

The Discovery

Introduction:

Many people spend an entire lifetime without asking the crucial question that Saul (St. Paul) asked the Lord:

“Lord, what do you want me to do?”

Such a question can potentially change the course of a person's life. Even an upright person posing this question may discover that the Lord desires of him/her something completely different from what they had sincerely believed. Decisions which we might have been convinced were the right ones might turn out to have been quite different from what the Lord desires for us.

Persistently asking this important question could result in a significant change in one's life – as was the case with St. Paul. We might discover that our mission in life is quite different from what we had assumed. Asking this question repeatedly should lead to its becoming an integral part of our prayers. We, therefore, should seek the Lord's guidance not only for crossroad-type decisions, e.g. marriage, emigration, or the like, but also for "simple" matters affecting our daily life. Consequently, incorporating such a simple question into our daily routine and daily prayers, could conceivably lead to marked and significantly positive changes in our lives.

Let us look and meditate this very important incident as it happened to Saul changing his whole life to become St. Paul who wrote the biggest part of the New Testament.

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1 & 2)

Jewish synagogues existed in every city. The Jews sensed a Christian infiltration from all directions – which made them very angry, and induced them to try to stop this fast-spreading tide of Christianity. They found a young, enthusiastic ‘terrorist’ named Saul, who was fully convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a mere babbler. Being a devout Jew, Saul was angry seeing that Jesus had many followers although (according to what he believed at that time), His teachings disagreed with Moses’ and were against the Jewish customs, scripture and the Law.

Being a fanatical Jew resolved to stop Christianity's tide at any cost, even beyond Jerusalem and Judaea, Saul armed himself with letters of recommendation to the synagogues of Damascus. This would open the doors for him there and facilitate his capturing those Jews who had converted to Christianity, dragging them to imprisonment in Jerusalem. His goal was clear, and he was fully convinced of his mission. He entreated the Lord to bless his quest in capturing the largest possible number of Christians, and imprisoning them, thereby fully pleasing God. He thus fully believed that his prayers were sincere, and that he was not only doing God’s will but even exceeding His expectations. His mission was to find any of those who were labelled “The Way” and kill them (Note that early Christians were labelled "**The Way**," since Christ said: ***“I am the Way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”***)

It should be noted that Saul was driven by honest enthusiasm for what he thought was ‘the right thing to do’ or in other words what he thought was **‘the will of God’**. He volunteered wholeheartedly for that task and expected no personal or material gain in return for his mission. He was a genteel Jew, and an ardent servant eager to carry out God’s will and nothing else ...

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul,

why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. (Acts 9:3 - 6)

Saul's stop or his abrupt awakening points to his sudden realization that there was something terribly wrong in what he was doing and that he was living a huge mistake.

Sometimes we are reluctant to acknowledge or face shortcomings in our lifestyle, preferring to convince ourselves that "all is well." We may also feel that our service should exempt us from admitting our lifestyle's glaring fault(s). Our Lord has His ways of giving us 'a wake-up call'. This could come in the form of an accident, a hardship, a significant failure in an endeavor. We could be alerted from our slumber by a simple sermon or a prayer striking a sensitive chord in our being causing us to make a pause and reconsider the way we are leading our lives and to ask again:

Lord, what do you want me to do?

That was precisely what happened to Saul, when, for the first time, he perceived the reality to which he had previously been totally oblivious. He recognized the grave error he was living. He seemed to be wondering: **"Everything I have been doing was wrong. I do love God, but in the wrong way. I love Him but I am not pleasing Him. I have been consistently doing the exact opposite of His will, while thinking that I exceeded His expectations!!"**

The message is that sometimes we wish neither to see nor hear what the Lord wants to tell us. We refuse to open our eyes to see the huge faults which the Lord wants to point out to us. This is

tantamount to refusing to see Christ Himself. We fail to see reality, preferring to retain a false image before our eyes: that of a pious, righteous, godly and "generally acceptable" person.

We note that during Saul's encounter with Christ, our Lord said cheerily to him:

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"

As if our Lord wanted to tell Saul: **"Look at Me! I am the true God Whom you are worshipping; I am Jesus Whom you hate"**. It should be noted that, while his love for God was intense, Saul hated Christ with a passion. He believed that God and Jesus weren't One and the Same. However, Christ corrected this misconception by saying **"I am He,"** meaning **"I Am God."** This reality hit Saul like a ton of bricks, as he must have wondered: **"How can the two possibly be one and the same?!"**

Saul knew that God revealed Himself unto Moses saying ***"I Am that I Am"*** resulting in Moses falling to the ground; Saul must have wondered, "Will God reveal Himself unto me the way He did with Moses??"

Indeed, despite the similarity of the two revelations, the problem was that Saul failed to see it; following his own rationale, and firmly believing that he was pleasing God, he persecuted, challenged and troubled Christ, on a daily basis. We sometimes fall into the same trap, namely, we could be trying to please God in a way that displeases Him. By routinely reciting a "standard" prayer, and rattling off a few psalms to appease our conscience before retiring for the day, we could actually be displeasing God while thinking that we are doing what we "should do", since this would be analogous to the "Pharisee syndrome" with which Christ was constantly faced.

God desires a responsive heart; He seeks sincere love, and expressions of yearning to be with Him. We could thus be going merrily down a certain path when, in fact, we would be doing exactly the opposite of what God desires. At the extreme end of

the spectrum we could, unknowingly, be persecuting our Lord. We thus need to appreciate fully, and to concentrate on, the following:

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. (Acts 9:8)

While Saul thought he could see, it turned out that he was completely blind! Projecting this into our lives, we need to recognize periodically that our vision is impaired. Therefore we need to entreat the Lord regularly: **"Dear Lord, I am incapable of seeing anything. I do not know if I am treading the right path. I am uncertain as to whether my life pleases You or not."**

Here is an eye-opening experience that happened to a servant who used to pay routine visits to some of the marginalized areas of greater Cairo. He used to wonder at the very poor people who had absolutely nothing, but always thanked the Lord. He consistently wondered:

"Dear Lord, how can You possibly accept me in heaven?!"

"I have an easy life while they don't.

"I am enjoying good health while they are not.

"My home is air-conditioned while they don't even have a simple fan.

"We have food exceeding our needs while some of them sleep in their hunger.

"My children are lacking nothing while theirs are needy in every respect.

"Since those disadvantaged people have none of the amenities I am enjoying, I wonder how the Divine justice will possibly deal with me ... It would be only fair for them to be accepted in Heaven while I may very well be rejected."

This eye-opening experience will reveal, to a sensitized conscience, the painful reality from which we always tend to shy

away. A fair God would reward some of those poor and needy people with heaven, while denying it to some of those who lead easy lives. This is indeed a scary perspective; **an easy life is cause for concern! Hence our Lord said:**

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)

Sometimes we arrive at a crossroads, where we should stop and re-evaluate our lives: “Does the Lord want to tell me something that I really prefer not to hear?”

Saul spent years forging down the path of persecution. He witnessed Stephen's stoning, and he was likely promoted as a key persecutor of Christians. He became the official emissary to Damascus. Nevertheless, he was consistently clueless with respect to the disastrous path he was treading. Hence, ***"But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus."***

Let us ask ourselves:

- **Do my prayers provide me with the answer as to what the Lord wants me to do?**
- **Do my readings of the Bible provide the answer?**
- **Is my overall spiritual life pleasing to the Lord?**

Likely, our daily routines will not provide us with a satisfactory answer to the crucial question:

“Lord, what do You want me to do?”

We should thus ask the Lord:

- **How do You want me to read the Bible, pray, or serve?**
- **How do You want me to prioritize?**
- **Whom do You want me to care for first?**

- **How much time do You want me to allocate to work, my family, and church service?**

Prioritization in the service needs Divine Guidance. Given the limited number of hours in the day, how can we decide between someone in dire need but is too shy to ask, versus another who loves to unload onto the servant's shoulders?? How can we decide whom to visit first? In each and every step of the way, we must go back and ask:

“Lord, what do You want me to do?”

Our Life’s Mission

Saul continued to carry out his self-stylized mission: his sole purpose in life was to eradicate Christianity. Many years later, though, he told Timothy:

although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:13)

In spite of the fact that Saul's perception was severely clouded, we have to always bear in mind that whatever he did, during this stage, he did it with one goal in mind, i.e. to please God. He said it clearly:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. (Galatians 1: 13-14)

In our pursuit of knowing our Lord's will, we ought to adopt this attitude of being "**zealous**" (enthusiastic) to actually do "His will". It is this that will make us rest assured that our Lord will definitely keep guiding us and will unfailingly unfold His Holy Will to us.

What then is our mission in life?!! We might have successfully fathered and raised children and grandchildren, gained prominence in society and amassed wealth. But is this what the Lord really expects of us?!! Most human beings, who have passed the age of sixty or so, would have, more or less, realized comparable accomplishments. What differentiates us from them, having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us?!!

Maybe we neglect or avoid asking the crucial question:

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

because we do not want to hear what He has to say or because we are afraid we are not up to what He wishes us to be/do.

Peter was an ordinary married fisherman whose sole preoccupation in life was to catch and sell fish. Yet the Lord's response to Peter's *"Lord, what do You want me to do?"* revealed a completely different challenge to his somewhat 'settled' life. However it proved to be that he was intended to be a fisherman of "men" rather than that of "fish". Peter was meant to have a totally different but infinitely better mission in life. He may not have ever dreamt of it. But with our Lord's help, it turned out to be a most blessed mission that there was no way to compare it to how he envisioned for his life.

False Accomplishments:

Although seeking to have many achievements in life is totally legitimate and quite needed; yet one should not be fooled into believing that those are the one and only needed for one's life. Self-realization, gaining money, marriage, having children, etc... are not bad goals; however, they should not constitute our *"raison d'etre,"* or become an end in themselves.

Money

Failure to seek God's guidance in identifying their mission in life leads many people to spend a lifetime in the pursuit of false, misleading, or treacherous "missions," such as the accumulation of wealth and other worldly acquisitions. They labor under the false belief that their sole mission in life is to be a "money-making machine." No wonder, Christ referred to money as another god:

You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24)

Those who pursue money as their ultimate aim in life are always haunted by misery, regardless of the degree of wealth that they reach.

This type of people resort to prayers only when things go wrong, for example when their plans to make more money fail. By praying, they are attempting to "legitimize" or "justify" the main target, namely accumulation of wealth, that is totally against Christ's will and teaching. Such a group may well include church-going servants, who believe there is nothing fundamentally wrong with their way of life. Their conscience is dulled. If they stopped to sincerely re-evaluate their life's goals and ask,

Lord, what do You want me to do?

the response will definitely be, **"What you are doing is completely wrong – your lifestyle needs a complete overhaul!"** They need to be stopped like Saul of Tarsus.

Credentials

Studying and qualifying for academic degrees which, in turn, open the doors for lecturing, authoring publications, and the like, represents another perceived "mission" towards which some race. While acquiring higher academic degrees is neither wrong nor sinful, it should not constitute the sole or ultimate aim in life.

Fame

Another group of people dedicates all their efforts towards gaining recognition or fame in one domain or another. This may be a scientific or social field or simply fashion or appearance; hence, their entire life's focus is to attract others' attention or praise.

Marriage - having children

Although noble goals, marriage and having children should not constitute our "*raison d'etre*," or an end in itself. Our life's "mission" should not only be "getting married and having children."

False Service

Sometimes we encounter members of the congregation who are quite keen on "serving," but on their own terms, and from their own perspective. They often have preconceived ideas on what they should do, and how it should be done, regardless of whether their ideas are aligned with the Lord's will or not (we should always bear in mind that Saul considered himself a very faithful servant of God by persecuting Christ!) Such people consider themselves the Church's guardians; they proceed zealously with their agendas to build, when in fact they are destroying, the church! All heresies and schisms started the same way: people enthusiastically attempting to accomplish their own agendas which bear no congruence with Christ's.

Divine Light:

Our Lord sometimes chooses to penetrate forcefully into a person's life – that could be someone fully absorbed in work, home, wealth or other ambitions. This is Christ's way of getting our attention, waking us up, and lovingly saving us from

misguided, and maybe destructive, preoccupations – just as He did with Saul.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. (Acts 9:3)

Saint Luke's use of the word "*suddenly*" refers to the abrupt jolt we may experience, and which Christ may drop in our path, to alert us forcefully to wake up and turn to Him. Our Lord oftentimes chooses to enter our life forcefully to tell us: "Stop, think, and listen to Me this time instead of yourself, as you have been doing for the past fifty years – enough self-talk and heed what I have to tell you." This sudden occurrence may take the form of a tragic incident, a brush with death, or a disastrous experience.

A military conscript tells of an incident whereby he was advancing in a tank, alongside a fellow conscript. He suddenly felt the compelling urge to jump out of the tank – which he did despite his colleague's warnings. A minute later the tank blew up killing his friend. He could never explain what happened except on the basis of Christ forcefully stepping into his life – giving him a second chance and a new lease on life. When Christ gives us a second chance, we must ensure that we live from thereon in accordance with His will. Let us start the day by entreating the Lord: "Dear Lord, yesterday is history. I failed to do Your will. But here I am today asking sincerely:

“Lord, what do You want me to do?”

We may get clear godly messages in our lifetime through:

A conversation with a trusted friend: Christ may send our way a trustworthy, godly, person, relaying to us a godly message highlighting our misguided lifestyle and urging us to change course.

A screaming message: While reading the Bible we may feel that a specific verse "jumped out of the Bible and struck us on the head." That verse may awaken within us feelings of guilt and a compelling urge to effect a radical change in our life – hence, "suddenly a light shone around him from heaven." We must pay immediate attention to such a message. **The sudden appearance of the Divine light resulted in a sudden change in Saul's life. Divine Light transformed him from Saul to Paul, from a persecutor of the Lord and His people to a devout preacher ready to risk and give up his life for Christ's sake.**

However, Divine Light should not be an actual encounter like that which happened to Saul. Rather, it could come to us in varied ways and through different spiritual media. For example:

The Light of the Word of God: Reading the Bible, especially in seclusion, enlightens us, and enables us to see truths not previously obvious to us – the world appears to us in a different light. We feel we are getting closer to Christ, and our perpetual query of the reply to "*Lord what do you want me to do?*" gets much closer to us.

The Light of Discipleship: The light of discipleship may shine upon and through us, during a session with our confessor. Listening to the man of God does not only induce our return to Christ and live a life of repentance and piety, but it surely helps in our 'discovery' of what our life is meant to be and reveals to us our true mission.

The Light of Prayer: When we lead a life of prayer where we seriously and sincerely ask the Lord to guide us along our lives,

we constantly get messages from Him. Our Lord reveals to us inner secrets. Those could be faults or sins we are harboring, or they could be God-given talents that we have not utilized (but for which we remain accountable).

Physicians possess a God-given talent. There is a big difference though between a physician charging for his services, simply doing his job, getting paid, and investing his money in the bank and another physician who treats the poor free of charge, he spends hours in the operating room trying to save a life for free, and travels to volunteer his services to the disadvantaged. The latter is led by God and experiences an overwhelming wave of joy, for having faithfully invested his God-given talent in Eternity, hence:

I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' (Acts 20:35)

We have not yet seen many of the talents buried within us. In most cases, we tend to be like Saul who was using his talents in a totally different way from what our Lord intended for him.

Prayer is key to make us perceive what the Lord desires for us. In fact we sometimes fail to see clear messages that Christ had already sent our way. We might have even interpreted things the wrong way to justify our actions.

The Light the Eucharist:

Partaking of the Holy Eucharist should be at the center of each Christian's life. When He knew that His hour was near, and that He will shortly leave His apostles (in the flesh), our Lord Jesus consecrated that Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. Our Lord had mentioned to His apostles that there is one and only way to keep being in close communion with Him and knowing His will for

their lives. It is eating His Body and drinking His Blood. No wonder the Sacrament of the Eucharist is also called in English "Holy Communion", i.e. it is becoming in holy communion with the Lord and with the whole congregation of the Church.

Before Passion week, Our Lord Jesus Christ left His apostles with some clear messages: He told His them:

A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. (John 14:19)

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. (John 15: 7)

And ...

And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you (Luke 22: 19-20)

For anyone who wishes to be sure of what our Lord wishes for every step s/he takes along life's journey, s/he needs to be in close "**Holy Communion**" with the Lord through constantly partaking of the Holy Sacrament of **the Eucharist**.

Being in close touch with His Word (the Bible), conversing with Him (in prayer), resorting to one's spiritual father for advice and eating our Lord's Body and drinking His blood puts us on the perfect road to safely being able to know the answer to this crucial question:

Lord! What do you want me to do?

To recap ...

- By listening to God, our life is renewed - we embark on a new path, led by Christ.
- By humbling and prostrating ourselves before God and falling to the ground, we discover our weaknesses and shortcomings - and death.
- Outward appearances are deceiving - whether we seek to project them, or whether others try to impress us by them.
- We must ensure we know the kind, loving, forgiving, compassionate, yet just, Christ Whom we worship.
- Christ is loving and longsuffering, and desires that all be saved.
- Let us discover Christ; let us get closer to Christ; let us consistently ask

Lord, what do You want me to do?

Let us keep partaking of the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist

Let us join Job in saying:

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. (Job 42:5)

CHAPTER 2

**You will be told
(Discipleship)**

Here was Saul in the direct presence of our Lord. Saul fell to the ground. He trembled. But he was smart enough to realize that our Lord came to him with a message. Saul asked the crucial question:

“Lord, what do you want me to do?”

But our Lord chose not to reply to Saul directly. Instead, He sufficed to have revealed Himself to Saul in a very clear way but would not give him an answer to the question. Instead, our Lord:

Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do. (Acts 9:5 & 6)

One would tend to wonder why our Lord chose not to tell Saul what he wanted of him.

Why was there a need for an intermediary?!!

Spiritual Intermediaries (mentors)

Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord. (Acts 9:8, 9 & 10)

The word "disciple" in the underlined text does not mean one of the twelve; rather, this label was given to any first-century Christian who had converted from Judaism – male or female (in Acts 9:36 we read of a disciple named "Tabitha.") According to the Coptic Synaxarion, Ananias had been appointed by the apostles Bishop of Damascus (this is the Coptic tradition – not mentioned in the Acts). He was a seasoned, well-established, man of God.

.....and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight. (Acts 9:10, 11 & 12)

The fact that the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision, without any surprise expressed on the latter's part, is an indication of Ananias' high spiritual level and closeness to God.

The Lord chose an indirect way for conveying to Saul His instructions; He appeared to Saul, then to Ananias, then Saul had to go to Ananias. There was a definite purpose for this. Christ had a plan for the new start for Saul's life, namely, Ananias had to indoctrinate and baptize him. We also note that Christ appeared to Saul a second time in a vision, saying that Ananias would go to him.

Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 9:13 - 17)

Men of God have a role to play, and God, in all His humility, will not sidestep them. For difficult cases, like Saul's, God will take the first step, then leave the rest to His servants.

Our Lord esteems His servants, the saints; He works through and with them, and He calls on them to participate in the salvation of others. We also note that God's humility is such that He even tolerated Ananias' questioning, and patiently convinced him to go see Saul!

We should not neglect the important role that the man of God (our confessor or spiritual guide) plays in our life. Although prayer and the word of God are essential elements for understanding the will of God, the third indispensable part is the man of God. The three building blocks for knowing the Lord's will are thus:

- **the presence of God (prayer & the Eucharist),**
- **the word of God (the Bible),**
- **the man of God (His Disciple the confessor or spiritual guide).**

A second point to note, with respect to choosing Ananias in particular is that (as mentioned earlier) he was an accomplished member of the priesthood, (having been ordained by the apostles Bishop of Damascus). His participation in Saul's conversion was thus necessary in order to, among other things, baptize him. Saint Paul specifically warned Timothy against ordaining inexperienced believers:

Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure. (1 Timothy 5:22)

Many will argue that, since we pray, and since God answers us through His word (the Bible), we neither need the Church, nor intermediaries such as priests or spiritual guides. However, it was pointed out earlier that God speaks to us through His presence (prayer and the Eucharist), His word (the Bible) and His servants

(the priests or spiritual guides). Furthermore, unless we consider the Church "our mother," we cannot address God as "our Father."

It is impossible to serve within the fold of the Church, if the Church played no role in our upbringing.

A very important point to note in Saul's story, is that he obtained his answer **only** after having spent three days fasting and praying.

Saul was famous, quite knowledgeable, well-educated, and fully-versed in the precepts of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, he had to appreciate the fact that his credentials were to no avail in the New Way. He had to acknowledge his need - like we all do - for **an earthly spiritual leader**, and bow his head before Ananias, whose worldly stature was relatively much lower.

The Old Testament gives us a similar example in David, the great king and psalmist, who had to bow his head before the prophet Gad, and who accepted reproach from Nathan the prophet.

Our Lord's ordinance requires us to conduct ourselves in accordance with His will – hence we pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Since our reference point on earth is the Church, those who choose to lead their lives outside the fold of the Church are in direct disagreement with the Lord's will.

Discipleship to, and following in the steps of, those who lived the Bible and preceded us, is essential. Claiming to be "the Bible's disciples" is insufficient. How will we understand it, and how can we apply it, without following their example?

Equally, we need the man of God to guide us to Church membership, through which we can establish a spiritual discipleship with the saints who preceded us. We see that, in Saul's case, he needed Ananias to baptize him and lead him to the Church, and he needed Barnabas to introduce him to the apostles; otherwise, he would have most likely been rejected by believers who, up till then, thought he had come to lead them away in chains.

Listening to the word of God through the Church and the men of God protects us from obeying "voices" claiming to be God's, while being the originators of Church schisms and heresies. Over the past two thousand years, many strayed down this path to perdition – and would have dragged down the Church with them.

It is therefore crucial "**to be told what we must do**" through God's intermediary. We can never be too careful in this regard, especially as Satan's wiles can easily trick us into believing that we are doing "God's will" while, unknowingly, we would be satisfying Satan's. This is precisely why Paul told Timothy:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, (2 Timothy 3:14)

Our spiritual guide will teach us. We are who we are through discipleship of the men of God. It is thus important to know "**by whom you were told.**" This is the "art" of our Orthodox Christian living. It should be noted that in this particular respect worldly doctrine is no different: we are shaped in our professions through our educational instructors. So, why should we lead a different path when it comes to our spiritual life and growth?!! Let us always consult our spiritual father before making decisions – to ensure that the Lord's will is being followed. Satan will not give up his attempts to steer us away from God's will. Acting on the pretext that we are obeying God's voice, when in fact we might not be, carries grave risks that lead to struggles and divisions feeding on people's pride.

One might argue that a very spiritual person, known for performing miracles, would surely be in no need of a spiritual guide. However, we note that all our church forefathers had confessors, regardless of their spiritual standing. Saint John said in this regard:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets

have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:1 - 4)

False Guidance:

Christ explained this to us quite plainly:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:15 & 16)

St. John also warned us:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.(1John 4:1)

The Book of Jeremiah tells us how we can be tricked by the spirits, and thus why we should "**test the spirits:**"

And it happened in the same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year and in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azur the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying, 'Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring back to this

*place all the vessels of the Lord's house, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, with all the captives of Judah who went to Babylon,' says the Lord, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and in the presence of all the people who stood in the house of the Lord, and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! The Lord do so; the Lord perform your words which you have prophesied, to bring back the vessels of the Lord's house and all who were carried away captive, from Babylon to this place. Nevertheless hear now this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: The prophets who have been before me and before you of old prophesied against many countries and great kingdoms-
-of war and disaster and pestilence. As for the prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet comes to pass, the prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent." Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke off the prophet Jeremiah's neck and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'Even so I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years.' " And the prophet Jeremiah went his way. Now the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "Go and tell Hananiah, saying, 'Thus says the*

Lord: "You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made in their place yokes of iron." For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him. I have given him the beasts of the field also." "Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Hear now, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, but you make this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will cast you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have taught rebellion against the Lord.' " So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month. (Jeremiah 28:1 - 6)

Jeremiah is telling a story about his encounter with Hananiah. The years of captivity had already started. Daniel and all the other young men had been taken captive, but Jeremiah was left behind because of his old age. All the people left behind in Jerusalem were thus wondering when the period of captivity would end, and when the Lord would turn His anger away from them. The Lord had already told Jeremiah that the period of captivity would be seventy years. Nevertheless, Hananiah tried to convince Jeremiah that captivity would be over in two years only. Jeremiah's "Amen" was simply his way of mocking Hananiah. Hananiah was saying what the people wanted to hear – not what the Lord said. At the same time, the people disliked Jeremiah because he always seemed to convey messages calling for their repentance – messages which everyone disliked. They had even tied him up!

It is our tendency to prefer listening to optimistic, encouraging, messages; nevertheless, it is infinitely more important to discern those messages that the Lord is sending us, as opposed to Satan's soothing lies.

Therefore, if the message is coming from someone with a proven upright track record, who is neither opportunistic nor self-motivated, and who loves and preaches the risen Christ, then the message is genuine. Attributes of such a man of God are listed in the paragraphs above. We note that when St. John said we should *test the spirits*, he was echoing Christ's "*You will know them by their fruits.*"

Saint Paul furthermore confirms that following false doctrines and deceiving spirits breeds heresies, and leads to apostasy - today's "New Age Movement" and "Mormons" are glaring examples:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1 - 5)

Saint Paul emphasizes his point further:

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. (1 Timothy 6:3 - 5)

Our first and foremost reference should thus be the Bible - the word of God. Our quest should be: genuine piety, pure worship, and earnest holiness.

While Seeking the answer to

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

We should neither be satisfied with asking a friend who loves us, nor an intellectual person who owns a lot of worldly wisdom.

A "faithful" friend may readily side with our views, telling us what we want to hear – or what would make us feel comfortable – with no knowledge of Christ's teachings or the tenets of our faith.

A person who loves us might be reluctant to upset us or make us feel uncomfortable – we would thus likely hear advice intended to make us "feel good," not advice derived from prayers and spiritual wisdom.

Characteristics of a Man of God – Spiritual Leadership:

Consulting a man of God who prays earnestly and who seeks divine spiritual guidance from the Holy Spirit will support and authenticate our sense of direction. His input will protect us against our, sometimes misleading, emotions. Saint Paul corroborates this view in his letter to the Galatians:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood,... (Galatians 1:15 & 16)

He "*did not immediately confer with flesh and blood,*" means that he consulted **only** with Ananias, the apostles, and Barnabas – all of whom were men of God. Had he spoken with, say, his relatives, they might have dismissed his account as "hallucinations." The Jews or Greeks would have equally sought

to discredit him. He knew for a fact that he had to seek direction only from men of God (His true disciple).

We have the following beautiful concluding verses from the Book of Deuteronomy and Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you.... (Deuteronomy 32:7)

For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. (1 Corinthians 4:15)

Both verses accentuate the importance of resorting to our fathers when seeking the will of God. When we ask the Lord in prayer, He answers through His word, the Bible, and our confessor confirms the message. Let us ask ourselves: **"To what extent do we heed our confessor's advice?"**

Our Church has granted us the privilege of discipleship, shepherding and fatherhood. Let us not downplay this privilege – rather, let us use it to our spiritual advantage in finding the answer to this crucial question.

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

The Bible thus tells us that having many years' experience in a relationship with God is important and carries much weight. In the Coptic Church, for example, the elected pope must have spent at least fifteen years as a monk, as a necessary condition.

In order to qualify as "a man of God," the following requirements must be satisfied:

- **a man of prayer (not simply a member of the priesthood),**
- **an accomplished disciple with much experience,**
- **a man consistently yielding to the will of God,**

- **spiritual maturity,**
- **a flexible personality,**
- **full knowledge and conviction that God neither reasons nor acts in human terms, and with God nothing is impossible, and has no aspirations for personal gains.**

Ananias submitted to God's will, despite his apprehension of being the first on Saul's list of Christians to be led away in chains.

A man of God will offer guidance on the basis of his own knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, his closeness to God should lead him to accept unusual situations that transcend human experience.

A man of God's spiritual maturity implies that his views are inspired by the will of God; it follows that it is inappropriate to challenge his decisions.

Let us seek discipleship to, and constant guidance from, a man of God or spiritual guide, who could be our confessor. He will help us discern the Lord's voice and will.

CHAPTER 3

Obstacles & Incentives

We may be unaware that we spent a lifetime treading the wrong path. Our compassionate God will neither level accusations at us, nor utter threats; rather, He reveals our glaring faults lovingly:

I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. (Acts 9:5)

The most beautiful response to this Divine declaration is:

Lord, what do You want me to do? (Acts 9:6)

When we ask this question, we will always find obstacles in realizing our Lord's will. However, we have to trust that our Lord will never leave us to tread under those obstacles, as long as we are honest and sincere in realizing His Will. He will perpetually allow us to experience lots of incentives that encourage us and help us along our struggle.

Obstacles:

While there are incentives leading us to pose this question, there are also obstacles preventing us from asking and/or going by what our Lord tells us to do. Some of those obstacles are:

- This never occurred to us,
- We are firmly convinced that we are doing the right thing,
- We are confident in our ability to plan our future,
- We are afraid of changing the way we are doing things,
- Our logic fails to grasp the advantage of changing our ways,
- Internal conflict between lusts and worldly desires on one hand and spirituality on the other.
- We do not persist in asking.
- Our habits (laziness, procrastination, gossip, insincere prayers)

Obstinate resistance to the voice of the Lord may be due to any or all of the following:

Habits

It is difficult to defeat a habit which disagrees with Christ's teaching: How can we fast when we are used to eating? How can we be watchful when we need to sleep? How can we focus on Christ when our thinking is always on worldly matters? Habits steer us away from listening to God.

Customs

We often feel compelled to follow local customs, simply because "everybody is doing it." We do not stop to ask God if that is really what He wants us to do, or how He wants us to behave. We should also note that generalization could be misleading.

Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. (1 Kings 19:18)

Fear

Fearing to deviate from accepted worldly norms, such as forgiving an aggressor, or not seeking material acquisitions, leads us to ignore God's calling (when Peter feared, he started sinking). We may also have fears of loss, of pain, and of negative people's opinion.

Sufficiency - self-righteousness

Continuing to feel "we are good – we are doing nothing wrong," hinders God's input; this is like having ear plugs. In Revelation we read:

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)

Human Logic

The will of God may defy human logic. Reasoning with God and/or using mortal intelligence will deprive us from the enormous blessing of carrying out what He wants us to do without questioning. In the miracle of feeding the five thousand:

Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little. (John 6:7)

Christ insisted; the resultant blessing was immeasurable. We should eliminate from our vocabulary the expressions "That's impossible!" and "I am simply not convinced!" It was said of Christ that He was crazy, of Saint Paul that he had a warped mind, and of the first Church that it was a group of idiots. That is why Saint Paul said:

Are they ministers of Christ?--I speak as a fool--I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. (2 Corinthians 11:23)

Paul was telling the Corinthians that they should accept him executing the will of God though his behavior might seem irrational. Moses gave another perfect example: leading two million people into the sea hardly seemed like a logical thing to do; but that was the will of God.

Worldly lusts and desires

Our desires and physical ambitions will create internal conflicts against our spiritual needs. Seeking honor and prominent positions disagrees with selflessness and humility. It is impossible to hear the word of the Lord amidst the row of earthly desires without first purifying our minds from its maelstrom of worldly thoughts. It is impossible to hear "*I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting,*" eliciting the response

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

It is imperative that we eliminate all impediments to our consistently asking God

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

The Lord's answer to this question will lead us to do what is required of us, and will prepare us for eternity.

Incentives

Despite any of the impediments listed above, we ought to cling to asking this crucial question same as Saul asked it most sincerely. We also need to take St. Paul as our role model in the face that ever since this incident, throughout the subsequent years, he remained committed to live in accordance with the Lord's plan for him.

Let us contemplate some incentives that drive us to ask this very important question:

Love

St. Paul narrated the story of his meeting with our Lord three times (Acts 9, 22 and 26). He revealed to us in his narrative that he did love the Lord, and that persecuting Christians did not constitute, in his then twisted mind, anything wrong. He thought

that he was simply doing what his rationale told him was the correct way to serve the God Whom he worshipped.

We meet people around us who, unknowingly moved by Satan, are serving earnestly and doing, what they wrongly perceive as, the "will of God." Such people may be easily enlightened and turned around by God. This is why we believe that God is capable of working with, and through, those who persecute His children under the guise of "love of God."

Saul was a very intelligent and knowledgeable individual, who had studied the scriptures, and who appreciated quite well that God appeared many times to humans such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Solomon. Nevertheless, he was shocked to discover that the God Who appeared to him **was in fact Christ** Whom he hated and was persecuting! Even more puzzling to Saul was the fact that the Almighty God chose not to crush him; rather, He spoke to him warmly, gently telling him that Christ loved him despite his misguided ideas. This was evident in Christ's calling Saul by name. Isaiah confers this meaning:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

Furthermore, St. Paul told the Galatians:

Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ)... (Galatians 1:1)

The message that Saul understood clearly was that despite his having persecuted Christ, Christ still loved him and invited him to work with Him. That reality shook Paul's being to the core. Christ fathomed Saul's heart; He knew that the spark of sincere love of God in Saul's heart could and would be directed to fire the correct zeal in Christ's service. Christ showed Saul that although he knew him quite well he had yet to learn much about Christ.

Christ's love is unconditional. Humans' expressions of love, on the other hand, are always conditional: "I love you because....."

The more we love God, the more we would be driven by our love to ask this crucial question:

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Such a question seeks God's guidance in relationships, work, health, and any other situation we meet throughout our life. It is the defining line between reacting to various situations relying on human wisdom, versus conducting oneself in accordance with God's will. If our love for God were sufficient, that question would preoccupy us twenty-four hours a day.

Saul's asking this question carried a **commitment to do what the Lord desires no matter what it would cost him**. He, therefore, gave up all his prior beliefs and life attitudes succumbing totally to what our Lord instructed him to do. St. Paul would then change his service route in accordance to what our Lord told him to do. The abrupt, change in Saul's life, after his encounter with Christ, during which he asked Him ***"What do you want me to do?"*** is evident: he turned from searching out Christians and methodically exterminating them, to searching out unbelievers and methodically preaching salvation to them!

We ought to be sincere in asking our Lord what He wishes for our lives. Moreover, we need to do that with great love. In praying, many times we recite the Lord's prayer mechanically, failing to realize that when we say: **"Thy will be done"** we are in fact asking our heavenly Father Whom we love and who loves us unconditionally. We fail to realize that His response is indeed always for our good, no matter hard it appears to be. Our lack of trust in God's love and our insufficient love for Him lead us to pay insufficient attention to His will or to recite those words mechanically without honestly wishing to know the answer.

Enlightenment

Often, we treat our Lord the same way we treat fellow humans. It is incorrect to assume that, having committed a sin, God

will no longer listen to our prayers. That is not the nature of God Whom we worship. It should be noted that Christ's love for Saul was unchecked by Saul's persistent persecutions.

It is indeed true that our Lord Jesus Christ knows, and is interested in, every minute detail, and each passing moment, in our lives including any good or bad. Christ's purpose, though, is neither to compile a list of our transgressions, nor to give us "points" each time we pray or perform a good act. This is not His way. His love for human beings is unconditional. He will never harbor hate or resentment against any human being even the most wicked or evil. Saul, who used to follow the rules of the Law meticulously, later on became St. Paul who discovered that God is not interested in formalities, and is not a "Pharisee," Who rewards Pharisees for memorizing, and literally following the Law.

In Matthew's Gospel we read:

He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:45)

This new, enlightening, knowledge, of Who Christ really is, makes us ask sincerely, "***Lord, what do You want me to do?***" In this regard, Paul told the Romans:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1 & 2)

Thus, St. Paul's main realization was that it is "***the renewing of minds,***" which motivates us to seek and follow God's will, rather than our own. He also alerts us to, and warns us against the

main worldly principle of **conforming to “this world”**, hence being always preoccupied by asking:

What do I want to do?

This is the question driving worldly activities: I sleep or eat whenever I want, I yell whenever I feel the urge, I seek honor, recognition and wealth whenever I see the occasion, etc. Worldly wisdom thus introduced the radical change: from:

"What do You want me to do?"

to

"What do I want to do?"

However, we should be fully convinced and attuned to the fact that whatever God desires for us is infinitely better, sweeter and more beneficial to us, than whatever our human minds can ever aspire to achieve.

St. Paul consistently lived and preached the principles given above, throughout his evangelical journeys. Therefore, while admonishing the Galatians and Corinthians, he praised the Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians, especially during his imprisonment, for their uprightness.

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Colossians 1:9)

Although they were godly, St. Paul found it necessary to pray for them, since they had not yet attained the level of enlightenment and wisdom necessary for **discerning the will of God**. He reiterates the same sentiment of unceasing prayers and thanksgiving to the Ephesians:

.....do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of

wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. (Ephesians 1:16 - 19)

He is also telling them that they had yet to enter the beautiful land of understanding the will of God.

Repentance & Confession

Repentance means a complete change of direction: from persisting in following our own rationale, to asking God what He wants and following His will. Christ told Saul:

"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

The goads are sharp sticks used to prod cattle for keeping them on the right track. Ignoring (or "kicking") the goads resulted in sharp pain; but it was this pain that helped bring back the lost animals on track.

Christ was lovingly telling Saul that his misguided path and continued resistance to Christ would only result in his own pain and suffering. The message to us is that we should be alert to, and never resist, God's prodding (that usually has the aim of putting us on track).

Once this realization hit Paul, he never stopped racing in the direction Christ had charted for him; he told the Corinthians and Philippians:

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. (1 Corinthians 9:24)

And

I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14)

Let us not waste our lives resisting God's calling!

In a nutshell, we should be motivated to race - but **in the right direction.**

Thus Christ 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. (Matthew 7:13)

Repentance is never complete if not coupled with the Sacrament of Confession in which the priest practices the authority given by our Lord to forgive sins and offers guidance to the repentant as to how to evade such sins again.

Holy Fear

Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:4 - 9)

The Bible tells us that Saul *“fell to the ground”* and that he was *“trembling and astonished.”* This feeling of being at once terrified and perplexed created a lasting impression on Saul. All the subsequent years of his life were built on that moment and those feelings of awe (holy fear).

Adherence to an upright spiritual life is driven by this important incentive of "Holy Fear." Although our trust in God's mercy is necessary and well-placed, it should not lead to laxness or complacency. A touch of "holy fear" injects more seriousness into our lives, motivates us to seek the will of God, and lends more urgency to our finding the answer to:

“Lord, what do You want me to do?”

There are various factors that initiate this feeling of Holy Fear:

1. Unexpected hour:

We should be fearful about the day we will face our Lord. Fear is instilled within us bringing about regret for our past sins, iniquities and failure to obey God's will. We get fearful when we will realize that if (God forbid) one's hour is here and we are not ready, we will end up in eternal hell. Holy fear is thus tied to past sins and the ominous realization that soon we will have to be accountable before the Almighty.

"We fear the past, and we fear that tomorrow will race past us just like yesterday did....."

Since we know that this fast-approaching day is inevitable, why wait until it is too late?!!

2. Feeling lost:

It is very disturbing indeed, to feel that we are completely lost and wandering aimlessly in a life that is rapidly winding down. During their last moments, many people will yearn for a second chance to right the wrongs they had done.

Loving God is not opposed to fearing Him. As a matter of fact both are completely congruent. We, therefore, should be awed by His presence during the liturgy, while praying, while reading His word, and while serving Him.

The Conscience

Our conscience motivates us to seek the Lord's will. Saint Paul once made a striking public confession:

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. (Acts 23:1)

Blessed and happy indeed are those who have consistently pleased their conscience, and who can boast a spotless lifetime of godly fear.

Our forefathers agreed that "*adversary*" in the following Biblical passage refers to our **conscience**, which will bear witness against us before the Holy Throne:

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. (Matthew 5:25)

Hence, failing to "*agree with your adversary quickly*," means "**failing to agree with your conscience**" throughout your lifetime. Also, "*lest your adversary deliver you to the judge*,"

means that your conscience will otherwise testify against you before the Almighty Judge.

Agreeing with our conscience means we should never ignore its prompting to do that which is right. Saint Paul said:

although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:13)

Saul persecuted Christians in ignorance, believing that he was really doing the will of God. From the moment he **genuinely** yielded to the will of God, he "***lived in all good conscience,***" and he was confident of God's mercy. He went on to tell Timothy:

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:15)

Our conscience will thus constantly push us to please the Lord, and steer us to obey God, rather than our own judgment.

Speaking about his conscience once more, Paul said:

This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. (Acts 24:16)

This passage carries a critical message: we can be responsive to a sensitized conscience, or we can labor to dull our conscience leading, ultimately, to having a dead conscience.

Alert, versus dead, conscience:

We have a choice of either training our conscience to be alert and sensitive to the least irregularity, as opposed to giving it full reign to "go with the flow." Examples are those who fear God and strictly observe Christ's teachings and commandments to love, refrain from adultery and act honestly in all they do, versus those who accept to be swept with the generally-accepted tide of

belligerence, fornication and dishonesty. The first group yields to the will of God through a sensitized conscience, while the second deliberately dull their conscience into doing and rationalizing anything they please.

David the prophet passed through two distinct stages of his life: in the first, his conscience was highly sensitized, while in the second it was dead.

Then Saul took three thousand chosen men.....and went to seek David.....So he came to....a cave.....David and his men were staying in the recesses of the cave. Then the men of David said to him, "This is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you.' " And David arose and secretly cut off a corner of Saul's robe. Now...David's heart troubled him because he had cut Saul's robe. And he said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to....the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him.... (1 Samuel 24:2 - 6)

At this stage, David's conscience was so sensitive that his heart troubled him for having cut off a corner of the robe of the Lord's anointed one!

David's dead conscience – murder of Uriah the Hittite – David had distanced himself from the Lord:

The following Biblical passage shows the remarkable change that took place in David's conscience:

Then ... one evening ... David ... saw a woman ... and the woman was very beautiful ... So David ...inquired about the woman. And someone said, "Is this not Bathsheba ... the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David ...wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, "Set Uriah in the forefront of

the hottest battle ... that he may be struck down and die."
So it was ... Uriah the Hittite died ... David sent and brought her [Bathsheba] to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. (2 Samuel 11:2 - 27)

How can one person's conscience be troubled for cutting the hem of his master's robe, yet remain untroubled while murdering a man for the sake of committing adultery with his wife? David's conscience had died. Later on David woke up to his senses when the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to reproach him. Holy fear tempers the conscience, and sensitizes it to the voice and will of the Lord.

+ Are the Holy Spirit and the conscience one and the same?

The Holy Spirit is not the same as the conscience. Many unbelievers have alert consciences, but they do not have "God" inside them. **The Holy Spirit dwelling inside us sanctifies our conscience and elevates its level of tempering and reproach, thus prodding us to become increasingly Christ-like.** Responding to the Holy Spirit within us raises us to the level of holiness and godliness that our Lord wishes us to have/be like. Thus, it is not simply a matter of having good manners or a good conscience. It is impossible for the Holy Spirit to err. The conscience, on the other hand, could make mistakes.

The Bible tells us:

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. (John 16:8)

The Holy Spirit dwelling in us will prompt us not to commit any kind of sin. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit will provide the answer to :

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

The Holy Spirit convicts on three levels:

of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:9 - 11)

➤ **He convicts of sin:**

Christ characterized sin as "lack of faith;" therefore, when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, He is convicting us for absence of faith. Our potential to err is eliminated by trusting Christ fully.

➤ **He convicts us of righteousness:**

Christ said, "***because I go to My Father and you see Me no more.***" The interpretation is that since Christ, the source of all righteousness, is no longer within our field of vision, following His resurrection, the Holy Spirit maintains Him at the fore of our minds at all times; He thus drives us, not simply to refrain from sin, rather, He convicts us whenever we are not **Christ-like** in every aspect of life.

➤ **He convicts us of judgment:**

Since "***the ruler of this world is judged,***" our excuse that "Satan made me do it" is unacceptable. Satan has been vanquished; therefore, a prayer-less life, and indulgence in sin, are due solely to laziness, negligence, and disregarding the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

➤ **The Holy Spirit provides the answer to "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*"**

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He

will speak; and He will tell you things to come."He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12 - 14)

Also:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (John 14:26)

Therefore, through the Holy Spirit, a voice within us will steer us away from sin, guiding us to forgive, serve, reach out, and conduct ourselves in a Christ-like fashion.

Spiritual Enthusiasm (Zeal)

Spiritual enthusiasm motivates us to seek the Lord's will. Let us contemplate the plot against St. Paul in Jerusalem.

Seven years after Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, St. Paul insisted on leaving Asia and Europe and going to Jerusalem despite attempts by his followers to dissuade him, warning him that he would be persecuted and tortured there.

When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit,...to go to Jerusalem, (Acts 19:21)

Paul agreed to demonstrate to the Jews in Jerusalem that he respected their customs; he therefore purified, in the temple, four young men who had taken vows, and spent with them the seven days required for purification.

Nevertheless, the Jews were dissatisfied and sought to kill him. Having seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, accompanying Paul in the city, they incorrectly assumed that Paul took him inside the temple which, to them, was a criminal offence. They thus tried to

kill him. The Roman soldiers then rescued him from the mob and, on the way to their barracks, the following dialogue took place:

Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek?"... Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people. (Acts 21:37 & 39)

Paul testifies concerning himself and how his faith started. Paul's wisdom was such that he addressed the Roman commander in Greek, and the Jewish multitude in Hebrew, thereby commanding their attention:

Brethren and fathers ... I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death ... as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me,

***'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.'* (Acts 22:1 - 10)**

The underlined text shows Paul's zeal in executing what he thought was the will of God. Zeal, or spiritual enthusiasm, refers to the extent of a person's keenness, or the degree of ardor in a person's prayer or service. In a similar vein, Paul told the Galatians:

But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you. (Galatians 4:18)

Saint John also tells us:

Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up." (John 2:17)

Paul furthermore told the Hebrews:

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come-- In the volume of the book it is written of Me-- to do Your will, O God. (Hebrews 10:5 - 7)

Paul preferred to say, concerning Christ, "***He came into the world,***" instead of "He was born;" that was to dispel any doubts about Christ's Eternal Existence. In those verses to the Hebrews, Paul is emphasizing:

- Christ is the Most High Priest.
- Christ is the Incarnate God.

- Christ fulfills the prophecies, and Old Testament sacrifices are now to no avail.
- Christ's telling the Father "***but a body You have prepared for Me***" means that Christ is asking the Father for a body with which He can complete His atoning work.
- Finally, "***In the volume of the book it is written of Me-- to do Your will, O God***" means that as stated in the prophecies, the Person of Christ is coming into the world to do the will of God.

Christ therefore came into the world to perform **zealously** the will of God. That was precisely the reason for Christ's saying:

Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done. (Luke 22:42)

And:

But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here. (John 14:31)

Also:

Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. (John 12:27)

Paul thus emphasizes that sacrifices and offerings are now obsolete, since they do not represent the will of God. Presently, the will of God is the atoning work that Christ completed. Paul's enthusiasm for the law was transferred to Christianity after his transformation.

In a nutshell, zealously doing the will of God is infinitely more pleasing to Him than sacrifices, burnt offerings, or even giving beyond the required tithe.

Role Model

Role models are among the most significant incentives for us to do the Lord's will. A perfect example is that of children watching their parents pray time and time again. This is much more effective, especially in the long run, than simply instructing them to pray. It is important for us to seek and follow a godly role model – to attach ourselves to an upright person whom we love and respect, and to follow in the footsteps of those who preceded us to Heaven. Thus we will discern the will of the Lord. The Song of Solomon expounds this:

The Beloved If you do not know, O fairest among women, follow in the footsteps of the flock, and feed your little goats beside the shepherds' tents. (Song of Solomon 1:8)

In this respect, Saint Paul tells Timothy:

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance (2 Timothy 3:10)

We do not know the details surrounding the seven traits which Paul itemized, but Paul was not worried, since he knew that Timothy, after years of discipleship, would follow in his footsteps. It should also be noted that we may be shaping our life in accordance with a role model involuntarily, or unknowingly. The Old Testament also gives us another perfect example, that of Elisha following in the footsteps of Elijah.

Saint Stephen had a lasting effect on Saul:

Many scholars agree that Stephen's stoning produced an indelible impression on Saul's mind since, thirty years later, the latter said:

And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and

guarding the clothes of those who were killing him. (Acts 22:20)

His prayer for the Jews who tortured him was also in the same spirit as Stephen's. We should search diligently for those whom the Lord planted in our lives to set an example for us, and to do His will.

To recap ...

- Holy fear is a strong drive for leading an upright spiritual life and for seeking the Lord's will.
- Maintaining an alert conscience to the Holy Spirit's prompting will steer us along the godly path that God desires for us.
- We must be careful not to dull our conscience; this, in turn, will grieve the Holy Spirit Who in-dwells us.
- We must follow Christ's zeal in doing the will of God.
- Let us seek a role model and ask ourselves: "Whom did God put in our life, whose example we should in order to do His will?"

CHAPTER 4

Perplexity & Discouragement

First: Perplexity

At times we may find that, despite our having asked "**Lord, what do You want me to do?**" we find ourselves perplexed. Let us therefore look again at our biblical text:

So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:6 - 9)

Saint Paul's perplexity:

The full picture was by no means clear to Saint Paul, even after he had regained his eyesight. He spent three days in utter bewilderment, hence:

- Why was I blinded?
- Will I ever see again?
- Why did the Lord not answer me?
- Will He ever forgive me?
- Has my professional life ended?
- Is there a certain mission in store for me?
- Why did the Lord direct me to proceed to Damascus instead of giving me directions there and then?

All those questions gave rise to perplexity. Paul encountered Christ, and heard His voice – yet he was perplexed and, in his mind, many questions remained unanswered.

At the Lord's instruction, Ananias went to see Paul, baptized him, and cured his blindness. Paul was probably reassured, and he thought he would preach successfully in Damascus and Jerusalem. However, he met significant resistance and adversity in both places. He was more perplexed than ever: why did the Lord appear to him, dispatch Ananias to heal him miraculously and tell him that he was a chosen vessel while, on the other hand, avenues for his service were, apparently, blocked?!! He subsequently returned to Tarsus. We read in Acts 9:

Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. (Acts 9:23 - 25)

In Damascus, he encountered the first problem coz when he had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. He was therefore unable to serve.

Now, in Jerusalem, they tried to kill him.

When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. (Acts 9:26, 29, 30)

They sent him back to his hometown for his apparent failure to serve.

At the beginning of his service life, Saint Paul's feelings resembled those of a servant who spends many months, at the start of his service, unable to do anything. Such sentiments are quite difficult. Paul tried to rationalize the sequence of events which had befallen him.

Experiencing periods of perplexity should not surprise us. It is not unusual for us to entreat the Lord, pray ardently and seek His answer, yet see no immediate answer. The important message is that, having asked "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" we should not expect immediate answers, relief or clarity of vision.

Why does God permit periods of perplexity?

1. God allows us to experience periods of perplexity and an unclear vision **to induce us to pray more, since more prayer leads to a purer heart.** God knows that, if His answer comes quickly, we may become lax in prayers (we have received what we asked for - why pray more?) A pure heart will ultimately lead us to see God - this is heaven. Periods of perplexity are thus the best forum for growth in prayer. Let us rest assured that all prayers, however short they may be, are answered in God's way and in His own timing. Clearly, our Lord had a perfect vision of Paul's life from beginning to end; He could have told him precisely what to expect over the following days and months. But the Lord chose to let Paul know what he needed to know on a daily basis.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:34)

Is the Lord here today, and gone tomorrow?? Of course not - the Lord will give us answers day-by-day, as the need arises.....Believers do not need a long-range plan - God is in charge.

2. Pride is treated through perplexity. Feeling perplexed reduces our haughtiness and self-confidence, and brings us closer to being poor in spirit.

A perplexed person is too weary to feel proud, confident or conceited. Therefore, by allowing periods of perplexity to creep into our lives, God is treating our boastfulness. Coincidentally, though, our level of understanding God's ways is also reduced.

All of the above leads to the ultimate goal of increased prayer and humility.

3. Perplexity edifies our calling and deepens our spiritual stature.

Paul's self-confidence was likely shaken, despite his long-standing self-assurance. Saul was a distinguished, ardent, Pharisee, with unmatched zeal. It must have been quite difficult for him to sense that, apparently, he was considered a failure. He spent several years wondering what the Lord expected him to do.

Nevertheless, his life later became an unstoppable whirlwind of activity, moved by the hand of God. The reason was because his calling was edified - he submitted totally to God's will, evangelizing in Asia and Europe. God's work through him was unprecedented.

Saul of Tarsus - Paul - thus authored half the New Testament and preached the word to half the world. The path to such achievements consisted of initial perplexity, self-control, faintheartedness, and low self esteem: "*.....when his eyes were opened he saw no one.*"

This leads us to follow closely the stages of perplexity:

When we experience perplexity, we find that some things are quite clear, while others are not. In other words, some aspects

of a particular project or undertaking may be clearly in accordance with God's will. But some grey areas, may leave us wondering what it is that God really wants.

Perplexity & the Men of God

The Disciples' perplexity:

When the disciples' boat was struck by the stormy sea, they felt their lives were threatened; Christ then appeared, and hailed them, as He walked on the water - but the storm continued to rage! This is the Lord's will: that we persevere in prayer, that our faith in Him remains unwavering - Christ will appear to open doors, but not all of them.....

Similarly, we may encounter difficulties in our service - this is God's way: we should not expect to have perfect vision and smooth sailing all the time.

Positives and negatives will continue to co-exist in our life; we must always be in constant need, experiencing a touch of perplexity...

Like Saint Paul, no one who started serving the Lord could predict how their lives would end.

Perplexity in the Life of Moses:

Moses spent forty years of his life perplexed. He must have wondered, despite his good intentions and his zeal for the deliverance of the Lord's people, why did God allow him to lose his temper and kill the Egyptian? Nevertheless, after forty years, God revealed this plan divine.

Hence, at the end of Moses life, the period of perplexity was forgotten. He had no regrets about the forty years, and his faith in God's plan was unshakable.

Perplexity may last a long time, indeed, a lifetime. But the Lord will reveal at the end that it was all for our good with God, nothing is too late.

Perplexity in the Life of Joseph:

Joseph felt that he had done nothing which merited the evil treatment he received at his brothers' hands. He also wondered why, despite his father's piety, the Lord had not returned him to his father's bosom. He must have also wondered why, as a reward for his good behavior in Potiphar's house, he was thrown in jail! Overall, he may have thought the Lord had forgotten about him for the best part of fifteen years!

However, after God's plan had unfolded, Joseph ended up saving his own family in addition to many nations from starvation, and he brought his family to live with him in Egypt. Like Moses, he had no regrets about those years of perplexity, and his relationship with God remained stronger than ever.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

Patience during our periods of perplexity and asking our Lord to enlighten us with His answers will reward us with eventually finding out and enjoying the fruits of God's perfect plan.

Perplexity in the Life of Daniel:

Daniel had a fervent desire to go to Jerusalem. He lived many years through the Babylonian captivity and, in his old age, he prayed ardently to the Lord, to let his people return to Jerusalem before his death. He spent sixty years in perplexity and in captivity. The Lord promised him that he would return to Jerusalem with his people, and that the Incarnate Lord Himself

would stand in the temple in Jerusalem after 452 years! Needless to say, this more than satisfied Daniel.....

Perplexity soon drops out of memory. The most important thing is never to give up and never to lapse into a careless or desperate attitude.

Paul's Perplexity:

After Paul had regained his eyesight through Ananias, we can imagine a dialogue between them whereby Paul may have told Ananias that he thought he understood what his mission would be, and that he would be expected to use his expertise and knowledge in convincing the high priests, and in spreading the Gospel in Jerusalem, Damascus and Tarsus. Ananias, on the other hand, likely pointed out to him that his understanding was completely wrong, and that his mission would be to the Gentiles. The prospect of having to face off with well-known Greek philosophers was quite daunting to Paul, and we see his sentiments reflected in his letter to the Corinthians:

I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. (1 Corinthians 2:3)

Compared to the Greek philosophers, Paul was a beginner. Nevertheless, the Lord wanted to demonstrate to him that his reliance should be on the Lord, rather than on his own wisdom or knowledge. Therefore, Paul subsequently said:

And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,.. (1 Corinthians 2:4)

The Lord's infinite wisdom was such that He delayed Paul's usage of his talents. The message here is that we should never jump to the conclusion that we "finally" understand God's plan. Here is what the Bible says:

Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this. (John 13:7)

We often understand situations shortly or long after they had taken place. The understanding of certain perplexing circumstances may take many years or it may not happen at all in our earthly lifetime.

Perplexity in the Lives of the late Popes Kyrillos VI and Pope Shenouda III:

At the time those two great popes decided to become monks, they had no way of knowing the Lord's destiny for them. They probably thought that they would simply drift into oblivion, and lead a quiet life of prayer, meditation and solitude. Although having become leading religious and spiritual leaders for the Lord's congregation was in the Lord's plan, it certainly was not in their minds. But it turned out that our Lord had for each of them a totally different role that history would record.

Fasting and Prayer in times of perplexity:

In his zealous quest for understanding, Paul learned an important spiritual lesson that we too need to be very clear about in our pursuit of what our Lord's will is for our lives. This lesson is that our minds and spirits become enlightened through **fasting and prayer**.

Acts 10:1 – 35 tells us that Peter, having gone up to the housetop to pray at noon, fell into a trance (sleep with vision), after which his understanding, with respect to God's intent, became clearer. About three hours later, a man named Cornelius, living in another town, and having also fasted and prayed, was told by an angel to summon someone called Simon Peter. We can see that:

- Paul fasted and prayed for three days, after which the scales started falling from his eyes.
- Peter, having fasted and prayed, understood what was meant by reaching out to the Gentiles.
- Cornelius was fasting and praying before understanding that the message would come from Peter.

Therefore, fasting and prayer are the most effective catalyst for promoting our clarity of perception in times of perplexity; only then will the scales fall from our eyes.

It should be noted though, that fasting is not just abstaining from food consumption; rather, such abstention should be accompanied by meditation and deep spiritual contemplation.

When Paul was blinded, he subsequently blocked all his senses, and spent three days focusing his mind on the Old Testament prophecies; he discovered that the Christ Whom he had seen was, in fact, the Christ about Whom Isaiah and David had prophesied. He also understood that God's will would be communicated to him through the man of God, Ananias.

We must, therefore, neither jump to conclusions, nor hasten to make decisions, nor heed people's viewpoints. Rather, we should calm down, and persist in our fasting and prayer.

Seclusion at times of perplexity:

A typical example of the necessity of spending some time in seclusion in times of perplexity is given by Job. When his friends tried to rationalize his sudden misfortunes, they caused him much heartache, and impeded his understanding of the Lord – because all their efforts relied on human reasoning. They thus suggested that the cause was his children's wickedness, or the Lord's anger. That is why he told them to be quiet and allow the Lord to speak.

Spending time fasting and praying **in seclusion** plays an important role in clearing up perplexities. This is what the Bible says in this respect:

In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)

Let us take time to communicate with God and understand His will – the scales will then fall from our eyes. Periods of seclusion help us understand God's will. A monk once said:

"Silence your tongue so that your heart may speak, and silence your heart so that the Lord may speak."

Our prayers should be unceasing in order to know the will of God. As long as the Lord has not answered our question "**Lord, what do You want me to do?**" we must continue praying.

In the apocryphal Book of Judith, we read about a beautiful, pious, widow named Judith, who lived at the time when the Israelites were besieged by the Assyrians. The Israelites had grown weary, and were about to surrender. Judith, however, told them that seeing it is highly improper to dictate a timetable to the Lord, they should give her a chance to fast and pray for a few days, and to entreat the Lord on their behalf. They agreed, and the Lord responded after her period of fasting and prayer in seclusion. Accordingly, we should:

- never attempt to determine the Lord's schedule,
- continue praying, having failed to understand the Lord's will,
- spend time in seclusion while praying and fasting,
- persevere in our struggle and prayer, having understood the Lord's will,
- pray when the Lord does not answer us,
- pray and give thanks when the Lord answers us, and

- pray for clarity of vision when the Lord's will becomes known.

Second: Discouragement

Most certainly, the Lord does not want us to be discouraged. Discouragement and the Lord's will are diametrically opposed, since, to a person leading a life of faith and submission, everything is acceptable, and **nothing should cause discouragement**. Discouragement, indicates that we are not living in accordance to God's will.

Causes

Here are some examples of situations that could lead to discouragement:

- **We prayed a lot**, yet circumstances worsened (in our view). But maybe we prayed for a certain thing to happen not asking for the most important thing, i.e. His Peace, no matter how the situation turns out.
- **Disturbing news**, We may get discouraged at hearing any news which is not in accordance to what “we” think best. Our disturbance reflects the fact that we are not really trust our Lord’s words, namely that everything is for the good of His children.
- **False interpretation of prophecies**: Some people may "authoritatively" claim that certain prophecies or promises never materialized. Believing such false interpretations leads us to question our faith. In turn, we would feel discouraged – since, apparently, the promises we had been clinging to, turned out to be untrue.
- **Pessimism over the general outlook**: We may sometimes feel discouraged by seemingly adverse

political tendencies, fear-mongering rumors, demoralizing surroundings, and people's negative attitudes in general. Having a pessimistic disposition and being overly sensitive to exaggerations and misinformation could lead to discouragement and depression.

- **The end is near:** Discouragement could also be the result of interpreting all circumstances as indicative of doom, mass martyrdom, and the end of the world.

Discouragement, therefore, may have some logical explanations, but definitely no spiritual basis. On the other hand, a believer's feeling of discouragement is indicative of spiritual poverty, wavering faith, or insufficient prayer.

Biblical personages who experienced discouragement:

Although we should be careful not to fall into those feelings of discouragement, we have to bear in mind that we are neither the first, nor the last, human beings to periodically experience discouragement. The following are some biblical examples:

- **Joseph**

Joseph represents the Bible's perfect example of discouragement. His brothers threw him in a pit – and sold him a while later. Being unaware that his brothers reported to his father that he was killed, most likely he expected his father to go and rescue him. Joseph had a certain logical scenario in his mind – especially as he was innocent of any wrong doing. However the months passed and his father never came. He must have experienced periods of discouragement. But, having been well brought up in spirituality, he worked honestly in Egypt, and

Potiphar "*...made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority....*" (Genesis 39:4).

Just when things were looking up for Joseph, Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. When he turned down her advances, she screamed for help. He thought that, surely, the other slaves would come forward and testify that he was innocent and had been unfairly accused. However, no one came forward and he was thrown in jail. Now the chances of his father ever finding him were almost nil. That must have been significantly discouraging!

Joseph's honesty earned him a high position in jail. At some point, two government officials were imprisoned with him. One of them subsequently had a dream, and Joseph correctly interpreted the dream to mean that the official would be reinstated to his former position. Joseph entreated him to plead his case seeing that he had been unfairly jailed. The official promised to have his release signed within three days.

Joseph fully anticipated his release from jail. However, the days went by, the official forgot all about Joseph – and nothing happened. Hence, Joseph was quite discouraged, since his father never came for him, he was unfairly thrown in jail, the promise for his release was forgotten, and the Lord was allowing this injustice to continue.

Two years later, when Pharaoh sought an interpretation for his dream, the minister remembered the promise he had made to the Hebrew boy who knew how to interpret dreams correctly!

Joseph's initial discouragement turned later on to become great news and achievements: he ruled Egypt for several years and saved it together with the neighboring towns as well as his own family from starvation, and he sustained his family for many years in Egypt. Once again, the will of God yielded perfect results.

- **Nehemiah**

During Nehemiah's initiative to rebuild the wall, he was faced with several discouraging developments:

Then Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall." And our adversaries said, "They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease." (Nehemiah 4:10 & 11)

Hence, they were getting tired (a discouraging factor by itself), transporting all the rubbish was quite daunting, and the fear of being killed by the enemy topped it all!

It is a well-known fact in the annals of history that the media plays a significant adverse psychological role causing discouragement. In Nehemiah's case, Judah was scared and discouraged because of unfounded fear-mongering. They were discouraged simply because of rumors! But Nehemiah's firm faith and hope in God surpassed all such discouragement. He said:

Our God will fight for us. (Nehemiah 4:20)

Triumph then replaced discouragement, and the wall was built in fifty-two days.

- **Jeremiah**

Jeremiah, one of the prophets of the period of captivity, spent his entire fifty-year service life feeling discouraged although everything was later on repaired. He is labelled "the lamenting prophet" since he pleaded with the Israelites to repent and they did not heed him, he witnessed the Babylonians burning down the temple and slaughtering the Jews, and he wrote the *Book of Lamentations* (part of which is read during Good Friday service).

The Babylonians made peace with Jeremiah and, when offered a choice, he chose to remain close to the temple; thus, he was not taken captive along with (the much younger) Daniel, and Ezekiel.

The Jewish remnants in Jerusalem then asked Jeremiah to enquire of the Lord as to whether they should go to Egypt; they promised to do as he said, acknowledging that they had ignored him in the past.

After having fasted and prayed for ten days, the Lord told him to tell the people not to go to Egypt. He gathered the leaders and delivered the Lord's message. Nevertheless, they told him that he did not know what he was talking about, and that they would go to Egypt anyway.

Of course he was frustrated and protested reminding them that they had promised to obey the Lord. He added:

you made a fatal mistake when you sent me to the LORD your God and said, 'Pray to the LORD our God for us; tell us everything he says and we will do it.' ... I have told you today, but you still have not obeyed the LORD your God in all he sent me to tell you. So now, be sure of this: You will die by the sword, famine and plague in the place where you want to go to settle." (Jeremiah 42:20-22)

So they went down to Egypt, against the Lord's will; they even took Jeremiah with them as prisoner and stoned him to death in Egypt. Needless to say, their fate in Egypt was precisely as Jeremiah had prophesied.

God encouraged the crest-fallen Jeremiah saying:

.....After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you (Jeremiah 29:10)

Jeremiah transmitted the message to the Jews, but he departed from this world prior to fulfillment of his prophecy.

Through the eye of faith, Jeremiah saw the return from captivity and the ensuing blessings. Daniel took over his mission, and departed about one year before the end of captivity.

• **The woman with the flow of blood**

The Bible tells us that this woman, had

a flow of blood for twelve years (and)... had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any (Luke 8:43)

She had several reasons for feeling discouraged:

- she had spent all her money on physicians,
- her affliction could not be cured,
- her hopes, which she had placed on money and physicians, were all shattered, and
- being Jewish, she felt unclean.

Her situation was very discouraging indeed: she had spent twelve years praying to no avail and, at the same time, her poverty, anemia, and uncleanness were all increasing.

After twelve years of profound discouragement, she met Christ: He cured her instantly, she became a saint, and we seek her intercessions. Discouragement is indeed sweet when coupled with firm faith and hope in our Lord. It is then succeeded by the exceeding joy as God's plan unfolds.

• **The two Disciples of Emmaus:**

The two disciples (two of the seventy apostles) who encountered Christ on the road to Emmaus, felt their rosy dreams had been dashed. They had dreams of Christ their deliverer,

expelling the Romans and assigning them high positions in an earthly kingdom. They felt discouraged when their dreams perished with Christ's sudden death (They told Jesus (before recognizing that it was Him, that they were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel, but that this didn't happen.) They were talking to Christ, Who was walking beside them! They were quite discouraged and wishing they had not set their eyes on such high expectations.

Nevertheless, the Person to Whom they were complaining, said,

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? (vs. 25 and 26)

The exultation which then enveloped them lasted all their lives – they were so overjoyed that they rushed to Jerusalem to proclaim to the other disciples – “Christ is Risen!” Their initial, logical, disillusionment, was replaced by great joy – since the results of God's will (hence, Resurrection) far exceed our wildest expectations. Christ walks with us, whenever we feel significantly discouraged, but oftentimes we do not give ourselves the chance to recognize His Holy Presence. We, therefore, flunk our chance of gaining all the blessings that He wishes to give us during times of discouragement or weariness.

- **Saint Paul**

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul said:

For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. (2 Corinthians 7:5)

Even St. Paul, to whom our Lord revealed Himself and whose one and only preoccupation was spreading the Good News

experienced periods of discouragement. Imagine the great Saint – namely St. Paul, saying "***we were troubled on every side...!!!***"

As was the case with Nehemiah, discouragement is usually the outcome of several factors. Applying this to Saint Paul's letter, he says: "***...outside were conflicts, inside were fears.***" In other words, outside the Church, the Romans and Jews were seizing the chance to capture him. From within the Church, he had problems with the service and the servants.

During Paul's imprisonment, despite the false allegations against him, and despite his innocence, he longed for two things – the lack of one or both was cause for his discouragement:

- repentance of those around him, and
- freedom to resume his service.

When Felix agreed to listen to Paul, Paul was overjoyed. He sensed that Felix was starting to feel sympathetic towards his cause, and he thought that that would lead to his conversion – which would likely be followed by many others. Paul thought maybe that was God's purpose for allowing his imprisonment. Unfortunately, and to Paul's great discouragement, it turned out that Felix was only interested in a bribe to release him, and he detained Paul in prison for many months to appease the Jews.

But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.
(Acts 24:27)

Saint Paul was jailed, and his hopes for a speedy release never materialized. Likely, he reasoned with the Lord that his service was being interrupted and impeded by his imprisonment. However, the Lord's aim was far beyond St. Paul's logic and aspirations: while St. Paul was in prison, the service flourished, thousands were converted and he managed to write several of his invaluable New Testament epistles.

Hence, Paul's initial discouragement culminated in his preaching Christ before Emperor Nero (the most powerful monarch of his time), and in the gospel being spread to many successive generations through the Holy Spirit. God's plan was such that Nero acquitted Paul, and Christianity emanated to the entire world through Rome.

Once any of us experiences serious feelings of discouragement, we should always remember those incidents in the history of our Christianity and be sure that a lot of good will follow, no matter how hard to imagine.

- **Saint John the Divine:**

Saint John lived through the martyrdom of his eleven brethren, starting with James and followed by Peter, Thomas and the others – with one being martyred almost every other year. He himself yearned for martyrdom – but he lived to be over ninety. He survived persecutions and he must have wondered, "Dear Lord, why did You single me out to be exiled?"

His exile to an inaccessible island, at a time when the service seemed to need him most defied all principles of human logic. His feelings of intense discouragement are reflected in this verse:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 1:9)

However, Saint John's exile to Patmos, though initially painful and regrettable, gave us the ***Book of Revelation***. Heaven was revealed to us through him, and we witnessed how truth and goodness triumph in the end.

Possible consequences of Discouragement

Discouragement and Guilt Feelings:

We may start blaming ourselves for missed opportunities, for having said the wrong thing(s), for having not spoken when we feel we should have, for not having been sufficiently strict with our children, etc.... It is wrong to blame ourselves – we must realize that regret, that stops at guilt feelings, is useless and can be even dangerous. We must not allow discouragement to lead to harmful self-blame. For example past mistakes should not be interpreted as the reason for unanswered prayers.

God's anger, which we merit, is counterbalanced by His infinite mercy and compassion. Our Lord will listen to those crying to Him for help. When Daniel prayed he said

O Lord, to us belongs shame of face ... O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away (Daniel 9:8 & 16)

Therefore, let us be careful of excessive and exaggerated self-blame.

Discouragement and Doubt:

Satan capitalizes on discouragement to sow doubts in our hearts and minds. He will plant doubts concerning prophecies, the word of God, the Lord's promises, the effectiveness of prayer, and the utility of the church. Nevertheless, we know that discouragement does not constitute the end of the story – our hope endures for the real end in accordance with God's plan.

Discouragement and Blaming Others:

We have a tendency to blame others as soon as a problem arises, or as soon as a certain project or undertaking yields poor

results. We must realize that everything is in the Lord's hands. It is futile and counter-productive to blame others. We must turn the page, look forward, learn from experience and refrain from doubting the Lord, and from blaming ourselves and others.

Discouragement and Despair:

Discouragement may lead some to lose hope altogether; hence, they may stop praying, stop reading the Bible and stop going to church, arguing that nothing helped. Discouragement may thus have the detrimental effect of giving in to utter despair, with all its attending harmful effects.

However, Christ said:

I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8)

This means that, when the Lord finally intervenes, will there still be someone waiting and looking faithfully towards heaven, awaiting this intervention? When the Lord says "Here is what I promised," will He find anyone waiting – or all will have succumbed to one or more of the scenarios described above?

Clearly, faith must endure to the last rounds. Faith means keeping our heads high, and consistently telling God "**We believe You and we will wait for You until the end.**" Faith conquers all fears and doubts and maintains unwavering trust in the Lord's promises.

Those who have faith will remain unshaken and steadfast in their trust in the Lord, will not doubt, or blame anyone, and will await the Lord's deliverance no matter how long it seems to take.

How can we overcome perplexity & discouragement?

We have seen that discouragement is part of the Divine economy and the Lord's all-inclusive plan.

- **Cling to Firm Faith:**

Discouragement is always followed by great surprises. Although it is beyond human capability to fathom all the details of the Lord's plans, we have to firmly believe that, despite our short-sighted discouragements, everything will turn out for the best.

- **Rushing to the Lord:**

Discouragement can be beaten by rushing towards the Lord, spending quiet time with Him as Elijah did, going into the deep, and obeying the Lord as Simon Peter did:

But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net. (Luke 5:5)

We note that Peter obeyed the Lord, against his own judgment and reasoning. The result was a net full of fish: discouragement gave way to joy.

- **Stop all negative thought and speech:**

Here is what Isaiah said:

Do not say, 'A conspiracy,' Concerning all that this people call a conspiracy, nor be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. (Isaiah 8:12)

We must not imitate what people say – we must not allow ourselves to be led by their thoughts negative attitudes. Let us adhere consistently to our Lord, our faith and our style of thought and speech, regardless of what others may say or think. It is pernicious to be pessimistic and to follow prevailing currents.

- **Revisit the reference points - the unchangeable facts:**

The entire world politics and circumstances are subject to variations. But our unchangeable reference point is our

omnipotent, omniscient, kin-hearted Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He knows and controls everything, and He will always have the last word. Worldly leaders and laws may change – but we have our ever-constant reference point.

Let us, therefore, revisit our reference points. Our able, wise and loving Lord has never abandoned, and never will abandon, us, and He knows precisely what to do, and when to do it.

Material acquisitions may come and go – but no one can ever take away our eternity. Our names are written in heaven.

When we feel that God has delayed in championing the oppressed and punishing the oppressors, we must bear in mind that His ultimate aim is the Gospel's spread, and the salvation of all; His perfect plan will materialize according to His perfect timing.

- **Withdraw and spend some time in tranquility:**

Let us imitate Elijah and Peter, accompany Christ, and **"launch out into the deep."** Detaching ourselves from others, spending some time in tranquility and ardent prayer, and awarding ourselves with adequate rest and nutrition, will yield the favorable results of renewed peace and faith, clearer thought, perspective and vision. We should also learn from experience and examine lessons learnt from periods of discouragement. Finally, we should lay down a plan of action, prioritize our tasks and resolve to follow that plan.

It should therefore not strike us as "strange" when, during our earthly journey with the Lord, we feel discouraged – such feelings were experienced by many saints and prophets. We will not find everything we hope for; and not all prayers will be positively answered. The Lord is simply nurturing us, to enable us to see the positive side of discouragement.

In the end, nothing will matter much – because we are confident that whatever the Lord does is perfect. We will then see the futility of fretting and trying to anticipate, expect or forecast.

- **Holy Liturgy and the Sacrament of the Eucharist:**

Partaking of our Lord's Flesh and Blood after attending Holy Liturgy is the Christian's strongest defense against discouragement. For it is through going along the holy journey of mass with all its nourishing rituals and spirituality, and finally uniting with our Lord through partaking of the Sacrament of the Eucharist that our souls are nourished into firm Faith and Hope.

To recap ...

First: Perplexity

- God allows us to experience periods of perplexity and an unclear vision to induce us to pray more, since more prayer leads to a purer heart.
- Having asked "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" we should not expect immediate answers, relief or clarity of vision.
- The Lord will give us answers day-by-day, as the need arises.....Believers do not need a long-range plan - God is in charge.
- Feeling perplexed reduces our haughtiness and self-confidence, and brings us closer to being poor in spirit.
- Perplexity edifies our calling and deepens our spiritual stature.
- Perplexity soon drops out of memory. The most important thing is never to give up and never to lapse into a nonchalant attitude.

- The understanding of certain perplexing circumstances may elude us for many years.
- Spending time fasting and praying, while thinking in seclusion, will play an important role in clearing up perplexities.
- We must never attempt to determine the Lord's schedule, continue in our struggle and prayers whether we understand the Lord's will or not, give thanks when the Lord answers and pray for clarity of vision.

Second: Discouragement

- Discouragement and the Lord's will are diametrically opposed; to a person leading a life of faith and submission, everything is acceptable, and nothing should cause discouragement.
- Discouragement can be a result of: deviations from God's will, insufficient/insincere prayer, focusing on events instead of Christ, disturbing news, pessimism, false interpretation of prophecies, a wavering faith, or an impoverished spiritual life.
- Christ walks with us whenever we feel discouraged. We should always place our trust and hopes in God rather than men.
- We are neither the first nor the last to experience discouragement. Apostles, saints, and even the Lord, have expressed feelings of discouragement at times.
- Awaiting the Lord's perfect plan to unfold will replace discouragement with great surprises and joy.
- Allowing discouragement to take root in us will invariably lead to detrimental effects, namely, despair, a wavering faith, and blaming ourselves and others.
- Strong faith will endure to the end and transcend all adversities and feelings of discouragement.

- To vanquish discouragement we need to: rush to the Lord, revisit Christ's promises – our reference point, halt all negative thoughts and speech, and withdraw to spend time in tranquility and sincere prayer.
- Holy Liturgy and the Eucharist should be our consistent refuge that saves us from all earthly worries, perplexities and discouragement. Uniting with the Lord is our primary way of regaining firm Faith, Hope and Peace.

CHAPTER 5

Change of Mindset (Positive Thinking)

Sometimes we face the problem of being fixated on a certain line of thinking; hence, we develop a mindset, programmed to think within a "rigid" boundary which, though totally wrong, ends up dominating our thoughts.

The problem is that the brain refuses to pause. Being unduly worried, having significant feelings of guilt, focusing on past sins or other people's faults, agonizing over the future, or continuously judging others **do not** represent the Lord's will. Our difficult task is, therefore, to stop thinking this way, and to silence these dominating negative thoughts. It is only then that we will be able to listen to the Lord's voice.

Our Lord has a lot of interest in our way of thinking

He said to them, "Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?" (Mark 2:8)

Hence, Christ faulted the Pharisees not only in the way they spoke or behaved, but also in their thinking process. When Christ forgave the paralytic's sins, the Pharisees thought "***Who can forgive sins but God alone?***" They thus chose to judge Christ, rather than applaud the miracle, or congratulate the man for having been forgiven.

Negative Mindset

Christ said:

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things (Matthew 12:35)

"Treasure of heart" refer to one's thoughts and mind, i.e. one's mindset and emotions.

Anxiety

Let us not keep worrying about worldly issues like: jobs, finances, families, health, lifestyles, and the like. All this counterproductive thinking is against the Lord's will.

Allowing our minds to wander down the path of anxiety and uncertainty is contrary to the Bible's teaching:

Be anxious for nothing (Philippians 4:6)

We have all experienced the fruitlessness of fretting over possible situations which never materialized; all we gained was an increased stress level, not to mention hours of wasted time, caused by our wavering faith.

The Book of Psalms tells us:

Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God." Selah (Psalm 3:2)

Here, David expresses concern about external "voices" bombarding his mind with the thought that God, this time, is indifferent towards His children. However, after a period of tearful prayer and meditation, he goes on to say:

But You, O Lord, are a shield for me, My glory and the One who lifts up my head. (Psalm 3:3)

Agony and Despair:

Although at no time did God abandon him, and he was consistently protected, David says in despair:

How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:2)

An important rule to note: agony or severe pain usually stems from illusions.

David also said,

What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? (Psalm 120:3)

The "false tongue" refers to fear mongers – hence, "all is lost," "there is no hope," "life is impossible". When David says, "***what shall be given...or what shall be done,***" he means that dealing with such false tongues is indeed problematic. For this reason we note that, nowadays, the use of relaxants and the occurrence of nightmares have indeed increased. The first and foremost lesson to be gleaned from those verses is: **Let us eliminate agony and despair from our minds through prayer.**

We must also be especially alert to inputs, to which our senses are exposed, and which Satan manipulates to cloud our minds, confuse the Lord's messages, distort reality, and burden us with feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and fear.

God's clear answer to "**Lord, what do You want me to do?**" is:

- **I love you very much,**
- **chase all negative thoughts and illusions out of your head,**
- **I accept you as you are, and**
- **all your sins have been erased from the record.**

Judas Iscariot is famous for having harbored, and acted on, negative, destructive, thinking. His correct line of thought should have been: "**Christ fed me yesterday, He embraces me, He holds me in higher esteem than the rest of the disciples, therefore, surely, He will forgive me.**" We can also imagine our Savior whispering to him, "**Do not think negatively, I love you, I am giving up my life for the world's salvation – you included.**" Unfortunately, Judas did not listen to this gentle voice. He gave way to his despair and therefore was ultimately lost.

Even the apostles would have welcomed him back into their fold. Tragically, though, he went to the wrong people for advice:

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3 - 5)

Yielding to despair had the disastrous consequence of suicide. We should be careful and picky about who we resort to for advice – they can make all the difference between tragic and joyous consequences.

Focusing on one's shortcomings

We read in Jeremiah's first chapter:

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." Then said I "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth." But the LORD said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces. For I am with you to deliver you," says the LORD (Jeremiah 1:4 - 8)

We note in this passage that Jeremiah focused on his shortcomings, rather than on God's grace, omnipotence and omniscience.

Repentance is not dwelling on past transgressions and failures; rather, we should concentrate on prayer, looking forward, and seeking refuge in God's grace and love for us.

Focusing on what People Say

Attempting to please others displeases the Lord. Some people spend a lifetime trying to appear, eat, behave and speak, in the way that seems agreeable to others. In other words, **their god is the people!** It is a grave error indeed, to assume that people's opinion is our gateway to heaven or hell.

In the extreme case, attempting to please others could lead us to disregard, or even abandon, our own principles. Here are some examples:

- A young man, in his desire to "belong" to a certain group of youngsters, or gang, could go out of his way, defeating his principles, in order to be accepted, and not to be considered the "odd man out." Such a mentality could lead to perversion, drug abuse, or even crime.
- Similarly, a young girl could yield to societal pressures and give up her chastity, simply to "go with the flow," and avoid being branded as prudish or puritanical.

We can evade all such adverse circumstances by asking:

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

His answer will most probably be: "Chase all the disrupting voices out of your head – do not listen to those worthless people, and do not follow the bride's example in Solomon's song:

Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept. (Song of Solomon:16)

Here, the bride is trying to explain or justify the reason for her dark skin. Instead, she should have said: "Even though I am dark, I am pretty in my own eyes (as I behave in accordance to my dear Lord's will), and your opinion does not matter to me."

We should always bear in mind that those who focus mainly on pleasing others constitute a very fertile ground for Satan's wiles; soon, their entire mind's preoccupation will be thoughts judging and condemning others.

Focusing on Judging Others

Simon the Pharisee, invited Christ to dine at his home. Coincidentally, a sinful woman walked in, started shedding many tears, poured fragrant oil on Christ's feet, and wiped His feet with her hair. Simon's immediate thought was, "***This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.***" (Luke 7:36) Thus, he immediately judged both Christ and the woman! By contrast, in the Church's meditations of the midnight hour's second service, we say, "*Dear Lord, grant me many springs of tears, as You gave the sinful woman in olden times....*" Therefore, quite unlike Simon, we have a lot of admiration for that woman, and we pray that our tears of contrition and repentance be as abundant as hers.

We thus find two opposed thought processes: while one focuses on loving enjoyment of others' well-being, the other dwells on others' shortcomings and past sins and failures. Unfortunately, we all tend to do the latter to varying degrees. We must eliminate this judgmental way of thinking from our minds.

Instead of being at least over-joyed, for being honored and blessed by Christ's presence in his home, Simon the Pharisee chose to judge, not only Christ, but also the sinful woman, and all his guests for failing to speak up!

Similarly, Christ's visit to Zacchaeus, who was well-known for his dishonesty, should have elicited acclamations and praise

from positive-minded people; hence, they should have said, "Wow! This prophet is so great that he is willing to visit this sinner with an open heart!" Nevertheless, their twisted minds led them to judge both Christ and Zacchaeus.

The mind which is "programmed to judge others" was evident even in Christ's closest followers – his disciples! When they saw Him talking to the Samaritan woman, all they could think of was "Dear Lord, why are You humiliating Yourself by talking to this woman?!"

Remedial steps

We should be always watchful over our thoughts. We have to act in honesty exposing our mindset and substituting it to a positive one.

- Honesty and Exposure:

As a first step, we have to listen to Christ's voice saying:

...Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?...

The Lord is telling us to stop ruining our lives by a negative mindset that is preoccupied with needless anxiety, judging others, and focusing on one's shortcomings.

Prayer and regular Bible readings are the effective weapons in the struggle against our minds.

It is impossible to rid ourselves of negative, detrimental or counterproductive thoughts unless we **reveal them**, and bring them under the spotlight. Exposure burns unclean thoughts. Full disclosure of our thoughts to our confessor is most effective. Anguish, judgment, guilt, and people's opinions will find no place in a mind saturated with God's love, and infinite wisdom.

- **Substitution:**

"Substitution" means replacing all negative thinking (worry, past sins, feelings of inadequacy, uncertainties, judging others, ...) with positive thinking.

Here are a few Bible verses that should help us in this respect.

do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God ... will not leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6)

he who touches you touches the apple of His eye." (Zechariah 2:8)

Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Luke 12:7)

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4)

We should bear in mind that faith's reality and the Lord's truth are stronger than unfounded anxieties usually brought about by illusions, since Christ said:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. (Matthew 24:35)

Substitution as described above will be achieved through our firm knowledge that God loves us, God died for us, God has prepared a place for us, and God's angels guard us.

The dominating thought in our minds should be whether we will be pleasing to the Lord, during our presence and defense before Him and His angels on the Day of Judgment, rather than pleasing people.

Let our thoughts of repentance and love replace those of judging and condemning others. We are required to love others; love encompasses forgiveness and *"love covers all sins."*

(Proverbs 10:12) Also, repentance drives us to pray, "Dear Lord, my sin is weighty, remove it from me and have mercy upon me."

Programming ourselves to focus on repentance and loving others, will eliminate any tendency to be judgmental, which is precisely what Christ meant when He said,

Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:5)

Having the Mind of Christ

Positive thinking means having the mind of Christ, as the Bible tells us:

But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:16)

The mind of Christ is not focused on people's faults or iniquities; rather on His love that wishes all to be saved. He said:

I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. (John 12:47)

Christ was abused, ridiculed, envied and wrongfully accused; nevertheless, He maintained His focus on His mission and on pleasing the Father, and His faith in the Father's love never wavered. **Having the mind of Christ means having a sound and holy mind, that resists and transcends any and all erroneous, unproductive thoughts.**

Saint Paul gives us the perfect example of positive thinking:

....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,... (Philippians 3:13)

It is a great pity indeed that too many people prefer to cry over spilt milk, rather than look forward with hope and faith in God.

Let us repent and forget past iniquities. Rather than emphasize past regrets, let us live with hope for the future. God dwells neither on our past, nor on our myriad of broken promises. This is positive thinking, hence, "*....one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead...*"

Children quickly react with joy, forgetting instances of naughtiness and disobedience, once their parents give them gifts they longed for; they will never say, "Oh, but I do not deserve this gift because I was bad!" **Let us be childlike in thankfully accepting God's love and grace, and in forgetting our past ills and wrongdoings.**

Let our thinking be always positive,

forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead (Philippians 3:13)

It is only then that we will be able to discern God's will for our lives.

CHAPTER 6

Human Expectations versus God's Wisdom

During stressful times and hardships, we must always cling to Christ's promises, and never lose sight of the fact that He is in full control. At the same time, we must always bear in mind this crucial question:

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Some of God's "standard" answers to this question are applicable at all times, and remain unchanged:

- **Pray.**
- **Love your neighbor.**
- **Give thanks.**
- **Submit.**

Those are answers which our Lord will always give us. But unfortunately we sometimes fail or refuse to hear or pay attention to them.

Human Expectations

When we yield to thinking in human terms, we often fail to perceive the Lord's way of doing things. Our expectations are usually the nearest solution, the logical solution, the obvious solution or the easiest solution. Let us tackle each of those in details.

The Nearest Solution

This means that we expect a solution that is closest to our circumstances, experience and logical reasoning and that would seem "normal" for us. However, the Lord does not always follow the "normal" course, or the "nearest solution."

Examples:

a) The miracle of calming the storm in the fourth watch (Matthew 14:25):

When our Lord Jesus told His disciples to get in the boat and go before Him to the other side, a storm arose in the sea, and the waves struck the boat. It is quite likely that the disciples expected the storm to die down within a few minutes, since they understood the weather pattern, and they knew that that was not the stormy season – hence, the "nearest solution." Our Lord, however, calmed the storm several hours later – in the "fourth watch." God's reasoning is different from ours.

b) Joseph sold into slavery (Genesis 37:28):

When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, he must have thought that his father would surely soon look for him and bring him home (the "nearest solution.") He must also have felt dejected and humiliated. However, many months went by, and his father never showed up. When events do not unfold in accordance with our expectations, particularly when we feel that we had not transgressed God's commandments, we end up being discouraged, wondering why we seem to have been abandoned by our heavenly Father. We fail to realize that the nearest solution is not always in accordance with God's plan.

c) Joseph's imprisonment (Genesis 39:20):

Joseph furthermore must have been devastated, when his master threw him in jail (instead of his father taking him home). His dreams were shattered further when, having correctly interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officials, he was completely forgotten in jail for many months. Once again, the nearest solution was not the one God had in store for Joseph.

d) Our father Abraham (Genesis 12 & 13):

Our father Abraham obeyed the Lord when He told him to leave his country, his family and his father's house. He went to the land of Canaan, and the Lord promised to bless him, to make him a great nation, and to make his "*descendants as the dust of the earth.*" If Abraham had considered God's promises with human reasoning, he might have thought that, surely, God will permit him to have many wives from whom the offspring would be "as the dust of the earth." However, many years went by, and nothing happened! God renewed His promise (Genesis 15 & 17) and it materialized when Abraham and Sarah were far beyond child-bearing years. Here, again, we see that God does not operate through the "nearest solution".

The Logical Solution

Sometimes we tend to visualize a logical solution to our problems – a solution along the lines: “Since ... Therefore....”

Examples:

a) Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8):

He was a blasphemer and a persecutor of the Church. It was logical to assume that, in response to all the believers' ardent prayers, God would end Saul's life, and end that wave of merciless persecutions. Obviously, God's plan was quite different.

b) King Saul (1 Samuel 16):

When Samuel anointed David to be king of Israel, it would have made sense for Saul to step down or die since, logically, two kings are not necessary. In reality, though, the new king continued to tend the sheep, and king Saul did not die; this situation lasted for fifteen years. Clearly, God does not follow human logic.

c) Joseph in Potiphar's service (Genesis 39:7 - 20):

Joseph served Potiphar honestly and faithfully - Potiphar trusted him. Joseph probably thought that someday he would ask his master for a vacation, and return to visit his family, likely accompanied by a slave. However, Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of misconduct and he landed in jail! Our minds may devise logical solutions, which are completely different from God's plan.

d) Esther (Esther 4 - 7):

King Ahasuerus, without knowing that Esther was Jewish, signed an edict to have all Jews in his kingdom destroyed. Both Mordecai and Esther (his cousin) prayed ardently, and Mordecai tried to convince Esther to have an audience with the king (her husband). Esther kept resisting saying that the king had to summon her first before she could dare talk to him (the logical solution). However, that logical solution never materialized and the king, over the next several months, was too busy to summon her. Finally, and defying all logic, the king asked to speak to Esther, and she told him that his top aid, Haman, had ordered the annihilation of the Jews. God does not function in accordance with human logic.

The Obvious Solution

All the nearest, logical and obvious solutions converge towards the human mind's way of thinking. We sometimes feel that something is "as clear as the noonday sun," therefore that must be the way to go. Nevertheless, God does not subscribe to our "nearest, logical or obvious" solutions.

Examples:

a) Horrible Murdering of Bethlehem's male infants (Matthew 2:16):

King Herod the Great, the tyrant, ordered that all male infants in Bethlehem, two years and under, be slaughtered. That was a heinous crime by anybody's standards. We note that the Bible tells us:

The cup of the Lord's right hand will be turned against you (Habakkuk 2:16)

And

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

Naturally, one would expect that Herod perish shortly after committing such a crime. But, rather than have this "obvious" solution, the Lord's angel ordered Joseph to embark on a long, difficult and dangerous journey to Egypt, where the Holy Family would spend more than three years! Furthermore, the Lord's angel later told Joseph:

Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead. (Matthew 2:20)

It would have been nearer, more logical, and more obvious for Herod to perish much sooner than three years later.

b) Paul's imprisonment (Acts 23:12 - 32):

The Book of Acts tells us that more than forty Jews

banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. (Acts 23:12)

Furthermore, they made a bizarre request to the chief priests and elders:

Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near. (Acts 23:15)

Our Lord, nevertheless, arranged for Paul's nephew to hear of this plot, and tell Paul. Consequently, Paul called one of the centurions and told him:

Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him. (Acts 23:17)

When the commander heard the story, he dispatched an entire army to guard Paul, as he was escorted to Felix, the governor. Up till that moment, God's plan coincided with expectations, namely, Paul prayed, and God rescued him from prison and from the Jews waiting in ambush. Following this line of thinking, Paul should have been set free by the governor. However, he ended up spending two more years in jail!

Paul could have reasoned with God saying: "Dear Lord, I have been treated unfairly, and all the allegations against me are false. I am only asking to be exonerated according to Your will, and that You rule in favor of the oppressed. You are a just God and I am being unjustly treated."

But the Lord had other plans: "I understand – but you have to wait a while and trust my way of doing things ..."

c) Tobit (from the apocryphal Book of Tobit):

Tobit, the father of Tobias, was a great almsgiver and an unprecedented doer of good deeds to the poor – to the extent that he buried each and every one who died of his Jewish people, in

order to escape the wrath of king Sennacherib. According to St. Paul, Tobit's reward must surely be significant:

He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2 Corinthians 9:6)

However, as this kind and generous man fell asleep one day under a tree, he was blinded by sparrow droppings. We might wonder: "How can such a catastrophe befall such a righteous person?? He prayed, expecting a relief from his calamity (the obvious solution), given his spotless track record."

On the contrary, he was plagued further with financial problems. Finally, he sent his son (Tobias) to collect a significant debt from someone in a far-off land. The Lord sent Raphael, the angel, to accompany Tobias (who did not know that his companion was an angel).

The obvious solution now was to expect Tobias' return with a lot of money, and to expect Tobit's return of his eyesight. However, Tobias tarried for a very long time, and the eyesight remained unchanged! **Tobit's immediate reaction could have been:** "Dear Lord, I have done nothing but good all my life, yet I am rewarded with poverty, the loss of my son, and stricken with blindness!"

Nevertheless, Tobias finally returned with loads of money, and a beautiful bride; Tobit's eyesight was also restored. The moral of the story is: Everything is perfectly resolved in due time – not in accordance with human near, logical or obvious solutions; rather, in accordance with God's perfect plan which transcends all human prediction and understanding.

The Easiest Solution

In this case, we are telling God, "It is alright, dear Lord, this is a simple matter - we will take care of it."

Examples:

a) The paralytic man (Luke 5:18 - 25):

For the four men carrying the paralytic man, the easiest solution was for Christ to say the word - in one second - and he would be healed. That word was:

*Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."
(John 5:8)*

Nevertheless, Christ looked at them in amazement and said,

Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?' (Luke 5:23)

Contrary to what the men might have thought, forgiving sins is much more difficult and important than healing a physical affliction.

We often expect something very straightforward and easy from God; but, for Him, He will do the much more significant things first; hence, repentance, forgiveness and salvation. Physical ailments rank least in importance.

b) The miracle of feeding the multitude (Luke 9):

Although Christ's sermon on the mount pleased the multitude, they started to get hungry, and darkness was falling. The easiest and most logical solution was proposed by the disciples: *"Send them away now so they might find something to eat before nightfall."* However, that was not Christ's plan: seating the multitude in organized groups and feeding them must have seemed to the disciples a far more complicated arrangement than the easy, logical, solution they had proposed.

c) Noah's ark (Genesis 6 - 8):

When humanity's transgressions had significantly increased, God decided to annihilate all living creatures on earth by a flood except the upright Noah, his family, and all the creatures he would

take with him into the ark, which God had commanded him to build.

Noah's logical thinking could have been: "Dear Lord, since I have found favor in Your sight, and since I have no idea how to build an ark of this size, and since nothing is impossible with You, why don't you send your angels to build the ark in a few days?" Nevertheless, God instructed Noah to build the ark himself – a task that lasted more than one hundred years!

Our Lord's Solutions

Our Lord seems to always choose the most difficult, distant, illogical or obscure solutions. We have to bear in mind that:

...as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

We have to remember and trust that our Lord sees things much farther into the future than we can ever conceive.

As humans, we always seek immediate solutions for today's problems. We devise all the possible scenarios and are ready to advise God how to proceed!

We fail to appreciate St. Paul's observation:

For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? (Romans 11:34)

Let us never forget: **Christ is always in control – omnipotent and omniscient.**

Here are some examples to remind us ...

a) Joseph, Jacob's son (Genesis 50):

God's plan was infinitely more comprehensive and far-reaching than any human mind could have possibly imagined. God could have helped Joseph to escape, his brothers to have repented and gone back to get him, or any such easy, obvious, solution. However, God's plan was far more outreaching and inclusive of a wide vision for many more parties to be involved, i.e. for the Hebrews to be enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, for the emergence of Moses, for their deliverance with His mighty hand, and ultimately for the salvation of mankind! As Joseph himself said:

But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. (Genesis 50:20)

What Joseph meant was: "I could have returned home, and we would have all died in the famine. But being ruler over Egypt allowed me to save you and your children."

b) Moses the prophet (Exodus 2):

Having spent forty years in Pharaoh's palace, Moses acquired the highest degree of education in the world at that time. He was well-versed in administrative and military matters. Why did the Lord allow him to lose his temper, kill the Egyptian, become a wanted man, and lose everything he had built for himself over forty years?!!

Most likely, Moses had grandiose plans to overthrow Pharaoh and to free the Hebrews. Nevertheless, God had other plans that required Moses' schemes to fail miserably, because:

- Moses had to spend forty years more doing other tasks.
- The Hebrews had insufficiently prayed to, and supplicated the Lord.
- The Hebrews had yet to feel the full burden of bondage.

- There needed to be no possible human solution to the Hebrews' plight.
- God's intervention had to be the Hebrews' only way for their deliverance.
- Our Lord will only start His work after Moses' admission of his ignorance and ineptitude.

God's plan unfolded perfectly in due course: after forty years Moses initially declined his assignment, and admitted his inadequacy. Moses finally executed God's miraculous deliverance relying solely on the mighty hand of God.

b) Daniel (Daniel 6):

God delivered countless believers from councils of the wicked, throughout the ages. Daniel could have very well fallen into that category.

In the days of Darius the Persian king, Daniel had been promoted to the highest administrative level in the kingdom. This created for him many who hated and envied him, and sought ways for his destruction. But Divine wisdom was such that they were allowed to trick Darius into signing a decree that would punish anyone (by being cast into a lion's den) who did not worship the king; they knew that Daniel worshipped the one and only God.

God blinded Darius to the plot and dulled his intelligence, such that he naively signed the decree. Daniel, however, continued his daily prayers to God. When his adversaries reported his disobedience, the king reluctantly cast him into the lion's den – the conspirators told him that the Persian and Median law prohibited him from repealing the decree he had signed.

We thus wonder:

"Dear Lord, why did You not frustrate the conspiracy, alert the king, and end the whole plot easily from the start? Why

did You allow Daniel's humiliation? Why did You permit him to be thrown into the lion's den?"

This is the Divine plan: Daniel had to be thrown into the lion's den in order for our Lord's name to be glorified then and to date ... for us to understand and appreciate this miracle without which we would have likely never heard of Daniel.

c) The three young men (Daniel 3):

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were three devout Jews who worshipped the one and only God. When king Nebuchadnezzar set up his golden statue and decreed that all should worship it at the sound of different musical instruments, these three young men refused and continued to worship their God. They were thrown into the fiery furnace for their disobedience, but the Lord delivered them.

Here again, we wonder why the Lord chose not to save them before being thrown into the furnace – that would have been the easy way out.

But the Lord willed that they be thrown in the fire, that He appear walking with them, that they praise God in the furnace, and that the fire feel like dew drops on their skin. Hence, a great miracle took place.

The Important Rule:

Our Lord's solutions will therefore not be the closest, easiest, expected or most logical. This is because He sees much further than we do, His plans encompass much more than ours, and He knows perfectly what He is doing. Eventually, His results always turn out to be by far better than our wildest dreams.

Important Messages:

a) Let us never forsake our faith, no matter how complicated things become. Increasingly complex issues are in no way an indication that the Lord is angry, is ignoring us, or is penalizing us for some sin we had committed. All this constitutes Satan's reasoning. When trials persist, let us never doubt the Lord's compassion and sovereignty, let us never question the teachings of the Church, and let us always believe in the saints' intercessions.

When hardships intensify, we must adhere to our faith - He does what is best. This is an irrefutable fact.

- He knows what He is doing.
- His plans for His children are the best ever.
- He controls all matters and holds all keys.

There is always something better than our expectations - we see this every day. Our expectations stem from:

- our head,
- our worries,
- our quest for the nearest solution(s),
- our "cause and effect" reasoning.

b) Our peace should never forsake us, in the event of a delay in heaven's response. Without even praying, God directed Elijah to declare to king Ahab:

As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word. (1 Kings 17:1)

And indeed, because of Elijah, heaven withheld its rain for more than three years. Elijah subsequently made his historical challenge:

If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. (1 Kings 18:21)

When the Lord's fire consumed the sacrifice, the people fell on the ground and cried:

The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God! (1 Kings 18:39)

Elijah then prayed that rain would fall, since the people confessed that the Lord is God. However, NO rain fell. Elijah then asked his servant to check for clouds seven times. Only after the seventh time did the servant report: ***“A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”*** (1 Kings 18:44)

Let us retain our peace, even when heaven's response is delayed.

- The Lord knows the perfect timing, and the perfect formula.
- The perfect solution will come at the most opportune time.
- The most important thing is our unwavering faith.
- A beautiful surprise always awaits us.

c) When we start wondering why life seems to be getting bleaker, and hardships worse, we should always cling to hope, and to the full belief that solutions are in the Lord's, not any human, hands. Let us not hang our hopes on human hands, a system, or wealth.

Whenever circumstances overwhelm us, our hope remains in the Lord. He will never forsake us. The final result will always surpass happiness.

Had it not been for the lion's den, Daniel would have never dreamed that His God be preached all over the world - since Darius issued a decree saying:

I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel. For He is the living God, and steadfast forever; His kingdom is the one which shall not be destroyed, and His dominion shall endure to the end. (Daniel 6:26)

Had it not been for the fiery furnace, the whole world would not have seen Christ, and known the true Son of God.

Thus, the end is always beyond joy - let us neither fret nor worry, and let us always cling to hope.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God [we must fast and pray, and worship God with body and mind]—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1 & 2)

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will

be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats ; do not be frightened. (1 Peter 3:14)

Let us not imitate those who spend an inordinate amount of time watching television, listening to media broadcasts, fretting, and propagating false rumors. Let us not be conformed to the world which is swayed by day-to-day occurrences. There is one omniscient Being above all Who is in full control of everything and everyone.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

This means that what the Lord does is consistently perfect, His solutions are always flawless, and He is certainly in no need of our suggestions as to how He should proceed, especially when experience has shown that failure and disappointment await those who place their trust in humans. Our God is beneficent and will never do evil. Whatever He sends our way is good. God's will is always righteous and pleasing.

Reflecting once more on Joseph's circumstances, he must have spent many days and nights praying, and wondering why God seemed to have forgotten or forsaken him. Nevertheless, his patience and unwavering faith led him to rule over Egypt, to be reunited with his family and to save them from starvation - none of which he had ever dreamed of accomplishing.

Therefore, what should we do, to live up to God's Wisdom and not our Earthly Expectations:

a) Give thanks at all times:

We should give thanks even before seeing any results. Unwavering faith means fully trusting that the result must be perfect; therefore, we start by giving thanks in anticipation of God's perfect solution.

b) Contemplate the events:

By reading carefully through the saints' lives and biographies, we realize that we should not allow ourselves to rise and fall with every wave that sweeps through our lives. We appreciate that God does not follow humans' quest for the easiest, logical or obvious solutions - simply because His vision is infinite while ours is limited. Let us trust His judgment and stop fretting.

c) Speak little:

We are inundated with opinions broadcast and published through television, newspapers, public gatherings on the streets, churches,

All such nonsensical disturbances obstruct prayer and impede God's work. Let us replace speech with thanksgiving and abundant prayer - this will calm us and help us witness God's work and His salvation.

Stop talking! Listen! Watch God's salvation!

Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, For it is an evil time. (Amos 5:13)

Let us follow the example of our mother the holy virgin: she spoke little and prayed much.

d) Ask and seek understanding:

It is quite acceptable to entreat the Lord to open our minds and help us understand what He is doing, and to acknowledge our ignorance. We may diligently seek His help in prayer to illuminate our hearts and help us find answers to explain His work. David said:

*Blessed are You, O Lord! Teach me Your statutes!
(Psalm 119:12)*

This means that we are fully submitting our lives to Him, and that we fully accept our incompetence.

Our problem is that we often feel we understand what needs to be done while God does not. The exact opposite is true.

e) Study and search the books:

This means that nothing should surprise us, once we study the Bible thoroughly - simply because the same will recur, as before, from one generation to another. It is normal for perturbations to occur, for people to worry, and for the Lord's congregation to feel pressured and to experience hardships. It is equally normal for God to delay answering our prayers, and for His time scale to be completely different from ours.

We will discover that nothing is strange, once we have completed a thorough study of the Bible.

If we studied the twenty chapters of the Book of Acts, we would find that we are the twenty-ninth chapter: the same circumstances and the same happy ending.

f) Seek Advice from you Father of Confession: as mentioned in the previous chapter on Discipleship.

g) Partake consistently of the Holy Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist:

Our Lord made it a point to consecrate this Holy Sacrament right before Passion Week. He wished to give His Apostles the way to discern His will and be constantly attached to Him by offering them.

To recap ...

- Some of God's "standard" answers to "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" are:
 - Pray.
 - Love your neighbor.
 - Give thanks.
 - Submit.
- God does not function in terms of human reasoning: He does not follow our nearest, logical, easiest or obvious solutions.
- God's plan and solutions are always perfect - waiting for God's plan to unfold yields great surprises and results beyond happiness.

- To ensure we are leading upright lives we must:
 - Give thanks at all times.
 - Contemplate events throughout the saints' lives.
 - Speak little and wait calmly for God's work and salvation.
 - Ask God to help us understand His ways.
 - Study and understand the Bible.
 - Partake of the Holy Sacraments.

➤ His Holy Body & Blood:

He clearly told them ***“do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22 : 19)***, What could be a better way to Know Christ’s will other than to eat His Body & drinking His Blood, thus being in constant union with none less than HIM.

CHAPTER 7

Do not be Afraid

God's Will & Commandment is: "Do not be afraid"

It is unbecoming for the children of God to be afraid.

It displeases God to see His children frightened of anything. For how can we bear any fear while we trust our Father who is the Creator and who we know is in full control of everything. When we ask God "*Lord, what do You want me to do?*" He will say: "**First of all, shed away your fear.**" Let us examine this passage from the Book of Joshua:

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, it came to pass that the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: "Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them--the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and

night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:1 - 9)

God's instruction "**Do not be afraid**" appears in numerous places in the Old and New Testaments. This commandment applies to several forms of fear, i.e. being terrified, worried, and tense, etc....

Fear means disobeying the Lord's commandments; and disobedience necessitates repentance. **Hence, we need to repent of the sin of fear.**

We may think that fear is not a sin. This is a wrong idea, since, among other things, God told Joshua "**Have I not commanded you?**" which, clearly, means that God commanded us not to fear. We will see in the following sections how we can struggle successfully towards eliminating fear.

Since fear is a sin that we are trying to get rid of, we need to understand and apply a golden Orthodox principle, namely, "**vanquishing any sin is a gift** [meaning God has a role to play] **and a commandment** [meaning we have a role to play]." When God sees us resisting fear, He will take it away from us and grant us peace and confidence. People around us will wonder at our insensitivity to the surrounding, terrifying, circumstances.

In Jeremiah we find this amazing verse:

Do not be dismayed before their faces, lest I dismay you before them. (Jeremiah 1:17)

In other words, do not be afraid of them, otherwise, I will abandon you, and let you yield to your fear.

The fact that God commanded us not to fear implies that we have a role to play. Harboring or expressing sentiments of fear, means that we have yielded to fear, and that we are not performing our role. Our role is to resist such feelings and to cry to the Lord for help and support.

Joshua had every reason to be afraid:

- He was responsible for about two million lives.
- He was quite apprehensive of being compared with his predecessor, who terrified Pharaoh, stood against Amalek, and spoke to God as a friend.
- God told Joshua: *"as I was with Moses, so I will be with you;"* God was effectively telling Joshua that all the feats which Moses had accomplished (for example, parting the sea's waters) were due only to God's help and intervention, not to any magical powers in Moses' staff (we see, later on, that Joshua also parted the waters - of the River Jordan). Here, again, comparing himself to Moses is a very disturbing thought indeed.
- Comparison with respect to quality of service can also be a daunting thought. Having experienced Moses' success, it was scary to contemplate matching such performance. This also applies to today's servants: attempting to succeed someone who was well liked and whose service was exemplary leads to fears of failure to measure up.
- Joshua was faced with many formidable challenges: leading a huge unruly, stubborn and difficult nation, safely across the wilderness, while facing adversities from hostile nations along the way, not to mention scorpions, poisonous snakes and other hazards....Also, he had to make this huge nation to, somehow, listen to, and obey, him, given that even Moses had much difficulty in this respect.

- Joshua was also faced with an obscure future. God had neither specified all the details, nor provided him with a clear picture. God simply said *"to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them"* with no specifics as to how he would do that. To complicate his thoughts further, this promised land was already inhabited by other nations who would certainly put up resistance.....

Many questions must have been buzzing around Joshua's mind:

- Why did God choose to end Moses' life before entering the promised land?
- Moses could have done this himself and all I had to do was accept my land parcel quietly....?
- How will I conquer the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites?
- How will I arm and train the Israelites?
- How will we cross the Jordan during its flood season?

Joshua felt that he had been orphaned. His father, on whom he had relied, and from whom he had derived his strength and knowledge, was no longer there. The feeling of suddenly becoming alone in this world was (is) quite disconcerting.

A person may sometimes appear, to others, to be outwardly composed while, in reality, he may feel weak internally.

There are always reasons, as mentioned earlier, for feeling scared. We thus see in the previously-quoted Joshua 1, the terms:

- "Be strong and of good courage;"
- "do not be afraid, nor be dismayed;"
- "every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you;"

- "be strong and very courageous."

The message coming through all those quotes is: "***do not be afraid!***"

It should be clear that, practically, telling someone "do not be afraid" will not result in that person suddenly becoming "fearless."

This is the reason why God repeats "***do not be afraid***" numerous times in the Holy Bible: He knows that our feelings of comfort will be short-lived, and we will fall back into the state of fear.

Steps leading to Fearlessness:

Be Realistic

Fear should never be treated by fantasies, dreams or denying reality. We note that the first thing God told Joshua was "***Moses My servant is dead.***" That was the reality. Trying to dispel feelings of fear should not in any way mean denial. Denial is quite inadvisable since, at some point, we will wake up to reality.....The message that God gave Joshua was: "Let us neither ignore, nor deny, the tragic fact that Moses is dead. However, this is not the whole story - there are other aspects that you do not know yet....."

Hence, realism is one component of fear treatment. When God says "do not be afraid" He does not mean that we should deny or ignore reality. Rather, He knows ALL the facts, whereas we only know some. Hence, God told Joshua:

.....arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them--the children of Israel.... (Joshua 1:2)

Plan in accordance with God's will:

We should follow the Lord's example: He started by telling Joshua that Moses was dead (being realistic - the first step), then He told him about His definitive plan: "*.....arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them...*" We, too, must do likewise: whenever challenges arise, we must turn to God and ask Him to tell us clearly what our plan should be - rather than use our own reasoning.

We must also bear in mind that God feels our fears, and Christ's understanding of human weaknesses is greater than anybody else's. He thus told Joshua:

Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. (Joshua 1:3)

Cling to the Divine Promise:

The Divine promise is essential in treating fear. It never fails and it is the soothing balm that has no side effects. The promise God made to Moses was simple: "*I will give you every place where your feet tread.*" Although Moses' death prevented him from seeing God's promise materialize, the promise remained, and God did not change His mind. God will never renege on His promises. The Bible tells us:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. (Matthew 24:35)

Thus, He told Joshua:

From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. (Joshua 1:4)

Types of promises that God makes to us

We note that today's Jews are clinging to the promise given above: God promised them all the land which, initially, was inhabited by the Canaanites.

That was an over-arching, long-term promise. This is analogous to God's promise to us that He is preparing a place for us in heaven, and that our names are written in heaven. This is, indeed, a very comforting promise; however, there are other promises along the way....

Therefore, we find that God's promise to Joshua consists of the following parts:

No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life [1]; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you [2]. I will not leave you nor forsake you [3].

Part [1]: "***No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life***" provided Joshua with the reassurance he needed: at 80 years of age, he still had no achievements under his belt, and he was about to "retire;" but God had other plans for him. On the other hand, he knew that Moses started his active service at the age of 80.....

Part [2]: "***as I was with Moses, so I will be with you***" was used by the Lord to soothe and comfort Joshua. That was the sweetest

promise from Joshua's perspective. Joshua was very close to Moses, and he had seen Moses' successes and steadfastness, as well as his faults; yet God was with him throughout his service and never forsook him. To hear God promising ***"as I was with Moses, so I will be with you"*** was a huge consolation and relief for him.

- Fear not - I will be with you as I was with them:

Therefore, when God promises to be with us as He was with all the saints, He is not at all saying, "Do not worry, you will experience no problems;" rather, He is saying,

"You will encounter hardships, but I will be with you as I was with them, everything will pass for the overall good, and you will witness in each difficulty grace, blessings and miracles."

- God's promises support us along the way:

Although the upshot is always guaranteed, the details are always unknown; the promise is ***"as I was,"*** and we repeat it in the meditations of the third canonical hour:

As You were with Your holy disciples, arise and be with us, and grant us Your peace." We also repeat it during the Divine Liturgy: "As He was, thus He shall be...."

It should also be emphasized that ***"as I was"*** has significant implications; it means that we see our future through our predecessors' experience. It means that God's promise is a constant, consistent, unchangeable reality, independent of our performance. Hence, our capable, wise and loving God,

overcomes our weaknesses, and His promises support us throughout our life, no matter what.

Part [3]: ***"I will not leave you nor forsake you"*** is a promise which God gives us, conditional on our having faith - this is the only condition, applicable to all God's promises. Our role in this equation is to obey His commandment ***"do not be afraid,"*** hence, to have faith.

➤ God's conditional promises:

***Judge not [condition], that you be not judged [promise]...
(Matthew 7:1)***

***.....if you forgive men their trespasses [condition], your
heavenly Father will also forgive you [promise].
(Matthew 6:14)***

However, the promise ***"No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life"*** is absolute - unconditional. It is also gratifying to note that there are no time limitations attached to this promise, hence, ***"all the days of your life."***

- **Cling to The commandments:**

Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go..... do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:6, 7 & 9)

The Lord is saying that we should be strong enough such that passing criticisms, allegations, news, or the like, not perturb or worry us. We should always remember, and cling steadfastly to, God's promises.

We now come to another commandment, namely, "***observe to do according to all the law.***"

Saint Paul also said:

***Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ....
(Philippians 1:27)***

It is crucial that we lead a Christian life and act in accordance with God's will.

To be worthy of the gospel of Christ means obeying the word of God, hence, we must pray, give thanks, love, forgive, and never be disturbed by surrounding developments.

.....do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. (Joshua 1:8 & 9)

Obedience must be complete - not partial; hence, we must neither deviate to the right nor the left...We must be fully absorbed in studying and contemplating the word of God - not anything else. God is thus exhorting us to place our full reliance on Him, and to ensure that nothing diverts our attention away from His word. We note that "***be strong and of good courage***"

was repeated three times in the verses given above, thus emphasizing the overall message "***do not be afraid.***"

"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth" means that our tongues must only utter God's words and God's promises - regardless of conversations in which we may get involved, we must steer discussions back to the Bible. Our focus must always be on Christ – we must place all our burdens on Him.

Our Lord's Presence wards off Fear

The following verse is the key for quelling any and all fears:

.. *do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*

The best reassurance that anyone can possibly have is "***the Lord your God is with you.***" The New Testament starts with the gladdening annunciation - the best piece of news in the world: "***.....Immanuel, which is translated, "God with us."***" (Matthew 1:23) Furthermore, Saint Paul says:

....If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)

"God with us" is an awesome and powerful resource available to us at all times and under all circumstances. Our problem is that we are impoverished by failing to draw on this resource - this is analogous to a wealthy man who never spends or enjoys his money. In order for us to revel in God's presence, to make use of this treasure, and to overcome our fears, **we need to continuously maintain the following: humility – prayer – the**

Bible – repentance and confession – Holy Liturgy and the Eucharist.

- Humility:

We must be poor in spirit, consistently reflecting our need for the Lord – otherwise, God's presence will not be felt. We will never feel that God is with us, as long as we feel self-sufficient and confident in our abilities. God will respond positively only to the poor in spirit, whose entire reliance is on the Lord.

Micah tells us precisely what the Lord expects from us:

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)

Placing our full trust in the Lord, and humbly showing our need for Him, will result in "everything falling into place" through His guidance and manipulation.

The difference between the beginning and end of Joshua's life:

By reading Joshua 1, we can see how he started his service, as a scared, and relatively unknown, follower of Moses. However, he ended up dividing the promised land among the Israelites, parting the waters of the Jordan, and commanding respect and fear from all nations - because: *"as I was with Moses, so I will be with you."*

- Prayer:

Prayer of any kind calls on God, and recalls to our minds *"God with us."* Without prayer, God is not with us - not because He

abandoned us, rather, because we ignore His presence. In Genesis 28 we read of Jacob's prayer:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." (Genesis 28:16)

This means that Jacob was unaware of God's presence with him; this unawareness lasted for 20 years, because he had stopped praying. However, when he resumed a life of prayer towards the end of his days, he sensed God's presence once more.

We can thus see that desensitization to God's presence is due to insufficient prayer. Put differently, if our prayers were sufficient, we would have no feelings of fear, anguish, uncertainty, or the like. Our "dose" of prayer may be increased through prostrations, reciting psalms, and repeating the "Jesus prayer," also known as the "prayer of the heart:" ***"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."***

- **The Bible:**

The second pre-requisite that would sensitize us to God's presence with us is the Bible, hence: ***"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth."*** We must be thoroughly familiar with, and fully immersed in, the word of God - the Bible.

The following facts about Joshua should be emphasized: he accompanied Moses constantly, and he loved to be with the Lord. The Bible tells us:

So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his

servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle. (Exodus 33:11)

The Israelites' tabernacle, or tent of meeting, went through two stages. At first it was in the center of a cross shape, with the twelve tribes' tents pitched in four clusters, three tribes each, situated alongside the four sides of the cross shape.

The Israelites subsequently angered the Lord, when they built and worshipped the golden calf. Moses entreated the Lord on their behalf and, finally, the tabernacle was moved from the camp's center to another distant location. The Israelites regretted their rebellion, which had resulted in God removing His visible presence from their midst. When Moses travelled to the tabernacle, Joshua was the only one who accompanied him.

The verse given above says that Joshua "***did not depart from the tabernacle.***" Hence, he delighted in the presence of the Lord.

The message here is that we should satiate ourselves with time spent in the Lord's company through prayer and reading His word. That is how we can conquer fear, and feel God's presence with us.

- **Repentance & Confession:**

Sin distances us from God. Repentance draws us closer to Him and, thus, makes us feel His presence with us.

Isaiah says:

***But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He
will not hear. (Isaiah 59:2)***

Thus, the Israelites' golden calf was the sin which distanced them away from the Lord.

Why should a "golden calf" be inserted between us and God?

It is a great pity indeed, to allow ourselves to be separated from God, by worldly preoccupations such as appearances, pride or money. Moses burned the golden calf, ground it to powder and scattered it - by way of avenging himself on the wickedness which separated them from God.

However, repentance and entreating the Lord for His forgiveness will immediately reconcile us to Him. Conversely, persisting down the path of judgment, anger and strife, will negate such reconciliation.

We conclude that feelings of God's absence from our lives are due to insufficient or insincere prayer, Bible reading, and repentance.

- The Holy Liturgy and the Eucharist:

Attending the Holy Liturgy and partaking of the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the backbone of our Christian practice. It is the most powerful way of defying any negative thoughts or feelings. The time we spend attending the Liturgy should be our charging power against fear of anything and everything. It is the living renewable memory of Our Lord's coming on earth to save us and

an awaiting of the final grand celebration of His Second Coming on the clouds.

To recap ...

- It displeases God to see His children afraid, because it does not become them.
- Fear means disobeying the Lord's commandments; and disobedience necessitates repentance. Hence, we need to repent of the sin of fear.
- When God sees us resisting fear, He will take it away from us and grant us peace and confidence, despite surrounding, terrifying, circumstances. However, when He sees that we are succumbing to fear, He will leave us wallowing in our fear - and we will suffer the consequences.
- Harboring fear means yielding to fear, and not performing our role, namely, resisting such feelings and crying to the Lord for help and support.
- Most of us may experience, to varying degrees, the following, leading to fear: being compared with others, daunting challenges, uncertainty of future, news that we hear, (fear of) ourselves, and/or loneliness.
- God repeats "*do not be afraid*" numerous times in the Holy Bible, because He knows that our feelings of comfort will be short-lived, and we will fall back into the state of fear.
- In order to vanquish fear we must: be realistic, plan in accordance with God's will, cling to the Divine promise, and obey God's commandments.
- God's over-arching, long-term promise to us is that He is preparing a place for us in heaven, and that our names are

written in heaven. However, there are other promises along the way....

- When God promises to be with us as He was with all the saints, He is not at all saying, "Do not worry, you will experience no problems;" rather, He is saying, *"You will encounter hardships, but I will be with you as I was with them, everything will pass for the overall good, and you will witness in each difficulty grace, blessings and miracles."*
- **"God with us"** is an awesome and powerful resource available to us at all times and under all circumstances. Our problem is that we are impoverished by failing to draw on this resource.
- In order for us to revel in God's presence, to make use of this treasure, and to overcome our fears, we need to satisfy four prerequisites: prayer, the Bible, continual repentance, humility, repentance and confession, and partaking of the Holy Eucharist

CHAPTER 8

Prayer with One Accord (The Church)

We will tackle this subject through the Book of Acts which is the Biblical reference for an ideal Church. This Book depicts a generation which demonstrated an exemplary Church. Consequently, during each Apostles' Fast, we should look back and revisit our reference points: **What constitutes our "right?" What should our church, ideally, look like? What are our Lord's expectations from us – His congregation?** The fact that we are incapable of seeing our Lord Jesus Christ physically, does not prevent us from knowing and doing His will; **this is the Church's philosophy, guided by the Holy Spirit.**

For example, our Lord met with His disciples many times during the forty-day period following His resurrection. Although Judas' suicide occurred immediately after the crucifixion, Christ, interestingly, never instructed His disciples to replace him! The disciples, though, came to this conclusion after the ascension – one may wonder why Christ did not provide this direction; again, this is the role of the Holy Spirit that works in and through His Church.

Let us examine the following Biblical text:

And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was

*numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.
(Acts 1:13 - 17)*

We note that the first thing done in the "Acts" is the realization of God's will for the Church, namely, "***These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.***" In the next verse we note the phrase "in those days;" this refers to the ten-day period between Ascension and Pentecost. Hence, as they awaited the descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), they fasted and prayed day and night, **with one accord**. We also note that "the number of names was about a hundred and twenty;" this number includes the seventy apostles, the twelve disciples (selection of the twelfth disciple is described in this chapter's subsequent verses), some women, Christ's mother, plus Christ's relatives – those were the leaven of the first Church.

Let us now tackle the crucial question of this book from a different perspective.

God's Will to the Church

Lord, what do You want us to do, as a church's congregation?

The first expected answer, applicable throughout all generations, is:

"Pray with one accord."

This is a prerequisite that must be satisfied before making any decisions, before any attempts to evangelize or to undertake acts of mercy, and before building any churches. The disciples were rejoicing, as they returned after having witnessed Christ's ascension – **they did nothing but pray**. Our Lord told them:

tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

This Divine will of **PRAYER WITH ONE ACCORD** is the most significant aim of our Church today. This should ensure that:

- Our day-to-day preoccupations, services and church administration are not done at the expense of prayer with one accord;
- Satan never gets the upper hand: if he fails in obstructing prayer, he will certainly attack the unity of accord;
- During church services we are not distracted by personal preferences which cause us to stray down a path unrelated to prayer;
- During church services our minds do not wander into criticizing, judging, or otherwise thinking of others; and/or
- We love each other.

The Divine will in the church's environment consists of two words: **prayer and love**. Eliminating one or both violates the Lord's intent – we would be proceeding contrary to His will.

We spend too much time talking, arguing and the like, under the pretext that these are necessary service requirements. In actual fact, service needs love, prayer with one accord, and people working in harmony – everything else will fall into place.

We also note that, to conclude the Acts' reading during liturgy, the deacon says: "**The word of the Lord shall continue to grow mightily, prevail, multiply, and be confirmed in this church and all other churches forever.**" Continuity of the growth of the word of God is **contingent on prayer with one accord**. Many examples of failed attempts at building churches and expanding services, despite adequate resources, attest to the sad reality: **absence of prayer with one accord leads to failure.**

Continuity ...

Hence, "continuity" is a key principle:

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication...

Continuity means perseverance and stability;

The essence of "prayer with one accord" is reflected during Divine liturgy, when the congregation and the celebrant entreat the Lord, "**May our hearts bond through deeply-rooted love.**" This sentiment is also echoed in the deacon's calling to the congregation to greet one another with a holy kiss: we cannot harbor a grudge against someone whom we are greeting with a "holy kiss." Consequently, elimination of grudges, hard feelings and unforgiveness, is conducive to "prayer with one accord." Conversely, negative sentiments within us hinder effective prayer. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the Lord's first answer to "**Lord, what do You want (Your Church) to do?**" is "Pray with one accord with your fellow believers."

It follows that church assemblies are of primary importance – which is the reason for the celebrant's praying: "Remember O Lord our assemblies – bless them." The Church allocated a litany specifically to assemblies because such is the Divine intent. The full litany reads: "**Remember O Lord our assemblies – bless them. Grant that we may have them, with no impediments or obstacles, in accordance with Your holy and blessed will** [the Lord's will is that we pray with one accord]." The litany's conclusion is "**...houses of prayer, houses of purity, houses of blessing.....grant that your congregation be blest with thousands upon thousands, and myriads upon myriads doing Your will.**" By "houses of prayer," we are entreating the Lord that love and prayer with one accord abound in the church. It is very unfortunate indeed to note that we could be praying together the canonical hours and, immediately thereafter, resume our arguments and struggles.

In order for the Lord's presence to be manifested in Church, and for blessings to dominate our service we need both love and prayer. **Let us pray together, pray for each other, and love one**

another. The length of time spent praying is inconsequential – rather, our focus must be on praying with one heart and one accord.

Prayer and God's Will

The disciples were a mix of fishermen and a tax collector – hence, strictly speaking, their starting point did not quite conform to the term "saints." However, their way to sainthood started with having learned the life of prayer from our Lord Jesus Christ.

The disciples lived with our Lord Jesus for several years. They saw Him many times spending whole nights in prayer. They prayed with Him and learned the power of prayer. They began to understand that prayer is limitless, and time spent in prayer can never be too much. After Christ's ascension they spent ten days praying, interrupted only by Peter's reminding them of the psalm which spoke of Judas' betrayal and subsequent replacement.

Although Christ never specifically instructed the disciples to replace Judas, what Peter did was most certainly the will of God. It was Christ's will to let the disciples pray and read the psalms, and to let Peter point out the prophecy, with which they all agreed, that Judas would be replaced. He relied on the verses:

For it is written in the book of Psalms: 'Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it'; and, 'Let another take his office.' (Acts 1:20)

We should be cognizant of the fact that the Lord's will becomes apparent only after continuing in prayer with one accord, reading the word of God, loving each other and partaking of the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. This is what we are tasked with – then doors will be opened, and everything unfolds in accordance with God's will, and in an unexpected way.

Peter's idea, as the disciples were praying, to replace Judas, was an important move which changed the course of history! It should be pointed out that choosing an apostle is much more

significant than choosing a pope – yet it was completed in a single session, as a result of prayer with one accord.

The conditions for finding Judas' replacement:

Peter started laying down the conditions for making their choice: it had to be someone who was well-liked by the apostles, and who had frequented Christ throughout His ministry: from its beginning, "*went in*" up till Christ's ascension "*...and out.*" We thus see that, in carrying out God's will, we also need to exercise our judgment: God intends that we think and decide within the boundaries of His guidance, given through prayer and reading His word.

Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,...
(Acts 1:21)

A second "condition" that had to be decided was participants in the vote: hence, who was eligible to vote for Judas' replacement? Eligibility was contingent on the 120 present, those who had known Christ throughout His ministry - hence, the founders of the Church – not any passer-by from the street.

Since its birth, the Coptic Orthodox Church has meticulously followed the example set in Acts 1. It should also be pointed out that the one hundred and twenty gathered represented a perfect cross section: the eleven disciples, the seventy apostles, plus some devout women.

And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. (Acts 1:23)

They decided to choose two likely candidates, who were well-liked by all, and cast lots to determine who the replacement should be - thus, the final "word" would be the Lord's. "*And they proposed*" implies that they gave the opportunity for others to

protest or express disagreement - which is exactly what our Church practices today. The Spirit finally chose Matthias.

Why did they have to go through all this – they could have simply appointed someone from the outset....?

The apostles had received the Holy Spirit from Christ, and Christ's mother was present with them. Surely that can be argued as sufficient to appoint a replacement!!! However, things did not go that way. The answer was that such a significant appointment required the **voice and will of the Lord**; no human element, however exalted it might be, was sufficient. All endeavors must be couched in prayer.

This is the prayer used in the Divine selection:

And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry (Acts 1:24 & 25)

Although they all knew that the two candidates were suitable for the service, the Lord alone knows the hearts of all. They were thus clearly admitting to the Lord that, although they had chosen two apostles, the final selection remained with the Lord, since He alone knows the hearts – then and always.

We note that, in the Old Testament, God appointed Saul to be king over Israel, due to their insistence on having a king. Saul started his reign well, but later departed from the Lord.

The Coptic Church's modus operandi, led by the holy synod, relies on human consensus first, followed by the final Divine selection. Consensus, via the synod, gives legitimacy to the Church's rules; even the pope cannot overrule the synod. This approach follows the clear description given in Acts 15. Consensus is a natural outcome of prayer with one accord, emphasized in Acts 1.

It is easy to achieve consensus once we have loved each other and prayed with one accord. That is the reason for Saint Paul's statement concerning high priests:

And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. (Hebrews 5:4)

In other words, this is a warning against anyone attempting to wrench forcibly such a position, since such a selection is to be made by the Lord, Who knows the hearts of all and the needs of His congregation.

Another point worth noting, is that we are told in Acts 12 that James was martyred – yet no attempt was made to replace him. The reason is that, while Judas willfully abandoned his apostolic seat, James was a martyred saint. Thus Judas needed replacement, while the Divine economy was such that James will remain forever a great saint and apostle. While still on earth with His disciples, our Lord deliberately refrained from revealing this to them in order to teach them to trust in His support, as long as they seek His will through prayer with one accord.

Acts 15 tells us of the debate that took place among the apostles concerning circumcision: is it, or is it not, a requirement for believing Gentiles to be circumcised? The discussion involved, among others, Paul, Peter, Barnabas and James. Although Paul was certain that circumcision was unnecessary, others wavered; James, however, invoked Peter's testimony regarding the work of the Holy Spirit, namely, since they prayed with one accord, they should be confident of their decision being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Unceasing prayer with one accord will give us clear answers to "***Lord, what do You want me to do?***" and will point us in the right direction.

Insincere/hurried prayer:

Our prayers, sometimes, have the tendency to be hurried, and to lack fervor and sincerity; in such instances, we would effectively be telling God "We do not have much time for You," while He would be saying:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Revelation 3:20)

We need perseverance in prolonged prayer with one accord. We need to be wary of Satan's wiles: immediately, he will stir up within us the vice of judgment, which kills prayer with one accord. Prayer with one accord cannot co-exist with strife.

An example of "prayer with one accord" is evident when, during liturgy, all deacons and congregation feel they are reciting the same prayers and litanies with the celebrant; we pray through each other, regardless of the person whose voice is heard. A discordant person is the one who likes to show-off, who is intent on showing off or being heard above everybody else.

The Orthodox philosophy calls us to wane and diminish, in order for Christ to shine and increase. Christ will disappear whenever someone attempts to shine and be conspicuous.

Unceasing prayer with one accord will produce immediate results pointing us in the direction of God's will, whenever a decision is to be made, or an issue needs resolution.

The decision-making system:

It is thus clear that the Church has a system for making decisions in accordance with God's will, such that:

- nothing is random, and no one forces their opinion on others,
- no decisions are made before prior prayers, or before seeking guidance from the word of God,

- we think together, we listen to each other, and we arrive at a decision by consensus.

This *modus operandi*, decreed by the Holy Spirit in Acts 15, two thousand years ago, remains in effect today. For example, if pagans were to express their desire, today, to convert to Christianity, we would not require them to be circumcised - since that was the apostles' decree, guided by the Holy Spirit, two thousand years ago.

To recap:

- In each Apostles' Fast, we should look back and revisit our reference points: What constitutes our "right?" What should our church, ideally, look like? What are our Lord's expectations from us, His congregation?
- As a church congregation, our Lord's first expectation from us is to pray with one accord. This is a necessary prerequisite before making any decisions.
- The Divine will in the church's environment is simply two words: *prayer* and *love*. Eliminating one or both contravenes the Lord's intent - we would be proceeding contrary to His will.
- The length of time spent praying is inconsequential - rather, our focus must be on *unceasing prayer with one heart and one accord* - and *loving each other*.
- The Orthodox philosophy calls us to wane and diminish, in order for Christ to shine and increase. Christ will disappear whenever someone attempts to shine and be conspicuous.
- We entreat the Lord to make His selection, because only He knows the hearts today and unto the end of a person's life, and only He knows the suitability of a particular person at all stages of the ministry.

- In our Church life, our service, and our decisions we must:
 - Pray ardently at every step of the way.
 - Search the Bible for answers.
 - Consult with each other and seek Christ's guidance.
 - Study the problem, the possible solution(s), and any conditions: the simple apostles proceeded in a logical fashion, two thousand years ago.
 - Consider alternatives and any effects of timing.
 - Think and pray together, read the word of God, and seek consensus before making any decisions.

CHAPTER 9

Discernment

Discernment is "having keen insight and good judgment," or "the ability to distinguish a particular path or situation among several similar ones." Our forefathers considered "Discernment" to be of primary importance for both our spiritual and daily lives alike. When we apply this definition to our day-to-day lives, we find that oftentimes we are faced with two different alternatives or courses of action. This would eventually lead us to wonder: **"Which path does God want me to follow?"**; hence the crucial and pressing question:

"Lord what do you want me to do?"

When the differences between options are significant, the choice is straightforward. Choosing becomes increasingly difficult, though, as the alternatives intersect. It is important to bear in mind that, even in moments of indecision or confusion, we must continue to seek the Lord's voice.

Let us examine what the Bible says about discernment, and how we can acquire this ability. Our Lord desires that His children have the ability to distinguish and to discern His voice; thus, He says:

the sheep ... know His voice ... for they do not know the voice of strangers. (John 10:4 & 5)

Shortly before his departure from this world, Saint Paul wrote a generic epistle to the Hebrews. Speaking of Christ as the High Priest, he says:

of Whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (Hebrews 5:11)

The following constitutes the background and reasons for this epistle:

- Saint Paul was approaching the end of his evangelical life, and many people, Jews and Gentiles, had repented at his hands.

- The Jews hated him, alleging that he was Moses' enemy, since he had annulled circumcision and other Jewish rites.
- He had also played down the Jews' sphere of influence. They thus tried him, then delivered him to the Romans for eventual execution.
- He wanted to make it clear to the Jews that he was one of them, that a true Jew must embrace Christianity, and that the Jews' Messiah of the Old Testament was our Jesus Christ of the New Testament.
- During the second half of the first century, Jews who had converted to Christianity were subjected to severe persecutions by the non-converts, and many reverted back to Judaism (apostasy). This epistle may be considered a message against apostasy.
- While parts of this epistle encourage the Hebrews, others reprimand them. Hence, in some parts he says "you have endured much and apostasy does not suit you," and elsewhere he warns, "if you renounce your Christian faith you will have lost everything." Apostates were under pressures, which could have been psychological or financial; many of them, though, returned to the Christian faith either because of this epistle or through the Church's pastoral care.
- When Paul said "*hard to explain*," in the verse quoted above, he meant to tell them that they were the main cause of the problem due to their failure to "listen to the voice of Truth" due to lack of discernment. He goes on to say:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. (Hebrews 5:12)

In other words, his expectations were that, after several years, they should have become teachers like him, following his example in evangelizing, having a full understanding of the Faith, and presenting Christ. He was surprised that, not only did they fail to meet his expectations, but they also wandered down a different path, and lacked understanding and knowledge of the basic principles that he had taught them! He thus observes that they need a very simply, basic, approach – hence: ***"you have come to need milk and not solid food."*** He goes on to say:

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:13 & 14)

Here, Saint Paul is speaking about:

- The beginners' or novice level, which he calls "***babe***."
- The advanced or mature level, or those who "***have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil***."
- Saint Paul thus links discernment to a spiritual level he called "***those who are of full age***."

We thus wonder:

- Spiritually, are we "babes," or "of full age?"
- Do we have the ability to discern, or are we easily swayed in every way, even in simple matters?

Had we been in Abraham's place, and heard our Lord saying "***Offer your son to Me as a burnt offering***," we would have had serious doubts as to whether that was really the Lord's voice. But Abraham's strong faith and mature spiritual level were such that he unequivocally discerned the Lord's voice, despite the harsh, message.

When the Lord seems to be pushing us down a path which we do not understand, we are confused, and plead with Him seeking direction and clarification. This is lack of discernment. A discerning person will have no doubts concerning the Lord's will.

Lack of Discernment & Spiritual Dullness

Sometimes we fail to grasp the Lord's message. **Such spiritual dullness of hearing leads to lack of discernment of the Lord's voice and messages.**

Reasons for Spiritual Dullness:

- **Loud external noise and disturbances:** money, work, politics and other externalities and worldly preoccupations distort, blur, or otherwise obscure the Lord's voice. Christ keeps telling us: You will never hear Me as long as all this preoccupies you!
- **Loud internal sounds and noise:** these are the thoughts and concerns constantly spinning around in our minds. Although we may have been successful in shutting out external noise, such internalities will continue to impede our hearing the Lord's voice.
- **Listening yet doing nothing – as though we have heard nothing:** We can never attain a state of discernment as long as we continue to ignore the Lord's voice. Our Lord Jesus Christ kept repeating: “*whoever has ears to hear let him hear*”. He also said:

everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand (Matthew 7:26)

Climbing up the Ladder of Discernment

The First Principles of the Oracles of God

Saint Paul speaks of "*the first principles of the oracles of God.*" In the early Church, there was something called "*the first principles*" which, today, we label "*the catechumens' program.*" This program prepares catechumens for their baptism: it explains the Christian Faith, and emphasizes their repentance as a prerequisite. The first principles are:

- love,
- prayer,
- memorizing and understanding the Nicene Creed,
- memorizing the Lord's Prayer,
- studying at least one of the four gospels,
- understanding the life of Christ, and
- sincerely repenting, changing direction and renouncing habits and practices contrary to Christian teaching.

Thus, Saint Paul says that it makes no sense to be "partially Christian" like having only one foot through the door. For example, how can a person, having been baptized, spend years without reading the Bible – which is originally a prerequisite for baptism!! That is why Saint Paul rebuked them: it turned out that those whom he thought should be well-versed in his teachings and in Christian principles, had no knowledge even of the basics.

The following are the building blocks of the "first principles:

Love

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

Love is a cornerstone of our worship, and a vital element of our life with Christ. It is inconceivable that a servant, while outwardly fasting and praying, not practice this fundamental tenet of our faith, namely, loving his/her brothers and sisters. We cannot begin to understand or practice discernment while breaking the basic commandment of love.

Prayer

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

We note here that a basic lesson is assigning a high priority to prayer in our daily life. This cornerstone is among the first principles taught to catechumens and novice monks/nuns.

We cannot advance in our faith and spiritual life if we fail to assign prayer its due priority in our daily life - this is an indication that we are still in need of "milk."

Saint Paul told the Hebrews:

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God (Hebrews 6:1)

We note here that Saint Paul repeats "*elementary principles*," meaning "*first principles*" mentioned in Hebrews 5. By saying "*let us go on to perfection*," he is expressing his desire to advance beyond the basics of "repentance, leaving dead works behind, and having faith in God." Projecting this idea into our Church and world of service, it would be a great pity indeed if

servants had to be consistently reminded to love one another, and to renounce gossip and bearing false witness. How can anyone aspire to "*go on to perfection*" without having practiced and perfected, *a priori*, the basic principles?? In the subsequent verses he goes on to say:

of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:2 - 5)

Paul clarifies and emphasizes his message: having been baptized, we should have had a clear understanding of the doctrine of baptisms, chrismation, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (at the end of our earthly life we will be accountable before God.) These basic doctrines are taught to catechumens, and should have been well understood by those who have received the Holy Spirit who, consequently, should have a relationship with the angels and saints, and whose eyes should be set upon heaven and eternal life. It is impossible to progress to the stage of discernment, and knowing the will of God, without a full understanding of the first principles. Nevertheless, since apparently they were taking steps backwards instead of forward, Paul is willing to revise with them all those concepts.

In the next verse, Paul addresses apostasy and those who have renounced the faith:

For it is impossible ... if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4 & 6)

It is impossible to re-baptize someone who renounces their faith, after having accepted it, and been baptized. To re-baptize is analogous to re-crucifying Christ - it is unreasonable to entertain such a thought or to take it lightly.....To "***fall away***" is to apostatize or to renounce the faith. It should be noted here that Saint Paul is being quite strict with them - and with us as well.

Failing to love one another - a basic staple of our faith - obstructs any effort at climbing the ladder of spiritual maturity, hence, watchfulness, asceticism and discernment; our persistence in nurturing worldly habits such as watching movies and engaging in fruitless discussions, gossip, and hating others, while ignoring our faith's principles, are a sure path to perdition, and a definite indication that that we still "***need milk and not solid food.***"

Considering the saints, we note that they take their life in Christ seriously: hence, love, repentance, struggle and prayer. Such a life breeds discernment, and leads to unequivocal recognition of God's voice and will.

Saints Paul and Peter re-emphasize this message in other epistles:

I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able (1 Corinthians 3:2)

And,

as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby (1 Peter 2:2)

Allowing sin to fester in believers' hearts cannot lead to strengthening our Church. Continuing to behave like undiscerning children, especially after having been indoctrinated into the faith's essential elements, impedes transitioning to a higher spiritual level: "***solid food.***"

Solid Food

The following are the four main components of "***solid food:***"

- **Blind Obedience**

Blind obedience to the commandments and to our spiritual father's advice definitely constitute "solid food." "Blind obedience" implies obedience without arguing, evasion or procrastination. Unfortunately, despite our familiarity with the commandments, and our having been saturated with sermons on the subject, we fail to obey them; blind obedience is lacking.

- **Toil and Watchfulness**

Toil and watchfulness must never be taken lightly, and are among the most significant contributors to the saints' strength and high degree of spiritual maturity. It is definitely not helpful

to malnourish the body and unreasonable to expect a malnourished body to serve effectively. A perfect example is our late Pope Shenouda III, who spent long hours every night toiling, watching and praying – which led to his developing discernment and effective leadership.

- **Self-Control**

This is yet another essential element of "solid food." Yielding to the demands of the flesh is detrimental to our spiritual growth. For example, succumbing to feelings of hunger or cravings for certain foods defeats the very purpose of fasting; yielding to the inclination of praying while lying down or sleeping is an absurd interpretation of sincere prayer. Such failures of self-control are definite indications of immaturity and unpreparedness for any claims to discernment.

- **Meekness and Humility**

Many years ago, novices and catechumens were subjected to extreme, almost terrifying, tests and demands – which make today's military rigid requirements seem quite simple! Nevertheless, they endured whatever it took to answer their calling – their resolve was unshakable, regardless of any demands or punishments they had to endure. As long as we continue to seek the "easy way out," to seek alternatives, to bypass the narrow gate, we can be sure that we still ***"need milk and not solid food."*** Serious meekness and humility are the way to heaven, to which we must cling, no matter what.

Sincere humility means consistently thanking God regardless of the severity of the trials He permits to come our way. We must

tell the Lord that we gladly accept all hardships if such is the path to Eternity:

For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. (Hebrews 5:13)

Thus Saint Paul expresses it quite clearly: as long as milk is all we are capable of absorbing, we have no experience. We must admit that, spiritually, we are children: not in the beautiful sense of innocence, rather, in the sense of being beginners, superficial, and inexperienced.

Saint Paul thus says:

Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. (1Corinthians 14:20)

He also says:

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

Hence, consuming healthy foods, reading the Bible avidly, standing in sincere prayer, subjugating the body with fatigue, and struggling to love our enemies, all constitute "solid food." These will lead to a life of enjoyment of the heavenly reward of discernment, understanding the will of the Lord, and being Divinely guided in all endeavors.

Our Coptic Church cherishes the following verse, which has helped in its preservation over the centuries:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you (Deuteronomy 32:7)

This means that we should never assume, or believe, that we have read and understood the Bible sufficiently, or to the extent that we can offer interpretations thereof. We must never ignore the advice and knowledge of our fathers and confessors. Even our ascetic fathers who dwelt the wilderness say they learned from their predecessors. Although all Churches possess Bibles, and boast historical roots, the secret behind the magnificence of our Coptic Church lies in its referential discipleship.

The currents of superficiality prompted Saint Paul to say:

But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. (1 Corinthians 4:19 & 20)

The righteous Saint James, Christ's cousin, and author of the general epistle of Saint James, says, in all humility and spiritual maturity:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. (James 3:1 & 2)

How can the great Saint James, a senior disciple, offend?? His greatness lies in his reluctance to speak lest he should offend.

- **Well-trained Senses**

Having well-trained senses means being sensitized to the voice and will of the Lord, and acting accordingly. This is genuine discernment. This is the kind of discernment demonstrated by our late Pope Shenouda III

Hence, possessing such discernment means that the person's spiritual experience suffices for hearing the Lord's voice louder than any human voice. Thus, discerning the Lord's voice extends far beyond human rationale, and rigorous calculations. Such is the implication of being led by the Holy Spirit, having well-trained senses, and having the level of discernment to which we aspire.

Two other instances in which Saint Paul refers to discernment:

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

And:

that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ (Philippians 1:10)

Sometimes, circumstances, situations or apparent solutions, may seem so similar that differentiation among them may prove to be quite difficult, and discerning the path pleasing to God may, consequently, be elusive. However, apparent similarities should not in any way mean that they are in fact similar. Our

faculty of discernment will identify for us, immediately, the Lord's voice and will, and, hence, the right path.

Our Lord Jesus Christ helped us to discern by saying that we would encounter many false prophets who would distort reality:

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:16)

Those whose lifestyle is totally incompatible with the beautiful sermons they deliver are precisely the *grapes from thorn-bushes* to which our Lord was referring. We can identify those false prophets by applying the Lord's advice: ***You will know them by their fruits;*** hence, are they pure, pious and holy? Then we can determine their essence.

The rule goes:

God's will is not necessarily everything which appears good. There are many things which have a nice appearance but with which God does not agree. This applies sometimes in the work environment, in service and even when embarking on a choice for holy matrimony. Let us always ask God.

We should not blindly apply each biblical teaching as the will of the Holy Spirit – because the Holy Spirit's intent could be different from what we may have understood or interpreted a verse to mean. Although quotations could very well be verbatim from the Bible, they could be taken out of context. This is precisely the problem that has faced our faith along the years: all denominations are quoting from the Bible – particularly enigmatic is the fact that one verse could be interpreted as meaning one thing while, in reality, it could mean something

else, if taken in the proper context. This is where the saints endowed with the faculty of discernment come in: it is vital to understand – hence, discern - the **intent** behind each verse, as opposed to simply reciting it.

Being in our infancy in the realm of spiritual development, makes us easy prey for being misled and for mistaking the wrong path for the Lord's will.

Let us remain within the Church's fold, drinking of its milk, and aspiring to see the day when we would graduate to solid food. Let us follow the example of our forefathers who knew how to discern, and who fully understood the Lord's ways. We must admit, and recognize the fact that, unfortunately, we are still beginners

To recap ...

- Discernment means "having keen insight and good judgment," or "the ability to distinguish a particular object or situation among several similar ones."
- Our Lord desires that His children discern His voice; thus, He says: *....the sheep....know His voice....for they do not know the voice of strangers.* (John 10:4 & 5)
- Saint Paul links discernment to a spiritual level he called *"those who are of full age."*
- It is important to bear in mind that, even in moments of indecision or confusion, we must continue to seek the Lord's voice.
- When the Lord seems to be pushing us down a path which we do not understand and plead with Him seeking direction and

clarification. This is a lack of discernment – a discerning person will have no doubts concerning the Lord's will.

- Failure to achieve discernment is spiritual dullness of hearing; it may be due to external noise (worldly preoccupations), internal noise (unproductive thoughts), or ignoring what we hear.
- Our hearing will remain dull as long as we continue down the path of evil and fall into sin.
- Saint Paul speaks of "the first principles of the oracles of God" which are:
 - prayer,
 - love,
 - memorizing and understanding the Nicene Creed,
 - memorizing the Lord's Prayer,
 - studying at least one of the four gospels,
 - understanding the life of Christ, and
 - sincerely repenting, changing direction and renouncing practices contrary to Christian teaching.
- It is impossible to progress to the stage of discernment, and knowing the will of God, without fully understanding, and practicing, the first principles.
- Love and prayer are the cornerstones of the first principles.
- We cannot advance in our faith and spiritual life if we fail to assign prayer its due priority in our daily life.
- Transitioning to a higher spiritual level, leading to discernment, requires: blind obedience, toil and watchfulness, self control, and humility and meekness.

- Consuming healthy foods, reading the Bible avidly, standing in sincere prayer, subjugating the body with prostrations, and struggling to love our enemies, will lead to a life of enjoyment of the heavenly reward of discernment, understanding the will of the Lord, and being Divinely guided in all endeavors.
- We should never assume, or believe, that we have read and understood the Bible sufficiently, or to the extent that we can offer interpretations thereof. We must never ignore the advice and knowledge of our fathers and confessors.
- Having well-trained senses means being sensitized to the voice and will of the Lord, and acting accordingly. This is genuine discernment. Possessing such discernment means that the person's spiritual experience suffices for his hearing the Lord's voice louder than his hearing of any human voice. Such is the implication of being led by the Holy Spirit, having well-trained senses, and having the level of discernment to which we aspire.
- God's will is not necessarily everything which appears good. There are many things which have a nice appearance but with which God does not agree.
- Let us remain within the Church's fold, drinking of its milk, and aspiring to see the day when we would graduate to solid food. Let us follow the example of our forefathers who knew how to discern, and who fully understood the Lord's ways. We must admit, and recognize the fact that, unfortunately, we are still beginner.

CHAPTER 10

Spiritual Maturity

Saint Paul says:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. (Romans 12:3)

At the beginning of his apostolic life, when St. Paul encountered Christ, he asked Him:

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Towards the end of his life, though, we find that he changed completely: he was in a state of growth and depth in perceiving the will of God. At the beginning of his apostolic life he used to flee death, or be helped to evade it. However, towards the end of his life, he knew exactly when and how he would die, and he embraced the end awaiting him. Clearly, this change was due to his spiritual maturity.

Similarly, today we are beginners, still attempting to find out God's purpose for our existence; many years later, if the breath of life is still within us, we may discover that we had failed to understand Him, and that comprehending our Lord is realized at a much deeper level.

Paul's flights from death at the beginning of his service

Paul's flight from the Jews in Damascus:

After his encounter with Christ (Acts 9) Paul started preaching in Damascus:

Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those

who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ. Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. (Acts 9:20 - 23)

At this point, maybe Paul was wondering whether the Lord desired his death there and then, or desired that he should continue his mission. The question

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

is indeed a tough one: should I follow Stephen's example and simply yield to their plot, or do You want me to do something else?

But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. (Acts 9:24)

They were adamant about capturing him; Saul could have easily given himself up

Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. (Acts 9:25)

Here, one could argue that such was the disciples', not Paul's, will.

Paul's flight from the Jews in Jerusalem:

And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem,

coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. (Acts 9:26 - 29)

Once again, we wonder: Why did Paul not yield to their attempts to kill him? Why did he opt not to follow in his Master's footsteps? Why not die for Christ Who died for him? Why not follow Stephen's example, given that Stephen ranked much higher than Paul at that time (Stephen was ordained archdeacon, while Paul had no standing in the Church's hierarchy)?

When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus. (Acts 9:30)

Here, too, no mention is made, as to whose will that was. Was it Paul's, the disciples' or the Lord's?? In this instance, Paul yielded to pressure from the surrounding, loving, disciples,

Paul's flight from a riot against him in Ephesus:

Fifteen years had passed, Paul became a bishop, and many Ephesians converted to Christianity. Consequently, the pagan trade of producing and selling idols was dying. About two hundred workers therefore demonstrated against him, attributing the loss of their business to his preaching

And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him. (Acts 19:30)

The disciples would not allow him to defend, or preach, Christ.

Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theater. (Acts 19:31)

This was because they knew he would be killed otherwise.

We note that in all three situations cited above, Paul could have died for Christ's sake. Nevertheless he was passive and made no decisions. This may reflect either wisdom or submission.

Paul's Change of Attitude & Spiritual Maturity

When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' (Acts 21:11)

Luke is the narrator here, and he shared those circumstances with Paul.

The person who *"took Paul's belt"* was called Agabus – a righteous man, who had come to visit the place through which Paul was passing. He tied his hands and feet with Paul's belt, and said that the belt's owner would be thus tied by the Jews in Jerusalem, who would then deliver him to the Gentiles. The same expression was used for Christ - that the Jews would bind Him and deliver Him to the Gentiles.

Luke continues with his narrative:

Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:12)

On previous occasions Paul went along with their pleas. This time, though, he did not:

Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." So when he would not be persuaded, we

ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done. (Acts 21:13 & 14)

The disciples urged Paul to stay - out of their love for him, as well as due to the fact that he was a central figure in the Church. On the other hand, although Paul probably had no knowledge of how his life would end, he was adamant, this time, about not agreeing with them - he saw something they could not perceive.....

Before going to Jerusalem, Paul delivered a historic, farewell, sermon to the elders of Ephesus (which our Church reads thirty times per year, in the Praxis lectionary, whenever the departure of a bishop is commemorated):

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.....And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,.... (Acts 20:17 & 22)

He addressed the presbyters and bishops of Asia Minor, saying that he was "***bound in the spirit.***" At this stage of his ministry, Paul's spiritual maturity was such that he could neither resist nor ignore the prompting of the Holy Spirit, urging him to proceed to Jerusalem. This prompting was much stronger than the disciples' urging to the contrary. Paul's emphatic response to them stemmed from his love for our Lord.

.....except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. (Acts 20:23)

Paul was fully aware, through the Holy Spirit, of the tribulations that awaited him in Jerusalem: he would be arrested and beaten, nevertheless, he was "***bound in the spirit.***"

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, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24)

This means that we should not cater to our own reasoning: logically, Paul had no business going to Jerusalem - he was heading straight towards disastrous treatment, while leaving the Gentiles who were in dire need of his service. Although having a malleable personality is a virtue, the Holy Spirit's prompting - the voice of the Lord - should never be ignored.

The voice of the Holy Spirit must always transcend that of the heart or mind - this is the highest level of response to

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

At times we may feel gratified when there is agreement between the Lord's voice and logic.

At other times, it may seem perfectly logical to proceed down a certain path - yet the Holy Spirit disagrees, since His perception is much broader than ours.....The hardest part of

"Lord, what do You want me to do?"

is when the Holy Spirit's prompting is at variance with our reasoning.

Saint Paul had attained an enviable degree of spiritual maturity; he could see what others could not. In this respect, the late Pope Shenouda III would see matters in a completely different light from others - only years later, would people appreciate, and agree with, his viewpoint.

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily. Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. (Acts 16:5 & 6)

Here, he experienced the Holy Spirit preventing him from doing something.....

After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. (Acts 16:7)

Paul, once more, is in the enviable position of hearing, and responding positively to, the voice of the Holy Spirit.

So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. (Acts 16:8)

At this point, Paul might have been wondering and praying, seeking God's guidance, *"Is this all there is? Should I return to my hometown now?"*

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us. (Acts 16:9)

Paul had become used to being led by the Spirit. The question *"Lord, what do You want me to do?"* which was his starting point in Acts 9, has now developed into being *"led by the Spirit."* Put differently, all his movements and actions from then on were determined by the voice of the Lord, rather than by human intellect or emotions. Paul had certainly come a long way.

When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 18:5)

The level of spiritual maturity of all the saints is such that they are always bound by the Spirit. Saint John the Divine is an example: his spiritual level was so high, that he saw his Revelation through the Holy Spirit:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet,... (Revelation 1:10)

Let us pray that the Lord bind us in His Spirit, manipulate us according to His will, and shield us from contrary counsels and wrong choices. Being thus bound by the Lord's Spirit will render unnecessary an answer to "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Paul felt an inner, irresistible, urge, which went far beyond a simple personal tendency, or a desire to celebrate Pentecost with

the disciples in Jerusalem; he knew he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer there - although he had no knowledge of the details or the timing of his death.

This is being **"compelled by the Spirit."** We may experience this through reading the Bible sometimes we get the feeling that the word of God is compelling us, such that whenever we open the Bible, we encounter a specific passage which speaks to us, conveying the same message.

The Lord always knows what is best for His children - even if that meant traversing periods of hardships, or opting for situations defying human logic. In Paul's case, he was successfully preaching across continents, and it seemed quite inopportune for him to march towards certain imprisonment and death.

Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:37 & 38)

Clearly, they all loved Paul dearly, and he was certain he would not see them again - why, then, did he insist on leaving? His answer: **"nor do I count my life dear to myself,"** because he was **"bound in the spirit."**

Our constant preoccupation with calculations, assumptions and deductions, prevents us from hearing the voice of the Lord. Paul would have never gone to Jerusalem, if he had tried, a priori, to figure out the consequences of service interruption, imprisonment, oppression and tarnished reputation (they alleged that he opposed Moses, broke the law, and was an imposter - potentially leading to loss of his disciples). The simple reason for defying this rationale: he was **"bound in the Spirit."**

"But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself"

To be "*bound in the spirit*," and to be flexible in the Lord's hands, one has to have attained a **high level of spiritual maturity**. Paul, likely, dismissed laughingly, his friends' concerns that he might be killed...

This notion may be illustrated further by the following story:

While one of the saints was on his way to martyrdom, the ruler, trying to flex his muscles, told him, "Don't you know what I can do to you?" The saint responded, "What??"

The ruler rejoined: "I will banish you."

The saint: "Will you banish me to a place where the Lord does not exist?"

The ruler after some thought: "I'll cast you into the sea."

The saint: "I'll find Jonah waiting for me in the whale's belly."

The ruler: "I'll throw you to the lions."

The saint: "I'll find Daniel."

The ruler: "I'll throw you into the fire."

The saint: "I'll find the three youths."

The ruler: "I'll have you tortured and beheaded."

The saint: "I'll be crowned."

Hence, this is how saints think: nor do I count my life dear to myself." A saint's life is worthless to him, contrary to the attitude of most people. The message is all that counts.

Thus, the required degree of maturity is such that one's life is of no importance; what really matters is the message, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit says imprisonment or martyrdom is the way to go - then so be it.

Being led by the Holy Spirit constitutes the saints' real wealth. We can claim spiritual richness if, and only if, we are led by the Holy Spirit in every aspect of our life, be it prayer, outreach, service, evangelizing or whatever we may be doing. This is the most beautiful target we can realize.

Obviously, we must not forget that Paul was backed by his previous experience: he had seen Stephen, and he had heard of the premature martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee; he thus was aware that others - better than he was, in his view - were martyred at an early age. Hence, martyrdom did not pose for him cause for concern.

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:36 - 38)

We see that Paul was unmoved by the display of such overflowing human emotions. Nevertheless, Paul harbored much love for each and every one of his children; he said in his farewell sermon, "**I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.**" (Acts 20:31) This shows the extent of his tender love for his children. But the will of God is above all.

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:37)

His love for heaven and the Lord was more important than that for his spiritual children. His yearning for the end had become more profound than human relationships. There was something that ranked much higher in priority than the great love between him and his children.

Let us search for, and identify, the obstacles impeding the Lord's will in our life; these could range from emotions and relationships, to habits or circumstances. Although we should enrich our lives with godly relationships, the more important question is: *"What does the Lord want?"*

Partaking of the Holy Sacraments:

Along our journey toward spiritual Maturity we need to consistently partake of the Holy Sacraments, pertinently confession, and the Eucharist.

As we attend Holy Mass, we are in the presence of our Lord and His Holy Saints. We enjoy their blessed companionship asking them to grant us the Holy Wisdom enlighten to see through all what we are experiencing. We need that through the saints intentions, we are granted the blessing of the Holy light that appeared to St. Paul and to hear our Lord's Voice clearly telling us what we wish us to do. This Holy experience culminate in the ultimate greatest grace of eating Lord's Body and drinking His Blood, thus becoming ONE with HIM.

The crown of our spiritual development and way to spiritual maturity can never be realized without our consistent partaking of the Holy Sacraments that our Lord has made sure to consecrate before Passion Week and later after His Resurrection. The crown of our Christian Faith lies in partaking of the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, which also cannot be done without having repented and enjoyed forgiveness during the Sacrament of Confession. Our Lord told His disciples:

Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)

Thus our Lord Jesus Christ founded the Sacrament of Confession in a clear attempt to pass on to us the vital importance of repentance, not only within one's own mind, but more importantly through the authority and guidance of "a man of God", who also becomes our spiritual guide helping us climb the ladder of spiritual maturity and discernment.

Our Lord Jesus continuously referred to the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist before the Last Supper. He said:

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6: 32-35)

Later on, as our He was preparing for the culmination of His mission of the salvation of humanity through Passion Week, He gathered His apostles and consecrated the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. He broke bread with them, and took the cup and gave them to eat and drink, saying that this is His body and His blood. He then clearly ordered them (and all of us):

"(Do) this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19)

Partaking of our Lord's Body and Blood is indispensable in reaching a level of spiritual maturity that allows one to discern our Lord's voice, knows His will and live a life in accordance to this Holy Will.

To recap:

- Achieving a high degree of spiritual maturity is a prerequisite for understanding the Lord's will.
- Paul's apostolic life is a perfect example of spiritual growth, and being sensitized to the Holy Spirit's prompting.
- The Lord's will, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, must always overrule any human reasoning.
- Let us weed out any obstacles, be they emotions, circumstances, or otherwise, impeding the Lord's will from materializing in our life.
- Partaking of the Holy Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist is mandatory for one to reach the level of spiritual maturity that allows us to discern our Lord's Holy Will and to live in accordance to it.

