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Pride as an Obstacle to Repentance

Week Three of the Great Lent

Isaiah 8 – 13

Introduction: The Journey to Pascha

Throughout the year, we get very distracted with the cares of this life. We carry on with school, work, and our families, but we often forget the big picture: our true and real purpose in this life. We came face to face with that purpose in Baptism. Although too young to remember our own, we experienced death and resurrection with Christ when we were baptized. We were given a new life and a new purpose. Our destination became the heavens. We put on Christ Himself to become living icons of the resurrection.

But over time, we lost this sense of purpose. Every year, the Church gives us the Great Lent as a reminder. The message of the Great Lent is repentance. As we journey towards the Feast of the Resurrection, the Feast of Pacha, we are reminded of our own resurrection in baptism. The word “pascha” means Passover. For us, it means the passing from this earth to the Kingdom of Heaven, our true destination.

The Journey through Isaiah: Review

We come now to the end of the third week of the Great Lent. In the first week, the readings from Isaiah reminded us that we are in need of repentance, *“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, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment”* (Isaiah 1:5-6).

After reading the Sunday gospel concerning fasting, prayer, and repentance, the readings of Isaiah remind us that we are rebellious children in need of the Father (“Our Father”): *“I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me”* (Isaiah 1:2). We are also reminded to avoid hypocrisy (not to show off before others, when inside we are full of sin), *“When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood”* (Isaiah 1:15). We were also reminded of our need for humility on our journey toward repentance, *“For the day of the LORD of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up and it shall be brought low”* (Isaiah 2:12). Lastly, as we approached the Sunday gospel reading concerning the Kingdom, and placing our treasure, not on this earth, but in heaven, we read about the abuse of the temporary nature of worldly possessions, *“In that day the Lord will take away the finery: the jingling anklets, the scarves, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the veils...”* (Isaiah 3:18-19ff.).

As we approached the Sunday Gospel reading of week two concerning the temptation of the Lord Christ, the readings from Isaiah reminded us of the trials we need to undergo in order to be purified. We were reminded that we God's planted vine, who bore sour fruits and wild grapes and trials and temptations are reminders to return to him. We were reminded through the grand vision of Isaiah (chapter 6), that our destination is to come to the altar, God's throne, and praise Him. We must realize our uncleanness, cast it off, praise the Lord, and approach holy communion in awe and reverence.

This week, we approach the Gospel of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The themes of the readings of Isaiah this week concerned our rebellion and God's mercy. After highlighting a few verses, we will focus on the theme of Pride.

Week Three in the Journey through Isaiah (chapters 8 – 13)

Monday's Readings: Fatherhood, Rebellion, and Repentance

At the start of the week, we are reminded of God's Fatherhood, "*Here am I and the children whom the LORD has given me*" (Isaiah 8:18). In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we are reminded of the Father's mercy and compassion and how He yearns for His children to return to Him.

We are also reminded of Son's rebellion. "*Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter, should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?...They will pass through it hard pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness*" (Isaiah 8:19, 21-22).

These verses remind us of the younger son who asked for his Father's inheritance and wasted it in prodigal living. He sought after the temporary joys of this life and went after his evil friends. In asking for the inheritance and disposing it, the son, in effect, wished that his father was dead. Such is our rebellion when we resist our need for God, and our sinful actions, which separate us from Him, almost scream out that we wish God were dead. Then, like the prodigal son, we come to our senses when we are found hard pressed and hungry, thinking that we would gladly eat the food of pigs.

We are also reminded of repentance in hope. "*Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples*" (Isaiah 8:16). Repentance is obedience to the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ and becoming His disciples. "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*" (Isaiah 9:2). Repentance means walking in the light of Christ. The passage from darkness to light; from death to life, is the whole theme of the Great Lent's passage into the glorious Resurrection. "*You have multiplied the nation and increased its joy; They rejoice before You according to the joy of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil*" (Isaiah 9:3). Repentance equals joy. The angels rejoice in even over one sinner who repents.

Tuesday and Wednesday's Readings: Pride as an Obstacle to Repentance

"...who say in pride and arrogance of heart, 'The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace them with cedars'" (Isaiah 10:10). This is the spirit of pride, by which a person thinks that he can accomplish and rebuild himself without the need or assistance of God.

"For the people do not turn to Him who strikes them, nor do they seek the LORD of hosts." This is a sign of a hardhearted people who refuse to turn to Christ as Truth. For them, repentance is lost.

Despite all this, we see the loving hand of the Father, *"For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still" (Isaiah 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4).*

Thursday and Friday: The Return to God

"And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. It shall come to pass in that day that the LORD shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left" (Isaiah 11:10-11).

"O LORD, I will praise You; though You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For YAH, the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation" (Isaiah 12:1-2).

Pride

Vainglory Leads to Pride

Before we speak out the subject of pride, we must understand the vice that leads up to it: vainglory. Vainglory tempts us in all things. Saint John Climacus (6th century) describes the problem as such: “I fast, and I turn vainglorious. I stop fasting so that I will draw no attention to myself, and I become vainglorious over my prudence. I dress well or badly, and am vainglorious in either case. I talk or I hold my peace, and each time I am defeated. No matter how I shed this prickly thing, a spike remains to stand up against me.”

Vainglory is the empty glory, the credit, or the congratulation of self for work well done.

The modern problem is that we are taught from an early age to sell ourselves and get ourselves noticed and to push ourselves forward. As a result, many become obsessed with external appearances, the opinions of others, and the need to fit in.

The problem is when we bring this attitude into our faith and our spiritual lives. We lose perspective and we become men-pleasers rather than God-pleasers. We must examine ourselves along the spiritual path: *Why* am I doing what I am doing?

How can we examine our hearts? Let us ask ourselves a few simple questions:

- Does my behavior change when no one else is around?
- Do I find myself telling others about all of my spiritual efforts and blessings?
- Do I find myself replaying what others have said to me or what I have said to them over and over again in my mind?
- Do I act and talk as if I have experientially known spiritual truths that I have only read about?
- Do I become discouraged and quit when no one notices what I do and/or I do not receive praise and thanksgiving I think I deserve?
- Do I hide my sins and failings from others, even to the point of lying or shading the truth so that my true faults are not discovered by others?
- Do I become defensive when I am criticized?
- Do I feel the need to make sure that everyone knows why I did something?

If we answer yes to any of these, then at some point we have become vainglorious. The important thing for us is not to be discouraged or depressed but to repent.

How do we change our intentions? We take baby steps to start answering “no” to the questions that we just asked ourselves. Avoid talking about yourself. Incorporate a secret service into your spiritual life (which can come in intensified prayers for others, helping others, or serving the church in an unseen way). Avoid worrying about what others think about you and be confident in Christ. Avoid thinking that world will collapse if you are not there to handle the situation. These are ways to cut off pride from its source.

The Dangers of Pride

What is the problem with pride? Let us read the words of Saint Climacus (6th Century) and discuss each of pride's characteristics in turn: "Pride is a denial of God, an invention of the devil, contempt for men. It is the mother of condemnation, the offspring of praise, a sign of barrenness. It is a flight from God's help, the harbinger of madness, the author of downfall. It is the cause of diabolical possession, the source of anger, the gateway of hypocrisy. It is the fortress of demons, the custodian of sins, the source of hardheartedness. It is the denial of compassion, a bitter Pharisee, a cruel judge. It is the foe of God. It is the root of blasphemy."

Humility is the root of all virtue, because when we stand before God and admit that we are nothing without Him, then He fills us, guides us, and directs our path. If God is working in us and through us, then surely everything that we do is for good and for His glory.

The opposite of humility is pride, and this was the cause of Satan's downfall. Satan wished to be equal or better than God and as a result, he fell from heaven.

Pride denies God, and we become the gods of our own universe. It is the invention of the devil, because through Pride, evil entered into the world. It is contempt for men. Just as Satan became jealous and hated mankind having been created in the image and likeness of God and with authority in paradise, so likewise, when we see the success of others and we want to think of ourselves better than they, hatred and jealousy develops in our hearts.

Pride is a sign of barrenness, because if we resist God, we have become empty. Pride speaks at length as if it knows something, but the inside is full of emptiness and idleness. It becomes the source of anger. We will be unable to take criticism; we will become angry at others when they do things that are wrong in order to show ourselves up.

It is the guardian and root of all sin. A wise elder once said, "Think of a dozen shameful passions. Love one of them, I mean pride, and it will take up the space of all the other eleven."

The danger of pride can be severe. See how many around us refuse to obey and refuse to submit their lives to God. Like the prodigal son, they seek after the pleasures in this life and neglect their reward. They immerse themselves in materialism, as if they do not need anyone, especially God to take care of them. And when they lose it all, instead of realizing that they are nothing without Him, they curse Him and blame Him and refuse to be touched by Him. They refuse to listen to instruction. They refuse to obey God's commandments in the Scriptures. They have refused to acknowledge and belief in what is True (in the Truth).

How to Overcome Pride

The first step to overcoming Pride is true self-examination. It is often in silence that we see ourselves for who we really are. The Great Lent, through its spiritual exercises and frequent services, should be for us a time to step out of the craziness of this world (where we forget who we really are), and put ourselves under the Light of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then we ought to take the following three steps in overcoming pride:

1) Remember the Example of the Saints/Read the Lives of the Saints

Saint John Climacus (6th Century) writes, “We should always be on the lookout to compare ourselves with the Fathers and the lights who have gone before us. If we do, we will discover that we have scarcely begun the ascetic life, that we have hardly kept our vows in a holy manner, and that our thinking is still rooted in the world.”

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that we are doing pretty well. If we measure ourselves against the world’s standards, we may very well be right. But what is the proper measure of virtue? Measure yourself against Christ and His saints. Set the standard as being holy and perfect as your Father in heaven is also holy and perfect.

If you think that you pray or fast a lot, remember our fathers the saints who prayed without ceasing and fasted for many days at a time. Are you proud of yourself because you have performed a service to the poor or to those in need? Remember the example of Saint Abraam, Bishop of Fayoum, and how he never stopped giving. Are you proud because you gave a great lesson? Remember great preachers like Saint John Chrysostom, or Saint Peter on the day of Pentecost who with only a few words was able to convert 3,000 souls. Are you proud because you endured criticism? Remember Saint Macarius the Great who was accused of causing a woman to bear a child, and despite the false accusations, he worked double to support her. When it was discovered that he was not the father, many people marveled at his endurance, and he fled to the desert to escape the demon of vainglory and pride. Do you think you love your enemies? Remember Saint Stephen who prayed for his enemies as they stoned him.

These examples should not cause us to despair that we will never reach the heights of their virtues. On the contrary, we should read their lives as a source of encouragement. These were men and women like you and me, who chose to make union with our Lord Jesus Christ and who chose to follow His will, the ultimate goal in their lives.

2) Remember Your blessings

Remember that any advancement in your spiritual life is a direct result of the blessing that God has given you. Do you have a talent valuable in the service? Remember that Christ gave you this talent and you did nothing to earn or deserve this gift in the first place. Remember that he can take away this talent in an instant. Give thanks to the Lord unceasingly. When we pray the Prayer of Thanksgiving, we do not only thank our Lord for helping us and supporting us, but for covering us; that is, though we are sinners, he covers these sins from others out of His mercy. Whenever you receive praise, remember that all glory is due to God, and that we are sinners, whom God, out of His compassion and mercy, uses for the service.

3) Remember that you owe everything to Christ

Remember that no matter how hard you struggle, without Christ there can be no victory. Without Him, the gates of Paradise would remain guarded, and we would be shut in Hades. Without Him, we would be shut off from the presence of God. As Saint John Climacus reminds us, even if we were to die 10,000 times, we could not have repaid what we owe.

Do not fall into despair over the temptation of Pride. Remember that we must pass through it; perhaps for our whole lives, so if we fall by it, we remember that Christ is our source of life. Just like the prodigal son, perhaps we need to fall on hard times to remember our dependence on God. Then, when we begin to realize that our goal is to be with Him, and then we will find a peace that surpasses all understanding, and be victorious in the joy of the Resurrection.

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



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Pride and Vainglory as Obstacles to Repentance

Monday's Readings: Fatherhood, Rebellion, and Repentance

1. "Here am I and the children whom the LORD has given me" (Isaiah 8:18)
2. "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter, should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?...They will pass through it hard pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness" (Isaiah 8:19, 21-22).
3. "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples" (Isaiah 8:16). "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). "You have multiplied the nation and increased its joy; They rejoice before You according to the joy of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil" (Isaiah 9:3).

Tuesday and Wednesday's Readings: Pride as an Obstacle to Repentance

1. "Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him who saws with it" (Isaiah 10:15)?
2. "...who say in pride and arrogance of heart, 'The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace them with cedars'" (Isaiah 10:10).
3. "For the people do not turn to Him who strikes them, nor do they seek the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 9:13).
4. "For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still" (Isaiah 9:12,17,21; 10:4).

Thursday and Friday's Readings: The Return to God

1. "And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. It shall come to pass in that day that the LORD shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left" (Isaiah 11:10-11).
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How to Overcome Pride

- #1. Remember the Examples of the Saints/Read the Lives of the Saints
- #2. Remember Your Blessings
- #3. Remember that You Everything to Christ

Glory is due to our God forever. Amen.