

**17TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(SUNDAY BEFORE THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS)**

SEPTEMBER 10/23, 2007

GALATIANS 6: 11-18

ST. JOHN 3: 13-17

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Gospel...And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

The Lord Continues His Admonition Of Jewish Pharisee Nicodemus And The Entire Jewish Nation

Christ is in the midst of explaining things to the reluctant Nicodemus who keeps asking the same fundamental question “How can these things be?” This illustrated his lack of true belief. His questions are steeped in skepticism and do not reflect spiritual matters which transcend human nature but are questions of this world.¹

The Lord explains that his questioning stems from ignorance: ‘You, a teacher of Israel, should call to mind the extraordinary miracles performed of old: man’s creation, woman’s formation from man’s side, the barren rendered fruitful, the marvels in Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and so on. If you had considered all this carefully, as should a teacher of Israel, you would have no doubts. As for Me, I speak of what I know and have seen.’ When the Lord says, *What we have seen*, He is referring, not to physical sight, but, rather, to exact, full knowledge. The words ‘but ye receive not Our witness,’ (which means ‘My

witness') are addressed not only to Nicodemus, **but to the whole race of Jews who refuse to believe – then, and now, and to the end** (emphasis supplied).²

Christ Clearly States Who He Is: The Fathers On His Two Natures

Blessed Theophylact, following the Fathers, in the beginning of today's Gospel points out that although the Gospel today may seem to be unconnected to the previous discussion, it isn't. Nicodemus thought Christ was just a "teacher and prophet". The Lord now tells him (and us) in no uncertain terms, I am the Son of God, no prophet ever ascended to heaven:

Because Nicodemus thought Jesus was a teacher and prophet, the Lord now says to him, 'Do not imagine that I am an earthly prophet sent by God. I came down from heaven as the Son of God, and I am not from the earth. *No prophet hath ascended up to heaven, I **alone*** (emphasis supplied) shall ascend, as I descended.'³

...

The prophet Elijah, of course, was taken up to heaven in his chariot. This great miracle took place entirely by **God's power** (emphasis supplied). Only Christ, the Son of God, ascends and descends **by His own will and power** (emphasis supplied).⁴

Christ has two natures, Divine and human, in one hypostasis/person. The names that refer to His natures are interchangeable:

Since Christ has two natures united in one hypostasis, or person, the names that refer to His human nature may also be addressed to God the Word; conversely the names that refer to the divine Word may be addressed to Christ as man.⁵

When Christ became flesh on earth, He did not "lose" His place in heaven. He is in both at the same time:

When you hear Me say that I came down to earth, do not imagine that I am **no longer** in heaven. I am here in the **body** on earth, and **at the same time** co-enthroned there with the Father **in My divine nature** (all emphases supplied).⁶

Glorified On The Cross: We Are Saved From Spiritual Death And The Evil One Is Defeated!

The Lord prepares us for the benefits of His crucifixion. He doesn't say exactly that He will be crucified, but He reminds us of the serpent and the Old Testament and by doing so teaches us that they are related; after all, "He is the lawgiver of both."⁷ Christ also instructs that we will avoid spiritual death much more "by gazing with faith upon the crucified One" than the Jews saving themselves from death by looking at the bronze serpent. He came free from the sting of sin; there was no sin in Him! We are to look at Christ suspended "on the Cross and believe" and by doing so "escape spiritual death"⁸:

When you hear the words *lifted up*, understand them to mean 'suspended.' Christ was suspended on high so that He Who sanctified the earth by His footsteps might also sanctify the air. You should also understand *lifted up* to mean 'glorified.' Truly the Cross became Christ's exaltation and glory. By that wood on which He appeared to be condemned, He in fact condemned the ruler of this world.⁹

The sinless Christ defeated the devil through His crucifixion. Until then, "death rightly had dominion over men".¹⁰ It was proper for Adam to die because he had sinned. The Lord had not sinned so the evil one put Him to death without any justification. In going to His death He defeated the devil and thus freed Adam from his deserved death. The evil one had tried to conquer the Lord by tempting Him on the mountain with one of the two principal passions, pleasure. Didn't work. So the evil one tried grief, "the disciples' denial, the soldiers' mockery, the blasphemies of the bystanders". Christ was unconquerable, so the devil tried his trump card, crucifixion. Still didn't work. Christ was and is too powerful for him, the prince of this world.¹¹

Not even the grief of crucifixion could induce the Lord to hate His murderers, the Jews. Instead, He loved them and prayed for them, saying, 'Father, *lay not this sin to their charge.*' See how He conquered by the very means which seemed to accomplish His defeat! Therefore the Cross has become His exaltation and His glory.¹²

Insofar as the Jews are concerned, forgive them because it is true that the devil made them do it. I know this is an old cliché, but notice its truth. Pray that they reevaluate their position in this world, reject it and come to the Lord Jesus Christ, Whose kingdom is not of this world. He will welcome them with open arms.

God Gave His Only-Begotten Son

God gave us His most prized, His Only-begotten Son for us to believe in Him and spiritually live. He didn't send us a prophet or angel, but Christ Himself. This is a gift that cannot be topped since He gave Him to us out of pure love.

When the Son went to His death, He did not suffer in His divine nature, only His human one. He suffered in the flesh not in His Divinity.¹³ By God's gift of His Son, we have gained a "life that is unending and beyond time".¹⁴

The Two Comings Of The Lord

Of course, the first has already occurred and we await the second. We cannot know with any certainty when He is coming again. *For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.* Here the Lord means His first coming. He did not come to condemn us the first time around because all of us would have been condemned: we're all sinners.

Before His coming there was a law of nature, and the prophets, and moreover a written law, and teaching, and ten thousand promises, and manifestations of signs and chastisements and punishments and many other signs which might have set us right; and it followed that for all these things He would demand back a rendering of accounts. But because He loves mankind, for a long while, He pardons instead of making examination. For had He done so, all would at once have been hurried to perdition. [St. John Chrysostom]¹⁵

So He did not have judgement as His objective in coming; however, those who then rejected Him and didn't believe "brought condemnation on themselves". In the second and last time He comes it will be with the express purpose of judging our spiritual efforts. He will "judge all and render to each according to his deeds".¹⁶

Anyone listening to this homily or reading the above and believing in the error that faith alone is sufficient should reconsider their spiritual position. Talk is cheap, what is also needed is spiritual action! We must be eternally grateful to the Lord for becoming flesh, voluntarily undergoing ridicule, contempt, and in the end, crucifixion to afford us the spiritual opportunity to follow Him and gain our salvation. The True Orthodox Church's position on salvation is clear: it is only through Jesus Christ that salvation exists. But our salvation is not automatic. It requires our asceticism and struggle. Let's meet the challenge!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ See the discussion in Blessed Theophylact, *Explanations of the Holy Gospel of St. John, Vol. IV*, (translated from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade) Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 2007, Chapter Three, verses 2.23 through 12, pp. 47-51.

² *ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

³ *id.*, p. 51.

⁴ *id.*, fn 5.

⁵ *id.*, p. 51.

⁶ *id.*

⁷ *id.*, p. 52.

⁸ *id.*

⁹ *id.*

¹⁰ *id.*

¹¹ *id.*, pp. 52-53.

¹² *id.*, p. 53.

¹³ *id.*

¹⁴ *id.*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁵ [Hom. 28, P.G. 59: 159 (col. 162).] in *The Orthodox New Testament The Holy Gospels Volume 1, St. John* Endnotes No. 78, 3: 17, p. 490. (Second Edition published by Holy Apostles Convent/Dormition Skete, Buena Vista, CO, 2000)

¹⁶ Bl. Theophylact, *St. John, op. cit.*, p. 54.