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God's Revelation to the Human Heart¹

Week Six of the Great Lent

Isaiah 43-45

Introduction: Spiritual Blindness

I read an amusing story recently. A tourist traveled to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. When he arrived, he took one look at the Grand Canyon and said to the guard, "Where is the golf course? When the guard told him there wasn't any, he said, "Well, what do you do around here?" Imagine that in the presence of one of the most sublime and awe-inspiring spectacles of the world, this man saw nothing. Although this man had eyes, his capacity to see beauty and grandeur had not been developed.²

This Sunday we read the miracle of the healing of the blind man. However, the greatness of this miracle does not solely lie in the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was able to restore the sight of a physically blind man. The greatness of this miracle lies in the fact that this man, who did not know Christ at all, was touched in his heart, and his spiritual eyes were so enlightened that he was able to preach to the Pharisees, was willing to risk being thrown out of the synagogue, and finally believed that Christ is the Son of God and worshipped Him.

How many people today have the capacity to see but are still blind? People are blinded by world success and materialism. People are blinded by an immoral and unchaste lifestyle. People are blinded by their refusal to believe in a living and saving God.

The Sixth Sunday of the Great Lent is called "Baptism Sunday" in the Coptic Orthodox church. The one who receives baptism is like the man born blind whose eyes were opened. The person who does not know God is like one living in darkness, but in the waters of baptism, he becomes as one who was blind and can now see.

The prophecy readings from Isaiah this week take us on the journey through baptism, witness, and salvation. We will highlight some of these passages. We will finish our lesson by discussing how God reveals Himself to the human heart. What are we searching for? What will it take for us to overcome our spiritual blindness? How does God reveal Himself to us?

The passages from Isaiah highlight the themes of baptism, witnessing, and salvation. Baptism and salvation are free gifts from God that He offers to us. He constantly reminds us in these passages that He is the true God and that there is no other God beside Him. How can we come into contact with that truth?

¹ The title and portions of this lesson are based on God's Revelation to the Human Heart by Father Seraphim Rose. Platina, California: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1987.

² Coniaris, Anthony M. Gems from the Sunday Gospels in the Orthodox Church Vol. I. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light & Life Publishing, 1975 (p. 95)

Week Six in the Journey through Isaiah (chapters 43-45)

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday Readings: The Themes of Baptism and Witness

The readings from these three days come from Isaiah 43:10-28, 44:1-8, and 44:21-28.

+ Let us first highlight some verses about the effects of Baptism:

1. "The beast of the field will honor Me, the jackals and the ostriches, because I give waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, My chosen. This people I have formed for Myself; They shall declare My praise" (Isaiah 43:20-21).
 - a. "But as often as water is named alone in the Holy Scriptures, baptism is referred to, as we see intimated in Isaiah... There, God foretold by the Prophet, that among the nations in places which previously had been dry, rivers should afterwards flow plenteously and should provide water for the elected people of God, that is, for those who were made sons of God by the generation of baptism. Moreover, it is again predicted and foretold before, that the Jews, if they should thirst and seek after Christ, should drink with us, that is, should attain the grace of baptism" (**Saint Cyprian of Carthage**).
2. "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25)

In these verses, we see that the waters of Baptism spring up in the life of someone living in darkness and aridity. Baptism is the spiritual rebirth that takes us from death to life, from darkness to light, and from a dry to desert to springs of water.

We also see that through baptism, we become God's children, who know Him and praise Him (Isaiah 43:21). Also, baptism is given for the forgiveness of our sins (Isaiah 43:25).

3. "For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring; They will spring up among the grass like willows by the watercourses" (Isaiah 44:3-4).

The waters of baptism water the Church and flood the dry ground of the world. The waters of baptism enlighten mankind to recognize Christ as Savior and lead him to worship in the Church. This reminds us of the blind man who went through the waters of the pool of Siloam and recognized Christ as God and worshipped Him.

4. "Remember these, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me" (Isaiah 44:21)!
5. "Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd; and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid"' (Isaiah 44:28).

These verses serve as words of encouragement to those who are baptized and are journeying on the path of fasting and repentance in the Great Lent. They are reminders that God forgives His people and does not forget them. Although destroyed by sin, the heart, through repentance and baptism, is rebuilt by God and a foundation is laid upon which the whole Church is built.

+ Next, let us highlight some verses about Witnessing. Once someone has come into contact with Christ in the waters of baptism, the next step is to witness to Him. This was done by the blind man who witnessed to his Healer to the point that the Pharisees threw him out of the synagogue. Witnessing is the essential work of a Christian, even to the point of dying for his or her faith (martyrdom).

1. "You are My witnesses," says the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me *there* is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign *god* among you; therefore you are My witnesses," says the LORD, "that I *am* God. Indeed before the day was, I *am* He; and *there* is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?" (Isaiah 43:10-13).
2. "Do not fear, nor be afraid; have I not told you from that time, and declared *it*? You are My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? Indeed *there* is no other Rock; I know not one" (Isaiah 44:8).

Thursday and Friday Readings: Salvation

The readings from these two days come from Isaiah 45:1-10 and 45:11-17.

We can learn three aspects about salvation in these verses: 1) Salvation may come in unexpected ways, 2) the Salvation of God is eternal, and 3) although God is unseen, God manifests Himself to His children and saves them.

1. "I have raised him [Cyrus] up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward," says the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 45:13).
 - a. The Israelites had been in captivity in Babylon, but through Cyrus, a Persian king, the children of God came out of exile and were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Salvation came from an unexpected source, a pagan king.
 - b. Also, could we have imagined that salvation would come through a cross, a sign considered a curse? Could we have imagined that salvation can occur through the waters of baptism? Could the blind man have imagined that just by mixing saliva with clay and washing in a pool that his sight could be restored?
 - c. We do not know how God will touch the heart of an individual to reach out and save Him. If we are concerned about an individual who is far from God, it is not for us to suggest how God should save His people, but only to pray

and fast, and submit our lives to God and ask Him to work in us and in that person in a way that will bring glory to His name.

- d. Salvation is a free gift offered by God.
2. “But Israel shall be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you shall not be ashamed or disgraced forever and ever” (Isaiah 45:17)
 - a. The salvation of God is eternal. For instance, baptism, once it is performed cannot be performed again and cannot be revoked. Even for a baptized person who later denies the faith and returns, that person will not be re-baptized.
 - b. When we are born in the body, we born from two parents who also have earthly bodies that will one day pass away. But for the person born from an eternal God, He can receive the promise of eternal life.
 3. “Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isaiah 45:15)!
 - a. We are encouraged not to preoccupy ourselves with the visible world and the signs around us.
 - b. Our salvation focuses on an unseen God. We are asked to penetrate deeper. We ought to seek His kingdom and His righteousness.
 - c. The blind man who was healed was able to see beyond a mere man and a prophet into Christ as the True God, a sight toward which the Pharisees and Scribes were blind.

God's Revelation to the Human Heart

Let us connect the passages we have just read in Isaiah and the story of the man born blind to the following ideas as to how to overcome spiritual blindness and to come face to face with Christ as truth.

1. The Search

- a. Why does a person study religion? What are people looking for?
- b. They are looking to come into contact with reality and to find a reality that is deeper than the everyday reality that changes, rots away, leaves nothing beyond, and does not satisfy nor bring happiness to the human soul
- c. Many are searching in the wrong places. They take drugs to experience a "reality" or to get away from the existing world. These sources end up destroying a person and leading him lower rather than higher.
- d. Many are looking for religious experiences. They end up falling into experiences which trap them rather than lead them to Truth, to what is real.
- e. Anyone who studies religion seriously comes up against a question; a question literally of life and death.

2. Revelation

- a. We must be wary of signs, miracles, and religious experiences as the sole indication that we have arrived at Truth.
- b. People chase after these mystical experiences and rest their whole faith on them.
- c. But sometimes, these "mystical" experiences can be imitated by people who are not in touch with what is truth.
- d. For example, there are many saints who truly were in communion with God as truth, and were seen embraced in light, or who worked miracles of healing, or who were clairvoyant. But there were also people of the devil who worked similar miracles. How can we tell what is real and what is not?
- e. First, we must come to the realization that truth cannot be found by the unaided powers of man.
- f. This was the problem of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Book of Acts, chapter 8. There are several mystical elements in this story. For instance, an angel tells Philip where to go. After the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip is taken up by the Spirit of the Lord and disappears from his sight. But this is not what made the eunuch want to become baptize and to become Christian. The miracles did not affect him, but something in His heart when the truth of the Scriptures was revealed to Him and He realized that Christ was truth. Miracles, although they sometimes help a person come to faith, are not the right reason to embrace Christianity.
- g. The words of Scripture are very powerful, when the right interpretation is given to them; then something in a human being "opens up" if his heart is ready.
- h. We also consider the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who did just recognize Christ because He disappeared from their sights (even a skilled magician

could do this). They recognized Christ because when He opened up to them the words of the Old Testament, their hearts burned within them.

3. Suffering

- a. Sometimes God allows a person to suffer and tills the heart in order to make it more receptive to receive His revelation.
- b. This was the case of the man born blind who suffered with his blindness since His birth. This made him all the more ready for healing and to understand truly the nature of the Person who would heal him.
- c. Some people have turned to Orthodoxy because they see in it a history of suffering people (for example, the persecution of the Russian Orthodox under the communist regime, or the history of the past and present martyrs in the Coptic Orthodox Church). They reason that if people are willing to suffer to such an extent in their faith, then what they're believing in must be real.
- d. Also, there is a story related to us by author Dee Margaret Pennock as to how God touched her heart in a moment of desperation³:
 - i. In my twenties, I didn't believe there was a God. But it bothered me that if an immense, incredible reality like God did exist, it would be really stupid not to be aware of such a significant reality. So I stepped into a church every day and said, "God, if you exist, would you please let me know?"
 - ii. Then came a walk in Central Park on a bleak November day. Because someone seemed to be following me, I turned onto a path that appeared to exit the Park. It led, however, into a wooded ravine and onto a bridge. Footsteps were rapidly approaching.
 - iii. "God," I said, "I don't deserve help; I don't even believe in you. But if you're there, unless you help me now, I'm sunk."
 - iv. Instantly I was possessed with a composure I've never experienced before or since. Turning to say hello to the man about twenty feet behind me, I saw that he was stocky, with a brown hat pulled over his eyebrows and red rims around his expressionless eyes, and with long arms dangling out of proportion to his height.
 - v. Continuing to walk, I asked him a stream of questions, street directions and so forth. He didn't seem able to move and think at the same time, and he never spoke. So the distance between us kept increasing. Finally I saw a couple ahead. Asking him another question or two and keeping the same pace, I caught up with them. As we all looked back, he jumped over a stone wall and crashed into the underbrush.
- e. After this experience, Pennock came into contact with the writings of the early Church Fathers and believed that God answered her prayers and led her to truth. It was in the moment of desperation that her heart became soft and asked for God's help and protection. It was through the proper interpretation of the Scriptures and the collective writings of the Church Fathers that she realized that when you really want the truth, God will give it to you.

³ Pennock, Dee Margaret. The Adam Complex: The Passions of Adam & Eve. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing Company, 2004 (pp. 52-53).

Conclusion

We cannot conclude that suffering is a sure-fired way that someone will be led to truth. There were many in the Russian prison camps for instance who suffered and went insane, but for those who were touched by Christ, they realized the purpose of their suffering, and remained hopeful in Him.

Fr. Seraphim Rose says, “When conversion does take place, the process of revelation occurs in a very simple way; a person is in need, he suffers and then somehow the other world opens up. The more you are in suffering and difficulties and are ‘desperate’ for God, the more He is going to come to your aid, reveal Who He is and show you the way to get out.”

We need humility. In every situation, we need to realize our dependence on God and say to Him, “Lord, I have before You as an empty and weak vessel. Give me strength. Reveal to Me Your truth.” In this way, God will touch the human heart. Like the man born blind, we will overcome our spiritual blindness and recognize Christ as Truth and worship Him.

GLORY IS DUE TO OUR GOD UNTO ALL AGES. AMEN.



Week Six of the Great Lent

Isaiah 43-45

God's Revelation to the Human Heart

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday's Reading: Baptism and Witness

Isaiah 43:10-28, 44:1-8, 44:21-28

Baptism

1. "The beast of the field will honor Me, the jackals and the ostriches, because I give waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, My chosen. This people I have formed for Myself; They shall declare My praise" (Isaiah 43:20-21).

"But as often as water is named alone in the Holy Scriptures, baptism is referred to, as we see intimated in Isaiah... There, God foretold by the Prophet, that among the nations in places which previously had been dry, rivers should afterwards flow plenteously and should provide water for the elected people of God, that is, for those who were made sons of God by the generation of baptism. Moreover, it is again predicted and foretold before, that the Jews, if they should thirst and seek after Christ, should drink with us, that is, should attain the grace of baptism" (**Saint Cyprian of Carthage**).

2. "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25)
3. "For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring; They will spring up among the grass like willows by the watercourses" (Isaiah 44:3-4).
4. "Remember these, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me" (Isaiah 44:21)!
5. "Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd; and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," and to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid"' (Isaiah 44:28).

Witnessing

1. "You are My witnesses," says the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me *there* is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign *god* among you; therefore you are My witnesses," says the LORD, "that I *am* God. Indeed before the day was, I *am* He; and *there* is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?" (Isaiah 43:10-13).
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Thursday and Friday's Readings: Salvation Isaiah 45:1-10, 44:11-17

Salvation from Unexpected Sources

"I have raised him [Cyrus] up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward," says the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 45:13).

Salvation is Eternal

"But Israel shall be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you shall not be ashamed or disgraced forever and ever" (Isaiah 45:17)

Salvation from an Unseen God

"Truly You are God, who hide Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isaiah 45:15)!



God's Revelation to the Human Heart

1. The Search
2. Revelation
3. Suffering



Glory is due to our God forever. Amen.