

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 3: ISAIAH 10:5-27

TRINITY 23

The affliction of Israel at the hand of the Assyrians was God's punishment upon Israel for not repenting of their sin and turning back to Him. The Children of Israel would be exiled and their earthly fortunes taken from them. They had turned from the true God to the gods of their neighbors, had given up true worship to worship graven images. Thus, they would suffer at the hands of pagans who thought their "carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria."

Yet, this was all part of God's plan to turn His people back to Himself and show His almighty power and mercy. The Assyrians' thought that they or their idols had real power was but foolish pride—they were simply God's tool: "Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it?" God was the One wielding the axe, the One bringing punishment upon Israel. Not only would Israel learn its lesson and return to the Lord with repentant hearts, but Assyria would learn not to mock the true God through its arrogant pride.

As Christians, we are God's instruments in this world. God places us in various vocations through which we serve others. Sometimes that vocation even requires us to discipline others, such as a parent disciplining a child. Yet, we must always be careful not to let pride sneak in and seek the glory for ourselves. While we can so easily become prideful of what we have done, really it is God working in us and through us. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 9:1-8 (NKJV)**

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed.

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”

And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!”

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins; then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’”

And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

THE COLLECT

O almighty and most merciful God, of Thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech Thee, from all things that may hurt us, that we, being ready, both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that Thou wouldst have done; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“The feet of him who brings good news” is this man named Nahum. In the midst of all the tumult that comes at the hands of the Assyrians, Israel is comforted by knowing that God will fight for them. God calls upon them to “fulfill [their] vows”—which is to say, “to fear, love, and trust in God above all things”—even though they have been subjected to the terrible hand of the Assyrians. The Israelites are called upon, as are all Christians, “to walk by faith and not by sight.”

As we walk this earth, evil surrounds us at every turn. Satan longs for the destruction of God’s people today just as he did the people of Israel at the hands of his workers of evil, the Assyrians. There are times that evil rears its ugly head in order to frighten us into thinking that God is not near us, much less does He even care about us. Then there are the times that evil comes in “sheep’s clothing”—times that are all the more perilous. These are the times when we are apt to let down our guard and evil does not have to conquer us so much as simply let us submit.

Such subtleness of Satan can leave us wondering if we can ever win in our fight against him. The short answer is, “No.” It is a battle we can never win: “On earth is not his equal.” “But, for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected!” Yes, Christ fights for us and protects us each day, and has promised that nothing shall ever separate us from Him.

“An oracle concerning Nineveh,” are the words that begin the Book of Nahum. The same Nineveh to whom Jonah preached had, has one commentator writes, “repented of their repentance.” At one time they had repented of their sins and turned to the true God upon Jonah’s preaching. But their repentance proved as short-lived as Israel’s typically was, and they had turned back to their savage ways, as the people of Nineveh apparently had not taught their children to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

They had at previously been spared God’s wrath, but now things would be different. They were hard of heart and without hope of repentance, so God does not send Nahum as He had with Jonah, but simply speaks His judgment through the prophet.

God’s harsh words concerning Nineveh are, at the same time, sweet speech to the ears of Judah. God has been patient with Nineveh but His patience has come to an end. God’s patience ought never be confused with weakness. He will demonstrate His power and Nineveh will be subjected to it. But, in His so punishing the wicked who afflict them, His people are given peace.

The strong of this world cannot compete with the strength of God, nor its wisdom with His wisdom. The greatest moment of God’s exercising His strength seemed most pathetic to human reason, but in death Jesus destroys death. In that moment of willing helplessness, Jesus is strong to save. For that reason, in our times of helplessness Jesus is always there, ever strong to save.

After 70 years of Babylonian exile, Cyrus, the Persian King, proclaimed in 538 B.C. that God’s people could return. Only a remnant from the two southern tribes of Judah actually did return. With the help of the priest Ezra, they rebuilt what is called Zerubbabel’s temple in 516 B.C. The book of Nehemiah occurs some 71 years after the rebuilding of that second temple. The report is that the returned exiles “are in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

We learn from Nehemiah’s prayer concerning the returned exiles how we are to come before the Triune God and plead for the communion of saints, the holy Christian Church—the true Jerusalem. Nehemiah knows that these returned exiles had sinned greatly. They had neglected the true worship, not supported the preachers, and withheld the offerings to maintain the church building. They had intermarried with the heathen, conducted Sabbath day sales, and charged usury to their fellow poor believers. Nehemiah does not mince words, “Both my father’s house and I have sinned.” He acknowledges that they deserve everything that they have received, but then he pleads for mercy. He holds God to His promise in Deut. 30:1-5. God promised forgiveness and restoration to those who confessed their sins, returned to God and showed their repentance by keeping his commandments. We, too, have sinned greatly and plead for mercy for the sake of Jesus Christ. Based on God’s Word we say, “I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. And Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.”

Though Nehemiah was doing a good work with “the good hand of my God upon Me [Nehemiah],” that doesn’t mean that his work was without hardship or suffering. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem caused the children of Israel lots and lots of trouble. At first they offered to help, but these enemies were not members of the chosen people and they certainly were not worshippers of the one true God. Though some of their worship was said to be to Yahweh, it was done under the image of a golden calf. This mixed worship, called syncretism, was not to be yoked together with the heritage of Israel. “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?”

When Ezra earlier, and now Nehemiah had rejected their offer of working together, these “people of the land” ridiculed those who sought to rebuild the Temple for the maintenance of a faithful and pure worship. They spread slander saying that God’s people were going to “rebel against the King.” They persecuted God’s people.

We shouldn’t be surprised when we are ridiculed for seeking to maintain a pure and faithful confession of faith concerning the pure Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Suffering is not necessarily a sign of God’s rejection. A true confession which excludes falsehood often does invite suffering. “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.” We are directed to be faithful to God’s Word and leave the outcome of the battle to the Lord. The Lord’s suffering on the holy Cross to forgive our sin is our victory!

It is appropriate that today, being the Festival of the Reformation of the Church, we hear from the second chapter of the Prophet Isaiah concerning God’s judgment against idols and idolatry. It was on account of the idolatry inherent in indulgences that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, on this date in AD 1517, nailed 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, in order to debate and debunk these indulgences that made out of the saints and their earthly possessions idols to be worshiped not only alongside of Christ, but instead of Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ and the grace of the forgiveness of sins found in the holy Gospel had been replaced by the works and traditions of men as a means to earn men’s salvation. This idolatry of one’s own works’ righteousness even went so far as to make people believe that some of them had not only enough good works for their own salvation, but could even offer or sell to others their good works for their benefit.

Our Lord, in His mercy, sent into this world Dr. Martin Luther and his co-workers to destroy the idolatry present within the Church, so that the pure and holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’s suffering and death might once again be given its full glory to enlighten the dark and sinful minds of mankind, so that they might turn from their worship of their works and look to the Lord Jesus as their only source of salvation.

So blessed, we ever pray: Lord, keep us in Thy Word and work; restrain the murderous Pope and Turk. Amen.

Joel continues the scene on the Last Day. With so much talk today about people “deciding for Christ,” we must make clear what is meant by “the valley of decision.” The “valley of decision” and the “valley of Jehoshaphat” are the same place. “Jehoshaphat” means “Jehovah has judged.” The “decision” is the decision rendered by *the Judge*, God. God’s people are spared because *He decided* to call them by the Holy Spirit to trust in Christ. His enemies are sent away because *they decided* to reject His call.

God’s judgment is simply to leave evil unto itself: God, who is Light, leaves evil in the perpetual darkness that it has perpetrated. Yet, the voice of such judgment is one that “roars,” causing “the heavens and the earth [to] quake.”

Those whom God calls to be His own, though, escape from this judgment by seeking “refuge” in Him. On the Last Day everything changes: the enjoyment of our Refuge is made manifest as God’s people are freed not only from evil, but from all of the effects of evil, and spend eternity in the new Jerusalem where “strangers”—evil and those who practice it—will never be allowed. The evil one had inflicted God’s people with sufferings, but only for a time. In the Judgment, the evil one and his cohorts are sent to suffer for all eternity, such being all of their own doing.

God’s people have Life and have it in abundance, while God’s enemies spend eternity in “desolation.” They shed the innocent blood of Christ and will forever pay the price for their actions, while what His blood and righteousness purchased is our inheritance.

We do not need to be uncomfortable with Nehemiah’s imprecatory (calling upon God to punish evil doers) prayer in verses 4-5. In keeping with the rule, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord,” we don’t take the matter into our own hands, but pray that the Lord would do as He has promised. Our Triune God has not only promised to forgive and save those who, confessing their sin, believe and are baptized into Jesus Christ, but He has also promised to punish those who reject the Holy Spirit’s teaching that Jesus is the Savior by sending them to hell. Only God knows for certain whether someone will remain impenitent unto death.

Our prayer is always that we first desire our enemies’ repentance if at all possible. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” However, should they resist the Holy Spirit with uncircumcised hearts and minds, they will die in their sin. Though we continue to love our enemies, we pray that God’s will is done concerning impenitence.

Like Nehemiah’s workers who held a sword in one hand to fight against evil doers and a trowel in the other for building up the temple, the church continues to defend herself against false teaching with the sword of the Word of God, all the while building up the church with the rightly taught Gospel and rightly administered Sacraments. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In 537 B.C. with the proclamation of Persian Cyrus, the Israelites remnant returned. The scribe Ezra arrived in 458 B.C., some 79 years after Cyrus' proclamation and 58 years after the completion of the Temple. Ezra finds that he must institute far reaching reforms, because the Israelites were not following the Word. Their confession is listed in Ezra 10. Thirteen years later in 445 B.C. Nehemiah, the governor, arrives in Jerusalem to find that not only was the wall torn down, but the people had once again not been following the Word of God.

With the wall completed, there was liberty and safety to gather for an assembly and the hearing of God's Word. However, the reading of the Torah made them realize how rebellious they had been so that they wept and mourned over their sin. When the Law has worked sorrow in the hearer, the response of the preacher should be the proclamation of the Gospel. Your sins which are great are forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ.

Nehemiah said, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." These words are the sweetest of Gospel. The Lord their God had restored His people to Jerusalem, caused the Temple to be rebuilt, and standing up against their enemies the Lord caused the wall to be restored. We are not strong of ourselves; our only strength is in God's joy to save sinners by His grace.

The Prophet Joel has much to say about the fortunes of Israel. As the prophets before him, as well as after, Joel preached repentance to the people. Those who heeded God's call to repentance were assured of His love and forgiveness, though their earthly life was oft time wrought with the consequences of sin brought on by those who did not repent. Consider Daniel: he believed and trusted in God, yet was exiled in Babylon with unbelieving Israel. Today's reading from Joel is one of sweet Gospel to the repentant Children of Israel and fierce judgment to the impenitent, the enemies of God.

To understand such Old Testament writing it can be helpful to think about time as a recurring story with a replenishing set of characters. The basic story is one of people who fail God and are called to repent. Moved by the Holy Spirit, some heed the call to repent, while others resist Him. The story repeats itself throughout time with the cast of characters changing from one generation to the next. Thus, this text from Joel is also sweet Gospel for us—God's chosen people who have been called to repent.

Ultimately, the story will come to an end...the end of time...the Last Day. The heartaches and sorrows of God's people are ones shared by Christ with us—and us with Christ—in His suffering and death. Whether Tyre or Sidon, or the enemies we face today, they are sons of The Enemy, Satan. In the end they will be summoned to the Valley of Jehosaphat where God will pronounce His the final judgment, "Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity."

THE HOLY GOSPEL **St. Matthew 22:15–22 (NKJV)**

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”

And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

THE COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Levites said, “Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever!” The response was not a modern praise song which repeats our actions, saying, “I will praise you” again and again. The words which follow are a litany of God’s actions in human history. True praise is to recount the merciful works of God’s salvation given to sinful mankind.

The Lord our God is the Creator of Heaven and Earth. He chose Abram and brought him to the Promise Land. The Lord answered the cries of our fathers in Egypt by the Red Sea deliverance, provided a pillar of cloud/fire to lead them, visited them on Mt. Sinai and sent Moses with the Ten Commandments. When they “hardened their necks” and rebelled, our God was “gracious and merciful, slow to anger.” He forgave them and sent the Holy Spirit to instruct them. The Lord mercifully did not forsake them but after forty years led them into the Promised Land. They rebelled again. God sent them judges to deliver them. When the judges died, they rebelled again. God sent them kings, princes, priests and prophets. The conclusion of all praise is, “For you have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly.”

Realizing that all the good which the Israelites now possess had come from God’s grace alone, they praise God by speaking the truth about God’s action. The only God pleasing response is to believe in God’s merciful action, by receiving His promised forgiveness. The only positive statement concerning man is Abraham’s faith-filled heart in verse 8. Jesus tells us that Abraham’s children, will do the things that Abraham did—believe in God.

The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah (from which we have today's reading) are the first prophets to return to Jerusalem after the 70-year Babylonian exile. They encouraged the children of Israel to rely upon God's many promises. Moses had said, "The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you."

God did work to gather a remnant and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Nevertheless, there are many things spoken of by the post-exilic prophets, which were not fulfilled until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the establishment of the holy Christian Church. Jerusalem became "the city of Truth" when God punished His Son on Calvary, "the Mountain of the LORD of Hosts, the Holy Mountain." The departed Glory of Israel returned when Jesus came to the Temple. "Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord!" For the chosen remnant of believers who came out of the children of Israel, the free forgiveness of Jesus Christ is "marvelous" in our eyes.

Just as surely as the law caused us to be "a curse among the nations...so I will save you, and you shall be a blessing." The Gospel will be preached to be a blessing to others. The Gentiles will "seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem," and come into the church through faith in Jesus. They will cling to the true fulfillment of all that the prophets have written—Jesus Christ is none other than Immanuel, "God [is] with you."

Our Lord says, "Rend your heart, and not your garments." Therefore, our Lord does not desire as a form of repentance outward gestures apart from a heart that is truly repentant. Tears and beating of one's chest; kneeling, bowing, and genuflecting do not profit us one bit, if our heart is not also crying and prostrating itself before the Lord God on account of our sins. True repentance exists not in contrition alone, but where faith is also present—faith that clings to the Lord Jesus Christ alone for its salvation.

Because our Lord desires our repentance—our contrition *and* faith—because He desires that our hearts be torn in true repentance, He has sent to us faithful pastors to preach the Word of God in its truth and purity, and to administer the Sacraments according to Christ's institution, so that by the Holy Ghost working through them, we might be led into sorrow over our sins, and turn to our Lord Jesus for our salvation by the preaching of the Law and the Gospel through these faithful men.

Therefore, our Lord commands pastors to pray on behalf of the ones entrusted to their care, "Spare Your people, O LORD, and do not give Your heritage to reproach." That is to say, it is the duty of ministers to pray for our repentance and our guidance by the Word of God. It follows that we should diligently and joyfully listen and hear the words of our pastor, for the faithful minister desires, like our Lord, that all men be led into repentance, and cling to our Lord Jesus for their salvation.

Today's reading holds a stern warning for those who revel in their sinfulness. The Lord will, in His justice, deliver all those who are impenitent unbelievers into the depths of Hell. The image in today's reading is of an army marching unexpectedly upon the city of Zion, while the inhabitants writhe in pain; their faces drained of all color at the realization that their doom cannot be avoided.

Such it is with us all when the terror over our sins grips us—the realization that we are doomed on account of our transgression of God's Law. When we come face to face with the realization that God does indeed threaten to punish all who transgress His commandments, our conscience leads us into despair and guilt that leads us to feel like the Prophet Joel describes, "A fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns," that is to say, we are completely consumed and destroyed by the weight of our sin.

But, contrition is only one part of repentance, for contrition only prepares the way to faith in our one and only Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, our pastors remind us again and again of our Lord Jesus and what He has accomplished, and direct us continually to the means with which the rewards won through our Lord's death for our salvation are given to us: Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Supper of our Lord. Through these means, the Holy Ghost destroys all the sinfulness that clings to us, and drives our enemies—sin, death, and the devil—far away from us. Therefore, cleansed by Him, we are the ones who can endure the great and terrible day of the Lord.

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 22:1–14 (NKJV)

And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding."'"

But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them.

But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

For many are called, but few are chosen.

THE COLLECT

Grant, we beseech Thee, merciful Lord, to Thy faithful people pardon and peace that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve Thee with a quiet mind through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Lord's plan for the salvation of the Gentiles was not a 'divine afterthought'—it was always the Triune God's will to gather His remnant from among the nations. Thus we read in verse 9: "Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled. Who among them can declare this, and show us former things? Let them bring out their witnesses, that they may be justified; or let them hear and say, 'It is truth.'" The truth which the nations were to receive was that which the Lord had made known to His people from the time of Adam until the time of the coming of the Christ; they had been partakers of the truth, and thus St. Paul taught that the Jews had received an advantage of old, "Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God."

But those who had received the "oracles of God" did not heed that Word when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Thus Jesus said to them: "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." All who are saved are justified by grace through faith in Jesus—God in flesh—for the Lord declared, "I, even I, am the Lord, and besides Me there is no savior."

The Prophet Isaiah declares with all the host of Heaven, "Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?" The picture that is portrayed in this text is the triumphal return of our Lord Jesus Christ after His Resurrection and Ascension to sit at the right hand of the Almighty Father to judge the quick and the dead.

Edom, you may remember, is the land of the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob—called Israel. Israel and Edom continued the feud that was started between Jacob and Esau over his birthright, which he sold for some lentil stew. Spiritually speaking, therefore, Edom is the place of the enemy, the place where the spiritual Esau—the devil—has his kingdom. "Edom" in this text is, therefore, referring to this world.

Bozrah, a city in Edom, means fortress. It is the counterpart to Jerusalem, the city of God: Bozrah is the city of the devil and his angels. What the Prophet Isaiah is preaching here is that our Lord Jesus Christ has entered triumphantly into Heaven after defeating His enemies entering to the song of praise. His garments are dyed red from the shedding of His own precious and innocent blood on the holy Cross, through which He took His vengeance upon sin, death, and the devil, won the victory, and gave us the eternal spoils of forgiveness, life, and salvation. To this all the saints of Heaven join their song in eternal praise of our victorious Lord.

The Prophet Obadiah, whose name means “Servant of Yahweh,” writes concerning the longtime animosity between Edom and Israel, two nations that had their origins in two brothers, Esau and Jacob. This strife originated in an argument over the birthright between Esau and Jacob. Esau had sold the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew and Jacob secured it with the help of His mother, Rebekah, by fooling his blind father, Isaac, into thinking Jacob was Esau when Isaac bestowed the blessing. Esau vowed to kill his brother for this treachery, and this animosity carried on for generations afterward.

By the time of Obadiah’s writing, Edom had helped Israel’s enemies attack Israel. Instead of being a “brother” and coming to Israel’s defense, Edom had betrayed Israel. Now, God is going to judge Edom for what it had done. Though Edom had been an influential nation, it would be brought to ruins because it “stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off [Israel’s] wealth.”

[Jesus said,] “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” The irony in Obadiah’s depiction of what would happen to Edom, is that it would also happen to Israel! She would become like Edom, and worse: Israel would not just “stand aloof” but would be the hands that brought about the death of True and Holy Israel, Jesus Christ. True Israel, Jesus, would be crucified because of this Israel’s treachery...but Christ, the Righteous Israel, would arise and God, on the Last Day, will bring to final restoration that which was begun in His Resurrection: the New Creation.

In the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel had become idolatrous and imagined that they could divide their loyalties between the Lord God and the various idols of the heathen nations. It was as if they imagined that they could increase their security by having “as many gods as possible” on their “side.”

The Lord rebuked their foolishness, and taught them once again that there is one God, and He ordains all that happens in Heaven and Earth: “Who raised up one from the east? Who in righteousness called him to His feet? Who gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? Who gave them as the dust to his sword, as driven stubble to his bow? Who pursued them, and passed safely by the way that he had not gone with his feet? Who has performed and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? ‘I, the Lord, am the first; And with the last I am He.’” Or, as the Lord declares in Revelation 1: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

The people would be sent into captivity on account of their idolatry. But the remnant would be preserved in faith, and restored to the promised land at the time of the end of their captivity: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” Now Israel’s time is fulfilled; the Church lives in the promise that Christ sustains her until His return in glory.

The vision was for an appointed time which was yet to come and the Word of the Lord declared: “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith.” By what faith is one counted as righteous? Through faith in Christ Jesus, for thus St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”

God’s Word gives us the clear understanding in Romans 1 of what was being taught in Habakkuk 2: the appointed time had come, and the Christ had made atonement for our sins. Thus the just shall live by faith. This faith, worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word, is not accomplished by any strength of man, for it is not a work of the Law; thus we read in Galatians 3: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’” By grace through faith in Christ Jesus we live, having been redeemed from the curse.

On account of our sinfulness, we sometimes feel like crying out with Zion, “The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me.” But, our Lord answers us in our distress, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb?” In other words, our Lord will never leave us nor forsake us, for we are His children born by His holy Bride, our mother, the holy, catholic Church, through the means of grace and the out-pouring of the Holy Ghost, Who has created faith and life in us by these same means.

We have proof of His love for us, and that He will never leave us nor forsake us, in His holy Cross. Upon His holy Cross we were inscribed in the palms of His hands, which bear the marks of the nails that pierced His flesh, on account of His loving sacrifice for us. He bears the testimony of His love and sacrifice for us for all eternity in His hands, His feet, and His side, which poured out blood and water to cleanse us of our sin, and to nourish us with His gifts.

He bears in His holy Body the marks of His sacrifice for us to redeem us from sin, death and the devil as an eternal testimony of our forgiveness of sins. These marks in His holy Body are His ornaments—His eternal adornment of our salvation. He has bound them onto His flesh as a bride binds onto herself the ornaments of her wedding garment. Remember this when you feel like the Lord has forgotten you.

The prophet Micah proclaims about Jerusalem that the Lord God would “make [her] horn iron,” and her “hooves bronze.” The power of a bull is in its horn and hooves. It is able both to defend itself with its horns and to attack its attackers with its horns and hooves. Without its horns and hooves, the bull would easily fall victim to its attacker.

In a spiritual sense, the devil, by false preaching and false administration of the Sacraments, cuts off people’s horns and hooves—their faith in God’s Word—so that those who are attacked by him are unable to defend themselves. Therefore, these are led into unbelief and cast off the Word of God in favor of the evil desires of their own hearts. They are led into spiritual exile away from the Word of God to live spiritually maimed and deformed by sin.

Our Lord brings us back from this exile and defends us against the assaults of sin, death and the devil, by offering up *His* horn and hooves—His perfect faith in, and obedience to, His Father’s Word and will—on the Cross as a sacrifice for our spiritual deformity of sin, the awful inheritance we have from Adam that we have intensified by our continuous falling prey to the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. He goes into the exile of the grave, so that we might have our horns and hooves—our faith in His promises of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—restored. Furthermore, He makes our fleshly horns and hooves into iron and bronze, that is, fortified metal, so that by His Holy Ghost, we remain steadfast in the one, true faith.

When the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, the Lord beheld their plight and delivered them. As we have read in Isaiah 63: “For He said, ‘Surely they are My people, children who will not lie.’ So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old.” The Lord God was a Savior to them, and present with them in the midst of their troubles.

Nevertheless, as the Word of God recalls to them in Isaiah 63, the people “rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” in the wilderness—and they did so again in the time of the prophet Isaiah. And the Lord allowed for them to be afflicted once again to guide them in the way of repentance, for the sake of the remnant. Chastened for their transgression, the remnant yearned again for the holy place of God’s presence with His people: “Your holy people have possessed it but a little while; our adversaries have trodden down Your sanctuary. We have become like those of old, over whom You never ruled, those who were never called by Your name.”

“As a beast goes down into the valley, and the Spirit of the Lord causes him to rest, so You lead Your people, to make Yourself a glorious name.” In words which are reminiscent of Psalm 23, the Lord presents once again the image of His grace care and protection for His people. The people of God need such gracious leading; the direction of our Good Shepherd leads us in the way of life.

What does man have that he can offer to the Lord in payment for his sins? Nothing. The words of Isaiah 64 strip away all our pretenses: “But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is no one who calls on Your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of You.” The drumbeat of words—all, all, all—is the destruction of our pretensions. We have nothing to offer, and, on our own, no one even calls on the Lord for salvation. Thus Isaiah wrote as one who was filled with terror at standing in the presence of God, conscious of his sin: “You are indeed angry, for we have sinned—in these ways we continue; And we need to be saved.” The one who acknowledged himself to be a man of unclean lips, proclaims the One who accomplishes salvation for us.

Knowing that it is God alone who saves us, Isaiah addressed the Lord: “But now, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand.” For us to be saved, we need for the Lord to convert us—to take from us the heart of stone and give to us a heart of flesh. The One Who formed man from the dust and breathed life into him gives us the Word of Life and restores dead men to new life in Christ Jesus, through water and the Word.

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Matthew 18:23–35 (NKJV)

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, “Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.”

Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, “Pay me what you owe!”

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?”

And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

THE COLLECT

O God, our Refuge and Strength, who art the Author of all godliness, be ready, we beseech Thee, to hear the devout prayers of Thy Church, and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! With a voice of singing, declare, proclaim this, utter it to the end of the earth; Say, “The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob!” The Lord exiled His beloved people Judah to Babylon for their persistent idolatry and willful sinning against His commandments. Through His prophets He gave them warning and threat of punishment but also the proclamation that their punishment would not be permanent. Judah would return. Jerusalem would be rebuilt. The temple, the place where God dwelt with man to forgive sins, would be resurrected from the ash heap. Judah would once again be God’s people.

In the New Testament, Babylon symbolizes the evil world in which Christians now live. We must suffer the yoke of persecution. Since we bear the Name of Christ Jesus we must suffer as our Lord Jesus did in His earthly life. We must bear reproach from the government, from family, and our own consciences at times. Yet on the Last Day the Lord will call His chosen people out of this Babylon, for “the LORD loves Jacob; He shall do His pleasure on Babylon, and His arm shall be against the Chaldeans.” He will return to judge the world and destroy its ruler, the prince of the power of the air. On that day there will be no more Satan to tempt. There will be no more tears shed for punishment or death. There will be no more struggle against the sinful flesh. On that day we will inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem and proclaim, “The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob!”

In Isaiah 5, we hear of the vineyard of the Lord: “My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; so He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.” The Lord did not “plant bad vines”; with loving care, the Lord provided everything for the sustenance of His people.

There is no ‘guess work’ regarding the subject of these verses: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.”

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared: “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” Bad trees bear bad fruit—why do the wicked lack for works which are the fruit of faith? Because they have no faith. St. Paul wrote to the Romans that “whatever is not from faith is sin.” Thus the bad trees have nothing to give but bad fruit. Still, those who hear the Word and keep it—those in whom the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith—bear good fruit according to the will of God, and they do so on account of that which the Lord has accomplished within them.

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 4:46–54 (NKJV)

So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine.

And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.”

The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!”

Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your son lives.” So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way.

And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, “Your son lives!” Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives.” And he himself believed, and his whole household.

This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.

THE COLLECT

Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Though Israel had rejected the Lord time and again, the Lord promises to make a new covenant with them. The new covenant will be initiated and completed by the Lord, just as the Lord’s covenant with Noah, Abraham, and David was initiated by the Lord alone. The Lord covenants unilaterally with His people. He does not say, “If you do this, then I will act thus.” That would make His covenant dependent upon our works. The Lord graciously acts so that His covenant with His people may be one of grace alone and not works, so that no one may boast.

The old covenant inscribed the Law, God’s revelation, upon stone tablets. The new covenant will inscribe the Law, not upon stone but upon the hearts of God’s people. He will implant His word in us by His Holy Spirit. He inscribes His revelation upon our hearts not with pen or sharp chisel, but by speaking His Word into our ears. What He writes on our hearts is not law, threat of punishment, and judgment as it was at Sinai. He writes the Name of the fulfiller of the Law and the culmination of all God’s revelation to sinners: the Name of Jesus Christ.

With His Name inscribed upon our hearts by the Word and Sacraments, we have peace with God, knowing that our sins are forgiven. Having the Name of Christ etched into our hearts, the good works which Christ desires us to do will spontaneously flow from our new hearts. Having the Name of Christ written with water and Word assures us that our sins are forgiven and that we are the Lord’s.

Though the Lord chastises His people by scattering them, He will yet gather them from their exile to the ends of the earth. Though the Lord allow death to swallow up His people, He will, in Christ's resurrection from the grave, swallow up death. Though Satan and his weapons of temptation are too strong for our sinful flesh to overcome, the Lord will cast Satan into the bottomless pit and put a final end to all his temptations. This is the Christian's hope. Our sins are forgiven on account of Christ's suffering and death for our sins. We will be resurrected on the Last Day in glorified bodies even as our Lord Jesus was raised from the tomb with a glorified body. Our enemies will be Christ's footstool. From there they will be utterly unable to exercise their tyranny over us.

As we look at our lives and see the effects of sin upon our families, ourselves, and our children, we know that the Lord still graciously remembers us. The Lord says of His people in verse 20, "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; Therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD." The Lord is moved with compassion for His people and will not let our enemies—death, the Devil's claims, even our own sin—stand between us and eternal life. No matter what trials you endure today, He will lead you to out as His own dear baptized child.

We are used to having requirements. Employers make demands of us. Families expect many things from us. The government requires much from us. It may feel as if all our time is spent meeting other's expectations. When we fail to meet other's requirements there is always a price to pay.

The Lord God makes demands upon us as well. Today He says in Micah 6:8, "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?" To do justly and to love mercy both mean that the Lord requires us to love our neighbor. He wants us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. To walk humbly with your God means that we are to walk in faith, believing His Word and placing our confidence in Him.

The Lord requires faith towards God and love toward our neighbor. We are to fear, love and trust God above all things. We are to do good works to our neighbor out of selfless love. The Lord knows that because of our sinful nature we are unable to meet His requirements. He does not find in us faith or love. Since we are unable to muster these by our own reason or strength, the Lord creates them in our hearts. He plants faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel. Faith then naturally does good works toward our neighbor. Give thanks, dear Christian, "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

False religion and disregard for the Word of God is the most difficult sin to find in oneself. Adultery can be searched out. Hateful thoughts are easily identified. The gossiping tongue or coveting eyes can be examined. But the heart that despises and thinks little of the Word of God is nearly impossible to find in ourselves. When we think little of the Word, we are tempted to make up our own religion and works of piety. The sinful flesh easily crafts its own religion and good works, imagining that the Lord will be happy with its self-fashioned works.

God seeks not self-made works; He does not desire religious showmanship. He desires that you hear the Word regularly. He desires that you take the true Sabbath rest and hear Christ's Word of Gospel which obliterates all your good works and draws you to His atoning sacrifice. You are to "turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable." You do this by gladly hearing the Word.

He desires that we do good works which are truly good according to the Ten Commandments. "Is it [true fasting] not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?" He desires that we hear the Word in faith and that we love our neighbors as ourselves, as the Lord gives us opportunity.

This is the sinful nature that possess all men, even the best. Hands, lips, and tongues habitually sin. Feet run, or desire to run, on wicked paths. Eyes are blind by self-concern. We look for salvation but see none. We open our mouths only to have roars come forth, mourning our sinful nature and our utter inability to redeem any of our thoughts, words, or deeds. All of our members are under sin's dominion. "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it." (Isaiah 1:5-6).

The Lord looks upon sinners and says, "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor." With no other hope, the Lord God readies Himself to redeem sinners. "Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; And His own righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak...the Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob." The Lord Himself rescues us from the depth of our sinful depravity. He sends His Only-Begotten Son to bear our sin for us, to baptize us so that we may be forgiven the guilt of original sin. He redeems our hearts, heads, and whole bodies so that we may fight sin in our bodies and rejoice in the day to come when we will receive new, sinless bodies like our Redeemer Christ Jesus.