



Bible Study

July 13, 2016

Romans 11:2-12
Matthew 11:20-26

Romans 8:2-13 (NKJV) -

God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day." And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see, and bow down their back always." I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!

Matthew 11:20-26 (NKJV) – Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you." At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight."

Commentary -

As St. Paul tell us in today's epistle reading, our Lord Jesus Christ came first to the people of Judea, and He came to them as the fulfillment of all of the promises of the Old Covenant, all of the promises given to their forefathers in the Law and the Prophets and the other Scriptures. He came to fulfill the Law that they had been given by Him, which they had been unable to keep. He came to rescue them from bondage to sin which kept them enslaved, and led them to death. He came to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth, freeing them from the domination of the powers and principalities that rule this age. He came to bring into existence the age to come, and set in motion the new Creation.

Despite this reality that it was He who fulfilled all of the deepest longings, the most fervent hopes of the Judean people, they did not receive Him. As St. John summarizes in the preamble of His Gospel account, "He came to His own, but His own received Him not" (John 1:11). For centuries they had longed for the day in which God would come to once again visit His people, yet when He did, they did not recognize or accept Him. This was, sadly, in keeping with the track record of the forefathers, who had likewise not only disbelieved and rejected the prophets sent by God to call them back to repentance and life, but had actively persecuted and even murdered them.

Christ goes so far as to say, in today's Gospel reading, that had the great cities of Israel's enemies, Tyre and Sidon, seen His works firsthand and heard His preaching, they would have repented and turned to the God of Israel. Tyre and Sidon were the capital cities of the Phoenician trade empire in the days of Elijah, and Jezebel, the wicked queen who murdered God's prophets was a daughter of Sidon. The Lord then goes further, and says that had they seen Him, and known Him, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which God could find not even ten righteous people, which were so wicked as to be destroyed by fire from heaven, would have repented and been spared. Christ's hypothetical, after His Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, was proven true, as the Gentile nations, the residents of thousands of pagan cities that had previously practiced all manner of evil, turned to embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the preaching of His Apostles.

Sadly, the people of Judea, despite Christ's warnings, pleadings even with tears, and the love and compassion He poured out upon them day by day, chose, for the most part, to reject Christ, both His Person and His words, going so far as to have Him condemned to death. St. Paul spends much of his Epistle to the Romans meditating on and seeking to understand this terrible tragedy; that the fulfillment of all of the dear promises to Israel was rejected by that same Israel. What he has seen, however, is that the cutting off of most of Judea has led to Christ's Gospel extending beyond His old covenant people to encompass all the nations, and the entire world. Paradoxically, the refusal of the people of Judea to embrace Christ has led to Christ embracing the people of all of the other nations of the world, and drawing them into relationship with Himself.

The Apostle is clear, however, in today's epistle that this does not mean, despite their rejection, that God has turned His back on the Judean people. First, St. Paul points out what had been true throughout Israel's history, that though on the whole God's people had never obeyed Him, and had been hard-hearted and wicked, there was in every generation a remnant preserved which remained true to Him. These righteous saints were, in every generation, the true Israel of God. Even moreso, St. Paul argues that the rejection of the Gospel by much of his people and the embracing of it by the Gentiles is all happening for a reason within God's purpose and plan.

Israel was called originally not as an end in itself, because Israel was more righteous than the other nations, or God loved those people and hated others, but as a means to an end. Israel was called, and given God's covenant, so that she could, by following the teachings of God, become an example to the other nations around her, so that they would want to also possess what she had, and come to follow the true and living God. These gifts which God gave to Israel out of all the nations of the world should have been precious to her, she should have cherished them, but she did not. And so, St. Paul sees, God

has taken them away, and given them to others, not out of spite or hatred, but in order that, seeing what she's lost and the nations have gained, the Judean people would be aroused to jealousy, and thereby realize just how precious her inheritance actually was. The Apostle is able to look forward to a day in the future when his people will remember and embrace Jesus as *their* Messiah, *their* King, and *their* Lord.

This is central to St. Paul's conception of what is happening in the Church. In the Church, Christ is receiving both Judean and Gentile to Himself, and reconciling them not only to Himself, but to each other. The Apostle sees this as the beginning of the age to come, of the new Creation, in which heaven and earth will become one, and the mystical union of God and humanity which already exists in the Person of Jesus Christ will come to be a reality for every human person who enters into the eternal life of the world to come.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) In today's Gospel reading, Christ reminds us that from those of us who have been given much, much will be required. We speak often about how the Orthodox Church represents the fullness of the Christian faith. We have been given the Scriptures, the Holy Mysteries, the wisdom of the Fathers, and the beauty of the Divine Liturgy. All of these are part of our inheritance and we are proud that we have them, and that others don't. All of these gifts, however, mean that when the day comes when we stand before our Lord's judgment seat, we will need to give an account of what we did with them. What have you done with your inheritance as an Orthodox Christian? Do you come to the Sacraments frequently? Do you read the Scriptures, the lives of the Saints, and study the Fathers? Do you work to put into practice in your life what you learn through the Church?
- 2) In today's epistle reading, St. Paul talks about the fact that while Israel was originally supposed to set an example for the nations of the world, now what was theirs has been given to everyone in order to inspire jealousy and allow them to see the value of their inheritance. Would someone getting to know you look at the way in which you live your life at work, with your family, and in public, and see something there that they would desire to have? Would they see a difference between you as a Christian, and the way everyday people of the world live their lives without Christ? Would knowing that you are who you are because you're an Orthodox Christian draw someone from outside to the faith, or push them away?
- 3) Our Lord, Jesus Christ, praises His Father in today's Gospel reading for hiding the Truth from those who think themselves wise, and revealing it to simple children. Today we have more education and information available to us than ever before. We very often hear about, and perhaps know people, who have left Christianity because they think themselves too sophisticated or intellectual to have faith in Christ. The Truth which is Jesus Christ, however, is so simple that the smallest children can understand it. The God who made us loves us, and gave everything for us, so that we could live with Him forever. We've made mistakes and done things wrong, but with God, we can work to make them right again. In the business of day to day life, have you lost sight of these simple truths? When times are difficult and you face suffering and trials, do you return to these truths, and to Christ Himself, who loves you and gave Himself for you?

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